TRIAL BY HISTORY:
A Retrospective on the War in Iraq

Even the most steadfast of humanists, setting out to tell the story of human civilization, must eventually and disconsolately concede that the story is primarily one of mounting atrocities, cruelty, terror, and subjugation. This makes an ethical perspective on history almost impossible; how do we judge what was right and wrong when every decision carries its own particular and bloody history? I do not mean to suggest that historians cannot raise questions of right and wrong, nor that they cannot state, with force, that at particular times and in particular places there are innocents and aggressors, victims and villains. But when we observe the whole of history, beginning to end, we see wrongs committed to right earlier wrongs, the right actions taken for the wrong reasons, the wrong actions becoming right through unforeseen consequences, the right actions proving to be wrong because they were not quite right enough.

I give my analysis this grim preface because we must face an ugly and unsatisfying truth: though ten years have passed, we are still unable to judge whether the United States’ overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime in Iraq and the means by which we achieved it were “worth it.” We will not be prepared in ten more years, in fifty more years, or in a hundred more years. To be sure, our actions removed from power and ensured the quiet and ignoble death of a dangerous madman who was a terror to his own people. But it also established a U.S. military presence in the Middle East that has become an endless source of fury and zeal for fundamentalist terror groups, cost the U.S.
billions of dollars and hundreds of young lives, and driven a wedge between member states of the United Nations which will take us at least another decade to repair.

In this article, I shall briefly revisit three of the arguments that, a decade ago, were being made for American intervention in Iraq. Although two of these arguments have clearly proven more or less valid over the years, one of them is too complicated to fully evaluate with only ten years’ hindsight. If the reader, whatever his persuasion leaves the article more uncertain about whether or not our intervention in Iraq was wise and moral, that is as it should be. It is my belief that until we, as a nation, come to grips with the endless complications involved in determining right and wrong in our foreign policy we will never be able to conduct ourselves responsibly as the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

The Case for Intervention

_Saddam Hussein has or is attempting to acquire biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons of mass destruction, which we cannot allow._ This assertion proved to be a nuisance for the Bush administration, though not enough of one to defeat their bid for reelection in 2004'. They played the shell game on this point, retrofitting their argument for intervention to make this an expendable part of it. If no weapons of mass destruction do turn up, the administration’s new line seemed to go, it is embarrassing but not disastrous, and it certainly takes nothing away from the great good of liberating the oppressed people of Iraq. And every once in a while there came half-hearted reports that tried to prove the existence of WMDs—an Iraqi chemical plant that might have been
intended for the production of nerve gasses or the like—but, for the most part, the Bush administration was happy to stop pressing this point, and most Americans were willing to forgive or forget the issue. If we do determine someday that the Bush administration knowingly ignored evidence that Iraq had no WMDs, then they must answer for it, though it may be too late to really bring them to account. Whether the administration lied or was mistaken is not relevant to our discussion. What is relevant is that no significant stores of WMDs were found in Iraq, so they cannot be used to justify our intervention.

Saddam Hussein supports Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. This argument was essentially an extension of the first one, since the concern was not just that Saddam Hussein supported terrorist organizations but that he might be capable of providing them with weapons of mass destruction. But we have not found any WMDs in Iraq, nor have we proven that Iraq’s support of terrorist organizations was any more substantial than, say, Saudi Arabia’s. As for the claims that Iraq might have had some connection with the 9/11 attacks, they have been long since dismissed by most intelligence agencies; our own C.I.A. has rubbed the notion that Mohammed Atta might have met with an Iraqi agent in Prague. Most significantly, it seems likely that if the Bush administration had any kind of substantial intelligence linking Iraq to terror groups, they would have pushed the connection much more forcefully. After all, they did not hesitate to inflate what limited intelligence they had “proving” that Iraq had or was developing WMDs. So this cannot be considered a worthy reason for invading Iraq. As attacks against our troops on Iraqi soil prove, our intervention has deepened resentment of the West throughout the Islamic world, which may

---

1 It proved to be something more for British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was eventually pressured out of his leadership of the Labour Party in the wake of reports that British intelligence about Iraqi WMDs was less than accurate.
end up being more “supportive” of terrorism than Saddam Hussein could ever hope to be.

*The oppressed people of Iraq must be liberated from the terror of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime.* Here is a moral argument for the invasion, and since it does not depend solely on empirical evidence it is difficult to support or refute. It is certain that Hussein was a killer on par with all the rest of this century’s second-tier mass-murderers who are overshadowed only by the most incomparable monsters of history—Hitler, Stalin, and their ilk. Besides his sustained starvation, torture, and slaughter of his own people and his genocidal policies towards the Kurds, we also know that Hussein frequently indulged in the melodramatic barbarity common to despots:

. . . we have Saddam videotaping the purge in the Baghdad conference hall, and sending the tape to members of his organization throughout the nation. So we have top party leaders forced to witness and even to participate in the executions of their colleagues. When Saddam cracks down on Shia clerics, he executes not just the mullahs but also their families. Pain and humiliation and death become public theater. Ultimately, guilt or innocence doesn’t matter, because there is no law or value beyond the tyrant’s will; if he wants someone arrested, tortured, tried, and executed, that is sufficient.²

So if we agree, for instance, that NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo was justified because it led to the arrest of Slobodan Milosevic and the end of his genocidal campaign against Bosnian Muslims, then perhaps our invasion of Iraq is justified because it removed a similar madman from power. Critics argued that there were atrocities being committed all around the globe, so why should

---

Iraq be the place we choose to intervene? This is a sound point, though what it actually implies is that we should have intervened in Iraq, but we should have also done so everywhere else. They also observed that in order to prevent Saddam Hussein from killing Iraqis it would be necessary to kill Iraqis ourselves; true—and awful—but we killed many, many more Germans during World War II (plenty of them civilians) and yet few raise questions about whether our intervention there was justified.

I think the anti-interventionists must ultimately concede on this point: it is weak and foolish to deny that the removal of the Baathist regime in Iraq, taken outside of context and considered as a singular event, was a great moral good. Time has proven that most Iraqi citizens felt the same way. The problem is that, much as they legitimately detested life under Saddam Hussein, they are not much more pleased with life under an ad hoc government tightly controlled by an occupying power. The anti-interventionist’s nightmare of an entire Iraqi generation converted to potential terrorists proved to be a dream, it is true, but so did the interventionist’s dream of an Iraqi populace forever grateful to their liberators from across the ocean. We have suffered great—most would say unacceptable—losses at the hands of terrorists striking out against our military forces in Iraq. Although most of these attacks have their origin outside of Iraq, they demonstrate the extent to which our intervention has lent solidarity and boldness to fundamentalist terror groups throughout the Middle East. Is this the price we must pay, and continue paying, for “doing the right thing”? Was it also worth it to lose the goodwill of the international community with our single-minded determination to remove Saddam Hussein by force, with or without the support of the United Nations? These are questions to which there is no empirical answer.
The Real Case for Intervention?

I have, so far, only cited reasons for invading Iraq that were explicitly given by the Bush administration, but anti-interventionists always suspected that the real reasons were never given. Some of them believed that the invasion of Iraq was just the latest in a long line of actions undertaken to protect the interests of the American oil industry abroad. While it would be utterly naïve to understate the influence the oil industry exerts on our foreign policy (especially during the Bush administration, many members of which had very personal ties to big oil), we must remember that this argument may suggest why there was an impetus to invade Iraq, but it does not tell us if invading Iraq was ultimately right or wrong. If it were right, it would not cease to be right because big oil was in favor of it.

More compelling is the claim that the Bush administration simply decided that the best way to suppress potential threats in the Middle East would be to establish and maintain a strong military presence there. Invading Iraq proved to be the best pretext for this action, since it was ruled by a dangerous tyrant that few would be sorry to see out of power. This plan might have included using Iraq as a foothold for subsequent invasions of Syria, Iran, or other states suspected of harboring terrorists. These allegations about the administration’s forehand intentions may not be provable, but our sustained military presence in Iraq ten years after the fall of Saddam Hussein lends plenty of credence to them.

Here we see a major problem. If our intervention in Iraq is part of a strategy for fighting terror, it is a clumsy one. Terrorist cells operate on stealth and secrecy, and fighting them with the American military is the equivalent of shooting at mosquitoes with a handgun: dangerous and ineffective. Preventing
terrorist strikes requires a heavy focus on intelligence and on close cooperation with our allies on every continent—the latter of which has suffered a serious setback precisely because of our insistence on invading Iraq before exhausting all other options for the removal of Saddam. By this criterion, our war in Iraq might have been a loss, a step backward in our so-called war against terror, not forward.

But if our intervention in Iraq was a strategic mistake, we must wonder whether it was enough of a moral victory to compensate for that. But even if it was a moral victory, was it a victory unachievable by any means other than the aggressive ones that the Bush administration took? Here’s yet another consideration: by allowing itself to be seen as a lone-wolf aggressor, hasn’t the United States crippled its power as a credible peacemaker? In our single-minded insistence on “doing the right thing”—so long as we do it our way—in Iraq, did we reduce our ability to do the right thing again, somewhere else? This is just the beginning of a long series of questions we will have to answer over the next decade, and the next, and the decade after that. History cannot answer definitively whether our actions were “worth it,” but, if we are patient, it may begin to give us some clues.

---

³ The Bush administration perhaps abandoned these plans when they began to lose public support during the long post-war occupation of Iraq. It would not have been prudent, at that point, to suggest even more American lives and dollars might have to be sacrificed.