

Were We Right? Assessing the Merits of ASA's Anti-War Resolution ***Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Texas A&M University*** **and** ***Keri Iyall Smith, Stonehill College***

A year ago, Sociologists Without Borders¹ (SWB) sponsored an ASA member resolution against the U.S. coalition-led intervention in Iraq. The ASA membership voted on the matter, and the resolution passed by a 2-to-1 margin. Since that time, 11,000 Iraqis² and more than 800 Americans have died in Iraq, and it is not clear that the world is more secure from terrorism. As social scientists, we must keep a tally of events to improve our analyses and tailor our policies to fit the data. Thus, we summarize here facts that have emerged over the past year to assess the member resolution's significance.

First, Iraq was not an "imminent threat" to the world order. The administration's claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was based on faulty intelligence³, a selective reading of available intelligence, and uninformed and/or incompetent presidential advisors who had determined long before September 11 that the United States would go to war with Iraq⁴, buttressed by the now-discredited Iraqi expatriate Ahmed Chalabi, head of the CIA-funded Iraqi National Congress.⁵

Second, when WMD did not materialize, the rationale for the invasion was changed to that of deposing an evil despot, hardly a good argument, as there are too many despots in the world and many have been supported by nations leading the Iraq intervention.

Third, this intervention seems to have weakened international rule, as the League of Arab Nations was sidestepped and the United Nations governance was for the most part ignored. And now that the intervention is clearly becoming a serious problem, President Bush has called upon the U.N. and many of the nations that opposed the intervention a year ago) to come to its rescue.

Fourth, President Bush's doctrine of "preemptive strike" is a threat to international rule and democracy. It is a violation of the U.N. Charter and of the Geneva Conventions, and international law only recognizes the right to self-defense in the face of imminent attack. Now that the United States has set a precedent, what will prevent other nations from invoking this doctrine to "defend" themselves from nations they regard as threatening?

Fifth, the United States is now openly using assassination of political leaders as a tool in this "War against Terror."⁶ Furthermore, the recent scandal over the use of torture by American soldiers has created a monumental problem of legitimacy. These practices are legitimizing similar behavior from other states (e.g., Israel) and creating a very dangerous precedent.

Sixth, the coalition and the U.S. media have labeled "terrorist" most forms of resistance to oppression in the world system. Thus today the national liberation struggles of Palestinians, Irish, and many other peoples are equated with the religious fundamentalism of Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization.

Seventh, the United States now seeks singular superpower control of the entire world. The White House's September 17, 2002, official policy statement makes this clear: "The United States of America is fighting a war against terrorism of global reach.... We must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from ever aspiring to a larger regional or global rule."⁷

Eighth, the way the war is being conducted has caused Al Qaeda and its allies, as well as Iraqis resistance, to attack "soft targets," causing Iraqis themselves to pay a heavier human toll, as attacks are directed at crowds, police officers, and even Mosques.

Ninth, it is doubtful that the transfer of power to Iraqis at the end of June will help advance democracy in the country. Despite the (late) U.N. participation in this process, few observers believe that Iraq will become a sovereign state while over 140,000 American and British troops in the country.

We know that a third of those who voted on this resolution believed that ASA ought not to have taken a position on this matter . Some have doubts about making official ASA statements on this or any "political" matter. In contrast, SWB contends that as sociologists, our primary orientation by training and temperament is the security of peoples. We believe that the US-led invasion of Iraq put in peril the security of millions of civilians and destabilized regional and national alignments. The cost of this war is not only the polarization of the world, but also the waste of vital financial resources for reducing poverty and expanding educational and other opportunities—the sorts of things that sociologists care about.

Sociologists are losing out in the marketplace of ideas in part because of our misplaced concern about intervening in public controversies. Hence, if only for self-preservation, sociology ought to aspire to have a more serious public engagement. Alternatively, sociology could risk the fate of dinosaurs and become a discipline of concern only to archeologists.

Notes ¹ See the Sociologists Without Borders website at www.sociologistswithoutborders.org/.

² The U.S. Central Command does not count civilian casualties. The best estimate available is by the Iraq Body Count Project (www.iraqbodycount.net/), which is based on *reported deaths* and is likely to severely underestimate casualties.

³Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq* (Parthenon, 2004).

⁴James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans* (Viking, 2004); Richard A. Clark, *Against All Enemies* (Free Press, 2004); John Prados, *Hoodwinked: The Documents that Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War* (The New Press, 2004).

⁵Chalabi has a record of dubious dealings in a variety of affairs. For example, after heading the Petra Bank in Jordan, he left the country abruptly in 1989. In 1992 he was convicted in absentia for embezzlement, fraud, and currency-trading irregularities and sentenced to 22 years of hard labor. Recently, the CIA stopped paying money to the Chalabi-led Iraqi National Congress for their "services" and accused him of spying for Iran.

⁶For reasons why one cannot fight against a military tactic (whether terrorism or low-intensity conflict or anything else), see George Packer, "A Democratic World," *The New Yorker*, Feb. 16-23, 2004, pp. 100-108.

⁷See the White House website at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html, pages 11, 32.