An analysis of the impact of Iraq on the 2004 election, the need to deconstruct Bush's 'War on Terrorism' and a perspective on how progressives can independently intervene in the election to defeat Bush in spite of poor tactics from the Democratic leadership.

The 2004 Elections:
War, Terrorism and the
Need for Regime Change

By Carl Davidson

The 2004 presidential election is most likely to be decided on the stands that the candidates, and the American people themselves, take on the matters of war, terrorism, and now, atrocity and occupation.

The decision, for many people, will not be easy. Ever since the 9/11 attacks and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the American people have faced a complex and dangerous international crisis.

On one hand, as a people, we faced the task of cooperating with other countries and peoples in a justified effort to defend all concerned against the terrorist attacks of the reactionary theocrats led by al-Quaeda. On the other hand, we faced the task of stopping the Bush administration's ill-conceived "War on Terror," its drive to an unjust war with Iraq, and, now, the ongoing brutal occupation of that country.

The White House policies on these questions have brought failure and disaster in every respect. The bombing and invasion of Afghanistan removed the Taliban, but only managed to install a rump regime in Kabul. Meanwhile warlordism took command elsewhere, the Taliban re-emerged and al-Quaeda remained at large, active and deadly around the world. In the midst of the Afghan debacle, without any just cause, Bush shifted his focus and resources to Iraq. The ensuing invasion removed Hussein, but plunged the country into chaos and strife. The occupation is meeting with resistance from all forces, progressive and reactionary, while Iraq's peoples refuse to be pacified.

War Aims Defeated Politically

Now, with the global exposure of the torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners, Bush has suffered a severe and irreversible defeat politically in the Islamic world and elsewhere. Historian and defender of the British Empire, Sir Michael Howard, saw it coming back in 2001, predicting how the images of the World Trade Center would fade and new, anti-U.S. images would come to the fore:

"I hate having to say this, but in six months time for much of the world that atrocity will be, if not forgotten, then remembered only as history; while every fresh picture on television of a hospital hit, or children crippled by land-mines, or refugees driven from

their homes by western military action, will strengthen the hatred of our adversaries, recruit the ranks of the terrorists and sow fresh doubts in the minds of our supporters."

The longer the U.S. maintains an unjust occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the worse things are going to get. Bush has lost the battle for hearts and minds, certainly in the Islamic world, and can only defend an unjust occupation with more injustice.

"It is a time for truth, writes Pat Buchanan, the conservative columnist on May 14. "In any guerrilla war we fight, there is going to be a steady stream of U.S. dead and wounded. There is going to be collateral damage – i.e., women and children slain and maimed. There will be prisoners abused. And inevitably, there will be outrages by U.S. troops enraged at the killing of comrades and the jeering of hostile populations. If you would have an empire, this goes with the territory. And if you are unprepared to pay the price, give it up."

Bush's reactionary approach to the problem of terrorism, moreover, reaches beyond Iraq. It has spurred, for instance, Israel's Sharon regime to new recalcitrance and atrocities in its occupation of the Palestinians and new cycles of terrible violence from both sides of the conflict there.

Less Secure Than Ever

The net result so far: the U.S. and other countries, most recently Spain, are still the target of al-Quaeda's terrorists. The U.S. is further bogged down in failing occupations in two countries, has never been more despised in the Islamic world, and has never been more isolated and estranged from many other peoples, countries and traditional allies across the globe.

Still Bush urges us to "stay the course." Despite a "few bad weeks," he claims "steady progress" is being made in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to questioning the patriotism of his critics, he and his underlings are clearly playing the fear of terrorism card to win support. National Security advisor Condoleezza Rice raised the specter of the bombings in Spain and the defeat of the conservative government there as a forecast of what might happen here between now and November. Attorney General John Ashcroft and Bush himself are making the rounds, warning of domestic terrorists and calling for more restrictions on civil liberties by making the so-called Patriot Act more repressive and "permanent."

Yet hardly a day goes by that another top official of the national security establishment doesn't break ranks and challenge the administration's direction. They expose factional strife and deceptions, either by leaking information to the press, testifying in hearings, appearing on news shows or writing books challenging the White House line. Sidney Blumenthal, former Clinton advisor, writing in the May 13 Guardian (UK), shows how the divisions are even erupting in the officer corps and the Pentagon:

"William Odom, a retired general and former member of the National Security Council who is now at the Hudson Institute, a conservative thinktank, reflects a wide swath of opinion in the upper ranks of the military. 'It was never in our interest to go into Iraq,' he told me. It is a 'diversion' from the war on terrorism; the rationale for the Iraq war (finding WMD) is 'phony'; the US army is overstretched and being driven 'into the ground'; and the prospect of building a democracy is 'zero'. In Iraqi politics, he says, 'legitimacy is going to be tied to expelling us. Wisdom in military affairs dictates withdrawal in this situation. We can't afford to fail, that's mindless. The issue is how we stop failing more. I am arguing a strategic decision.'"

Politics of Deception and Confusion

All this is having a profound impact on the 2004 election. The confusing politics, bewildering consequences and steady stream of outright lies surrounding these events is the critical factor behind the deep division in American society. We are divided from top to bottom; there are deep divisions among the ruling elites, as well as among the people themselves over what to do about terrorism, the invasions, the occupations and all the dangers and outrages unleashed across the board.

The electoral contest, at this point, appears to be very close. In these circumstances, it is in Bush's interest to maintain and deepen the confusion by merging wars in defense of Empire and terrorism of any sort into one single danger aimed at the homeland and the American people themselves. In fact, Bush has made the "War on Terrorism" the main cover for his foreign policy from 9/11 onward. He has done everything in his power to link Iraq and bin Laden, and to use "expanding democracy" as a cover for U.S. hegemonism and Empire. The entire right wing hammers away daily at both the Democrats and the peace movement, suggesting treason and sedition. Now the drumbeat is against John Kerry for being weak on war and terrorism, for his protests against the Vietnam War three decades ago to his tactical disputes with Bush and the GOP over Iraq and military spending today.

"It's a puzzling paradox," says Arianna Huffington in an April 28 column. "Recent polls show that voters are more worried that we are losing the war on terror, more convinced that we're about to be attacked, and more certain that the invasion of Iraq has put America at greater risk from terrorists. And yet, these same voters overwhelmingly believe that President Bush will do a better job of protecting them from terrorists than John Kerry."

If we are going to organize an opposition strong enough to defeat Bush and the neoconservative clique around him, we are going to have to deconstruct his "War on Terrorism" in an effective and mass way. The key to that task is making distinctions between just and unjust causes, and asserting a value-centered politics in opposition to the wealth-and-privilege centered politics of the ruling class. There is no other effective way to build and mobilize the new grassroots majorities required for progressive, systemic change.

Need for Unity and Clarity

First and foremost, we have to take a clear stand on the war. The invasion of Iraq, and now the occupation, was and is wrong and unjust. Weakened by years of war and sanctions, Iraq was no clear and present danger even to its neighbors, let alone to the U.S. This is not to say the Hussein was not a tyrant and that international support to develop an internal, democratic alternative to Hussein was unneeded or unwarranted. But we must say that there was no just cause for this war, and that every cause advanced by Bush, from elusive weapons of mass destruction to sham concern for fascist atrocities or lack of democracy, has proved to be a tissue of lies or hypocrisy or both.

How do we unite a majority of Americans around a plan to get out of Iraq? Noam Chomsky, writing in the May 6 issue of the Nation, summed up the "US Out, UN In!" perspective as clearly as anyone:

"A large majority of Americans believe that the UN, not the United States, should take the lead in working with Iraqis to transfer authentic sovereignty as well as in economic reconstruction and maintaining civic order. That is a sensible stand if Iraqis agree, as seems likely, though the General Assembly, less directly controlled by the invaders, is preferable to the Security Council as the responsible transitional authority. Reconstruction should be in the hands of Iraqis, not delayed as a means of controlling them, as Washington has indicated. Reparations--not just aid--should be provided by those responsible for devastating Iraqi civilian society by cruel sanctions and military actions; and--together with other criminal states--for supporting Saddam Hussein through his worst atrocities and beyond. That is the minimum that honesty requires."

Next we have to take a deeper look at the issue of terrorism. Terror has been a tactic deployed by both progressive and reactionary movements in various times, place and circumstances. There is both state-sponsored terror and the terror of non-state, insurgent movements. There is the terrorist violence described by Franz Fanon in the Algerian war of liberation. On the other hand, there is the terrorism in the classic definition of fascism, put forth by Georgi Dimitrov in the 1930s, where he describes Germany and Italy as "the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinist sections of finance capital."

As for state-sponsored terrorism, if we are honest, we have to say that the U.S government, at least over the past 50 years, has been the chief terrorist and sponsor of terrorism in the world. We can never forget that our government has the blood of a million Vietnamese on its hands. Most Americans do not even know that ours is the only country actually convicted of terrorism in a world court, for the atrocities of the U.S. sponsored Contras in Nicaragua.

War Combined with Racism

Bush and Rumsfeld have gone to great lengths to claim that the abuse and torture prisoners in Iraq are not part of the America character. Really? Not all of America, to be sure, but organized terror, especially again those with darker skin, is a deep strain in our history. As Tim Wise pointed out May 13 on ZNet:

"The images from Fallujah were not unique to Iraqis, and those from Abu Ghraib [prison] are not exceptional in the least. It wasn't that long ago, after all, that literally thousands of white Christians in this country would regularly engage in weekend lynch parties, or at least observe as spectators, giving the events all the spectacle of a three-ring circus. The lynch mobs would, with full approval of the demented white Christian crowds that gathered to cheer them on, drag blacks to death behind cars, torture them with blowtorches and burn them to death in what were advertised as "Negro Barbecues."

The "white blindspot" is deeply embedded in the defense of empire. In any case, if terrorism of whatever sort is a tactic and a method of rule, it makes no sense to declare war on it, for the simple reason that there is no end to it. One can declare war on a state or an organized movement—such a struggle has a beginning and an end, victors and vanquished. But tactics and methods can be passed on, time and again, as long as there are those who find a need for them. Moreover, terrorism can be highly political and its meaning can shift with changing political events and perspectives. For many years, governments in the West called Nelson Mandela and the ANC terrorists; now they are statesmen and national liberators.

But what about the terrorism of 9/11? This is the main form of terrorism that is front and center in the consciousness of the American people and the people of many other countries terrorized by al-Quaeda today. First, it is the method of a semi-feudal oil-rich oligarchy and the center of a reactionary movement to restore and expand a theocratic dictatorship. This is the essence of al-Quaeda's drive to destroy "Jews and Crusaders," "restore the Caliphate" and impose its Wahabi version of Islamic law over all lands ever dominated by Islam throughout history. Its "anti-imperialist" rhetoric is no more genuine than the "anti-British imperialism" invoked by the German fascists in another time.

Broad Cooperation & Collective Security

In truth, the events of 9/11 are best described as crimes against humanity, and not as acts of war. Why is the distinction important? The conservative right flies into a fury when it's made; to them it's war and nothing less. But Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro, many other leaders in the UN, and progressive voices worldwide stressed the first approach. It saw the battle with bin Laden as mainly a political and economic struggle, requiring broad coalitions of countries working together on collective security and intelligence, which would require armed force to arrest and disorganize the culprits only at the end of the process, by which they would be brought to justice.

Bush's unilateralist, militaristic approach, on the other hand, granted the other side a political victory from day one. He conceded to bin Laden and his ilk the desire to see this conflict as a war, albeit a "holy war." Moreover, it allowed the US to be portrayed as opposed to Islam in general, and not just to al-Quaeda. Again, the UK's Michael Howard, drawing lessons from British counter-insurgency efforts, makes the point:

"But we never called them 'wars': we called them 'emergencies'. This meant that the police and intelligence services were provided with exceptional powers, and were reinforced where necessary by the armed forces, but all continued to operate within a peacetime framework of civil authority. If force had to be used, it was at a minimal level and so far as possible did not interrupt the normal tenor of civil life. The object was to isolate the terrorists from the rest of the community, and to cut them off from external sources of supply. They were not dignified with the status of belligerents: they were criminals, to be regarded as such by the general public and treated as such by the authorities. To 'declare war' on terrorists, or even more illiterately, on 'terrorism' is at once to accord them a status and dignity that they seek and which they do not deserve. It confers on them a kind of legitimacy."

It is not enough, however, for an effective 2004 campaign to distinguish itself from Bush on the war, terrorism and related issues only tactically. To defeat Bush, a new majority of both regular voters and new voters must be mobilized. Movements like these require a just cause, not tactical disputes, to become active, grow and win.

Two Campaigns: Their & Ours

This is important because the campaign against Bush divides into two. Kerry and the DLC Democrats, for their part, are campaigning--so far anyway--by trying to minimize or even eliminate differences with Bush over the Iraq war and terrorism. Their hope is to win over the ever-shrinking number of undecided Bush-leaning voters in the center. Putting all their eggs in this basket is a strategy that has led Democrats to defeat time and again over the past decade or so.

Our intervention in the election, on the other hand, can move forward and have an positive impact independently of the tactics Kerry and the DLC—even in spite of them, if need be.

Our task is not to make John Kerry into something like Dennis Kucinich; nor is it to show how far apart he may or may not be from us on a range of progressive positions. Both of these projects miss the point.

Kerry mainly has two things going for him. One, his past history in VVAW and opposition to the Vietnam war, which will always distinguish him from Bush regardless of where Kerry stands now. Second, that Kerry represents a multilateralist, globalist faction of US imperialism that is at odds over some key issues with the unilateralist, U.S. hegemonist faction represented by Bush.

The latter point is more important, since it is the one the will enable him to marshal the financial resources needed by November to defeat Bush. In other words, there should be no illusions about Kerry and what he represents, nor any desire to prettify his stands today. It is enough that Kerry can play a role in ousting Bush's gang, since it is not a matter of indifference to us which faction wins. Nonetheless, it is up to us to continue to wage the ongoing struggle for peace and justice against the new gang in the White House,

should there be one, from that point on. That's why we must develop tactics maintaining our own independence and initiative both within and outside the electoral arena.

So how do we go about it? Chicago's Peace and Justice Voters 2004 is providing a positive and successful example. We continue to take part in the mass antiwar mobilizations, but we are also developing an electoral capacity. With nearly 700 deputized registrars in our ranks and over 10,000 new registrations so far, we are implementing our program in three phases: first, we are expanding the electorate in a progressive direction; second, we are educating and identifying our supporters in the electorate on our core values of peace and justice and, third, come election day, we will bring our base of new voters to the polls in a big way. There are several key features to our work:

We are a value-centered organization. Based in Chicago neighborhoods, schools and movements, our main slogan for this campaign is 'Regime Change Begins at Home.' We stand clearly against war, occupation and the economic impact of militarism; we oppose racism and support affirmative action; we defend civil liberties and oppose all forms of discrimination. We do not have to tell our people who to vote for; the overwhelming majority will vote against Bush.

We are nonpartisan. This means we don't endorse any party, but include people from many parties in our ranks—Democrats, Greens, Socialists, Independents and even a few stray pro-peace Republicans.

We don't endorse any candidate. Instead, we work in alliance with all the campaigns—Kerry, Kucinich, Nader and, in the Illinois Senate Race, Barak Obama—that want to expand the electorate in a progressive direction through voter registration, education and mobilization. Of course the great majority of people we bring to the polls are likely to vote for Kerry, either because they agree with him to one or another degree, or because they simply want to oust Bush. A few may decide to vote for a third party candidate, such as Ralph Nader, if the option exists. All of that is fine. That's democracy. Each person's vote belongs to them, and any thinking that says, ahead of time, that my vote or your vote should belong to this or that candidate without being earned, is opportunistic short-cut thinking that leads to bigger problems in the long run. Besides, most Nader votes this time around are most likely to be people who wouldn't vote at all otherwise, and thus should not draw that much from Kerry's totals.

We form broad alliances. Antiwar activists can't bring about regime change on their own. So we work closely with labor organizations, the League of Women Voters and feminist groups, Rainbow/PUSH, Citizen Action, People for the American Way, City Council members who worked on the Cities for Peace Initiative, Gay and Lesbian Rights Advocates, civil liberties groups opposing the Patriot Act, Members of Congress from the Progressive Caucus, the Black Caucus and the Hispanic Caucus, and, especially, progressive neighborhood-based organizations geared up to work in elections.

We build grassroots organization. The main thing for Peace & Justice Voters 2004, is that we are strengthening our own organization, rather building the Democrat's organization. We are not encouraging one person among those we reach to join the Democratic Party or to give Kerry a dime. We are building our own organizations--with our own lists, members in base communities, and bank accounts--so that no matter who wins this election, we will have a better means to continue the struggle against war and injustice no matter who is in the White House. Not only that, but more strategically, we will also have started and expanded the foundation building of what can become a mass party of the people, hopefully in the not-too-far-distant future.

Carl Davidson is co-chair of Chicagoans Against War & Injustice and a founder of its project, Peace & Justice Voters 2004. This article, now slightly updated, was initially presented as a paper at the 3rd Annual Global Studies Association conference held at Brandeis University in April, 2004. Web: www.cyrev.net and www.noiraqwar-chicago.org Email: carld717@aol.com.