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# The Return of History

## Mirage of Conquest, Oasis of Resistance

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### **The Empire backfires**

The eighty seven billion dollars in public funds approved by the US Congress this fall will be used mostly in a vain attempt to escape a stubborn reality: that the United States has lost its war in Iraq. That the occupation is doomed to fail will not be accepted in respectable (“failure is not an option” circles for some time, not until the price in lives and dollars has climbed to acceptable levels and beyond. What levels are deemed unacceptable will, in large part, be determined by the degree of domestic opposition to the war.

A few weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 I was asked to write some reflections for a solidarity magazine. As flags waved from every stoop I suggested that the patriotic fervor was shallower than it appeared; that the ghosts that moved into the US attic during the Vietnam War had not been exorcised. Beyond the rippling flags runs a deep current of unease, I wrote at the time. Old images of endless war, draft cards, and body counts were never truly erased. They lay dormant, waiting until they would be needed. Now they reawaken. The days of a unified, loyal rearguard for the empire are gone forever.

Indeed, in the ensuing two years the jingoistic clamor and global wave of sympathy have morphed into the largest anti-war movement in history, and the imperial crusade has run aground on unexpected shoals under the sands of Iraq.

The same miscalculation that led the regime to overlook the depth of US anti-war consciousness also caused it to walk into a nightmare of its own making in Iraq: a dismissal of the complex cultural experience of ordinary people.

### **Empire is agro-chemical, resistance is organic**

Under the industrial system of agriculture land is a medium to be swept clean of its local characteristics and remade in the image of a Monsanto experimental field. The ground cover is scraped away and chemicals introduced turn any plot of earth in the world into a receptive medium for engineered crops that can be maintained through a constant drizzle of chemical inputs. As the natural nutrients are drained from the soil, the levels of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and humidity can be adjusted in response to signals from electronic sensors. The local ecological history of the land is of little interest.

Organic agriculture, by contrast requires an intimate knowledge of indigenous eco-systems and microclimates, of local crop varieties and the intricate relationships among native fauna and flora. Farmers who pursue such a practice apply broad knowledge in a fiercely local manner. The organic farm immerses itself in the history and cycles of its environment and depends on its ability to harmonize with them for its effectiveness.

The imperial project for Iraq came roaring across the desert with the intention of remaking the political landscape of the region in a rapid Wolfo-witz-kreig. It would replace autocrats with technocrats better qualified to manage the oil spigots in accordance with the dictates of Washington.

Its wheels got mired in the complex reality of a society with perceptions, traditions, and memories of its own that could not be quickly swept aside in the shock and awe of the onslaught. Iraqis are mindful that the United States was responsible for the decade of brutal sanctions and bombings that led up to the invasion as well as the preceding decades of cultivating the dictatorship. The invasion has awakened a nationalist resistance that encompasses supporters, foes, and simple survivors of the old regime. Its ranks were swelled by victims of the raids and mass detentions, employment purges, and anti-labor measures of the early summer, and the ongoing civilian killings. With uncanny precision the occupying authority is managing to harm, marginalize, or offend all social sectors on which it would have to depend to consolidate power.

### **To lose by not winning**

Henry Kissinger once stated that a guerrilla army wins by not losing and a conventional army loses by not winning. By this criteria the success of the military resistance is all but assured. Fragmented as it has been among dozens of separate forces, the guerrillas have rendered the country ungovernable in a short period and have maneuvered the occupying forces into an untenable position. The U.S. military is locked into a posture of viewing all Iraqis as likely enemies, which has led to a growing proportion of them becoming real ones. Few people other than Fox News dittoheads believe the official line that the resistance is composed of regime holdovers and infiltrated Jihadists. Machiavelli warned that the ruler who has the public as a whole for his enemy can never make himself secure; and the greater his cruelty, the weaker does his regime become. Lurching between random acts of brutality and kindness does not seem to be winning over a critical mass of hearts and minds on the ground.

The escalation of resistance has frightened away the countries that had thought to curry favor with the superpower by sending troops to the victory party. Getting significant assistance on the ground is no longer even part of the discussion. The strategy debate in Washington is revolving around whether to begin to reduce troop levels or massively increase them; whether to strengthen or disband the puppet governing council; whether to speed up or extend the development of a constitution and government; whether to escalate or lessen the military crackdown; whether to broaden or narrow the targets of the repression. None of these choices will significantly affect the outcome of the conflict.

The Bush administration has served notice on the other regimes of the region that even slavish loyalty to U.S. interests will not protect them from attack and possible overthrow. If it was not already clear, the president's speech on exporting Democracy should have left no doubt. It has thus assured that the Iraqi resistance will never want for financial resources. Even elites who view their interests as tied to those in Washington will understand that their security is best assured by a U.S. giant bogged down, humiliated, and internally divided by an unending conflict in Iraq. The oiligarchies of the region have deep pockets and multiple channels.

The regimes are also under pressure from below. The popular outrage over the invasion has reawakened anger at US complicity with the occupation of Palestine. Stopping the US in Iraq is seen as solidarity with Palestine. This broadens support for the Iraqi resistance and deepens the anger at any regime seen to cooperate with the crusaders.

### **The coup at home**

The depth of resistance to the attack on Iraq has shifted political alignments in a number of important ways. This opposition, whether internally in Iraq, in the European labor movement, the streets of Pakistan, the Parliament of Turkey, or among military families in the US, is very worrisome to important sectors of the US elite. It made it possible for

members of the UN Security Council to withstand US attempts to secure international cover for the invasion. The lead countries in that opposition had their own imperial interests that conflicted with those of Washington but it took massive public outrage to stiffen their spines and make actual defiance of the US possible. The anti-war movement did not create divisions among the international elites, but by asserting its own opposition to the war planning, it made those splits meaningful.

The recklessness of the boys in the saddle has alarmed the long-time architects of imperial strategy. Decades of careful clandestine work to cultivate media and intelligence assets in the Middle East have been buried in the rubble as the president has declared old friends to be enemies and allies to be potential targets. Cultural engineering geared to produce a benign image for the US has been destroyed in pursuit of short term objectives. We can observe what appears from the outside to be a CIA destabilization campaign against the White House inner circle. A succession of intelligence agents, State Department analysts, and groups of former intelligence officers (a suspect category at best), have been supplying the media and legislators with a steady diet of leaks and exposes of the inner workings and deceptions of the Bush team. They appear to have at least the quiescence of the current president's father (himself a former CIA chief). Strong, critical statements from non-candidate Al Gore (who has neither convictions nor spine) are an indication of powerful interests at work. Given that the president is more of a figurehead than an architect of policy, the covert opponents of the regime may be satisfied with replacing the inner circle of power brokers (they are particularly gunning for Rumsfeld) with advisers more in line with the internationalist imperialism of George senior. If that proves impossible, or if Bush is damaged too heavily in the attack, any of the leading Democratic presidential candidates will satisfy their needs.

This may be connected to parallel developments in Israel. There leading military figures and former intelligence chiefs are joining the chorus of voices challenging the military offensive against civilians in occupied Palestine. These leading architects of repression have not likely undergone a moral transformation. Rather they have come to fear the destabilizing impact of Sharon's policies.

It is not certain how the power struggle in Washington will be played out given the ruthless devotion to power demonstrated by the inner clique, but at this point the White House thugs appear to have the weaker hand.

Even a new administration may not be enough to limit the damage done to imperial interests in the region. The scenario most likely to preserve long-term prospects for US domination would require surrendering such hopes for the short term. That's probably too bitter a pill for even the more enlightened technocrats to swallow. It would offer a tempting opportunity to rival powers to move in on the oil supply chain. Indications are that beneath the divisions over tactics and strategy there is a consensus at the top in favor of absolute US dominance as the organizing principle for the emerging global order. Only the proper etiquette is at issue.

Those who would pin too high hopes on the possibility of regime change in Washington would do well to recall that the Iraqi death toll from sanctions and bombing under Clinton and Gore far exceeds the best efforts of the current administration to date. This does not make such a change irrelevant but it does not do to lose perspective. Democrat's fear of being labeled wimps often makes them eager to demonstrate their comfort with violent action. Only the continued growth of our movement can place a clear anti-aggression policy within their conceptual reach. Even then they can be expected to lag far behind the consciousness of people back in the districts.

### **Ripples in the storm**

The collapse of the World Trade Organization negotiations in Cancun was certainly facilitated by the

weakened position of the major champion of the talks. Public opposition to the war in much of the world links US international aggressiveness to its domination of the globalization juggernaut. Similarly, the boldness of southern cone nations in Latin America in pursuing regional alternatives to US-dominated free trade and the loss of momentum of the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Miami must be seen in this context.

If the build-up to war damaged US prestige as a global power broker, the rapid crash and burn of its occupation scenario has destroyed its mystique as an unstoppable power. Thirty five years ago the stalling of the US military machine in Viet Nam set the stage for the proliferation of third world national liberation movements and the emergence of power blocks such as the Non-Aligned Movement that stood outside of the cold war framework. The success of Vietnamese resistance to the US accelerated recruitment and coalition opportunities for insurgencies against both colonial and neo-colonial regimes. The rivalry of the cold war put constraints on US military options as well as ultimately permitting some maneuver space for lesser players. In today's very different environment it cannot be foreseen how things will play out but it is likely that this defeat will have an equally profound impact on the post-cold war landscape. Today's drama is taking place in a world dominated by a single superpower with unassailable technological superiority. This makes a defeat in Iraq an even more stunning proof of superpower vulnerability.

### **Bringing the chickens home**

The brazen pursuit of corporate advantage in every field has eroded traditional support for US foreign adventures. Sectors of the US labor movement joined in the pre-war opposition after having become convinced that there was no gain to be had from supporting the administration. This helped to give authority to a groundswell of opposition among their own ranks. More significant in the long run will be the disillusionment of rank and file military employees and their families. For a generation of recruits who were sold on the military as a vehicle for personal growth and opportunity, the reality of low intensity warfare in a hostile setting has been a horrific awakening. Government indifference to the needs of soldiers and veterans along with revelations about the false pretexts of the war has caused early and vocal expressions of dissatisfaction that have added an important dimension to the anti-war movement. The families of soldiers are taking a lead in the public articulation of anger at the manipulation and mistreatment of their loved ones. Already officials are concerned about future recruitment problems and half of National Guard and Reservists in Iraq are expressing doubts about re-enlistment.

In my article from 2001 I noted the inability of the administration to accurately read the emotional undercurrents among the people, imagining a solid mandate for their agendas that was in fact far softer than they believed. The miscalculation, I wrote, will cost them.

Two years later the costs are beginning to show. They call into question the viability of the New American Century agenda of the regime.

### **The power below**

There is a tendency on the left to see government and corporations as following an internal logic of their own to which other social sectors, including movements of opposition, react. In fact the relationship is more complex and reciprocal. Elite policy is always at least in part in response to, or in anticipation of, the resistance of its victims. The strategies which are collapsing in Iraq are ones that were developed in response to the experience of the US in its invasion of Vietnam. It was meant to short-circuit the possibilities for opposition both at home and in the target society. The idea was to engage in brief, surgical military actions backed by maximum force and overwhelming technological superiority. Victory

would be secured by decisively crushing all resistance at the outset. It would be over before a significant opposition could emerge at home.

The old guard around the first Bush backed off from attempting an occupation of Iraq twelve years ago out of the correct perception that it would present too formidable a challenge for that scenario to play out successfully.

The edifice of deception constructed to justify the war and occupation was a necessary attempt to translate the conflict into a moral framework that the public would approve of. It is a tacit admission that the people retain a moral self image that is in contradiction to the intentions of their rulers. The unwillingness of the regime to make more than rhetorical concessions to the moral concerns of their subjects has been a major engine of growth for the anti-war forces.

Where the regime too easily puts its trust in mirages of quick and easy victory, the movement too readily embraces visions of defeat. Particularly in the US, a culture of instant gratification and easy disappointment causes us to assume that we deserve (and therefore can expect) rapid satisfaction. When it does not materialize (the invasion goes ahead as planned) we question the usefulness of our actions. Whether activists respond by withdrawing from the streets or by searching for more dramatic outlets for their frustration, they are missing an important insight. The tactics that we choose are less important than the tenacity we demonstrate. Our opponents devote a tremendous amount and variety of activity to the goal of making us go away. We are a powerful presence even in their highest counsels; the elephant in the Oval Office.

The insistence by Bush that US troop strength will come down by summer is an illustration of this. The level of US military casualties in Iraq is not enough to trigger a withdrawal response in the Pentagon. What drives this extraordinary promise is concern over the growing anger at home. That this anger is so strong in response to what the military would define as a low intensity conflict must be very worrisome to them.

The most important task of anti-war forces around the world is to maintain our presence in the public square, to keep people involved. The strategies we choose must be measured against this goal. A tactic that converts people to passive observers is an inappropriate tactic. This is not an argument against militancy. A mass movement will and must offer a varied menu to participants. But the internal rhythm and temperature of a movement are what suggest the tactics to pursue. Effective activists and leaders learn to read these indicators and act in harmony with them. The tactic that would sideline many supporters one day might be just the right medicine two months later.

What we must not lose track of is that our responsibility as the second super-power (as the world-wide anti-war movement has been called) is to keep the pressure on. The idea that we are not being effective seems to grip our movements at the times when our opponents are most desperate to squirm away from us. This self-imposed injury contributed to the collapse of the massive movement against the Indochina war before its time. Remember, it has been less than a year since fifteen to thirty million people marched together around the world against an invasion that had not yet been carried out! They served notice that any government that joined the invader must fear for its own survival. Elites around the world are still processing this message. This is a power that no anti-war movement has demonstrated before. Underestimating that power or blinding ourselves to its impact, is a step toward surrendering it.

When Mark Twain and his colleagues organized against the US war on the Philippines a century ago, they were not shy about identifying themselves as anti-imperialists. They meant that they opposed the

creation of a global US empire, not only the conflict at hand. During the war against Vietnam this was an issue of contention: should the anti-war movement limit its politics to Bring the Boys Home, to appeal to the broadest public and thus end the war sooner; or should it raise larger issues of the US role in the world and risk alienating some sectors of the population but pave the way for resisting future conflicts? By painting a target across the map of the world the regime seems to have resolved the dilemma this time. It would take great political dexterity to avoid the larger issues of imperialism raised by Bush's war without end. Keeping those issues out of the public discourse is of great importance to our rulers. They quickly intersect with issues of racist social control, mass imprisonment, corporate control, and other impolite matters.

A phrase that has been coming to my mind recently is the slogan coined by Black Panther Party leader Huey Newton: "The power of the people is greater than the man's technology." In the decades since, with the development of narcotic sprays for crowd control, heat seeking bullets, and satellite and nano-surveillance technology, this sentiment has come to seem a bit quaint. It may be time to reconsider. Formidable as the new capabilities of the empire are, they still must be utilized in an environment shaped and governed by the histories of peoples and classes, and by multiple layers of memory, culture, and tradition.

How this cultural complexity will be given form in the realm of politics will depend on many factors. The existence of social organizations, the nature of traditional and emerging leadership, the level of sophistication of peoples' vision and analysis in all of the affected societies all have a role in shaping how resistance will be expressed; whether it will be revolutionary, reformist, or reactionary; effective or self-limiting; strategic or reactive; socially broad or narrowly exclusive. But it will be expressed. Leaders and organizations may influence and inform it, nurture it and try to direct it as it emerges. We do not bring it into being. That happens naturally. Resistance, after all, is organic.

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