

UFPJ SAYS: YES WE CAN...END THE WAR IN IRAQ!

Pressing for a rapid and complete end of the occupation of Iraq remains at the heart of the antiwar movement's agenda. What Washington does in Iraq will be pivotal in determining whether this country moves toward an era of peaceful, cooperative engagement with the rest of the world or stays mired in bloody, fruitless and never-ending wars.

In the context of this new administration, all eyes are focused on the future. But to move decisively into a new era, we cannot forget:

****For the last six years Bush's propaganda machine has repeatedly termed its Iraq adventure the "central front" in the fight against terrorism. Yet five years after "Mission Accomplished" U.S. intelligence agencies agree that every day the occupation continues the threat of terrorism worldwide increases rather than decreases.**

****The invasion and then occupation of Iraq has been - and remains - a human, political and resource-draining disaster for everyone involved. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of U.S. service members have been killed. More than four million Iraqis have been driven from their homes and remain unable to return. What was billed as the first step toward a "new Middle East" of democracy and development has instead fostered ethnic cleansing within Iraq and fanned racist demonization of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. The war wrecked much of Iraq's infrastructure – which has still not been rebuilt – and cost tens of billions of badly needed U.S. dollars, benefitting only a few blood-soaked war profiteers like Halliburton and Blackwater.**

****Episodes from the Iraq War have become symbols of all the ugliness and failure of a foreign policy based on might-makes-right arrogance. The nonexistent Weapons of Mass Destruction are a worldwide example of Washington lies. Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo are global emblems for torture and racism. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" fiasco now serves as a reminder to any government leader who thinks military power can solve complex political problems or make a people accept foreign rule.**

****Much of the initial momentum gathered by Barack Obama's presidential candidacy stemmed from his early opposition to the Iraq War. Continued U.S. occupation of Iraq is opposed by substantial majorities of both the Iraqi and U.S. people.**

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

Hemmed in by all these circumstances, the Bush administration was forced to accept provisions it didn't like in last year's "Status of Forces Agreement" with the Iraqi government. The most important of these called for a measure of control by the Iraqi government over U.S. combat military operations; set a 2011 date for all U.S. troops to be out of Iraq; and banned permanent U.S. military bases in the country.

But – even beyond allowing three more years of a brutal, unpopular occupation - the pact has loopholes. Even its best provisions are undercut and may not be enforced.

President Obama has pledged the withdrawal of all U.S. combat troops within 16 months. One of his first acts in office was to meet with his top military commanders to press the development of concrete plans to move this process along. But there are mixed signals from the administration concerning plans for "non-combat troops" and tens of thousands of "security contractors." The

White House has not issued any firm pledge that U.S. forces will totally withdraw from Iraq by 2011 or any other date.

And already supporters of the Iraq War have renewed their campaign for permanent occupation. Right-wing pundits and Bush appointees like outgoing Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker warn that "if he withdraws too fast" Obama will "jeopardize the gains" made under the previous administration. So far they've been relatively polite, but make no mistake: the "he's stabbed our troops in the back" and "Obama is waving the white flag to terrorists" rhetoric is right around the corner.

KEEP IRAQ IN THE SPOTLIGHT UNTIL THE U.S. IS TOTALLY OUT

It's not on the front pages right now, but this is a big fight: the future of the U.S. occupation of Iraq is on the line. The majority is now on the side of peace, and the antiwar movement's task is to keep this fight in the public eye and not let up until the U.S. is completely out.

One aspect of this task is countering, again and again, the right wing's claim that the war has been a success. For us it may be old news, but in every arena of public debate constant reminders are in order about what President Obama inherited on the front from George W. Bush:

The U.S. military did not stabilize Iraq and the "surge" did not work. The U.S. invasion wrecked the country and reconstruction efforts have failed miserably: Industry has collapsed, vast numbers of Iraqis are unemployed, and basic services - electricity, water, gas, sanitation - are intermittent or nonexistent. U.S. commanders did not foster genuine democracy but played divide-and-conquer, arm-this-faction-against-that games which has left the country fractured along sectarian lines with competing political militias, many with ties to neighboring states, wielding power in the streets. Baghdad is a warren of blast walls and walled-off enclaves, reeling from years of ethnic cleansing, and Iraq's provincial capitals are rife with intrigue with some on the brink of outright civil war. The U.S. military, far from being a welcome force for security and democracy, is a hated foreign occupier provoking more violence than it is preventing. On top of all this, the war and occupation in Iraq have already drained hundreds of billions of our tax dollars and thus contributed to the current economic crisis.

A second aspect is being totally forthright about what may lie ahead.

More violence and trouble may indeed accompany a U.S. withdrawal. But it is the result of illegal war and occupation, not of getting out. The best way to prevent it is for the U.S. to accept genuine Iraqi self-determination and accompany complete withdrawal with a totally different kind of "surge" on the reconstruction and diplomatic fronts. Genuine no-strings-attached aid and reparations to help Iraqis rebuild their country, and serious negotiations to foster national reconciliation strategy among Iraqis, drawing in all Iraq's neighbors and the United Nations in a common quest for the regional peace and development in which all have a stake.

IRAQ AND THE REGION, THE REGION AND IRAQ

And last, we must be up-front with the U.S. people about the interconnection between ending the war in Iraq and the other conflicts and problems plaguing the volatile Middle East. Iraq will not be able to settle its internal conflicts and rebuild in a region wracked with conflict between its neighbors, between Sunni and Shia, or between the people of the region and Europe and the U.S. This means that an Iraq peace agenda includes preventing escalation of the war in Afghanistan and

new incursions into Pakistan and setting the U.S. on course toward withdrawal and negotiations there. It likewise means challenging the blank-check for Israel policies that have dominated Washington for years and are so central to the overall tension between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Threatened escalation in Afghanistan and Israel's recent bloody assault on Gaza have necessarily moved these additional tasks higher on the antiwar agenda. But just as peace in Iraq is linked to progress on those fronts, they are bound up with success in getting the U.S. out of Iraq.

It is in Iraq where the failure of Washington's policies of militarism and war is most naked. Where the biggest majority of the U.S. people now demand change. Where the new President has staked his claim to reverse the disastrous course of his immediate predecessor. Ending the Iraq occupation – totally and rapidly - is where a breakthrough can and must be made. If we let this slip off our agenda, we are handing Bush a victory he could not achieve while in office. If we succeed, we open the door to a host of peaceful possibilities we can only now imagine.

END THE WAR IN IRAQ – YES WE CAN AND YES WE WILL!