

Mutinies in the American army, 2004-2005 - Echanges #111

A brief discussion of incidences of dissatisfaction in the US Army during the Iraq War.

Mutinies, the word can seem excessive because Iraq is not (yet) Vietnam. However, a refusal to obey in the army, whatever the reason, is a mutiny and quite often such acts of insubordination have started with minor acts. Even isolated, such acts are indicative of "troop morale", an essential element for continuing war.

Half the U.S troops in Iraq (notably in the supply corps) are made up of reservists and elements of the National Guard. And, because of personnel shortages, many missions usually entrusted to the military are delegated to private companies, not counting a whole range of mercenaries hired to "secure" the intrusion under military cover for the country's exploitation by mostly American capitalist firms.

Despite the promises of a "short war," regular combat troops can hardly ever be relieved because America's presence must be upheld over the entire world, (even at the price of restrictions and redeployment.) Reestablishing the draft seems out of question, which testifies that even the approval of the war of Bush and a section of American capital doesn't meet with deep and massive support, despite the barrage of the "war against terrorism." Falling back on these added forces from the Army Reserve and National Guard sets up a very concrete psychological problem identical with the one blocking an eventual draft. These are no longer young people under twenty (often immigrants) like the professional army, but older men with careers and family life who, even if declaring a sincere militarism and patriotism, aren't ready to get themselves killed "for the country," much less feel prepared to take on the tasks assigned to them in Iraq (notably, the National Guard was intended to guarantee "internal security" within the U.S.)

** On October 15, 2004 at Tallil in southwestern Iraq, nineteen soldiers of a section of the 343 Company, all reservists, were absent from the pre-departure briefing for a supply convoy delivering fuel to a helicopter base.

Their refusal to carry out this mission was motivated by concern over the poor state of the vehicles and the fact that their convoy had to cross a danger zone, site of frequent insurgent attacks, without protection from an Army escort. Other soldiers from another regiment were then assigned to this mission.

It's difficult to know what happened then to the nineteen "mutineers" because, the army as always exercised complete censorship as much as possible over their actions and the disciplinary repercussions. The nineteen were arrested and locked up under military guard and a criminal investigation was opened, led by a colonel under a general's direction.

The mutineers were released the following Friday. Before the investigation ended, maybe thirty soldiers, alleged "leaders", were shipped to other units and some demoted. More precise information, often completely contradicting the military's version, filtered out by cell phone to families who then supplied the press. It equally looks as if the military machine, certainly out of fear of repercussions within the Army and the country, backpedaled, not bringing the mutineers up for court-martial as originally planned. It appears the whole episode shook up a little the official certainties in continuing military operations in Iraq.

*** On December 8, 2004, during a visit to Camp Buehting in Kuwait, the Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld was seen questioned by soldiers, all members of the Army reserve and National Guard, on the verge of being deployed to Iraq. Significantly, from the point of "army morale," he came to visit the troops to encourage them to "win the battle of will," which implies the will was missing. With out the usual special handling, Rumsfeld was questioned by second-rank soldiers who complained of the lack of equipment and the length of the assignments. Since his visit was televised, all these critical interventions, approved and applauded by 2,300 "cheering" soldiers) were diffused widely by the American media.

Contradictory conclusions can be drawn from these incidents. Some would conclude that "American democracy's" apparatus of domination is so strong and sophisticated in the art of manipulation that open dissent can be permitted and given wide publicity. But unlike the past, modern means of communication make total censorship impossible. As a result it's better to let some revelations out to stop other, more important disclosures, more particularly the individual or collective punishment or other control measures.

All these incidents show certain weaknesses in "American domination" which contradict the assertion of an "unequal strength" and hinges exactly on the acts we've described. In the basic reasons behind the refusal to obey, first place is occupied by the inadequate protection for supply convoys, from which can be concluded that the supply bureau despite its fire power doesn't follow the old military rule stating that an army in operation becomes more vulnerable the further it operates from base.

In its responses to the accusations coming from the ranks of specific deficiencies and scarcity of materials. Donald Rumsfeld can only answer that "it is a question of production and the capacity to make it . . . You know, you go to war with the army you have. Not with the army you want to have." Of course, one can go on about the American army's lack of preparation for a long war, which would be at the heart of the problem; a lack of preparation in personnel (drawn from an unskilled reserve) as well as in equipment (ill adapted to a type of struggle.) But the thought come up that on these two points - men and material ("industry can't follow," says Rumsfeld), the instruments of economic domination and the American military are declining disproportionate to its ambitions. Which gets back to other considerations brought up in this same issue and in other texts. - H.S.

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