ANALYSING THE IRAQI ADVENTURE, 2005

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The current intervention of the US in Iraq needs to be seen in the context of US foreign policy over the last thirty to forty years. During this time, US foreign policy has been prosecuted primarily to advance national interests. National interest, here, means primarily economic interests and especially the interests of large US corporations; many powerful figures in the Republican and Democratic parties (and their families) have close financial ties with such companies.

In this context, the US has been prepared to support many regimes that were generally sympathetic to them in South America, Asia, and elsewhere, even though the regimes were undemocratic and/or violated human rights (some examples are Argentina, Chile and Saudi Arabia). They have also been prepared to use force (both covert and overt) to try to destroy regimes that were not sympathetic to them (for example Vietnam, Chile and Panama), even when those regimes were democratically elected. Sometimes, a repressive regime that had been supported by the US has come to be a target once its sympathies changed. This is exactly the case in Iraq. Saddam Hussein was supported by the US, both financially and militarily, when Iran was attacking US interests, even though his regime was well known to be repressive. Things changed when Iraq itself came to be a threat to US interests (notably, with the invasion of Kuwait).

Of course, the US did not want their current invasion to appear to be an act of naked aggression. They therefore required a pretext (as do most countries that invade others). Their invasion would also seem more legitimate if it had the backing of the UN, which is why they spent so much time trying to obtain this. However, it is clear that early in its days the Bush administration had decided to invade Iraq, and that they were prepared to go ahead without UN backing if necessary.

The pretext they settled on was the possession by Iraq of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and the preparedness of the regime to supply these to groups such as Al Qaida. It is now clear that both of these claims are false. It is also clear that there was little evidence to support either of these claims before the invasion (indeed, the evidence

pointed clearly in the opposite direction). The evidence therefore had to be manufactured.

Once it became clear that this justification could no longer be maintained, the WMD issue was quietly forgotten. The 'liberation' of Iraq from a repressive regime was touted instead. The fact that the US had supported this regime was quietly forgotten (voters have a distressingly short memory and/or knowledge); nor was it mentioned that there were many equally repressive regimes in the world that it would have been much easier to get rid of (such as Zimbabwe).

After the invasion of Iraq, the US did not particularly want to occupy the country. Occupation is a costly business. What it wanted was to set up a friendly regime (a puppet regime if necessary). This was a strategy that was deployed in South Vietnam, though it would appear that the lessons of that particular episode have been forgotten. Setting up such a regime has (predictably) proved much harder than the Bush administration had hoped. The level of instability in the country caused by the invasion, together with general anti-US sentiment in the Middle East (caused by generations of US foreign policy, notably concerning Israel) have meant that an administration sympathetic to the US can be maintained only by the massive support of US military force. *De facto*, then, the occupation will continue for the foreseeable future.

Two other features of the situation are worth noting. The first is the language of human rights. This is a significant ideological weapon for the US. First, human rights *are* important. Secondly, they are close to the hearts of many Americans, which makes an appeal to them very effective. Thus it is that the US can always use an appeal to human rights violations in its attacks on powers not sympathetic to its interests. US administrations have generally not cared much about human rights, however. They have been prepared to support many dictatorships that violate human rights when it suited them. The current violation of human rights by the US is just another example of this. What events led, exactly, to the policies of torture in Abhu Ghraib, we may never know for sure. But what is clear is that the US administration has not only violated human rights, but produced the context in which such violations can flourish (making the hollowness of the regime-change pretext apparent). Putting people in Guantanamo

Bay, where, the Administration hoped, the detainees would be beyond the protection of the law is an obvious example of this; another is Bush's explicit declaration that he had no problems about violating the Geneva Convention when it suited him.

The second concerns activity by Al Qaida and similar groups. The nature of US foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, has not gone unobserved by the inhabitants of the region; this has produced the context in which Al Qaida can flourish. The present adventure in Iraq has given enormous strength to such groups. First, by producing yet another example of US self-serving foreign policy, people's resentment to the US has grown. Secondly, by producing the post-war chaos that any invasion makes inevitable, it has provided the material circumstances in which guerrilla activity of this kind can flourish (as well as providing an eminently accessible target). Thus, the action has done much to promote the circumstances that generated the attack on the US of September 11, and make similar occurrences inevitable.

What will happen in Iraq in the coming years one can only speculate. However, it seems almost certain that guerrilla violence will continue. This will presumably occasion an increasingly repressive regime backed by the US military. At some stage, driven by US deaths (and foreign criticism) this will become unacceptable to US public opinion. Whichever administration is then in control will then have to negotiate some face-saving pull-out. What will happen in Iraq after that is anyone's guess. It is unlikely, however, that things will settle down to stability as they did in Vietnam. The US invasion has destabilised an area that was already highly volatile. If anti-US regimes come to power after the debacle, as seems likely, the invasion will have been counter-productive to US interests on all fronts – a major policy miscalculation. And one which has not only killed and maimed many (often innocent) people and will continue to do so; one that has also made the world a more dangerous place – for those in the Middle East, those in the US, and those in countries perceived as supporting US foreign policy.