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The real lessons of Fallujah

By Barry Grey
3 April 2004

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The images beamed around the world Wednesday of enraged Iraqis in Fallujah celebrating over the mutilated corpses of American paramilitary operatives were horrific. But it must not for a moment be forgotten that they are the product of an horrific, illegal colonial war. History is replete with examples of occupied peoples, in the face of the systematic brutality and overwhelming military superiority of foreign invaders, giving vent to their indignation and outrage in such acts of retribution.

No one has less of a right to adopt a posture of moral superiority than those in the American political establishment, military brass and media who are responsible for the brutalization of an entire society, carried out for the most crass and sordid economic and political ends. The US takeover of Iraq is, in every sense, a criminal enterprise. Everything connected to it is foul and degrading. It marks one of the most shameful chapters in the history of the United States.

Only eight months ago, it should be recalled, the US government published photos and video clips of the dead, bullet-riddled bodies of Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday and Qusay, two days after American soldiers had gunned them down. In that case, there was nothing spontaneous about the gruesome spectacle. It was a calculated and premeditated attempt to intimidate and demoralize Iraqi opponents of the US occupation.

Political leaders, Democratic and Republican alike, and all branches of the media, "liberal" no less than conservative, declare that the mountain of lies that accompanied the war must not be allowed to detract from the solemn task of completing the pacification of Iraq. In the wake of the events in

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Fallujah, they demand, with varying degrees of bloodthirstiness, an intensification of the killing, incarceration and terrorizing of the Iraqi people.

This necessarily entails a continuous stream of new lies to compensate for the exposure of the old ones. One of the lies that was peddled in the run-up to the war was the claim that the vast majority of Iraqis would welcome a US invasion. Throngs of Iraqis would line the roads to shower the GIs with bouquets, the American public was told. It didn't take long for this myth to be exploded, as helplessly outgunned Iraqi fighters put up an unexpectedly fierce resistance in the opening days of the war, and mass protests against the US erupted within days of the American takeover of Baghdad.

Since then, new myths have been concocted, including the claim that the anti-US resistance represents the sentiments of a small minority of terrorists, "Saddamists," criminals and incorrigible foes of democracy. The enemies of civilization, the story goes, are concentrated in the so-called Sunni Triangle west of Baghdad, and the worst of the lot are in Fallujah.

The myriad of facts that contradict the official line are systematically suppressed by the unspeakably corrupt and venal American press. How many Americans, for example, are aware that on the same day as the killing and lynching of the four Americans in Fallujah, some 10,000 Shiite Muslims marched in Baghdad to protest the American closure of an anti-American newspaper and demand an end to the US occupation?

The purpose of this grotesque distortion of the real situation in Iraq is not difficult to fathom. Those who are fighting in their own country to drive out the foreign invader are, by dint of their resistance, criminals who deserve to be, in current parlance, "killed or captured," and the very fact of their resistance justifies more repression and killing by US forces.

This in a country where thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, have already been killed in the course of the present war—a measure of the US government's contempt for Iraqi life is the fact that it does not even bother to give out a count of the war dead—and countless thousands more have lost their jobs, their homes and any semblance of a decent existence. Many of the dead and injured are the victims of horrific anti-personnel bombs and missiles, dropped by the US for the express purpose of mutilating human flesh. As for the toll of Americans, the official count of US soldiers killed has now reached 600.

The language and tone adopted by US officials and the media in response to the events in Fallujah leave no doubt that massive and bloody reprisals are in

the offing. The US proconsul in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer, called those who killed the four Americans and gloated over their mutilated bodies, “ghouls and cowards.” Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt in Baghdad said the people of Fallujah “just don’t get it,” labeled them as “bestial,” and declared the US military response would be “precise” and “overwhelming”.

Rupert Murdoch’s *New York Post* ran an editorial that branded the crowds in Fallujah as “thugs,” “savages,” and “cold-blooded, ruthless barbarians”. It accused the Associated Press, which distributed the video and photos of the attacks on the American corpses, of being in league with the insurgents.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorialized that all those caught on film in Wednesday’s events should be rounded up and “visibly” punished, with irregular combatants brought before military tribunals and publicly executed. The newspaper demanded as well that the US occupation authority crack down on radical anti-American Shiite clerics and their followers.

The *Journal*’s online edition carried a commentary by regular columnist Peggy Noonan, calling the teenagers who cheered under the bridge where the charred remains of two of the Americans were hung “human expressions of nihilism,” and demanding that the US marines go into Fallujah, “arrest or kill” the youth, and blow up the bridge.

The *Washington Post*’s language was more restrained, but its message was essentially the same. It called for US commanders to “step up the counteroffensive against the Sunni insurgency” and disband the Shiite militia of the anti-American cleric, Moqtada Sadr. It praised Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry for solidarizing himself with the Bush administration on the war and declaring, “[W]e are united in our resolve that these enemies will not prevail.”

The line of the *Post*, that more US troops are needed in Iraq, is increasingly the line of the Democratic Party, which has adopted a posture of unqualified support for the occupation and focused its criticisms of the Bush administration’s war policy on complaints that the White House is being too timid in the application of military force.

In line with the preparations for an intensification of US military violence, the White House issued a public warning to the media to further censor its coverage of the Iraqi conflict. At his press briefing on Wednesday, White House spokesman Scott McClellan enjoined news organizations to “act responsibly in their coverage”.

Among the few objective accounts in the press was a piece published Friday in the British *Guardian* newspaper by Jonathan Steele. Writing from Fallujah, Steele provided an account of the brutal actions taken by the marines in the days that preceded Wednesday's eruption of popular hatred. "But as residents ushered reporters into their homes a few days ago," he wrote, "shortly before this week's attack on four American security guards (though mercenaries might be a better term), it was clear that deep communal anger was lurking here, and had reached the boiling point. They wanted to show the results of several US incursions over four days and nights last week.

"Rockets from helicopter gunships had punctured bedroom walls. Patio floors and front gates were pockmarked by shrapnel. Car doors looked like sieves. In the mayhem 18 Iraqis lay dead. On the American side two marines were killed. It was the worst period of violence Fallujah has seen during a year of occupation.

"So this week's retaliation comes as no surprise. The cycle of violence that US troops unleashed looks and feels increasingly like Palestinian rage in the face of excessive force by an occupying power."

Calling the American response to Iraqi resistance "heavy-handed and indiscriminate," Steele went on to describe "the chaos the marines left after sleeping in [a Fallujah resident's] house. Cupboards were ransacked, a computer had gone, and empty brown bags which once contained army rations littered every room. He was particularly upset at finding them in his teenage sister's bedroom."

Steele concluded: "Not many of Fallujah's people are former Baathist loyalists, as the Americans say, nor have the Americans produced evidence of large numbers of foreign 'jihadists.' They are ordinary families, driven by nationalist pride, and increasingly by a desire to retaliate when their homes and neighbourhoods are violated and their relatives and friends killed."

In point of fact, the people of Fallujah have borne the brunt of the US-led vendetta against Iraq for more than a decade. In the first Gulf War of 1991, a British jet dropped a bomb on the town, killing 200 civilians. In the current war, Fallujah was the site of the first major massacre committed by US forces after the fall of Baghdad. On April 28, 2003, US troops fired into a crowd of unarmed protesters, killing 13. Two days later troops fired on a second demonstration, killing another 3 Fallujah residents.

In between these atrocities, the people of Fallujah suffered under the brutal 12-year regime of sanctions imposed at the behest of Washington. The denial

of food, medical supplies and other necessities took an incalculable toll on Iraqi society, killing, according to United Nations estimates, more than a million people, including hundreds of thousands of children.

As for the four Americans killed in downtown Fallujah on Wednesday, the media designation “civilian contractors” is highly, and deliberately, misleading. They were mercenaries, among the 15,000 soldiers of fortune who have poured into Iraq under contracts granted by the US occupation authority to private paramilitary security firms. These four were employees of Blackwater Security Consulting, a subsidiary of Blackwater USA. The vast majority of these privatized soldiers are veterans of various special operations outfits in the US military. They are invariably armed when carrying out their duties in Iraq.

Blackwater, founded by two Navy SEAL veterans, owns a 6,000-acre compound in northeastern North Carolina, where both private mercenaries and US military personnel receive specialized training in counter-insurgency techniques. Blackwater signed a \$35.7 million contract to train US Navy personnel in 2002. It is currently training Chilean commandos who served under the fascist dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet for service in Iraq.

Of the four Blackwater men killed in Fallujah, one has been identified as an Army veteran, and another as a former Navy SEAL. According to the company, they were employed to escort food convoys to US troops in the Fallujah area. Why they were driving two SUVs on their own in the town center on Wednesday has not been explained.

The *Guardian* article quoted above carries the subtitle: “The US is creating its own Iraqi Gaza.” The comparison between the methods of the US in Iraq and those of Israel in the Gaza Strip and West Bank is apt. In the coming days and weeks the methods of mass reprisal, assassination and exemplary punishment will become all the more commonplace as the US seeks to crush the deep-going and broad opposition of the Iraqi people to a savage colonial occupation.

As is being said with increasing frequency and openness in the press, the prospect is for years, if not decades, of such bloodletting. The implications for the people of the Middle East and well beyond—not least, the American people—are incalculable and ultimately catastrophic. The events of this week in Fallujah underscore the necessity for an independent movement of the American and international working class against war and the imperialist system that breeds it.

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