

Choice clear: U.S. needs to pull out of Iraq

By Bill Fletcher Jr.
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Though the media acknowledged the death of the 2,000th U.S. soldier in Iraq, as with most other things in the USA, attention quickly shifted to another news story. Two thousand U.S. soldiers dead; at least 30,000 Iraqi deaths acknowledged by the U.S. government, and possibly as many as 100,000; an occupied country which could fragment at any moment; and President Bush says to stay the course.

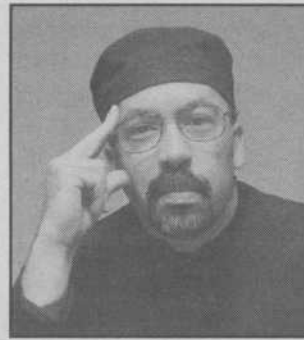
There is very little remaining of the administration's inflammatory and disingenuous justifications for the invasion and occupation.

The weapons of mass destruction argument has been discredited, and the evil doings of Saddam Hussein — which became the justification for the invasion after no weapons of mass destruction were found — were largely committed when he was an ally

of the U.S. during the 1980s (which begs the question of why the U.S. did not invade Iraq then if he was so monstrous and this needed to be stopped). All the administration can cling to is that Iraq is a mess and, therefore, the U.S. cannot withdraw.

Readers of my columns know that I vehemently opposed (and continue to oppose) the war and occupation. In that light, I wish to emphasize that nothing short of a complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the payment of reparations to Iraq for the damage it committed under the illegal pretext, will lay the foundations for the reconstruction of Iraq.

The U.S. remains a hated occupation force for a significant portion of the Iraqi population. The Bush administration forced the Ira-



BILL FLETCHER JR.

qis to accept economic programs that privatize major industries and, thus, force thousands into unemployment. The Iraqi living standard, which plummeted from 1991 through 2003 as a result of the heinous sanctions, has worsened.

In the midst of this tragedy, Iraq beings to look like a Thanksgiving turkey being carved up by the diners who, in this case, are the corporate friends of the Bush administration.

As with other unjust wars, one must ask how many people must die before there is recognition that a wrong was committed. Common sense should tell us that the Iraqis have no basis to trust the Bush administration's reconstruction policies in view of the lies that have already been told.

For those who suggest that the U.S. cannot leave Iraq because it would cause chaos, I would ask that they demonstrate how the U.S. military presence is bringing the country any closer to stability and peace. It is far more likely that a U.S. announcement of withdrawal would meet with international approval and offers by institutions and governments to assist in a democratic transition and reconstruction.

A continued U.S. presence only discourages the involvement of international partners in what has come to be nothing short of quicksand.

We must face a horrible truth: 2,000-plus U.S. soldiers and 30,000-plus Iraqis have died as a result of a hideous and gross violation of international law. The time has come for the curtains to close on this tragedy.

Bill Fletcher Jr. is president of TransAfrica Forum, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit educational and organizing center.

Government: Executions, death sentences fall

WASHINGTON (AP) - The ranks of people sentenced to death and the number executed declined in 2004 as the nation's death row population kept shrinking, the government reported Sunday.

Last year, a dozen states executed 59 prisoners, six fewer than in 2003, according to the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics. The report also said 125 people, including five women, who were convicted of murder received a death sentence last year. That was the smallest number since 1973.

Last year, 22 death row inmates died of natural causes or committed suicide, while an additional 107 had their sentences commuted, tossed out or overturned. As of Dec. 31, there were 3,315 people on death row, compared to 3,378 a year earlier.

Tracy Snell, one of the

List of 2004 executions, death row numbers

A list of 2004 executions by state and the 10 states with the largest death row populations as of Dec. 31, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the Department of Justice:

EXECUTIONS	ON DEATH ROW
Texas: 23	California: 637
Ohio: 7	Texas: 446
Oklahoma: 6	Florida: 364
Virginia: 5	Pennsylvania: 222
North Carolina: 4	Ohio: 201
South Carolina: 4	Alabama: 193
Alabama: 2	North Carolina: 181
Florida: 2	Georgia: 109
Georgia: 2	Arizona: 105
Nevada: 2	Tennessee: 99
Arkansas: 1	
Maryland: 1	

report's authors, said the number of prisoners under death sentences has declined four years in a row, the result of a murder rate now at its lowest level in 40 years.

One death penalty advocate said the threat of harsh

punishment is responsible for that falling rate.

"There are less murders, less murder victims and less death sentences because, in our view, we have been giving this problem the right medicine," said Michael

Rushford, president of the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation in Sacramento, Calif.

"Most states have effective habitual offender laws. These laws take the most likely group of potential capital murderers off the street," said Rushford, whose public interest law group works "to strengthen law enforcement's ability to assure that crime does not pay," according to its website.

Richard Dieter, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center in Washington, said jurors increasingly are reluctant to recommend the death penalty.

He cited recent cases where death row prisoners have been freed following media or legal investigations; the use of DNA evidence to exonerate those wrongly convicted; and the increased availability of life-without-parole sentences as an alternative to capital punishment.

"The thing that stands out to me is the breadth of the decline," said Dieter, whose group has been critical of how the death penalty is applied. "I think if it was just one year or one of those numbers, it would be less consequential. What we're witnessing is a pullback from the death penalty across the country."

Today, 37 of the 38 states with death penalty laws allow juries to consider life without parole as an alternative. That option may come to have a large effect in Texas, which in 2004 executed 23 prisoners, or more than three times as many death row inmates than any other state. A Texas law that took effect Sept. 1 allows capital murder juries to consider life-without-parole for convicted offenders.

California had the largest death row, with 637 inmates at the end 2004. California,

Florida and Texas together account for 44 percent of the nation's death row population, according to the report.

The report also said:

-The 59 inmates executed in 2004 had spent an average of 11 years on death row.

-Of those executed, 36 were White, 19 Black and three Hispanic, and one was Asian. One inmate was electrocuted; the rest were put to death by lethal injection.

-Ten federal prisoners were sentenced to death in 2004, or twice as many in any year since 1973.

-Fifty-two women were on death row, five more than a year earlier.

-The oldest death row inmate was 89; the youngest was 18.

-Preliminary data show that this year 13 states had executed 49 inmates as of Nov. 9, or seven fewer than during the same period a year earlier.

FEMA

(Continued from Page 1)

After Dec. 1, most hurricane evacuees who aren't ready to leave hotels will have to pay the costs out of pocket — either with FEMA rental housing aid they receive or from their own funds.

Katrina hit on Aug. 29, followed by Rita on Sept. 24.

In Houston, Mayor Bill White demanded that FEMA grant a similar extension to the city as it moves 19,158 evacuees out of city hotels.

"We have moved more evacuees out of hotels than any other city has ever had in hotels," White said in a statement. "So we encourage those new to it to ask us, not tell us, how to do it."

The hotel program marked FEMA's second step in finding homes for hundreds of thousands of evacuees displaced after the storms. Over the last month, FEMA has moved 8,748 people out of emergency shelters and into hotels and other transitional housing, Garratt said. As of Tuesday, 2,491 evacuees remain in shelters, down from a high of 321,000, he said.

Also by Dec. 1, thousands of evacuees who receive FEMA housing aid in vouchers issued through state or local authorities will have to sign a rental lease to remain eligible for the funding. Three months later, on March 1, FEMA will end the

voucher program and send housing aid directly to evacuees who qualify.

Additionally, the six-month leases for evacuees living on cruise ships will end March 1, Garratt said.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry, whose state welcomed many Katrina evacuees, said: "We recognize and agree with FEMA's decision to make personal responsibility a part of the hurricane recovery process. However, my great concern is that there is still no long-term housing plan for the hundreds of thousands of Katrina victims who lost everything — including their homes — as a result of the storm, and come March 1 many of them may find themselves with no long-term housing options."

Housing advocates said FEMA has not given evacuees enough time to find homes and sign leases — a process that can take months in rental markets already nearing capacity.

"It's a hell of a time to be telling people that they're kicked out a week after the holiday," said Doug Culkin, executive vice president of the National Apartment Association. He was referring to next week's Thanksgiving holiday.

"The coordination of this has just been horrible," Culkin said. "And we're just concerned that a lot of people aren't going to realize the predicament they're in until too late.

People are not going to have adequate time to make plans."

In the last month, FEMA has deployed "strike teams" of federal, state and local authorities to meet with evacuees and discuss their long-term housing goals — and how to reach them. Now, FEMA will assign 3,000 social workers to manage evacuees' cases — a \$66 million contract with the United Methodist Committee on Relief and the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.

So far, FEMA says it has provided \$1.2 billion in transitional housing assistance to more than 500,000 households displaced by the hurricanes.

The Red Cross had not seen details of the plan Tuesday, but spokesman Michael Spencer said "the time has passed for emergency housing."

"Interim housing is the responsibility of the state and federal government, and we have to assume they have a plan in place," he said.

FEMA officials still don't know how many evacuees in hotels have registered with the agency for housing aid, and it's possible that many will not qualify for direct rental assistance, Garratt said.

Those who will not will be referred to the Department of Housing and Urban Development for help, he said.