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WARS, LIES AND VIDEOGAMES

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FALLUJA AND THE FORGING OF THE NEW IRAQ

By Walden Bello*

A defiant slogan repeated by residents of Falluja over the last year was that their city would be “the graveyard of the Americans.” The last two weeks has seen that chant become a reality, with most of the 88 US combat deaths falling in the intense fighting around Falluja. But there is a bigger sense in which the slogan is true: Falluja has become the graveyard of US policy in Iraq.

The battle for the city is not yet over, but the Iraqi resistance has already won it. Irregular fighters fueled mainly by spirit and courage were able to fight the elite of America’s colonial legions—the US Marines—to a standstill on the outer neighborhoods of Falluja. Moreover, so frustrated were the Americans that, in their trademark fashion of technology-intensive warfare, they unleashed firepower indiscriminately, leading to the deaths of some 600 people, mainly women and children, according to eyewitness accounts. Captured graphically by Arab television, these two developments have created both inspiration and deep anger that is likely to be translated into thousands of new recruits for the already burgeoning resistance.

The Americans are now confronted with an unenviable dilemma: they stick to the ceasefire and admit they can’t handle Falluja, or they go in and take it at a terrible cost both to the civilian population and to themselves. There is no doubt the heavily armed Marines can pacify Falluja, but the costs are likely to make that victory a Pyrrhic one.

As if one battlefield blunder did not suffice, the US sent a 2500-man force to Najaf to arrest the radical cleric Muqtad al-Sadr. Again, even before the battle has begun, they have

created a fine mess for themselves. The threat of an American assault has merely brought over more Shiites, including the widely respected Ayatollah Sistani to the defense of al-Sadr. If the Americans do not attack, they will be seen by the Iraqis as being scared of taking on al-Sadr. If they attack, then they will have to engage in the same sort of high-casualty, close-quarters combat cum indiscriminate firepower that can only deliver the same outcome as an assault on Falluja: tactical victory, strategic defeat.

The last few days have left us with indelible images that will forever underline the quicksand that is US policy in Iraq. There are the marines blaring speakers at Falluja insurgents taunting them for hiding behind women and children, when the reality is that women and children are part of the Iraqi resistance. There is Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld cursing telecasts by Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera claiming there are 600 women and children dead when even CNN has admitted that a high proportion of the dead and wounded in Falluja were indeed women and children. Then there is George W. Bush vowing not to “cut and run” but not offering any way out of the impasse except the application of more of the military force with which the Americans have ruled Iraq in the last year.

To some analysts, the problem lies in the miscalculations of Rumsfeld. The man, in this view, simply underestimated what it would take to have a successful military occupation of Iraq. Rumsfeld thought 160,000 troops would suffice to invade and occupy Iraq. The result, according to James Fallows in the latest issue of the Atlantic, is that “it is only a slight exaggeration to say that today the entire US military is either in Iraq, returning from Iraq, or getting ready to go.” Forty per cent of the troops deployed to Iraq this year will not be professional soldiers but members of the National Guard or Reserves, who signed up on the understanding that they were only going to be weekend warriors. To many it now seems that the estimates of military professionals like General Anthony Zinni, who said that it would take 500,000 troops to secure Iraq, were more on the mark. But even Zinni’s figure—the high-water mark of the US troop presence in Vietnam—may now be outstripped by the wildfire speed of the insurgency racing through rural and urban Iraq.

To other observers, it has been the ineptitude of

Paul Bremer, the American proconsul, that has created the crisis. In this view, Bremer made three big political mistakes during his first month in office: removing some 30,000 top-ranking Ba’ath Party figures from office; dissolving the Iraqi Army, thus throwing a quarter of a million Iraqis out of work; and making a handover of power indefinite and dependent on the writing of a constitution under military occupation. Add to these his recent closing of a Shiite newspaper critical of the occupation and his ordering the arrest of an aide of Muqtad al-Sadr—moves that, Canadian journalist Naomi Klein contends, were calculated to draw al-Sadr into open confrontation in order to crush him.

Inept, Rumsfeld and Bremer have certainly been, but their military and political blunders were inevitable consequences of the collective delusion of George Bush and the reigning neoconservatives at the White House. One element of this delusion was the belief that the Iraqis hated Saddam so much that they would tolerate an indefinite political and military occupation that had the license to blunder at will. A second element was persisting in the illusion that that it was mainly “remnants” of the Saddam Hussein regime that were behind the spreading insurgency when everybody else in Baghdad realized the resistance had grassroots backing. A third was that the Shiite-Sunni divide was so deep that their coming together for a common enterprise against the US on a nationalist and religious platform was impossible. In other words, it was the Americans themselves who spun their own web of false fundamental assumptions that entrapped them.

The Bushites are hopelessly out of touch with reality. But so are others in Washington’s hegemonic conservative circles. An influential conservative critic of the administration’s policy, Fareed Zakaria, editor of Newsweek’s international editions, for instance, has this to offer as the way out: “The US must bribe, cajole, and coopt various Sunni leaders to separate the insurgents from the local population... [T]he tribal sheiks, former low-level Ba’athists, and regional leaders must be courted assiduously. In addition, money must start flowing into Iraqi hands.”

The truth is, the neoconservative scenario of quick invasion, pacification of the population

with chocolates and cash, installation of a puppet “democracy” dominated by Washington’s proteges, then withdrawal to distant military bastions while an American-trained army and police force took over security in the cities was dead on arrival. For all its many fractures, the cross-ethnic appeal of nationalism and Islam is strong in Iraq. This was brought home to me by two incidents when I visited Iraq along with a parliamentary delegation shortly before the American bombing. When we asked a class at Baghdad University what they thought of the coming invasion, a young woman answered firmly that had George Bush studied his history, he would have known that the Americans would face the same fate as the countless armies that had invaded and pillaged Mesopotamia for the last 4,000 years. Leaving Baghdad, we were convinced that the young men and women we talked to were not the kind that would submit easily to foreign occupation.

Two days later, at the Syrian border, hours before the American bombing, we encountered a group of Mujaheddin heading in the opposite direction, full of energy and enthusiasm to take on the Americans. They were from Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Palestine, and Syria, and they were the cutting edge of droves of Islamic volunteers that would stream into Iraq over the next few months to participate in what they welcomed as the decisive battle with the Americans.

As the invasion began, many of us predicted that the American invasion would face an urban resistance that would be difficult to pacify in Baghdad and elsewhere in the country. Famously, Scott Ritter, the former UN arms inspector, said that the Americans would be forced to exit Iraq like Napoleon from Russia, their ranks harried by partisans. We were wrong, of course, since there was little popular resistance to the entry of the Americans to Baghdad. But we were eventually proved right. Our mistake lay in underestimating the time it would take to transform the population from an unorganized, submissive mass under Saddam to a force empowered by nationalism and Islam. Bush and Bremer constantly talk about their dream of a “new Iraq.” Ironically, the new post-Saddam Iraq is being forged in a common struggle against a hated occupation.

The Americans thought they could coerce and buy the Iraqis into submission. They failed to

reckon with one thing: spirit. Of course, spirit is not enough, and what we have seen over the last year is a movement traveling on a steep learning curve from clumsy and amateurish acts of resistance to a sophisticated repertoire combining the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), hit-and-run tactics, stand-your-ground firefights, and ground missile attacks.

Unfortunately, these tactics have also included strategically planned car bombings and kidnappings that have harmed civilians along with Coalition combatants and mercenaries. Unfortunately, too, in the broader Islamic resistance’s effort to sap the will of the enemy by carrying the battle to the latter’s territory, it has included missions that deliberately target civilians, like the Madrid subway bombing that killed hundreds of innocents. Such acts are unjustifiable and deeply deplorable, but to those quick to condemn, one must point out that the indiscriminate killing of some 10,000 Iraqi civilians by US troops in the first year of the occupation and the current targeting of civilians in the siege of Falluja are on the same moral plane as these methods of the Iraqi and Islamic resistance. Indeed, the “American way of war” has always involved the killing and punishing of the civilian population. The bombing of Dresden, the firebombing of Tokyo, the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Operation Phoenix in Vietnam—all had the strategic objective of winning wars via the deliberate targeting of civilians. So, please, no moralizing about the West’s “civilized warfare” and Islamic “barbarism.”

The resistance is on the ascendant in Iraq, but the balance of forces continues to be on the American side. The Iraq war has developed into a multi-front war, with the struggle for public opinion in the United States being one of the key battles. Here, there has been no decisive break so far. The liberals are hopeless. At a time that they should be calling for a fundamental re-examination of US policy and pushing withdrawal as an option, their line, as the liberal Financial Times columnist Gerard Baker, expresses it, is, “Whether or not you believe Iraq was a real threat under Saddam Hussein, you cannot deny that a US defeat there will make it one now.” It does not help to point out to Baker and others that this is a non-sequitur. For the liberals are not responding to logic but to baiting from the same frothing right wing that, three decades ago, predicted chaos, massacre, and civil war should the US with-

draw from Vietnam.

For presidential contender John Kerry and the Democrats, the alternative is stabilization via greater participation by the United Nations and the US' European allies, which, of course, hardly distinguishes them from George Bush, who is desperate to bring in the UN and more troops from the Coalition of the Willing to relieve US troops in frontline positions.

One of the reasons Democratic leaders do not call for withdrawal is their fear that this could harm them in the November elections—despite the fact that, according to the Pew Research Center, 44 per cent of Americans now say that troops should be brought home as soon as possible, up from 32 per cent last September. But an even more fundamental reason is that they agree with Baker's position that while the invasion of Iraq may not have been justified, a unilateral withdrawal cannot be allowed since this would strike an incalculable blow to American prestige and leadership.

The paralysis that has gripped the Democrats on Iraq can only be broken by one thing: a strong anti-war movement such as that which took to the streets daily and in the thousands before and after the Tet Offensive in 1968. So far that has not materialized, though disillusion with US policy in Iraq has spread to more than half of the US population.

Indeed, at the very time that it is needed by developments in Iraq, the international peace movement has had trouble getting in gear. The demonstrations on March 20 of this year were significantly smaller than the February 15 marches last year, when tens of millions marched throughout the world against the projected invasion of Iraq. The kind of international mass pressure that makes an impact on policymakers—the daily staging of demonstration after demonstration in the hundreds of thousands in city after city—is simply not in evidence, at least not yet. Which raises the question: Was the New York Times premature in calling international civil society the world's "second greatest superpower" in the wake of the last year's demonstrations?

All this indicates that the dramatic April events in Iraq do not yet add up to an Iraqi equivalent of the Tet events in Vietnam in 1968. At most, they are a dress rehearsal. Domestic opposition to the war in the US has yet to escalate to a

critical mass. Without this domestic challenge from below, the Bush administration will most likely continue to send in more troops to the Iraq meat-grinder in pursuit of an elusive military solution that would turn the conflict into a long-drawn war of attrition until the level of casualties finally ends public tolerance in the US for a policy headed nowhere but more body bags.

THE KILLING GAME

By Gerard Greenfield*

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How will the history of the US-led military aggression against Iraq be told? For many activists in the peace and antiwar movements this is – by necessity – a question for tomorrow. It is clearly less urgent than the task of resisting the entrenchment of US imperial interests in occupied Iraq. And as new acts of aggression – including aggression by proxy – are waged in other corners of the world, it is likely to remain marginal on the antiwar agenda. But in many ways this question for tomorrow was answered yesterday: it's done. The history that favours military aggression, racism and state violence, and justifies domination and exploitation (all essential elements of the capitalist world in which we live), has been written. It is being taught, absorbed and institutionalized in various ways as historical fact. Not only is this history taught, but it is experienced.

A challenging new mode of learning or experiencing this history is through computer games, particularly interactive online gaming and historical simulation gaming. These games are often presented as based on “real events”, involving “real people and places”, and of course “real battles.” Maps, chronologies, biographies and “official sources” add to this reality. Indeed, the authenticity of games may be considered as important as the quality of its graphics, player options and sound effects. Advertisements promoting military computer games cite the role of military advisors, including advice and support from the US Department of Defence, in ensuring the accuracy of the games and their proximity to reality.

A new innovation that has boosted the degree of authenticity in computer war gaming is the use of real images from wars fought, including video footage of actual bombings, replete with the destruction of “targets” and shots of US military in action. . The new online game, Kuma War, developed with the assistance of the US Defence Department, includes the bombing of Iraq, the US military capture of Saddam Hussein and the killing of Uday and Qusay. Like several best-selling games depicting “Operation Desert Storm”, newer games on the US-led aggression against Iraq use real video footage of the war blended into digital effects – diminishing the line between game and reality; between truth and fiction.

For many Vietnam War games the advice of decorated US war veterans and high-ranking US officers is presented as proof of the historical accuracy of the scenarios and strategies recreated in the game. Of course this authentic history necessarily excludes other histories told by US war veterans whose experience led them to oppose the war and the current acts of US aggression. More importantly, the histories of oppressed peoples, those who fought on the “other side” and the victims of war cannot be told. Cries of “Stop the killing!” and stories of civilian casualties and immense suffering are not the stuff of entertainment. For war gaming to be authentic, the killing must be justified and must continue.

Defenders of the objectivity of war games may argue that games like *ShellShock: Nam '67* portray the atrocities of war (through the eyes of a US draftee), and *Battlefield Vietnam* allows ambitious players to choose to take sides with the North Vietnamese Army. But the fact is that moving from “grunt” to Special Forces is a measure of progress in *ShellShock*, and killing racks up the scorecard whichever side is chosen. Choosing to be the “enemy” adds no objectivity, it just makes it harder to win. And the enemy is still depicted in racist terms.

Reinforcing the racism that justifies domination and mass killing becomes a key part of the authenticity of historically accurate war gaming. That is how we find players killing “gooks” in *Nam* and “towel heads” in *Libya*. It is how First Nation peoples are relegated to the status of “savages”, without technology and skills (or even language), and thus the “civilizing mission” as a battle between good and evil is recreated. Players can choose to be the “baddies”; choose to be the “savages”; making it more challenging to play with a handicap. But the context of this violence, and its necessity is given. It’s not an option. The genocides are digitally recreated. The bombings relived. History repeated. And acts of military aggression endlessly justified.

There have been few instances where the historical representations in these games have been seriously challenged. One example is a strike by workers at a Japanese-invested software manufacturing plant in China in 1997. The workers went on strike because a game they were producing contained scenes that glorified the Nanking (Nanjing) massacre. The massacre of civilians by the Japanese imperial

army in Nanking is depicted as another battle, led by war heroes (complete with biographical data on their heroism) and counted up as another high score. So while debates rage in Japan over the new history textbook of right-wing nationalist scholars and its glorification of war and denial of the Nanking massacre, few have asked whether more pernicious modes of learning history needed to be examined. Which is more influential in making history in the minds of a younger generation: learning through a computer game played endlessly for hours over several days or weeks (or for days without a break as the gaming culture now entails), or through a school history textbook? Both are important. But one seems to pose a greater challenge globally, in terms of what history is learned and experienced through war gaming.

The learning of history through computer war games is not a problem limited to the advanced capitalist countries, but extends to the global South. Shortly after 9/11, I was in an internet café in Shanghai where more than a third of the students crouching over their consoles were playing online war games. The engineering student next to me was playing a Vietnam War game: he was a US marine shooting up “Viet Cong” and calling in napalm strikes. I thought I’d seen it all. Then I saw the same game played in a cyber-café in Ho Chi Minh City by a group of university students.

It is true that the commodification of war and violence as entertainment and the subsequent misrepresentation of history are not new. The history of Hollywood is rife with this, as with nationalist/fascist cinema in so many countries past and present. But it is important to recognize the unique role of computer games as a tool of learning, and as a source of historical truth about war and oppression.

I am not suggesting that we promote peace games as an alternative. Non-violent games certainly exist and should be encouraged. By like the organic food alternative to corporate agriculture, this too easily caters to those who are already convinced. A niche market of ethical (or health consciousness) supporters that can easily co-exist with corporate agriculture is as much of a dead-end as non-violent gamers coexisting with the killing-as-entertainment majority.

Neither am I suggesting censorship. Censorship is precisely the right-wing reaction that will tap religious fundamentalism of all kinds (recall the burning of Harry Potter books in the US for their evil witchcraft). What is needed is a critical response that engages the gaming population, that provides another view – a view that at very least reminds them it's just a game and that the information depicted in games is not historical fact. Critical reviews of war games that present the truth behind the aggression are very much needed, and must be part of a sustained, critical popular education based on a people's history against military aggression and imperialism, past and present. So long as the US-led "War on Terror" is an endless war, so too is the task of recording, teaching and popularizing the real history of what is happening.

Looking forward into the past, all the efforts of the peace and antiwar movements today are rendered meaningless if today's history is learned through racist, militarist and imperialist eyes. And the more vivid and engaging the technology, the more difficult our task. This task is even greater given the US empire's commitment to an infinite war of justification. Ironically, it's here we find some truth in the online war games. The developers' diary of the online version of Kuma War describes it as "the game that never ends...."

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