

# CounterPunch

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## OUR LITTLE SECRETS

### BUSH'S IRAQ MESS: GETTING WORSE BY THE DAY

BY PATRICK COCKBURN

A plume of dust and smoke rose from a field just outside Fallujah, west of Baghdad, on November 3, where a giant American Chinook helicopter, crippled by a missile, had crashed and burned, killing at least 18 and wounding another 20 of the soldiers and crew on board. It was the worst single military disaster for the US in Iraq since the war to overthrow Saddam Hussein started in March. It means that the US forces in Iraq may in future days have to rely less on helicopters and use the roads—which in this part of Iraq are almost equally hazardous.

The destruction of the helicopter should underline the speed with which the war in Iraq is intensifying: 16 US soldiers were killed in September, 33 in October and a further 16 in just the first two days of November. It is also spreading north, to the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk. But even as I was driving to Fallujah, just before the helicopter was brought down, I heard on the radio President Bush repeat his old mantra that "the Iraqi people understand that there are a handful of people who do not want to live in freedom."

It is an extraordinarily active handful. I heard from a shopkeeper in the centre of Fallujah that a Chinook helicopter had been shot down on the other side of the Euphrates river, which flows through the town. It was only three or four miles

(OLS continued on page 2)

## From Clinton to Bush: The Contours of Descent

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN

My plan here is to describe and extol Robert Pollin's conclusive epitaph on the economic legacy of Bill Clinton, so by way of introduction here's a signpost, pointing along the road many are doomed to follow since Clinton's attack on welfare. I found it planted in a dispatch from Ohio by Julian Borger in the London Guardian on November 3. Borger edifies his readers with an account of a visit to a soup kitchen in Ohio where he reports that "hunger is an epidemic".

Since Ohio went for Bush in 2000, Borger narrates, the state has lost one in six of its manufacturing jobs, many of them on account of the trade policies espoused by Clinton and now Bush. Two million of Ohio's 11 million population resorted to food charities last year, up 18 per cent from 2001. In 25 major cities across the country last year the need for emergency food rose an average of 19 per cent.

Last year another 1.7 million Americans slid below the poverty line, bringing the overall total to 34.6 million, one in eight as a proportion of the population. Over 13 million are children. The U.S. has the worst child poverty and the lowest life expectancy of any industrialized country.

About 31 million Americans, Borger reports, are reckoned to be "food insecure", meaning they don't know where the next meal is coming from. Nine million are classed by the USDA as suffering "real hunger", defined as "an uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food due to lack of resources to obtain food".

Now to Robert Pollin's *Contours of Descent*, subtitled *U.S. Economic Fractures and the Landscape of Global Aus-*

terity, just published by Verso. Pollin, who teaches at U-Mass, has robust credentials as a highly intelligent, technically reliable economist with a radical backbone. He's been one of the prime architects of the Living Wage movement. You can trust his numbers and understand his prose.

Across his 238 pages Pollin is unambiguous on the career of neoliberalism whose function ever since 1980 has been to hike post-tax corporate profits and get the rich securely back in the saddle: "It was under Clinton that the distribution of wealth in the US became more skewed than it had at any time in the previous forty years." Pollin adds an essential rider to fundamental economic failure within the US. Any US president who claims proudly (as they all do) to be the leader of the free world (excepting the Chinese People's Republic, which currently performs the vital function of financing a huge chunk of the US deficit, thus keeping the whole show on the road) has to take responsibility for the failures as well as the presumed successes. Under the coercions of such US-dominated institutions as the IMF and World Bank, most of the world is worse off than it was quarter of a century ago, at the dawn of the neoliberal era.

Neoliberalism gives us a world of tramps and millionaires, which the populist Ignatius Donnelly stigmatized as the economic emblems of the Gilded Age. Pollin instructs us that within the US under Clinton the ratio of wages for the average worker to the pay of the average CEO rose from 113 to 1 in 1991 to 1 to 449 when Clinton quit. In the world, ex-  
(Descent continued on page 3)

(OLS continued from page 1)

away, but on the way we drove past the remains of a US truck which had been blown up two hours earlier by a bomb or rocket-propelled grenade. On the other side of a bridge over the river was a minibus taxi punctured by shrapnel, its interior sodden with blood. Locals claimed it had been hit by a US missile, which killed one passenger and wounded nine others.

But the White House and the Pentagon seem unable to comprehend how swiftly the US political and military position in Iraq is deteriorating. Even after half a dozen rockets hit the al-Rashid Hotel, narrowly missing Paul Wolfowitz, the US Deputy Secretary of Defence and one of the architects of the war in Iraq, US generals in Baghdad were still contending to incredulous journalists that overall security in Iraq was improving.

In his blindness to military reality Mr Bush sounds more and more like the much-derided former Iraqi Information Minister, 'Comical Ali', still claiming glorious victories as the US army entered Baghdad. Every attack is interpreted as evidence that the "remnants" of Saddam's regime are becoming "desperate" at the great progress being made by the US in Iraq.

Two arguments are often produced to downplay the seriousness of the resistance. One is the "remnants" theory: A small

group of Saddam loyalists have created all this turmoil. This is a bit surprising, since the lesson of the war was that Saddam Hussein had few supporters prepared to fight for him.

In fact the "remnants" of the old regime have become greater in number since the end of the war. The US occupation authority has been the main recruiting sergeant. It has behaved as if Saddam Hussein were a popular leader with a mass following. It has dissolved the Iraqi army, leaving 400,000 trained soldiers without a job, and sacked Baath party members. A friend, long in opposition to Saddam, told me: "Two of my brothers were murdered by Saddam, I fled abroad, but now they are going to fire four of my relatives because they were forced to join the Baath party to keep their jobs."

Another comforting method of downplaying the resistance is to say it is all taking place in the "Sunni triangle". The word "triangle" somehow implies that the area is finite and small. In fact the Sunni Arabs of Iraq live in an area almost the size of England. Ghassan Atiyah, a distinguished Iraqi historian and political activist, believes that "if the Sunni Arabs feel they are being made second-class citizens they will permanently destabilise Iraq, just as the Kurds used to do".

Mr Bush's solution to all this is to get Iraqis to fight the resistance. The US-run Coalition Provisional Authority, isolated in its fortified headquarters in Baghdad, says it plans to deploy a force of 222,000 police, military, civil defence and other security organisations by next September.

This sounds impressive. But only 35,000 of these will be troops of the new American-trained Iraqi army. There are many police on the streets of Baghdad, and they have successfully reduced crime. But in interviews they always make clear that they see their job as protecting ordinary Iraqis from criminals. They very reasonably have no desire to be pushed into a paramilitary role, for which they are neither trained nor equipped. They do not want to be portrayed as collaborators, particularly in areas where the resistance is strongest and the Americans would need them most. In Fallujah, perhaps the most militant town in Iraq, the police openly say they will not patrol or man checkpoints with US troops. As I was leaving the police station in the town last week, I heard an unseen policeman in a sentry box crooning a patriotic song filled with praise of Saddam Hussein.

The US could have avoided many of its present problems if it had given greater legitimacy to the occupation at an early stage. It can only recruit an effective Iraqi security force, capable of fighting guerrillas, if there is a legitimate Iraqi provisional government. Iraqis simply will not fight if they are asked to join a force which is viewed as an adjunct to an American army. They see no reason why they should be cannon fodder for a foreign regime.

The US could have legitimised the political reconstruction of Iraq in the eyes of Iraqis if it had placed the process under the auspices of the UN. Instead it repeatedly rebuffed the idea. Now, as the last UN foreign staff leave the country, it is probably too late.

Paul Bremer, the head of the CPA, this week pledged to hand over more power to Iraqis. But there is no sign in Baghdad that this is more than window dressing. The US-appointed Governing Council is mostly made up of exiles and nonentities. Only its Kurdish members have a demonstrable constituency in Iraq. It has little authority. Ministers privately complain that US officials in Baghdad simply bypass them and take all the important decisions themselves.

Because the US has sought to monopolise power in Iraq, it has few real allies aside from the Kurds, the smallest of Iraq's three communities. The Sunni Arabs are mostly hostile, and the Shias increasingly so. The only way out for the US - though it is getting very late in the day - is to hold elections to create an Iraqi authority, effectively a provisional government, which Iraqis know they have chosen themselves. A general election would be difficult to organise at short notice. But even a body of delegates chosen by local leaders in each governorate would have some claim to speak for Iraq.

The US toyed with the idea of local elections in mid-summer. But it was frightened off by a fear that the new body would be dominated by Shia clerics or their supporters. The Shia, at least 55 per cent of the population, are eager to show their electoral strength.

The failure to create an elected and legitimate Iraqi provisional government, even if it is an interim administration, will make it impossible for the US to set up a security force that will not be seen as collaborators by most Iraqis. Fallujah, where hatred of the Americans is almost palpable, is not yet a typical Iraqi town, even in Sunni areas, but it may soon become so. CP

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