

# THE PERILS OF OCCUPATION

Statement by the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy - October 2004

In this election season, we still need a realistic debate over the most costly and dangerous American foreign policy action in recent history: the military occupation of Iraq. We are a diverse group of scholars, analysts and former government officials from across the political spectrum who believe that the use of military force to direct the internal affairs of other nations is detrimental to American national security.

We question the new conventional wisdom, which proclaims the need for the United States to "stay the course" in Iraq by maintaining a substantial army on the ground. It is reminiscent of last year's conventional wisdom, which uncritically accepted the need for an invasion to eliminate Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction." The experience of the past year and a half has demonstrated that instead of producing stability, the presence of American troops inside Iraq is a continuing incitement to nationalist insurgency and regional upheaval.

Despite claims that the United States has now transferred "full sovereignty" to an interim Iraqi Government, it remains fully subject to American decision-making. Its handpicked leadership is constrained by laws enacted by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and lacks jurisdiction over the 160,000 foreign troops now based on its territory. That American led force retains final authority over Iraqi security, a mission that has previously been used to justify interference with protest, the censorship of newspapers, mass arrests and extended incarceration of people without formal charges or access to counsel.

At the time of the June handover, the Coalition Provisional Authority's own polling data revealed that 82 percent of the Iraqi public disapproved of the U.S. and allied military presence in their country. If the Bush Administration is serious about the right of Iraqis to determine their own destiny, there can be no rationale for requiring them to accept foreign troops on their soil, when a majority wishes them to leave. The existing state of affairs is compromising to both governments. The United States is held responsible for problems it cannot solve, while the new interim Iraqi government is deprived of popular legitimacy and the opportunity for independent action.

For the people of Iraq, the American occupation has brought neither physical safety nor economic improvement. More than 10,000 civilians have lost their lives in the crossfire between U.S. troops and the insurgents. To the harshness and unpredictability of daily existence, the shocking abuses at Abu Ghraib prison and other detention facilities have fanned an escalating sense of national humiliation.

For the people of the United States, the human and financial costs of the Iraqi venture have far exceeded the projections of the Bush Administration. Over 1,100 servicemen and women have died, more than 8,000 have been wounded and thousands of others have been evacuated because of illness and "non-combat" injuries. At least \$140 billion has already been spent on the Iraq war, with operations continuing to cost over \$1 billion a week, draining resources that are vitally needed here at home. Meanwhile, our Army is dangerously overextended, and the National Guard and Reserve systems are reeling under the new demands.

The effort to combat international terrorism through a strategy of Iraqi occupation has proven to be impractical and counter-productive. It has inflamed public opinion in Iraq and throughout the Muslim world, weakened the support of vitally needed allies, diverted energy and funds from the campaign against Al Qaeda and handicapped efforts to improve safety inside the United States.

**We urgently need a principled, realistic approach to the crisis in Iraq, one that takes seriously the right of Iraqis to control their own country and that recognizes the limitations of American power.** In the political sphere, this means abandoning the hitherto misguided efforts to choose Iraqi leaders, impose governmental structures and enforce American-drafted laws. In the military sphere, it means ceasing offensive operations immediately, pulling troops away from heavily populated areas and beginning a process of phased but rapid withdrawal, following the election of a new Iraqi government.

The United States can play a vital role in assisting Iraqi reconstruction and providing technical support for the scheduled elections. However, this help will not be welcome so long as the Americans are perceived as occupiers. By the same token, the international community has a legitimate interest in seeing that Iraq does not acquire "weapons of mass destruction" or become a new base for terrorism. It can more successfully address these concerns, once the specter of American domination has been eliminated.

At this historic juncture, the United States faces a critical choice. We can persist in imperial policies that are sacrificing our soldiers every day and heightening antagonism all over the world, or we can embrace an approach that combines democratic values with a more responsible understanding of our national interest.

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