

Obama and Washington Mythmaking

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Over the years, Washington has evolved into a city of deceptions where semantics cloud reality and where a hazy mix of lies, half-truths and mythology can combine to unleash the devastating military might of the United States for no good reason. Indeed, if there were to be a serious effort to "change the mindset" that got the United States into the Iraq War - as Barack Obama has promised - one place to start would be to force Official Washington to take a long hard look in the mirror.

During George W. Bush's presidency alone, language has been routinely twisted to justify everything from aggressive war to torture. Those two international crimes were turned into "preventive war" and "alternative interrogation techniques."

But "preventive war" is nothing but a grotesque Orwellian euphemism, since it makes no sense to claim that you're preventing a war by starting a war.

The accurate phrase, especially in the context of the Iraq invasion, would be "aggressive war." That phrase, however, would force an uncomfortable judgment that President Bush and many well-dressed neocons at Georgetown dinner parties were "war criminals" deserving of hanging.

Under the legal standards applied to the Nazi leaders at the Nuremberg Tribunals, "aggressive war" was deemed the "supreme international crime" because it sets loose all the atrocities of warfare.

However, rather than liken Bush and the neocons to the Nazis, Official Washington replaced "aggressive war" with the ever-so-much-nicer choices of "preventive" or "preemptive" war.

Official Washington also disdains the word "torture" when it describes actions approved at the highest levels of the Bush administration. It's so much more comforting to talk about "alternative interrogation techniques." [For more, see Consortiumnews.com's "Torture Trail Seen Starting with Bush."]

There's also that pleasant denial of reality when one hears reassurances from Vice President Dick Cheney and other senior officials that "the United States doesn't torture."

So what if simulated drowning from waterboarding, forced nudity, stress positions, sleep deprivation, use of extreme temperatures and similar techniques have long been regarded as torture, especially when used by U.S. enemies or against American troops? If U.S. officials now say those methods aren't torture, then it's time to go with different phrasing.

False narratives play an important role, too, in Washington's self-delusions, by casting U.S. government actions in the most favorable light and those of its enemies in the most negative.

At one level, you have Bush answering the American public's post-9/11 question "why do they hate us?" with the fairy-tale explanation that Islamic extremists "hate our freedoms." Other times, you get outright lying.

For instance, President Bush began insisting in July 2003 that he had no choice but to invade Iraq because Saddam Hussein refused to let the United Nations arms inspectors in - even though any cursory reading of recent history would show that Hussein did let the inspectors in, in fall 2002.

It was Bush who forced the inspectors to leave in March 2003 so he could proceed with his shock-and-awe invasion. Yet Bush has continued to invoke this made-up history about Hussein barring the inspectors as recently as Dec. 1 when he spun the tale to ABC News' Charles Gibson.

Like many big-name journalists before him, Gibson didn't contradict Bush's historical revisionism. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Bush Still Lies About Iraq War." For more on the history of Washington deceptions, see Robert Parry's Lost History.]

Change with Obama?

The big question now is whether President Obama will bring any meaningful change to the deceptive mindset of the Washington Establishment. Or will Obama bend to Washington's potent conventional wisdom which incorporates these pleasing narratives?

So far, it appears the Washington Establishment is winning out. Obama's transition has been so much to the liking of the power elite that everyone from Dick Cheney and Henry Kissinger to the many neoconservative writers on the Washington Post and New York Times editorial pages have been pinching themselves to make sure they're not dreaming.

They have cheered lustily over Obama's national security picks, particularly the decision to retain Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who oversaw President Bush's "surge" of about 30,000 troops in Iraq in 2007-2008 after Donald Rumsfeld balked at doing so.

The Gates choice is especially heartwarming to the neocons because it reinforces an important argument as they rehabilitate themselves in the wake of the Iraq fiasco. By keeping Gates, Obama is acquiescing to the myth of the "successful surge," which the neocons see as crucial in validating their war judgment and discrediting their critics.

The "successful surge" myth is built around the widely accepted conventional wisdom that the increase in U.S. troop levels in 2007 brought Iraqi violence under control and carried the United States to the verge of "victory" in Iraq.

This analysis is now considered a nearly indisputable fact by Bush's defenders and most of Washington's elite news media, although it is shared by very few military experts who credit the drop in violence to a variety of other developments, many of which - like the switching of sides among Sunni tribes in Anbar province and the killing of al-Qaeda's murderous leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi - predated the "surge."

Other non-surge security factors included:

--The surprise decision of radical Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr to order a unilateral cease-fire by his militia;

--The vicious ethnic cleansing that separated Sunnis and Shiites while forcing several million Iraqis to become refugees either in neighboring countries or within their own;

--Concrete walls built between Sunni and Shiite areas, "cantonizing" Baghdad.

--The detention of thousands of "military age males" who were rounded up often indiscriminately;

--The cumulative effect of five years of concentrated U.S. firepower on Iraqi insurgents and civilian bystanders, leaving countless thousands dead.

--With the total Iraqi death toll estimated in the hundreds of thousands and many more Iraqis horribly maimed, the extraordinary trauma affecting Iraqi society has caused many Iraqis to simply look toward their own survival.

Besides being only one of many factors in the reduced violence, the "surge" also failed to bring about the political-economic reconciliation in Iraq that Bush had promised when he announced the build-up in January 2007. Nor has it led to the expected drawdown of troops to below pre-surge levels, with almost 150,000 U.S. troops now in Iraq, about 16,000 more than before the "surge."

Yet, the myth of the "successful surge" has proved extraordinarily powerful.

During the campaign, Obama faced hectoring from media interviewers, such as CBS News' Katie Couric and ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, demanding that he admit he was wrong to oppose the "surge."

For weeks, Obama held firm, insisting that the issue was more complicated than his interviewers wanted to admit. He argued that there were many factors behind Iraq's changed security environment. But ultimately he caved in while being interrogated on Sept. 4 by Fox News' Bill O'Reilly.

"I think that the surge has succeeded in ways that nobody anticipated," Obama confessed to O'Reilly. "It's succeeded beyond our wildest dreams."

Obama may have judged that continued resistance was futile. But his surrender on the "successful surge" myth may have other long-term consequences.

Sizing Up Obama

Having watched him succumb to media pressure - and then seeing him accept Establishment favorite Robert Gates as a Republican holdover in the new Cabinet - the U.S. high command in the Middle East appears to be getting ready to roll over the incoming President on his central campaign promise of a 16-month withdrawal from Iraq.

Generals David Petraeus and Ray Odierno have outlined to Obama a scheme for a modest withdrawal of about 7,000 to 8,000 troops in the first six months of 2009 - bringing the total down to levels that still might be higher than those before the surge two years ago - and then keeping the numbers there until at least June 2009 when additional judgments would be made, the New York Times reported Thursday.

Rather than "change you can believe in," the generals seem to have in mind something closer to Bush's old "stay the course."

Gen. Odierno, who is commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, also said on Dec. 13 that American combat troops will remain in Iraqi cities after June 30, 2009, the date of their scheduled relocation away from the cities under a new "status-of-forces agreement" with the Iraqi government. Odierno said these troops would be "transition teams" advising Iraqi forces.

Col. James Hutton, a spokesman for Odierno, later amplified on the general's comments, characterizing U.S. troops staying behind in the cities as "enablers to Iraqi security forces."

Iraqi critics of the status-of-forces agreement were quick to criticize these American word games of redefining U.S. troops as "transition teams" and "enablers."

"This confirmed our view that U.S. forces will never withdraw from the cities next summer, and they will never leave Iraq by the end of 2011," said Ahmed al-Masoudi, a spokesman for a Shiite parliamentary bloc close to al-Sadr.

The status-of-forces agreement, which is intended to govern the actions of U.S. military forces in Iraq after Dec. 31, 2008, also calls for a complete American military withdrawal by the end of 2011. However, many Iraqis are dubious that the United States intends to live up to its word - and Odierno has noted that the deadline can be renegotiated.

"Three years is a very long time," Odierno told reporters.

In other words, the top U.S. commanders for Iraq have taken the measure of the President-elect and decided that they can openly flout his central campaign promise - that he would give them new orders on his first day in office to begin a monthly withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq, culminating after 16 months with only a modest residual force left behind.

Now on Day One, Obama can expect to face clear opposition to his withdrawal plan from the lead generals in the region and from Defense Secretary Gates, who also has spoken out against Obama's timetable. If he presses ahead on a pullout, Obama can expect strong institutional resistance and leaks critical of his leadership.

However, if he reneges on his campaign promise and succumbs to the power play by these Bush holdovers, Obama will be sending another troubling signal - that he can be "handled" - a message that will resonate across Washington and around the world.

Rehabilitating Bush

Besides undercutting Obama, the myth of the "successful surge" has fueled a new narrative favorable to George W. Bush, that his decision to liberate Iraq may have suffered from many problems of execution but he bravely stuck with it until he came upon a winning strategy.

To celebrate this story line, Bush secretly flew to Iraq on Dec. 14 to sign the status-of-forces agreement and boast about an impending U.S. victory.

However, reality reasserted itself when Bush was forced to dodge two shoes thrown by an angry Iraqi journalist, Muntader al-Zaidi, who upstaged Bush's self-congratulatory rhetoric with shouts about the death and destruction that the near-six-year-old war has inflicted on Iraq.

"This is from the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq!" al-Zaidi shouted as he threw his second shoe (before being wrestled to the ground and beaten by Iraqi security personnel).

Now, Barack Obama must decide if he wants to buy into Bush's war in Iraq, even while vowing to increase U.S. forces in Bush's other war in Afghanistan.

If he does, Obama may find himself equally in need of euphemisms to explain his reversal of a key

campaign promise - and to justify the additional widows and orphans who will surely be created over the next several years in Iraq.

The question now is whether Obama will change Washington or whether Washington already has begun to change Obama?

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