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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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## Why the U.S. Occupation is Faring Better in Iraq

By Patrick Cockburn

**S**ome 19 U.S. soldiers were killed in December 2007, the lowest number of American military fatalities in a single month since the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. As recently as May this year, 135 U.S. soldiers were shot dead or blown up by Iraqi guerrillas.

The fall in U.S. casualties was one of the most surprising events of 2007. At the beginning of the year, the U.S. occupation in Iraq seemed to be clinging on by its fingertips, as more and more of the country came under the control of Sunni and Shia warlords. Twelve months later, U.S. units were peaceably patrolling districts of Baghdad, where once they faced ambushes at every street corner.

Viewed from the White House, events in Iraq seem to be one of the few optimistic developments in the series of crises facing the U.S. in the central core of the Islamic world, as the fragility of the U.S. position is underlined by the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, one of its main allies, in Pakistan.

Iraqis and the outside world are equally perplexed as to what this means. Are we seeing the beginning of the end of the fighting in Iraq, a conflict, which has now gone on for longer than World War I? Or is it a lull in the violence that is bound to end because Shia, Sunnis, Kurds and Americans are as divided as ever?

Significant changes have taken place in Iraq in the last twelve months. The most important is that part of the Sunni Arab community, the core of the insurgency against the U.S. occupation, has changed sides and is now fighting al-Qaeda in alliance with the U.S. military. This dramatic switch in allegiance occurred primarily because the Sunni Arabs, only 20 per cent of Iraq's population, were being

## Hogwash

### Fecal Factories in the Heartland

By Jeffrey St. Clair

**I** grew up south of Indianapolis, on the glacier-smoothed plains of central Indiana. My grandparents owned a small farm, whittled down over the years to about 40 acres of bottomland, in some of the most productive agricultural land in America. Like many of their neighbors, they mostly grew field corn (and later soybeans), raised a few cows, and bred a few horses.

Even then farming for them was a hobby, an avocation, a link to a way of life that was slipping away. My grandfather, who was born on that farm in 1906, graduated from Purdue University and became a master electrician, who helped design RCA's first color TV. My grandmother, the only child of an unwed mother, came to the U.S.A. at the age of 13 from the industrial city of Sheffield, England. When she married my grandfather, she'd never seen a cow. A few days after the honeymoon, she was milking one. She ran the local drugstore for nearly 50 years. In their so-called spare time, they farmed.

My parent's house was in a sterile and treeless subdivision about five miles away, but I largely grew up on that farm: feeding the cattle and horses, baling hay, bush-hogging pastures, weeding the garden, gleaning corn from the harvested field, fishing for catfish in the creek that divided the fields and pastures from the small copse of woods, learning to identify the songs of birds – a lifelong passion.

The farm, which had been in my mother's family since 1845, was in an unalterable state of decay by the time I arrived on the scene in 1959. The great red barn, with its multiple levels, vast hayloft and secret rooms, was in disrepair; the grain silos were empty and rusting ruins; the great beech trees that stalked the pasture hollowed out and died off, one by one,

winter by winter.

In the late 1960s, after a doomed battle, the local power company condemned a swath of land right through the heart of the cornfield for a high-voltage transmission corridor. A fifth of the field was lost to the giant towers, and the songs of red-wing blackbirds and meadowlarks were drowned out by the bristling electric hum of the power lines.

After that, the neighbors began selling out. The local dairy went first, replaced by a retirement complex, an indoor tennis center, and a sprawling Baptist temple and school. Then came a gas station, a golf course and a McDonalds. Then two large subdivisions of upscale houses and a manmade lake, where the water was dyed Sunday cartoon blue.

When my grandfather died from pancreatic cancer (most likely inflicted by the pesticides that had been forced upon him by the ag companies) in the early 1970s, he and a hog farmer by the name of Boatenright were the last holdouts in that patch of black-soiled land along Buck Creek.

Boatenright's place was about a mile down the road. You couldn't miss it. He was a hog farmer, and the noxious smell permeated the valley. On hot, humid days, the sweat stench of the hogs was nauseating, even at a distance. In August, I'd work in the fields with a bandana wrapped around my face to ease the stench. How strange that I've come to miss that wretched smell.

That hog farm along Buck Creek was typical for its time. It was a small operation with about 25 pigs. Old man Boatenright also ran some cows and made money fixing tractors, brush hogs and combines.

Not any more. There are more hogs than ever in Indiana, but fewer hog

overwhelmed by the Shia, the branch of Islam to which 60 per cent of Iraqis belong.

The U.S. and British armies have examined many past guerrilla wars, looking for parallels, which might prove useful in combating the Iraqi insurgency. British generals were once particularly keen on proudly citing their actions in Malaya and Northern Ireland as providing rich experience in anti-guerrilla warfare. Most analogies were highly misleading. "Basra was the exact opposite of Northern Ireland and Malaya," a British officer told me in exasperation. "In the latter we were supported by the majority communities while we fought the Roman Catholic and Chinese minorities. In southern Iraq our main problem is that we had no real local allies."

The Americans suffer from a similar problem in central Iraq. Outside Kurdistan, it is difficult to find an Iraqi who supports the U.S. occupation for more than tactical reasons.

Seldom mentioned for obvious reasons is the one recent anti-guerrilla war, which has many similarities to that being fought by the U.S.A. America in Iraq. This is Russia's successful re-conquest of Chechnya between 1999 and the present.

In a similar way to al-Qaeda in Iraq,

the Islamic fundamentalists in Chechnya, invariably called Wahabi, played an increasingly central role in the armed resistance to the Russian forces. But the savagery of their fighters alienated many anti-Russian Chechens and eventually split the insurgency. I remember being astonished that Chechen human rights workers, who usually denounced Russian atrocities to me, were prepared to cooperate with the Russian army to attack the Wahabi. Often, their motive was a blood feud against a Wahabi commander who had killed their relatives.

The parallels between Iraq and Chechnya should not be carried too far. The U.S.A. has effectively raised a

## The U.S.A. has had real operational successes on the ground in Iraq in the last year, but there is little sign yet of Iraq being pacified.

Sunni militia force, which may soon total 100,000 men, many of them former insurgents. They are armed and paid for by the U.S. but regard the Shia-Kurdish government with deep suspicion. Many Sunni commanders speak of taking on the Shia militia, the Mehdi Army, which has been stood down by its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr.

It is a bizarre situation. One experienced Iraqi politician told me that al-Qaeda in Iraq, which never had much connection with Osama bin Laden's organization, had effectively split last year. A sign of this was when somebody betrayed the location of its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, to the U.S. military, which bombed his hideout and killed him. Some of the so-called "Concerned Citizens" militiamen, now on the U.S. payroll, are former al-Qaeda fighters, though the U.S. is still holding hundreds of men in dire conditions in Guantanamo, accusing them of being associates of al-Qaeda.

The U.S.A. has had real operational successes on the ground in Iraq in the last year, but there is little sign yet of Iraq being pacified. Local warlords in Sunni

areas have switched from attacking U.S. forces to working with them, but they might easily switch back tomorrow. As with the British in Basra, the Americans lack long-term allies who can stand on their own feet without U.S. assistance. The war could rekindle easily enough. The Shia will never accept their political dominance being eroded by a U.S.-backed Sunni resurgence. Iran has eased off its support for Shia militias, but it will likewise want to keep the Shia religious parties in power and make sure that Iraq will never become a potential platform for a U.S. attack on Iran.

This is one of the dangers of the continuing U.S. presence. The longer it goes on, the more the government of Iraq becomes incapable of existing without U.S. support. The government in the Green Zone is a hothouse plant, which would wither and die without the American military presence. Although Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki complains about the way in which the U.S. controls the Iraqi army, he makes little practical effort to move out of the Green Zone or establish his practical independence. The U.S. may say that it will leave when the Iraqi government can stand on its own two feet, but the continuing occupation makes sure that day does not come.

Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are very different countries, but they are the terrain in which President Bush chose to test the United States' status as a superpower. They are also countries where it is difficult to win a decisive victory because power is so fragmented. Successes often turn out to be illusory or exaggerated. For instance, the Taliban was so swiftly overthrown in 2001 because the local warlords, whom the Taliban had bribed or intimidated into supporting it, found that the U.S. offered bigger bribes and its bombers were more intimidating. They changed sides once again, though very few of them went out of business.

The same is true of Iraq today. Iraqi parties, movements and communities have an extraordinary ability to withstand outside pressure. Most of them survived Saddam Hussein and are not going to buckle under anything the U.S. can do to them. CP

Patrick Cockburn's forthcoming book, *Muqtada! Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia revival and the struggle for Iraq*, will be published by Scribner in April 2008.

### CounterPunch

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