

The Iraq occupation and the kidnapping of Douglas Wood

By James Cogan and Nick Beams
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The kidnapping and threatened execution of 63-year-old Australian citizen and US resident Douglas Wood is a further expression of the living hell that Iraq has become under the US-led occupation.

On May 1, an organisation calling itself the Shura Council of the Mujahedeen of Iraq sent a DVD to Al Jazeera and other news agencies. It showed a highly distressed Wood, with rifles aimed at his head, begging US President George Bush, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, Californian Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, his family and friends to “help take the American troops, the Australian troops, the British troops out of here and let Iraq look after itself”. It is thought he was kidnapped 24 to 48 hours before the video was aired.

A second video sent to news agencies on May 7 showed Wood, bruised, terrified and with his head shaven, and set a 72-hour deadline for the Australian government to announce a troop withdrawal or he would be killed.

One cannot fail to be moved by Wood’s plight. The Australian-born father and grandfather has lived in the United States for most of the past 40 years, working as an engineer at nuclear power plants and running various small business ventures. At an age when many people are considering retiring, he was lured to Iraq by a lucrative contract with the US military and has found himself in the nightmarish situation of being a political hostage.

Wood’s family, with the assistance of Australian journalists in Iraq, Australian Muslim community leader Sheik Taj el-Dene Elhilaly and media outlets in the Middle East, are attempting to have him released. Al Jazeera broadcast an appeal to the kidnappers by Wood’s brothers, who described him as a caring family man, with a serious heart condition and no involvement in politics. Elhilaly has flown to Iraq to deliver an offer by the Wood family to donate to an Iraqi charity, and appear with Iraqi clerics in joint calls for his release. Television ads appealing for his release are being broadcast in Iraq,

along with ads in the printed press. However, there has been no word on Wood’s fate since the May 10 deadline passed.

If Wood is executed then the responsibility will rest squarely with the Howard government, which committed Australian forces to support the imperialist plunder of Iraq’s resources and secure US backing for its own predatory activities in the Asia-Pacific region.

The lie that the war was launched because of the dangers posed by the weapons of mass destruction in the hands of the regime of Saddam Hussein has long been exposed. But now even the explanation offered up by Howard—that in committing Australian forces he acted on a genuine belief in the veracity of the military and other intelligence—lies in tatters.

On May 1, the very day the Wood DVD was broadcast, the British *Sunday Times* revealed that on July 23, 2002, Richard Dearlove, at that time the head of MI6, the British equivalent of the CIA, briefed Tony Blair and his national security officials that the Bush administration had decided to launch a war against Iraq. Dearlove told the British prime minister the war was to be “justified by the conjunction of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction” and that “the intelligence and facts are being fixed around the policy”. Howard knew this to be the case, just as surely as did Bush and Blair.

Thoroughly enmeshed in the intrigues, lies and outright criminality that mark the imperialist occupation of Iraq, Howard’s response to the Wood kidnapping was completely predictable. “I’m not giving in to hostage takers... We can’t have the foreign policy of this country dictated by terrorists.”

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, in his Boy’s Own style developed in the early 20th century tales of the British Raj, could not wait to front the television cameras and insist that Australia was holding firm. “Let me make it quite clear,” he said, “we will not be changing any

policies and we will not be paying any ransom.”

As for the Labor Party opposition, its leader Kim Beazley insisted that the party would “suspend” all criticism of the government, including its decision to send an additional 450 troops to Iraq. “We are as one with the government on this point, and that is you don’t shift policy on the basis of a terrorist act against you.” For Beazley, as with Howard, the bottom line is not the life of Douglas Wood but “essential Australian national interests”.

Not surprisingly, Beazley’s stance drew fulsome praise from the *Australian* with an editorial on May 9 declaring that “the Labor Party has behaved with enormous decency and commonsense, suspending debate over Iraq policy and backing the Howard government’s resolute stand.” The newspaper’s foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, articulated the indifference of the political establishment to Wood’s fate, calling him a casualty of the “democratic revolution” being unleashed by the Bush administration in the Middle East. The fact that his kidnappers called for Australia to withdraw its troops “indicates that we are on the right side and our efforts are having an effect”.

While Wood has acknowledged that he was employed on contracts for the US military, his kidnapping and threatened execution does not advance the struggle against the occupation one degree and is in fact profoundly reactionary.

Iraq’s subjugation will not be ended by these methods. Nor can this task be carried out by the Iraqi people alone. Above all, it requires the active political opposition of working people the world over to the crimes of the imperialist powers.

Kidnappings and murder of individuals such as Douglas Wood only serve to block the development of such a movement. They play straight into the hands of all those who are seeking to devise new justifications for the continued occupation, now that the lies on which the war was launched have been so thoroughly exposed.

All that the organisation which kidnapped Douglas Wood has accomplished is to provide the Australian political establishment with a propaganda field day. The majority of Australians opposed the Iraq war, oppose the deployment of Australian troops and sympathise with the Iraqi people’s right to resist the US invasion. The horrifying images of Wood’s torment have been used to demonise all such resistance as “terrorism” and justify the occupation on the grounds that it is preventing Iraq descending into barbarism.

The greatest confusion is being created by supposed

“left” opponents of the war who now give credence to the claim that the occupation is necessary to bring “democracy” to Iraq.

A typical example of this type of argument is provided by Clive Hamilton of the Australia Institute in an article published on May 6 in Australian Policy Online. “While the intervention in Iraq was based on misrepresentations and hypocrisy,” he wrote, “the fact is that withdrawal now would, in all likelihood, lead to catastrophic civil war.”

The reality is that the US conquest is the cause of every aspect of the catastrophe that exists in Iraq. The social crisis, the indiscriminate killing and destruction, and the torture and abuse that has been carried out by the US military, has produced a reservoir of growing opposition. Sectarian and terrorist methods are a by-product of the continued occupation.

The installation of the so-called “democratic” government—hailed by all the apologists for the US and its allies—is a case in point. In the last two weeks alone, over 400 people have been killed and more than 1,000 wounded in a wave of car bombings, some of which have been deliberately detonated to kill or injure Shiites on the ground that the US-backed regime in Baghdad is dominated by Shia political figures.

The killing of Douglas Wood will not serve the interests of the Iraqi people and will cut across the struggle for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all occupying powers. He should be released immediately. But if he does die, his blood will be on the hands of the Howard government.

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