

New York Times defends military escalation in Iraq

By Barry Grey
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The *New York Times* on August 13 published an editorial entitled “Wrong Way Out of Iraq” that unambiguously argues in favor of an indefinite US military presence in Iraq and against any significant reduction in troop levels.

The editorial cites the British government’s decision to pull out all but 5,000 of its original contingent of 30,000 troops and restation the remaining units at a relatively secure airbase outside of Basra as an example of what the US should not do.

The *Times* notes that the option chosen by the British government “follows the script some Americans now advocate for American forces in Iraq: reduce the numbers—and urban exposure—but still maintain a significant presence for the next several years.”

For “some Americans,” the *Times* editors could more accurately have substituted every leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. The Democratic frontrunners—Senators Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards—have all made it clear that they would maintain a scaled-down deployment of US troops in Iraq indefinitely for the purposes of “counterterrorism” operations and protecting US strategic interests; i.e., suppressing Iraqi resistance and assuring control of Iraq’s oil wealth by American-based energy conglomerates.

The *Times* editorial goes on to cite the disintegrating security situation in Basra, where the British have overseen the occupation for the past four years, declaring that the lesson is that “going partway is not a realistic option.”

The editorial concludes: “The United States cannot walk away from the new international terrorist front it created in Iraq. It will need to keep sufficient forces and staging points in the region to strike effectively against terrorist sanctuaries there or a Qaeda bid to hijack control of a strife-torn Iraq.

“But there should be no illusions about trying to continue the war on a reduced scale. It is folly to expect a smaller American force to do in a short time what a much larger force could not do over a very long time.”

The editorial marks a clear shift by the *Times*, which only last month published a page-long editorial entitled “The Road Home.” That statement, published July 8, began: “It is time for the United States to leave Iraq, without any more delay than the Pentagon needs to organize an orderly exit.”

The *Times* argued then that any chance of averting a civil war and establishing a stable, pro-US central government in Iraq was lost, and that leaving a large American combat force to intervene in the sectarian warfare would only make matters worse.

“Leaving troops in Iraq might make it too easy—and too tempting—to get drawn back into the civil war...”, the *Times* wrote. “The political

decision should be made, and the target date [for a drawdown of troops] set, now.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time (see “The *New York Times* and the crisis of American imperialism in Iraq”), the July 8 *Times* editorial was riddled with internal contradictions and was far from a call for an end to the war. We wrote:

“Exuding a sense of hopelessness and despair, riddled with internal contradictions, raising more questions than it answers, the editorial reflects more than anything else the perplexity of the US political establishment in the face of a catastrophe of its own making.

“Beginning with its title, ‘The Road Home,’ the statement reveals as well the duplicity of the Democratic Party and the liberal wing of the political establishment for which the *Times* speaks. As one reads the statement, it becomes clear that the newspaper is not really calling for a withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, but rather a redeployment leading to a permanent US military presence in Iraq and an expansion of American forces in the region. Such is the real content of the alternative to the Bush administration’s policy being promoted by the Democratic Party in the name of ‘ending the war.’”

Nevertheless, the July 8 editorial argued for a shift away from the White House’s military policy, including a withdrawal of American forces to secure bases distant from urban centers. The policy the *Times* advanced then roughly corresponds to the British example which the newspaper now rejects. How is this shift to be explained?

The *Times*, it should be noted, makes no attempt to square its latest pronouncement with what it published a little more than a month ago. It fails to even mention its July 8 policy statement.

In analyzing the *Times*’s shift to an openly pro-war policy, it is first necessary to reiterate that its differences—and those of the Democratic Party—with the war policy of the Bush administration have never been of a principled character. Both the *Times* and the Democrats supported the decision to invade and occupy Iraq, whatever their differences with the Bush administration over the best means of carrying the decision out.

The disagreements within the political and media establishment over the war, although at times quite sharp and bitter, are of a tactical character, fueled by the disastrous failure of the US intervention. Virtually all factions of the American ruling elite supported and continue to support the imperialist aims that underlay the war, centered on establishing unchallenged control over the vast oil resources of Iraq and using the occupied country as a strategic base for projecting American economic, political and military power throughout the region.

If anything, there is a growing consensus within the ruling elite that no matter the cost in blood and treasure—both Iraqi and American—and

no matter how great the popular opposition within the US to the war, a pullout from Iraq would be a defeat for US imperialism of such catastrophic proportions as to be out of the question. For American imperialism, the war in Iraq is only one front in a much broader strategy for establishing US domination over the Middle East and the entire world.

The timing of the *Times*'s latest editorial is doubtless related to the report due next month by the US commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, on the progress of the military "surge" announced by President Bush last January. Statements by Petraeus and other military officers have made it clear that the general will call for a continuation of the military escalation and reject any timetable for a reduction in troop levels.

Virtually all leading Democrats have accepted the supposed right of the military command to dictate basic policy in Iraq, and the *Times* is adjusting its position in advance to accommodate itself to Petraeus's dictat.

But there is something else at work here. In its editorial of July 8, the *Times* motivated its decision to support the setting of a date for a partial withdrawal of troops with the following declaration: "It is frighteningly clear that Mr. Bush's plan is to stay the course as long as he is president and dump the mess on his successor."

This statement establishes a clear thread of continuity between the *Times*' nominally antiwar editorial of July 8 and the openly pro-war position it advanced on August 13. With the first phase of the 2008 presidential election campaign—the primary contest—in full swing, and the prospect of a Democrat capturing the White House looming large, the *Times* is shifting its line to prepare the way for the eventual Democratic candidate to abandon the party's antiwar pretences.

This is indicated by the front page article published by the *Times* on Sunday, August 12, headlined "Democratic Field Says Leaving Iraq May Take Years." As is frequently the case with the so-called "newspaper of record," articles are strategically placed which, in the form of "news," suggest an editorial line that is subsequently spelled out on the opinion pages.

Sunday's article is a thinly veiled proposal of ways and means by which the leading Democratic presidential candidates can massage their ostensibly antiwar message with the appropriate caveats so as to suppress and confuse popular antiwar sentiment and, once elected, continue and even expand the war.

The article begins: "Even as they call for an end to the war and pledge to bring the troops home, the Democratic presidential candidates are setting out positions that could leave the United States engaged in Iraq for years."

The article continues: "These positions and those of some rivals suggest that the Democratic bumper-sticker message of a quick end to the conflict—however much it appeals to primary voters—oversimplifies the problems likely to be inherited by the next commander in chief. Antiwar advocates have raised little challenge to such positions by Democrats."

It goes on to say: "The candidates are not only trying to retain flexibility for themselves in the event that they become president, aides say, but are also hoping to tamp down any expectation that the war would abruptly end if they were elected."

The *Times* implicitly makes the case for a Democratic president to extend the war. The newspaper writes: "Among the challenges the next president could face in Iraq, three seem to be resonating the most: What to do if there is genocide? What to do if chaos in Iraq threatens to engulf the region in a wider war? And what to do if Iraq

descends into further lawlessness and becomes the staging ground for terrorist attacks elsewhere, including in the United States?"

It is highly significant that the *Times* marshals in support of this cynical and two-faced policy the compliance of, in its words, "antiwar groups." The article declares that "... a new phase of the debate seems to be unfolding, with antiwar groups giving the Democrats latitude to take positions short of a full and immediate withdrawal."

It cites as representative of antiwar groups the Democratic Party-aligned MoveOn.org and its "affiliated group" Americans Against Escalation in Iraq. The article concludes with a quote from a spokeswoman for the latter, who says, "We are in a good position when leaders are debating the best way to bring our troops home rather than whether or not to bring them home."

The *Times* implicitly counts as legitimate only those "antiwar groups" which insist that opposition to the war must be oriented toward pressuring Congress and electing a Democratic president. The newspaper could, on this basis, have named other left-liberal organizations and tendencies, such as United for Peace and Justice and the *Nation* magazine.

The *Times* editorial of August 13 and the article which preceded it should be taken as a stark warning by all those seriously opposed to the war in Iraq and what Bush likes to call "the wars of the 21st century" that are looming in the near future. There is no genuine antiwar faction within either big business party or any section of the US political establishment. All of the "left" organizations and tendencies that propagate the myth of an antiwar or "progressive" wing of the Democratic Party play a critical role in undermining and preempting any effective movement against militarism and war.

The policy now openly advanced by the leading organ of American liberalism makes clear that the transfer of the White House to a Democrat in 2008 will not end the war in Iraq or forestall a further eruption of American imperialism in the Middle East and beyond. On the contrary, growing sections of the US ruling elite consider the election of a Democrat the best political option for taking the measures required to sustain an ever-expanding series of military attacks and neo-colonial interventions, beginning with the restoration of the draft.

The way forward in the fight of working people and youth against war proceeds from a rejection of all efforts to corral the struggle behind the parties of the ruling elite. To end war, it is necessary to put an end to the capitalist system that is its root cause. The sole force capable of achieving this is the American and international working class, which must be united and mobilized on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.

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