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Cakewalks and slam dunks: realities of the Iraq War

by Colman McCarthy

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From the beginning to the end -- March 2003 to December 2011 -- the Iraq War was a lose-lose tragedy: losses for the people of Iraq that range from a mass exodus of refugees to a civilian death toll beyond counting, and losses for America that include battlefield deaths, physical and psychic wounds, a record number of soldier suicides, an economy bankrupted by the costs of a war that the public was lied into and was exploited by military contractors, hawked by the establishment media and defended by cheerers who predicted a quick victory as either a "slam dunk" or "cakewalk."

None of these realities received even a passing nod when Commander in Chief Barack Obama in mid-December spoke in a hangar packed with soldiers in Fort Bragg, N.C. Instead, he dealt in fantasies, accolades and bromides. The war "is one of the most extraordinary chapters in the history of the American military." It "has made America stronger and the world more secure." We have "the emergence of a new dawn."

If that were only slightly true, why not hold a victory parade for the troops along Pennsylvania Avenue and do it up right? Stage an Appreciation Day on the National Mall. Bring Toby Keith to the White House, where he sang in 2001, this time to belt out "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" and its wonderfully spiritual lines: "This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage and you'll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A., 'cause we'll put a boot in your ass, it's the American way."

At Fort Bragg, Obama was staging a pep rally, a hollow event for soldiers who were the expendable ones for a reckless foreign policy devised by the Bush-Cheney-Wolfowitz-Rice White House cabal, carried out by a Rumsfeld Pentagon and funded by a pliant Congress. The speech might have been a moment to level with an American public that was forced to pay for the war, by citing the warning of Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "The single biggest threat to our national security is

our debt.? The slogan 'peace through strength' has become weakness through war. Invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to economic defeats for the nation and individuals. TIME magazine reports that per-person spending on the military rose from \$1,500 a year in 1998 to \$2,700 in 2008. Current estimates are much higher.

Obama omitted any mention of the suffering endured by Iraq. No apologies were given to the families of civilians killed by American or NATO bombings. No regrets were made for the destruction of the nation's infrastructure. No reparations were offered to Iraq's war widows, estimated in 2009 at 740,000 -- with fewer than one in six receiving state help. No reference was made to the post-traumatic stress disorder afflicting Iraqis. Last July a report by the congressionally-appointed Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction stated that the country is plagued by corruption, economic and security problems, and sectarian violence.

It was nothing new. The same office reported in September 2008 that \$13 billion in American aid meant for reconstruction had been stolen or wasted. The year before, a coalition of relief organizations found that 'Iraq's civilians are suffering from a denial of fundamental human rights in the form of chronic poverty, malnutrition, illness, lack of access to basic services and destruction of homes ... as well as injury and death.' Days after the Obama speech, and with the last American combat soldier leaving Iraq, 17 explosions in Baghdad killed at least 65 people and injured more than 200. More bombings followed the next week

Despite the loss-loss reality, the violence in Iraq and Afghanistan did have winners: war contractors and their shareholders. The Commission on Wartime Contracting, created by Congress, reported in September that U.S companies were paid \$206 billion for goods and services. More than 260,000 private workers greased the engines of war, many of them lavishly paid and cashing in on no-bid contracts. The commission found between \$31 billion and \$60 billion wasted, including 'vast amounts of spending for no benefit.'

So the predictions were right after all. For contractors, dunks were indeed slammed and the cakes were walked.

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