

The Political and Military Implications of the Iraq War

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THIS ARTICLE may have rather a tone of “I told you so” but I want to point out where I was right in my predictions about the war and where I was wrong.

In a previous article, in *What Next?* No.22, I said: “What has happened is that in a series of wars against very inferior opponents, in Iraq, Bosnia, Serbia/Kosova and finally Afghanistan, the United States has overwhelmed its enemies with gradually improving technology. Each war was short. In each one, weaknesses in technique and management could be corrected as they were revealed, and improvements could be secured in time for the next encounter. The Nazis only had one Spanish Civil War from which to learn lessons; the Americans have had four little struggles over a ten-year period. It may be that, just as in Spain, some wrong lessons have been learnt, but the general effect has undoubtedly been to raise the effectiveness of the new methods.”

To these wars must now be added Iraq, a war on a much bigger scale with a much greater use of precision munitions but also the use of massive armoured columns to move forward and seize territory. Again lessons will have been learnt, some of which will be addressed, such as further improvements in reconnaissance capability and attempts at fuel economy that will enable armoured blitzkrieg operations to go forward for longer without a pause. However the technologies to do this will take a year or two or even more to develop. But other lessons, such as the need for soldiers to maintain law and order in the immediate aftermath of a military conquest, will probably not be dealt with for fear that some poor American soldiers might get hurt when they got out from behind their armour. In addition there appears to have been a deliberate failure to assess enemy casualties and civilian deaths from the bombing – a great contrast with the period after World War II when there was a most rigorous analysis of where they had gone wrong and where right. The attitude

seems to be that we can deny we killed many civilians if we do not count them and can rubbish any other estimates as not being “official”.

I also wrote the following in my introduction to the “Mutiny” issue of *Revolutionary History*:

“Schumpeter’s was a brilliant insight [that bourgeois society hated war*] even if the growing automation of war has prevented quite the military collapse of capitalism before a non-capitalist conqueror that he prophesied. But his insight does have implications for predictions as to how imperialism will behave. The Beast will, I envision, be far more fearful of war with anybody who could inflict a butcher’s bill. And this, as we can see in Kosova and elsewhere, will enormously hamper any attempt to impose any valid political solution, since a few thousand dead citizens, and in the case of the United States mostly black citizens at that, cannot be endured in the messy task of conquering populations and creating a stable post-war political structure – not just massacring them from afar. The inability to impose solutions has important implications, though a purely military solution can still be imposed by a wealthy state on an economically backward enemy. I say nothing one way or another of the justice of any solution imposed on Kosova, or anywhere else, I would simply emphasise that whether just or unjust such a solution must be stable, and this will involve lots of people on the ground for some time, and therefore casualties.”

I think everything that I wrote there a year or two ago there has been abundantly justified. I went on:

“They will therefore desperately avoid direct military confrontation and against an enemy will increasingly use diplomatic pressure, bribery, blockade, even the mining of harbours, internal *coups d’état* and, if a military clash is finally unavoidable, they will, as in Bosnia and the Gulf, seek to use precise air attacks to destroy military and communication centres and will rely for the

messy part of the fighting on irregular auxiliaries whose mothers have no votes within the imperialist centres. Thus far, that is what they have done against Third World and economically weak opponents. If things get of hand and they have to bring in masses of their own troops, their political strength, though not their economic muscles, would prove very feeble. But out of such an unforeseen political crisis opportunities for the working class might arrive.”

Here I was wrong. It is clear that Rumsfeld at any rate is eager to commit American troops to all sorts of adventures, thinking that he can get away with it as US war technology is so superior that they will sustain few casualties. This view is not shared by the more intelligent people in the Pentagon and intelligence communities, but they can be sidelined, retired and new “unofficial” advisers brought in who will say what he wants to hear. Executing the bringer of bad news is an ancient tyrannical habit of the Orient but it does tend to lead to disaster – in this case for perhaps the entire globe. Against Iran the methods used, or those suggested, are more likely to be the ones that I have suggested at the beginning of the paragraph.

At the time of the 15 February 2003 anti-war march, I said in an email to Colin Falconer: “If they plunge on into this appalling adventure the easy part will be going in, the difficult part will be getting out. It took the Israelis 18 years to leave southern Lebanon. The actual campaign will be swift and easy but they cannot walk away. In Afghanistan there were only bare-arsed brigands and rocks, in the Balkans (Bosnia & Kosova) they left the Europeans to clear up the mess and spend the money to keep the area on a more or less even keel. Here they are sitting on all the oil. What will these pro-western Arab regimes do? Become even more brutal? ... If Britain has to help to garrison the Middle East they will be putting most of the British army there to suffer prickly heat and to catch the clap in a far, far more difficult and brutalising environment than Northern Ireland. How popular will this prove to be among conservative as well as labour voters? The economic situation too is very dodgy, it could get a lot worse.”

I even estimated that the allies would succeed in a week. I was wrong about the time-scale, as indeed were the unofficial estimates of the US spokesmen, but had the American armed services, faced with very minor opposition, been prepared to suffer a few more casualties instead of showing incredible timidity, then it might indeed have only taken a week. Once it was prolonged beyond a few days, then sheer exhaustion of the troops, logistic problems, breakdowns and accidents among all

types of military vehicles necessitated a pause. So matters took about 3-4 weeks. And that is interesting. The fear of casualties was far greater than I had foreseen and that in itself led to some very temporary political embarrassment in the war since the troops would not, or were not allowed to, push on and quickly overcome the very minor defences with which they were faced.

In an unpublished article dated 11 June 1999 that I showed to a few people, about the Kosova war and the limitations of air power, I wrote:

“If force, using air power, is applied to a situation where there is no political coherence in the bombed country apart from a personal dictatorship, where there is in short no established class formation, as in Iraq, violence may just result in the disintegration of society rather than any stable outcome favourable to world capitalism.”

In conversation I said that by September 2003 the Americans would be finding things in Iraq very awkward. I had not realised how quickly matters would deteriorate. It took a month or two but now even the feeble Democratic opposition is starting to ask what the hell is going on.

The huge superiority of American military power is clear, though against other and more formidable opponents it might not find it so easy and have rather greater casualties. More importantly, it is also becoming clear that they are finding it increasingly difficult to transform this military superiority into political and economic dominance. Colonies were by and large only acquired before the existence of the dominance of representative institutions under manhood (let alone adult) suffrage and imperialism occurred under regimes that exported capital. The Americans have too much democracy and not enough capital to be a long-term colonial power. Perhaps Bush and his band of conspirators will get to get rid of the first, but the second is more difficult to acquire without raising the rate of profit, which must mean a greater exploitation of the American working class or a temporary wiping out of capital values of the American capitalist class. But both these would cause great problems and might even affect electoral results.

So there should be opportunities for the working class internationally, but we can see little sign of any leadership that could take advantage of such opportunities.

Note

* That bourgeois society hates war and is increasingly unmilitaristic does not mean that there is no imperialist drive to war. If there is such a drive that is a further contradiction within the system.