

Afghanistan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia

EVEN America's hardened warmongers are beginning to admit that we've got a nimrod in the White House who doesn't understand the first thing about war. He can start them, creating death and chaos, but that's about as far as he's gotten. What he hasn't learned is that there's more to ending a war than simply making a unilateral declaration that it's over.

Take Afghanistan. Our supposed war to rout terrorists from that sorry little piece of scorched earth killed more civilians than the 9/11 attacks against America. Yet, over a year after George W. Bush declared "victory," the US is still spending \$99million per month on troops still mired in combat against a regrouping Taliban army. The last year has seen, according to The Los Angeles Times, "A boom in opium production" and "rampant banditry." The occupation government of Hamid Karzai has no functioning authority outside of the cities of Kabul and Kandahar.

Press reports indicate that the Taliban enjoy little popular support. This is not surprising. It was not a populist uprising that put the Taliban into power. They seized control propped up with American arms and money at the end of the cold war, maintaining power by terrorizing the people of Afghanistan. This is what they're continuing to do today: burning schools that admit girls, killing international relief workers who are trying to rebuild the country and feed its people, and attacking workers attempting to clear mines from roads. They're doing this, according to reports in The Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post, with a growing army of mercenaries openly hired and armed in Pakistan.

The Washington Post reports that while Bush's Afghan war forced the Taliban leadership underground for six months, they're now back roving the countryside in bands

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of 50 or more fighters. Joining the Taliban in terrorizing the country is a plethora of warlords and narcotraffickers (with lines between the three groups often blurred). During the past week, some combination of these groups ambushed and killed six government workers. In recent months they've executed workers attempting to repair the country's water system, build schools and feed the population. As a result, the number of aid organizations working in Kandahar, for example, has dropped from 22 to eight, with reconstruction projects and food distribution grinding to a halt. The situation for women has also worsened in recent months, with organized gangs of men attacking and raping women both in schools and in their homes. Human Rights Watch reported last week that the US helped put these warlords into power in the wake of the war against the Taliban and that they are now terrorizing the population with impunity.

Muslim clerics are also coming under fire, with no effective protection from coalition forces or peacekeepers. In recent months, according to The Post, three Mullahs were executed after voicing support for the government of Hamid Karzai. In this environment, the establishment of a stable democracy stands little chance, with one Pashtun ethnic leader complaining that "If someone rises up to say something about democracy or social equity, than tomorrow he won't exist anymore."

Of course all of this instability and violence creates an ideal environment to nurture terrorists and the organizations that support them – hence the US is back where it started in Afghanistan. The only difference is that Afghanistan is more chaotic, violent and certainly more drug infested than it was at the onset of this little endless war – except now, thousands of people are dead and American troops are sitting vulnerable in the middle of this mess.

Meanwhile in Iraq

If Afghanistan is George Bush's nightmare, Iraq is the apocalypse. Sporting his signature smirk – dumb, yet arrogant - Bush appeared on the world's televisions on May Day (May 1st) to declare victory in Iraq. The war, according to Bush, was over. Since then, however, ABC News reports that 115 more US troops died in Iraq. Tell their parents that the war is over. This number includes 55 troops who died under enemy fire while supposedly not fighting in a war. The total number of troops killed in this not-a-war situation (115) is in fact rapidly approaching the number killed in the official war (140). If current trends continue (and I sincerely hope they don't), by mid-September, more American troops will have died since Bush declared "victory," than in the actual "war" itself. Wars don't end just because the official rhetoric says they are over.

While the official number of troops wounded during both the war and the "peace,"

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remains at 827 (Pentagon number) or 926 (Central Command in Qatar's number), US officials such as Lt. Colonel Allen DeLane, who commands the airlift of wounded troops to Andrews Air Force Base, place the number much higher. In an interview with National Public Radio, DeLane claims to have transported about 4,000 wounded troops to Andrews, with 90% of the injuries being directly war-related. That number, he said, doubles when you take into account injured troops transported to other facilities such as Walter Reed Hospital and Bethesda Naval Base. Since the war "ended," the number of injured troops arriving at Andrews has increased, with about 1,500 arriving during the month of May.

American deaths in peacetime Iraq are so common that the Associated Press reported that last week's killing of an American soldier "broke a period of relative peace" since "no US soldier had been reported killed in combat in Iraq in more than 48 hours" – an odd statement for a news outlet that reported the war had ended a month earlier.

Buffalo's ultimate sacrifice

I need to stop and take a breather here for a second. Quantifying dead people as statistics is one of the cold hard evils of social science. At least in the case of some of the American dead, it is possible to put names with the numbers. This is where Disney's ABC News division deserves credit – their "Primetime" website lists the names and hometowns of the American troops who died in Iraq, adding a breath of humanity to a cold heartless statistic. Reading this list illustrates the lopsided burden this war has placed on poor and working class Americans whose children make up over 90% of the armed services. Notably absent from this list of hometowns were names like Scarsdale. Instead the listed included places like Linden, New Jersey, Columbus, Ohio and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania – poor communities with high unemployment rates. Buffalo, now sporting one of the lowest per-capita income rates in the country, was horribly over-represented, losing three young people in Iraq.

Chaos and Hummers

The result of this war is that Iraq, like Afghanistan, is now mired in chaos. Rapes, armed robberies, random killings and assassinations are now as common as the Humvees patrolling the streets of Baghdad. We now know the original premise for the war was built on a foundation of shoddy lies. Like many former CIA "assets" now serving as dictators around the world, Saddam Hussein was a brutal thug. The war, however, was and is illegal – violating both US and international law.

Like Vietnam, Americans are dying every week while the nation wonders in vain trying

to figure out why they are there. Speaking to Reuters last week, Colonel David Teeple, commander of US forces for Iraq's largest province, said American troops are virtually powerless to stop escalating attacks against their convoys. Fearful of potential bombs, Teeple explains, they now look with suspicion at "any piles of sand, bags, garbage, tires [or] anything that may be close to the road." Any unfortunate Iraqis caught near such a pile or hump in the sand will potentially come under attack, according to Teeple, who says, "There will be action by the convoy against those that may be close enough to command detonate that." In short, with the war supposedly over, American troops are sitting ducks shooting at shadows. And Iraqi civilians are still dying, caught in a crossfire of fear.

In a letter to his local newspaper, *The Oregonian*, a 20 year-old Army private in Iraq complains about poor morale, writing, "It's hot, we've been here for a long time, it's dangerous, we haven't had any real down time in months and we don't know when we're going home." He goes on to explain that "we've become an occupation force" in the eyes of the Iraqis. "We don't feel like heroes anymore." High tech weaponry, he explains, is useless in this type of conflict. "We are outnumbered. We are exhausted. We are in over our heads... It would take a group of supermen to do what's been asked of us." We're clearly seeing shades of Vietnam here but with a new twist. Above the private's letter, on the online version of *The Oregonian* is a banner ad beckoning readers to "Test drive the Hummer H2." In a twisted surreal moment we see real working class soldiers mired in endless combat while chickenhawks back home play war with their personal fuel-guzzling Hummers on reconnaissance missions to the mall.

The Pentagon's solution to the morale problem is not to bring these troops home, or in any way increase their morale. According to *PR Week*, it's to curtail troop interactions with the press. To that end, they're shrinking their embedded reporter program, controlled and contrived as it was, and firmly ordering troops not to talk to the press without a public relations officer present. If they're effective, we won't be hearing many more grunts quoted like they were two weeks ago on ABC News, calling for Donald Rumsfeld to resign or including George W. Bush on a personal "most wanted list."

Continuing the sanctions

This is a war seemingly without end, and as evidenced by the false declaration of victory, without an exit plan. Even George W. Bush, while declaring his family's victory over the rival Hussein mob and a supposed end to the war, has all but admitted the defeat of his supposed policy in Iraq. On July 31st, Bush issued an executive notice declaring a continuation of the "National Emergency With Respect to Iraq" and calling for

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maintaining sanctions against that country.

Now this is certainly odd. One of Bush's prime justifications for the war was to remove the Hussein government, and hence, end the crippling sanctions that were leading to the deaths of so many Iraqi children. The Hussein government is gone. In Saddam's place right now is a US viceroy. The US is supposedly running Iraq. The war is supposedly won and over. Yet George W. Bush wants to continue the sanctions, still claiming Iraq poses a threat to US interests.

There's a modicum of reality here. Iraq today is more of a threat to US interests than it was before the war. According to The Boston Globe, George W. Bush's State of The Union speech assertions about al Qaida links to Iraq were just as false as his statements about Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Globe points out that in a 2001 State Department map of 45 countries with al Qaida operations, Iraq was not listed (Interestingly, al Qaida did operate in the US controlled Kurdish autonomous zone in Northern Iraq). They cite former CIA counterterrorism specialist Judith Yaphe, who claims Saddam saw al Qaida more as a threat than as an ally in a potential war against the US. "Bin Laden," she says, "wanted to attack Iraq after it invaded Kuwait in 1990." The US, however, after initially approving Iraq's attack on Kuwait, quickly turned on its former ally and beat al Qaida to the punch, beginning what history will see as the Bush Wars.

The "post-war" situation is now different. Al Qaida's strongest opponent on the ground in the Middle East, Saddam Hussein, is now powerless. In all likelihood, he'll soon be dead. The region's strongest secular government, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, is now gone. Fundamentalist forces which were never a factor in Iraqi politics, now have a strong foothold in Iraq as the country remains mired in chaos (commonly misidentified as "anarchy" in the press). Al Qaida, for the first time, is now openly operating in Iraq proper where they bombed the Jordanian embassy last week, killing about 20 people. All the sympathy that the world felt towards the United States after 9/11 is gone, with the US now reviled around the globe – a political reality that thwarts international cooperation in the fight against al Qaida. And images of US troops killing Muslims, coupled with the creation of thousands of martyrs (at press time, almost 8,000 civilians have been killed by US troops in the Iraq war) has given al Qaida a PR boost and recruitment tools that would have been unimaginable just months ago.

Who's the real enemy?

American troops are now bogged down fighting Vietnam style wars against guerrilla forces in Afghanistan and Iraq – yet Americans are exposed to more of a terrorist threat

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now than we were before these wars began. If the Afghan war was a sloppily executed knee-jerk reaction to the 9/11 attacks, the Iraq war was pure political opportunism. The 9/11 attacks created an opening for a nasty violent reactionary political culture while transforming the unpopular Bush into a popular leader. With this culture in place, the Bush administration had little difficulty leading a confused frightened nation into war. Endless code oranges kept us distracted while hyper-patriotism quelled potential dissent among dazed Democrats. A sudden nationwide bout of amnesia disposed of lingering questions regarding Bush's ascendancy to power. In this political environment we could have been led into almost any war – the Bush team strategically picked targets they identified years ago – Afghanistan and Iraq. Both of these countries, ironically, sported regimes which were formerly supported and armed by the Reagan and Bush Senior administrations.

The recent congressional probe into the 9/11 attacks, however, identifies a different foreign culprit. Their final report identifies the government of Saudi Arabia as being connected to the attacks. And if the Bush administration had its way, this is a fact that you'd never know, since they declared 27 pages of the long awaited report as "classified" – not for public view. The Los Angeles Times and the mildly conservative weekly, The New Republic, however, got access to the information on the classified pages, with both publications quoting US Government officials who read the classified report.

According to The Times, one of their government sources describes the report as documenting "very direct, very specific links" between Saudi government officials and two of the 9/11 hijackers as well as other co-conspirators "that cannot be passed off as rogue, isolated or coincidental." Another official described the report as "really damning," explaining, "What it says is that not only Saudi entities or nationals are implicated in 9/11, but the Saudi government as well." The New Republic's government source claims that, "If the people in the [Bush] administration trying to link Iraq to al Qaida had one one-thousandth of the stuff that the 27 pages has linking a foreign government to al Qaeda, they would have been in good shape."

The obvious question is why, if its the Saudi government that's connected to, or responsible for, the 9/11 attacks, did the US go to war with Afghanistan and Iraq? And why, with those wars still droning on with no end in sight, is the Bush administration rattling its sabers at Iran and Syria? The answer is painfully obvious. With Dick Cheney's Halliburton once again active in Afghanistan and Iraq, with US pipelines under construction in Afghanistan and with the US government controlling Iraq's oil ministry, it's clear that these wars had nothing to do with 9/11.

The big question now is, if the allegations against Saudi Arabia hold true, why would a

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government with very close ties to both the Bush family and the Bush administration, launch this horrendous attack against our nation? ●

If you would like to easily lobby your elected representatives and encourage them to stand up for American values by launching an independent investigation into the criminal behavior of the Bush administration, visit www.moveon.org and www.truemajority.org. You can help change the world.