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Main Menu

- [Home](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Donate](#)
- [Gifts](#)
- [News from the Front](#)
- [PINR](#)
- [PINR-Español](#)
- [PINR-Francais](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Submissions](#)
- [Volunteer at YT!](#)

Other Options

- [AvantGo](#)
- [Feedback](#)

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"A five step plan to change course in Iraq"

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(YellowTimes.org) – After watching the images of the four unlucky American gunmen slain in Falluja, their bodies burnt then hanged, many Americans see in the crystal ball little besides more carnage. Indeed, the Sadr rebellion raises the specter of defeat. Most likely, U.S. forces can quash the immediate rebellion, but long-term prospects are hopeless. The guerilla war will intensify; the next revolt is guaranteed to be bigger and the one after bigger still. The U.S. can win every battle. It can destroy Iraq as it destroyed Vietnam. But there won't be a pro-U.S. Iraq.

Staying as a hated occupier means ever more death to both Americans and Iraqis. It also means motivating more attacks on American soil. Already, in most of the Middle East, Osama Bin Laden has a higher approval rating than George Bush. But to leave, so say all the talking heads, is unthinkable. To leave would be to show weakness; it would only embolden the anti-American rage, turn Iraq into a radical, perhaps Islamic, haven and base for those who want to fight America to the death.

Washington is befuddled. The Emperor, like the one in Hans Christian Andersen's story, is pretending nothing is wrong with his neo-con tailored war costume: He is playing baseball. The Anything-but-Bush team that won the Democratic primaries is showing its true colors, calling for staying the course, whatever that means.

George Bush finally lives up to the claim he is "a uniter, not a divider": Shi'a and Sunni rebels buried their differences and united against the occupation, often joined by the very U.S. trained police that was supposed to contain them. Meanwhile, Ariel Sharon's Washington-based vampires, William Safire in the Times and George Will in the Post, demand more Iraqi blood. Only the neo-cons keep their cool; their plan to sink the West into a millennial war is ticking like a well-rigged bomb.

Is there a way out? Yes. There is a way for Americans to quell the rage, and yet to earn respect and goodwill.

But first, Americans must come to terms with the deep origins of the current revolt.

Last year, the U.S. launched an unprovoked, wholly unjustified attack on a defenseless country. Over 50,000 Iraqis are dead as

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a result of that attack, 10,000 of them civilians, many children. The U.S. took over Iraq, deposed one dictator, Saddam Hussein, and imposed another, Paul Bremer. The new dictator, having installed himself in the same barricaded palace of his predecessor, immediately took to the ways of his predecessor as well -- abductions, torture, shooting into crowds, licensing, newspapers, sham elections, etc. With largely empty promises of a new dawn, the U.S. turned Iraq into a free-for-all Lootistan, awarding billions to chummy contractors and fire-selling Iraq's national assets.

All that is criminal in the highest degree. Yet over half of Americans supported it and still do. If people in the Midwest can applaud criminal leaders and support the killing of innocent civilians, so can people in the Middle East.

Compounding the outrage is the fact that Saddam Hussein's vilified Baath party rose to power with the encouragement of the CIA. Saddam, allegedly the little Hitler whose evil ways justified the war, was for many years a great friend of Washington. Much of his horrible criminal record was written while he was receiving military intelligence and help in weapon acquisition from the U.S., including help in producing biological and chemical weapons.

And even that isn't the worst. For over a decade, the U.S. imposed an international regime of sanctions against Iraq that resulted in the deaths of one million people, half of them children. The sanctions prevented Iraq from recovering from the deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure during the first Gulf War, condemning children to death by poisoned water and lack of medicines. This silent, bureaucratic mass murder was the result of an intentional policy forged in Washington. Asked whether the death of 500,000 Iraqi children was worth it, State Secretary Madeleine "Human Rights" Albright said yes.

Yet that policy was supported in the U.S. across the board, even to the extent that at the early stages of the antiwar movement, there were those who condemned Bush because they wanted the "successful" sanctions to continue.

There are ample reasons for Americans to be less than loved in Iraq. The road to Falluja wasn't paved last week. It took decades to pave.

But another road can still be paved. Despite the painful history of U.S.-Iraq relations, the firebrand leader of the rebellion, Moqtada Sadr, portrayed by the media as a hateful anti-American fanatic, still believes in the honesty of the American people. He has asked Americans publicly for help, urging the "American people to take sides with the Iraqi people, oppressed by [U.S.] leaders and the occupation army, to help them so that power is transferred to honest Iraqis."

Moqtada Sadr still sees a difference between the American people and the U.S. government. But it is up to Americans to prove that one exists.

Here is what Americans can do to change course:

Step 1: Force the government to leave Iraq. Obviously, Iraq is a sorry mess but U.S. withdrawal is the precondition for

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improvement.

Step 2: Apologize to Iraqis for the support of Saddam, the sanctions, and the war.

Step 3: Empower a special, international tribunal that would indict and try all those who had a role in shaping those U.S. policies that resulted in massive death and suffering in Iraq. The charges should be the most serious ones, crimes against humanity, mass murder, and international aggression. And the punishment should be appropriate.

Step 4: Create an international commission that will determine sums and rules for paying full and generous reparations to the Iraqi victims of these crimes and to their survivors. Then pay every penny.

Step 5: Augment the Pledge of Allegiance with an additional sentence: "As a citizen of the United States, I pledge to watch my government with diligence, so that never again can my government, through my negligence, commit crimes against humanity."

Will that earn Americans the respect and goodwill of the whole world, including the Muslim world? You bet! Then there is an important additional benefit -- it is the right and honorable thing to do.

At bottom, this should be a simple concept to grasp: respect and goodwill are not a birthright; they are earned and lost in deeds.

[Gabriel Ash was born in Romania and grew up in Israel. He is an unabashed "opssimist." He writes his columns because the pen is sometimes mightier than the sword - and sometimes not. He lives in the United States.]

Gabriel Ash encourages your comments: gash@YellowTimes.org

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