

MARCH 17

Why Iraqi withdrawal makes sense

President Bush just told reporters that he has no intention of setting any timetable for withdrawal. "Our troops will come home when Iraq is capable of defending herself," he said. Powerful pundits keep telling us that a swift pullout of U.S. troops would be irresponsible. And plenty of people have bought into that idea – including quite a few progressives. Such acceptance is part of what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the madness of militarism."

Sometimes, an unspoken assumption among progressive activists is that the occupation of Iraq must be tolerated for tactical reasons – while other issues, notably domestic ones, are more winnable on Capitol Hill. But this acceptance means going along with many of the devastating effects of a militarized society: from ravaged budgets for social programs to more authoritarian attitudes and violence in communities across the country.

"The bombs in Vietnam," King said in 1967, "explode at home; they destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America." He rejected the insistent claims that it would be more prudent to avoid clear opposition to the war in order to concentrate on domestic issues. "I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted," he said. "I speak for the poor in America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam."

As spring 2005 begins, many who like to praise Martin Luther King are going out of their way to evade the fundamental destructiveness of this war. Of course, throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, a prevailing argument was that removing U.S. troops would be a betrayal of U.S. responsibility to the people of South Vietnam. Today, likewise, opposition to a swift U.S. pullout from Iraq is often based on the idea that the American military must stay because of a responsibility to the people of Iraq.

But most Iraqis want the U.S. military out of their country – pronto. As Newsweek reported in its Jan. 31 edition: "Now every major poll shows an ever-larger majority of Iraqis want the Americans to leave." Yet we hear that U.S. troops must stay for the good

of the Iraqi people – even though most of those people clearly want U.S. troops to leave. (Are we supposed to believe that Americans know better than Iraqis whether American troops should stay in Iraq?)

To paper over such illogic, a media-stoked myth tells us that getting out of Iraq is a notion remaining outside the boundaries of what the U.S. public could take seriously. Most politicians and pundits insist that it's off the table. But polls are telling a different story.

"According to a recent NBC/Wall Street Journal poll taken after the Iraq elections, 59 percent of the public believes the United States should pull its troops out of Iraq in the next year," Amy Quinn of the Institute for Policy Studies wrote in early March. "Yet the ranks of those actively demanding that the president produce an exit strategy from Iraq are slim."

In mid-March, an ABC News/Washington Post poll found that a large proportion of the U.S. population has a negative view of the war. For instance, the poll asked: "All in all, considering the costs to the United States versus the benefits to the United States, do you think the war with Iraq was worth fighting or not?" Only 45 percent said "worth fighting," while 53 percent said "not worth fighting."

Such nationwide poll numbers hardly indicate a country where few people are interested in proposals for extricating U.S. troops from Iraq. But the point is not only that political space exists in the United States for a grassroots movement to effectively organize for a swift pullout. It's also the best alternative for Iraq.

Consider the perspective of David Enders, a brave American journalist who has been in Iraq most of the time since the invasion. While writing for such outlets as Mother-Jones.com, the Nation magazine and the British daily Independent, he actually covers Iraqi society firsthand rather than staying behind American lines. Days ago, responding to my questions via email from Iraq, Enders provided some of the reasons for his assessment that American troops should leave rather than stay. For instance:

* "It is the will of the Iraqi people." Enders cites a recent survey by Iraqi pollster Saadun Al-Dulaimie, who found that 85 percent of Iraqi people want U.S. troops out of their country as soon as possible.

* "The U.S. does not provide security for the average Iraqi, and it never has."

* "The U.S. has not prevented a civil war from taking place. If anything, it has exacerbated it."

* "It is not morally derelict to pull out; it's morally derelict to stay. Returning real control and sovereignty to Iraqis is the most effective way to prevent the country from breaking apart. U.S. troops complain Iraqis don't want to stand up and fight for themselves,

and a big part of the reason is the occupiers' presence."

Meanwhile, Enders voices enthusiasm for the resolution sponsored by more than two dozen members of the House of Representatives "expressing the sense of Congress that the President should develop and implement a plan to begin the immediate withdrawal of United States Armed Forces from Iraq" (House Concurrent Resolution 35, <http://www.woolsey.house.gov/newsarticle.asp?RecordID=401>).

This spring, as U.S. activists work to build a strong movement against the war, the need to pressure Congress is clear. What's less apparent is the need to also push – and, if necessary, confront – hesitant progressive organizations that are taking the easy way out by refusing to challenge the ongoing war.

Fortunately, some national organizations are providing forthright leadership to pursue the goal of getting U.S. troops out of Iraq. Those groups – including United for Peace & Justice, Progressive Democrats of America, Military Families Speak Out, TrueMajority, Iraq Veterans Against the War, Code Pink, Campus Antiwar Network, Veterans for Peace, Iraq Pledge of Resistance, American Friends Service Committee, Democracy Rising and U.S. Labor Against the War, to name just a dozen – inspire as they organize.

Only clear opposition to the war can change the terms of the national debate. Taking the paths of least resistance won't get us very far.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer. His columns and other writings can be found at: www.normansolomon.com