

# Shock and Awe Revisited: Legacies of the Iraq War 20 Years Later

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## “Shock and Awe Revisited: Legacies of the Iraq War 20 Years Later”

Zaynab Quadri

In the increasingly breakneck-paced and internet-centric world of the twenty-first century, the past twenty years is a difficult amount of time to situate mentally. Is it already official history? In the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth countries of Australia and Canada, the Public Records Act of 1967 delineates thirty years as the legal and temporal boundary separating the present from the de-classifiable and thus formally historical past. Yet in practice—especially for students in today’s college history classrooms—the unprecedented and constant digital availability of information makes even recent memories from before the 2016 election feel ancient and in need of explanation.

The Bush years have already receded into the distance in the public sphere: as Will Ferrell quipped in a much-applauded 2017 reprisal of his aughts-era SNL impersonation of George W. Bush in the wake of Trump’s inauguration, “How do you like me now?”<sup>1</sup> In my recent course on US diplomatic history in the Middle East, I had to teach the Iraq War the same way I teach the 1970s, the 1940s, the 1910s: as a past, with primary sources and a historiography, in a broader context of American power.

It was in this spirit that on March 31st, 2023, I organized a one-day conference event at The Ohio State University in my capacity as a postdoctoral fellow at the Mershon Center for International Security Studies—an event I called “Shock and Awe Revisited: Legacies of the Iraq War 20 Years Later.”<sup>2</sup> The twentieth anniversary of the US invasion of Baghdad offered an important opportunity to revisit the war as history and to host a sustained academic discussion of the local as well as global causes, consequences, and legacies of the Iraq War. In the Mershon Center’s long tradition of bringing scholars of the humanities into dialogue with traditional security studies, three panels totaling nine scholars came together in Columbus, Ohio—not in shock and awe, but in sobriety and reflection.

The framing of this introductory essay, and the roundtable of five essays that follow, were produced out of conversations that evolved through the conference event. The roundtable essays represent cutting-edge scholarship, and feature fresh insights, on the Iraq War specifically but with broad implications for the general study of US diplomatic history.

Since 2003, a growing and diverse body of work—from incisive books written by investigative journalists, to academic scholarship across media and cultural studies,

political science, history, and American Studies—has already begun to address questions of the war’s dubiously legal origins; its cultures of Islamophobia, imperialism, and incarceration; and the conduct of political officials, private security contractors, and military practitioners of a revamped counterinsurgency program.<sup>3</sup> More recent scholarship within the last few years has shed new light on internal Bush administration machinations, the role of contractor workers, and the Iraq War’s relation to Bush’s larger Global War on Terror campaign.<sup>4</sup> Debates and disagreements do abound between individuals, of course.<sup>5</sup> Yet, a thicker, more cohesive field-level academic discourse on the war—especially in the study of US foreign relations—has yet to emerge in its own right. As Marjorie Gallelli inquired in this publication’s pages in April of 2023: “Why are historians so reluctant to tackle the subject?”<sup>6</sup> More specifically, I would add: Why are historians so reluctant to tackle the subject *critically*?

The last twenty years have, in fact, seen prodigious yields of scholarship on the history of US empire that can, should, and must form the foundation for the next wave of scholarship on the early twenty-first century’s “forever wars,” including the Iraq War. The analytic of imperialism incorporates important structural nuance and long-running arcs of violence into its treatment of American foreign policy; these contexts are critical for historicizing the devastating military campaign waged against Iraq. In 2003, shortly before and then during the initial heat of the invasion, a multivalent discourse on imperialism did emerge in real time, in the popular press as well as in academia, in direct response to events on the ground.<sup>7</sup>

As Paul Kramer notes, “the term’s use... in reference to the United States has crested during controversial wars, invasions, and occupations, and ebbed when projections of American power have receded from public view.”<sup>8</sup> But “empire” is, of course, more than a sometimes-fashionable pejorative or polemic. It is, as Kramer puts it, “a dimension of power in which asymmetries... enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation.”<sup>9</sup> Empire as a lens is especially useful in excavating continuities across space and time—from Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” in the Caribbean to the re-colonization of the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century to US Cold War policy in Asia.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, in her 2003 presidential address to the American Studies Association a few months into the war, Amy Kaplan called on historians in particular to “draw on our knowledge of the past to bring a sense of contingency to this idea of empire, to show that imperialism is an interconnected network of power relations, which entail engagements and encounters as well as military might and which are riddled with instability, tension, and disorder—as in Iraq.”<sup>11</sup>

Dynamic work throughout the humanities and social sciences has made path-breaking strides in fulfilling this mandate. War and militarism—“not... a shadow [but] the substance of American history,” to borrow Marilyn B. Young’s turn of phrase—foster new proximities forged in violence within and beyond the re-fortified yet contingent and contested national boundaries of the United States.<sup>12</sup> The Costs of War Project, begun in 2010 at the Watson Center at Brown University, has become a vibrant and essential repository of scholarship highlighting the myriad social, political, and economic costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars.

In addition, texts by scholars such as Chalmers Johnson, Ann Stoler, Reece Jones, David Vine, and Daniel Immerwahr have continued to employ fresh archival sites, materials, and methodologies by which to take the measure of American imperial power and its ever-evolving reach. Johnson’s *The Sorrows of Empire* (2004), Stoler’s *Haunted by Empire* (2006), Jones’s *Border Walls* (2012), Vine’s *Base Nation* (2015) and *The United States of War* (2020), and Immerwahr’s *How to Hide an Empire* (2019) collectively emphasize the importance of culture, ideology, labor, and material logistics in maintaining American hegemony in ways that speak to and through the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars and the Global War on Terror. New resources such as the United States Foreign Policy History & Resource Guide provide ever more examples of how to write nuanced histories of US global power that attend to the complexity as well as brutality of US war-making.

Of course, there remains plenty of work to be done on the Iraq War, as the twenty-year threshold is crossed, and new archives become available, and another generation of scholars starts building upon these first drafts of not-quite-recent-anymore history. The Shock and Awe Revisited Conference, and the essays in this roundtable, seek to help advance this endeavor.

The conference was conceived out of the reading and research I have been doing in the course of revising and reimagining my book manuscript in progress. The project, tentatively titled “Inherently Governmental: Private Military Contracting and US Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century,” works at the intersections of diplomatic history, American Studies, and critical theory to analyze private military contractors (PMCs) as both under-studied brokers of US empire and opaque figures onto which public anxieties around war, democracy, and empire were displaced. Among other interventions, it weaves together news media, journalist accounts, blogs, films, legal cases, congressional hearings, and governmental reports to theorize private contracting as a structure—a form of corporate governance at odds with traditional liberal-democratic governance in the post-9/11 US security state, as well as its client states in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I have therefore spent time scouring an eclectic array of academic sub-fields to locate scholars and scholarship that could address the political economy of American warfare as it was transformed through the mobilization for the War on Terror. I was extremely fortunate that the Mershon Center saw the value in translating the conversations I was having with myself, through footnotes and draft chapters, into an in-person assemblage of esteemed experts on the twentieth anniversary of the Iraq War.

The conference panels were structured around three broad topics and sets of questions. The first panel, “Social and Political Costs of Intervention,” featured anthropologists Zainab Saleh (Haverford College), Bridget Guarasci (Franklin & Marshall College), and Catherine Lutz (Brown University) in conversation regarding the immeasurable costs of the Iraq War on Americans but especially Iraqis. The second panel, “Historical Contexts and Memories,” more explicitly asked its participants, Osamah Khalil (Syracuse University), Carly Krakow (New

York University), and Alex Lubin (Pennsylvania State University), to situate the Iraq War in the twentieth and twenty-first century history of US diplomacy. The third and final panel, “Culture, Journalism, and the First Draft of History,” brought Deepa Kumar (Rutgers University), Moustafa Bayoumi (City University of New York), and Rajiv Chandrasekaran (formerly of the *The Washington Post*) together to address the changing media landscape of the last twenty years, and how to grapple with the limits of traditional and digital media coverage of the Iraq War.

The essays in this roundtable reflect and expand upon themes that emerged in and across the panels. The first essay, by Catherine Lutz, provides a comprehensive overview of the myriad metrics by which to assess the costs of the Iraq War in the United States and in Iraq. However, these costs, as Lutz demonstrates, go even beyond the already grim body counts, permanent injuries, national debt, destruction of infrastructure, and rampant political corruption. “Another result of the war,” she writes, “has been a kind of moral coarsening. War is, like slavery, a human institution that destroys bodies and damages the souls of those who wage it, both in combat and as civilian supporters and bystanders at home.”

The second essay, by Moustafa Bayoumi, delves further into this particular social and moral effect through the lens of delusion, arguing that “from before the run-up to the Iraq War of 2003 until its twentieth anniversary... delusion appears as the common thread in so much of the American media’s discourse.” The third essay, by Osamah Khalil, addresses the “persistent silences coupled with mythmaking about the war, its motivations, and consequences” which converged to obscure the costs of war in the political as well as social sphere. Read together, Lutz, Bayoumi, and Khalil illuminate the ways in which the Iraq War remains so difficult to narrate because of how systemic and devastating its effects have been on the very fabric of American society.

The fourth and fifth essays, by Carly Krakow and Zainab Saleh, explicate the environmental and human tragedies that have had and will continue to have psychological, material, and generational impacts beyond the immediate visible damage on the ground. Krakow’s work on burn pits connects the quite literal toxicity of warfare in Iraq to the Vietnam War. “The use of war toxins in Iraq and Vietnam,” writes Krakow, “demonstrates the United States’ destructive pattern of deploying war toxins abroad, delaying recognition for US veterans harmed by these toxins, and leaving civilians behind to face ongoing toxic assaults in contaminated environments for years.”

Finally, Saleh draws attention on how the obfuscation in the United States around how to remember the Iraq War adds insult to already cataclysmic injury for Iraq and Iraqis. “Mechanisms of erasure, sanitation, deflection, and rehabilitation constitute a strategy mobilized by US officials, military personnel, and journalists to evade any serious and ethical reckoning with an illegal invasion that has caused unruliness and death in Iraq,” she argues. To “reflect solely on [Saddam] Hussein’s regime” and its record of atrocities in justifying the war “ignores the United States’ political and military interventions in Iraq over the past four decades.”

Twenty years after the invasion of Baghdad, this roundtable should leave no doubt or ambiguity for scholars or students: the Iraq War was not just an American mistake, or miscalculation, or political lesson to learn. The Iraq War was an existential tragedy. The Iraqi people paid for decisions they did not make with their lives and their livelihoods at a generational scale. It is my personal and professional conviction as a historian of US foreign relations that in our minds, and in our analyses, this is the legacy we must continue to center.



Notes:

1. Samantha Bee, "Will Ferrell's Full Speech As George W. Bush At #NotTheWHCD | Full Frontal on TBS," YouTube Video, May 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZ7S-ymyaZ4>.
2. Recordings of the panels can be found on the Mershon Center's YouTube page. For example: Mershon Center, "Shock and Awe Revisited: Legacies of the Iraq War Twenty Years Later | Panel 1," YouTube Video, April 5, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x285tFKuniU>.
3. Notable texts include: Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Michelle Brown, "'Setting the Conditions' for Abu Ghraib: The Prison Nation Abroad," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (September 2005): 973-997; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007); Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008); Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008); Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (New York: Nation Books, 2008); Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, "'We Are All Torturers Now': Accountability After Abu Ghraib," *Theory & Event* 11, no. 2 (2008); Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman, eds., *Understanding the US Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
4. See: Adam Moore, *Empires Labor: The Global Army That Supports US Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Alex Lubin, *Never-Ending War on Terror* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021); Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire: Twenty Years After 9/11* (London: Verso, 2021); Joseph Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics, 1990-2003* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Zaynab Quadri, "War is Still a Racket: Private Military Contracting, US Imperialism, and the Iraq War," *American Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (September 2022); Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
5. See, as recent examples: Joseph Stieb, "Confronting the Iraq War: Melvyn Leffler, George Bush and the Problem of Trusting Your Sources," *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/confronting-the-iraq-war-melvyn-leffler-george-bush-and-the-problem-of-trusting-your-sources/>; Jeremy Kuzmarov, "Dispatches," *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* 54, no. 1 (April 2023): 51.
6. Marjorie Galelli, "The Last Word: It's Been Twenty Years— Time for Historians to Turn to Iraq," *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* 54, no. 1 (April 2023): 63.
7. See, for example: Michael Ignatieff, "The American Empire; the Burden," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/05/magazine/the-american-empire-the-burden.html>; Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, "American Empire, Not 'If' but 'What Kind,'" *The New York Times*, May 10, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/10/arts/american-empire-not-if-but-what-kind.html>.
8. Paul A. Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (December 2011): 1348.
9. *ibid.*, 1349.
10. Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, & the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine, *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
11. Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Hartford, Connecticut, October 17, 2003," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (March 2004): 7.
12. Marilyn B. Young, "'I Was Thinking, As I Often Do These Days, of War': The United States in the Twenty-First Century," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (January 2012): 1. See also: Inderpal Grewal, *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Todd Miller, *Empire of Borders: The Expansion of the US Border Around the World* (London: Verso, 2019); Roberto J. González, Hugh Gusterson, and Gustaaf Houtman, eds., *Militarization: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

## Iraqis Deserve Better Than Saddam Hussein and the U.S. Invasion

Zainab Saleh

March 20, 2023, marked the twentieth anniversary of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. The anniversary, which received considerable media and scholarly attention in the United States, Britain, and Iraq, also coincided with the first anniversary of the Russian war on Ukraine and the International Criminal Court's issuance of an arrest warrant for Russian president Vladimir Putin on allegations of war crimes.

Journalists, scholars, and military personnel grappling with the legacy of the U.S. invasion have focused on different aspects of it. The mainstream media in the United States mainly discussed the lessons learned and the "winners" and "losers." Though this coverage included some detailed reporting on the experiences of the vets and some mention of the situation in Iraq, it mainly approached the invasion as an opportunity to reflect on what went wrong and on how to wage a better military invasion in the future. Scholars and journalists in independent media, however, elaborated on the ways the U.S. military campaign and policies reshaped the social, political, religious, and environmental landscape in Iraq and across the region, with references to double standards regarding Bush/Blair and Putin.

As an Iraqi who arrived in the United States just seven months before the invasion, I was curious about how the U.S. occupation would be commemorated. Two decades later, I have followed the mainstream media coverage of this anniversary closely. This year I was also invited to many conferences commemorating the event, which included military personnel and journalists as well as scholars of Iraq. During this diverse coverage, one question kept being raised by U.S. military personnel and even well-informed journalists: If Saddam Hussein had stayed in power, would he have committed more atrocities? U.S. officials and media pundits often indicate that by focusing on the atrocities of the U.S. invasion, we ignore Saddam Hussein's persecution of his people, in particular Kurds and Shias, because of ethnic and sectarian hostility.

What is striking about this question from an Iraqi perspective is the ongoing effort by U.S. military and media personnel to erase the devastating legacy of the invasion in human and political terms, deflect any opportunity to hold U.S. officials accountable for an illegal war, sanitize the invasion as producing something good despite the violence and destruction, obfuscate earlier U.S. support of Saddam Hussein, and convey the assumption that Iraqis can choose only between two bad alternatives, namely an authoritarian regime or a brutal invasion. Ultimately, this line of reasoning is based on the premise that violence perpetuated by Western imperial powers—such as the United States and Britain—is more benevolent than Saddam Hussein's atrocities.

The effort to reflect solely on Hussein's regime ignores the United States' political and military interventions in Iraq over the past four decades. On the one hand, the United States supported Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War and ignored his atrocities (including the gassing of Kurds in 1988) for geopolitical reasons. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the United States and its allies carried out a military campaign—known as the Gulf War of 1991—that targeted military installments but also led to a massive breakdown of infrastructure, including water and sewage treatment, agricultural production and food distribution, health care, communications, and power generation.

After the war, the United States decided to keep Saddam Hussein in power for fear of the rise of an Islamist government. It also imposed brutal sanctions, which had devastating impacts on Iraqis. The sanctions led to an

increase in crime, theft, and prostitution. Families struggling to make ends meet had to sell their possessions. The basic monthly rations distributed by the Iraqi government prevented mass starvation in the country, but they did not limit malnutrition. It is estimated that at least five hundred thousand children died between 1990 and 2003 because of malnutrition and a lack of basic services. When asked by a journalist about the price of half a million Iraqi children for the sanctions, Madeleine Albright, the secretary of the state in the Clinton administration, famously replied that “the price is worth it.”

This catastrophe was brought on by policies adopted by the United States and Britain, in particular, which included restricting imports of food and goods into a country that was heavily dependent on foreign products, the undermining of the sale of oil in exchange for food, and the destruction of public infrastructure during the war. Joy Gordon called the sanction years, from 1990 to 2003, an invisible war waged mainly by the United States and Britain, which stifled any attempts by members of the United Nations to lift the sanctions.<sup>1</sup>

The argument that the U.S. invasion was necessary to prevent further atrocities by Saddam Hussein also erases the war’s devastating impacts on Iraq’s society and state after 2003. The United States enacted measures and carried out policies that engendered rampant corruption, the collapse of infrastructure, the rise of the Islamic State, the massive displacement of Iraqis internally and abroad, and a staggering death rate. Among those policies were the disbandment of the army, the privatization of the state, the institutionalization of a sectarian quota system, de-Ba’thification, the failure to protect the borders, the resort to brutal violence and collective punishment to put down the insurgency, the incarceration and brutalization of prisoners, the use of depleted uranium, and burn pits.

The U.S. invasion also prompted a civil war that ripped the country apart and evolved into a proxy war involving different regional players, including Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the U.S. military employed brute force to deal with violence and attacks on its troops. The leaked pictures of abused and brutalized prisoners at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison epitomized the U.S. military’s use of extreme violence against Iraqis. In addition, the invasion worked to erase Iraq’s cultural landscape and historical memory with the destruction and pillage of museums, archaeological sites, libraries, and archives.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not the starting point for imperial interventions. Scholars of Iraq have argued that the 2003 occupation was merely the latest chapter in the contemporary imperial history of Iraq. Toby Jones situates the U.S. invasion of Iraq within a longer history of U.S. policy in the region. He warns against the argument that September 11 was the catalyst for change in U.S. policy, pointing out that this argument fails to consider that “oil and oil producers have long been militarized, the role oil has played in regional confrontation for almost four decades, and the connections between the most recent confrontation with Iraq and those of the past.”<sup>2</sup>

Using this framework, Jones refers to the United States’ decision to pursue a policy of regime change in Iraq in 2003 as “the high-water mark of direct American militarism in the region.”<sup>3</sup> He suggests we see the past four decades of Iraq’s history not as a series of wars—the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Gulf War of 1991, and the 2003 invasion—but as “a single long war, one in which pursuing regional security and protecting oil and American-friendly oil producers has been the principal strategic rationale.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Sinan Antoon maintains that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 constitutes Act III of U.S. military interventions in

Iraq, with the Gulf War as Act I and U.S. sanctions as Act II.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars of Iraq have repeatedly problematized the politics of erasure and sanitization and argued that the current situation in Iraq is the product of decades-long policies by the United States. While imperial politics in Iraq have shaped the political and economic scene through the support of authoritarian rule and increasing militarization of the country, the expansion of its scope since 1991—through the use of more lethal weapons during bombardments, the destruction of its infrastructure and social fabric, the installation of corrupt and sectarian elites who have the backing of militias, and the privatization of the state—brought about an all-encompassing political, social, and environmental collapse. Tragically, and ironically, the situation in Iraq is so bad that there is now nostalgia for Saddam Hussein, not because Iraqis liked living under a dictatorship, but because the status quo deteriorated to such an extent after 2003 that Saddam’s reign has come to be re-imagined as “better days,” when there was still the semblance of a functioning state and political violence was perpetuated by the regime only.<sup>6</sup>

The constant references to Saddam Hussein’s atrocities are premised on the erasure of the United States’s complicity in his crimes and political and military interventions in Iraq, as well as the failure to hold U.S. officials—such as former President George W. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld—accountable for a war that was based on lies. Rather than challenging U.S. militarism abroad and the rehabilitation of George W. Bush as merely a nice man who paints dogs, U.S. pundits continue to convey the idea that the U.S. invasion ultimately produced something good: the removal of a dictator. The idea that Iraqis should see U.S. violence as more benign than Saddam’s violence obfuscates the conditions of unruliness under which most Iraqis now live today. The idea reproduces the old colonial rhetoric that the West is saving brown people from brown dictators, while omitting the fact that this dictator was for a long time supported by the West.

Ironically, it was a gaffe that made former president George W. Bush acknowledge the brutal impact of his action in Iraq. On May 18, 2022, in a speech in Dallas about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Bush referred to Putin’s decision to invade as “the decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq.” He quickly corrected his gaffe by saying, “I mean Ukraine,” but he chuckled and muttered “Iraq, too,” to laughter from the audience.<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Twajj, a journalist and child of Iraqi migrants, commented that Bush “has finally, if unintentionally, admitted his error in invading Iraq nearly 20 years ago. While attempting to scold Russian President Vladimir Putin for his ruthless invasion of Ukraine, Bush accidentally condemned his own action.”<sup>8</sup>

The condemnation of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine by Western countries and the welcoming of Ukraine refugees in Europe and the United States starkly show the hypocrisy of the liberal West, whereby the lives of white and European people during imperial wars have more value than the lives of people of the global majority. While Western countries have condemned Putin for his invasion of Ukraine and flocked to provide military and humanitarian aid to Ukrainians, they have been silent about their own colonial past and imperial present, and they have resisted accepting Iraqi refugees in their countries. In this framework, Iraq emerges as part of a Western tradition of hypocrisy and violence.

These mechanisms of erasure, sanitization, deflection, and rehabilitation constitute a strategy mobilized by U.S. officials, military personnel, and journalists to evade any

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serious and ethical reckoning with an illegal invasion that has caused unruliness and death in Iraq. Moreover, they are premised upon a will to ignorance. This will to ignorance forecloses the possibility of remembering wars and grappling with accountability. It also invokes a politics of forgetfulness, which will blame victims for their tragedies, minimize U.S. military violence, and pave the road for another war.

Twenty years after the invasion, it is shocking to see that these deep-seated assumptions still prevail. More importantly, the question about Saddam Hussein's brutality had he stayed in power shows that the person asking cannot envision a different existence for Iraqis. This question forecloses the possibility of seeing Iraqis (and marginalized and dispossessed people all over the world) as human beings who are worthy of safety, who deserve a life beyond the binary of U.S. atrocities and Hussein's dictatorship.

Notes:

1. Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
2. Toby Craig Jones, "America, Oil, and War in the Middle East," *Journal of American History* 99:1 (June 2012): 208–18.
3. *Ibid.*, 216.
4. *Ibid.*, 217.
5. Sinan Antoon made this remark during a lecture entitled "Iraq Afterwar(d)s: Epistemic Violence and Collateral Damage," delivered at Swarthmore College on April 25, 2023.
6. [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/17/iraqis-saddam-hussein-us-invasion-country?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb&fbclid=IwAR1F\\_ynK0Gk1YpIClrNfX4DiAy57VXRcYmWmf-wWbuY9-wU5-ZjOKaqceOto](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/17/iraqis-saddam-hussein-us-invasion-country?CMP=share_btn_fb&fbclid=IwAR1F_ynK0Gk1YpIClrNfX4DiAy57VXRcYmWmf-wWbuY9-wU5-ZjOKaqceOto)
7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eH3QqcUJnBY>.
8. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/george-bush-gaffe-ukraine-iraq-putin-rca29829>.

## The Costs of the U.S. War in Iraq: An Overview

Catherine Lutz

There are too many wide-ranging impacts of the U.S. war in Iraq to enumerate them all.

These brief notes will summarize some effects, a number of which have been described by contributors to the Costs of War, a research project ongoing since 2010 at Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs ([www.costsofwar.org](http://www.costsofwar.org)). While a few of those impacts are benefits accruing to the corporations that have received billions of dollars in war contracts, most of the impacts form a litany of social, political, economic, and moral costs, firstly to the people of Iraq, where those impacts have been catastrophic, and secondarily to the people of the United States.

It is important to point out that this essay follows the framing of this conference around the period beginning with the U.S. invasion of March, 2003. What follows is an accounting of the impact of that period from 2003 to the present. We know, however, that the violence of war in which the United States was a central actor began with military support for Iraq in the 1980s and continued with the 1991 war and then the sanctions and aerial occupation/no-fly zones of the 1990s.

In Iraq, the war was defined by massive loss of human life, first and above all civilian life. Many lives were also lost among Iraqi soldiers, policemen, and insurgents; among U.S. military contractors, many of whom were Iraqis; and among journalists and humanitarian workers, many of whom were also Iraqis. These individuals died from U.S. aerial bombardment, including drone strikes; from ground combat, in house raids and street fight cross-fire; in sectarian killing; and from toxic exposures to U.S. weapons and practices of war.

An even larger number of people died as a result of what demographers call an "indirect" result of war, that is, as a second-order effect of such things as the bombing of sewage treatment plants, which led to diarrheal disease and death, particularly in infants and children; or the bombing of hospitals, which led to otherwise preventable death by everyday diseases. Such reverberating deadly effects of the war continue today and will do so far into the future as basic infrastructure, such as the electrical grid, continues to exist in a war-degraded state.

The war resulted in even larger numbers of serious physical and mental injuries than deaths. Some of those Iraqis will require lifelong care and will represent an economic drain on their households and the country. Some of those injuries and illnesses are the result of toxic exposures that have contributed to higher rates of cancer, heart and respiratory diseases.

The war also created vast dislocation, as people fled the violence. That dislocation was both internal and cross-border. Internal displacement is associated with some of the worst health outcomes, as it increases the likelihood that people will be unemployed, be unable to get public services such as clean drinking water, or be pushed into areas of environmental contamination. The internally displaced also experience malnutrition and mental health challenges at higher rates, and more often lack access to healthcare, with particularly serious consequences for maternal and infant mortality.

Many internal and cross-border migrants did not return home, and the drain in medical talent was particularly hard-hitting. The flight from home also fractured communities in ways that created even lower social trust than once existed within neighborhoods. The flight across borders into neighboring countries and into Europe amplified regional tensions in many cases and provided an opportunity for right-wing demagoguery against immigrants to flourish.

Beyond the impact on morbidity and mortality, the widespread infrastructural destruction in Iraq degraded public services once uniformly relied upon, including electricity, water and sewage, housing, and central societal institutions such as government services and education. The unreliability of those services further eroded the legitimacy of existing governance. Furthermore, corruption metastasized at every level, particularly through privatization and lessened regulation of the oil industry. This had deeply erosive effects on government legitimacy and stability.

Human rights abuses were rampant in virtually every context in which the U.S. military interacted with Iraqis, from prisons to household raids and street encounters. Although the United States built numerous judicial facilities and prisons throughout Iraq, the rule of law remained weak.

The war also resulted in continued or worsening militarization. U.S.-funded security labor increased during the war, as did weapons transfers and then sales through U.S. military-industrial corporations in recent years. As part of this process, the war proliferated private militias and helped birth ISIS, al-Qaeda in Iraq, and other organizations. Sectarianism was strongly amplified by U.S. policies and helped result in civil violence and longer-term governance challenges.

U.S. bombing, the immediate invasion chaos that it created, and subsequent insecurity resulted in the looting or destruction of museums and other sites of historical, demographic, and health data. The long-term consequences of these losses of knowledge may be likened to the country having been shot in the brain.

Unemployment rose and remained high, leading to higher poverty, suffering and outmigration rates. The death rate among men resulted in many more widow-headed households. Widows have even more limited employment

opportunities than men.

In the United States, as many have pointed out about war in general, the first casualty of these wars was truth. During the Iraq War, the Pentagon perfected its methods of controlling the narrative of war, methods first developed when journalists brought visuals of the Vietnam War home to the U.S. public. The very powerful, very well-funded campaign of Pentagon public relations included disinformation, the embedding of journalists within units, and home-front advertising. These decades-long efforts created a war that, for much of the civilian U.S. public, was alternately invisible and imaginary.

Another result of the war has been a kind of moral coarsening. War is, like slavery, a human institution that destroys the bodies of those subjugated and damages the souls of those who wage it, both in combat and as civilian supporters and bystanders at home. That coarsening takes many forms. In this case those forms include racism, white supremacism, Islamophobia, and toxic masculinity. While the latter are certainly not new problems in U.S. history, the Iraq War has thrown gasoline on those already burning fires. It would in fact seem impossible for a society to spend twenty years waging violence on this scale without these kinds of effects.

Historians have long detailed the growth of an imperial presidency and the concentration of power in the Executive Branch. That continues apace and, in combination with issues just mentioned, has garnered further acceptance of authoritarianism more generally.

Another national political effect is erosion in faith in government. Despite some support for the war and long-term but unwarranted faith in the military in the United States, faith in government has declined, as some people recognized the catastrophic costs and incompetence displayed in going to and prosecuting the war. Intertwined with the rise in violent masculinity, paramilitarism has grown, and it contributed to the attempted coup of January 6, 2020. In fact, fully twenty percent of all those charged for crimes at the Capitol were veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There has also been a rise in the size, power, monopolizing tendencies, and profit-taking of U.S. military industrial corporations and a corresponding acceleration of the more general corporate capture of Congress. These corporations have become much larger and more powerful, allowing them to be ever more successful in their efforts to capture resources from the federal discretionary budget.

The war has prompted the rapid and massive growth of military spending as a proportion of all federal discretionary spending, resulting in a squeezing out of spending on all other elements, including the welfare of the public. While the military budget tended to increase each year from World War II onward, the increases during the Iraq War were much larger (in both a newly carved out Overseas Contingency Operations or war budget as well as the "base budget").

The macroeconomic effects of this (and all) military funding are significant. They include upward pressure on interest rates as money for the Iraq War was raised through borrowing rather than new taxes or war bonds; and job creation that proceeded at a much lower pace than it would have with spending on more labor-intensive sectors as health, education, or home construction.

Finally, there is the damage the war has done to military personnel and their families. While the death rate per year of war is far lower than in previous U.S. wars, partly as a result of the massive outsourcing of military work and risk to civilians (i.e., contractors), especially Iraqi and other workers from the Global South, many service members have survived with catastrophic injuries as a result of advances in battlefield medicine. While the U.S. media have paid a relatively significant amount of attention to these

deaths and injuries of service members, it has taken years of struggle for some of the injured (e.g., those with burn-pit inhalation injuries and traumatic brain injuries that only reveal their severity and nature over time) to be recognized as such. There is a similar imbalance in the attention the U.S. media have paid to household disruptions in military families with multiple deployments. They have focused on the emotional struggles of those at home, but not on the higher rates of substance abuse, child abuse and divorce that the wars have produced.

## History, Silence, and Mythmaking Twenty Years On

*Osamah F. Khalil*

On board the USS *Abraham Lincoln* in May 2003, President George W. Bush declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq. He reiterated the claim that Iraq was linked to the al-Qaeda terrorist organization responsible for the September 11 attacks and that the war was a "crucial advance in the campaign against terror." Bush hailed the swift military victory and the use of new weapons that allowed the United States to "achieve military objectives without directing violence against civilians."<sup>1</sup> Like the administration's claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction leading up to the war, these assertions were proven false. However, in the two decades since the United States invaded Iraq, there have been persistent silences, coupled with mythmaking about the war, its motivations, and its consequences.

Only a few weeks after September 11, President Bush initiated war planning for Iraq. Over the next sixteen months, the administration embarked on a deliberate campaign of saber-rattling, deception, and misinformation. The campaign relied on a decade of demonization of Saddam Hussein and Iraq following the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Saddam Hussein's brutal regime persisted under the crippling sanctions imposed after the conflict. He was also able to counter regime-change efforts, which relied on exile groups with limited support inside and outside of Iraq. September 11 reinvigorated the failing regime change policy and provided the Bush administration with the rationale for a direct intervention.

Vice President Dick Cheney led the disinformation campaign. Then-House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tx) later recounted that Cheney pushed the narrative of Iraq attempting to acquire uranium as well as aluminum tubes, presumably for centrifuges and an active nuclear weapons program. In the press and in briefings with lawmakers, Cheney also promoted non-existent ties between Iraqi intelligence and al-Qaeda.<sup>2</sup>

These claims were repeated by congressional allies in the debate for the authorization of military force and recycled in the media. Fake defectors were made available to select journalists to repeat key administration talking points about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs as well as ties to and training of terrorists. After these claims were repeated in major media outlets, administration officials promoted the published reports as proof that Iraq was an existential danger.

These reports were compounded by hundreds of articles and dozens of op-eds in leading outlets with an editorial bent that consistently favored war. There was a similar echo-chamber on the cable news networks that often relied on the same reporters, columnists, op-ed authors, and think tank experts. Although there was an attempt by several outlets to examine their participation in the deception two years later, that history has been removed from the twenty-year retrospectives that were recently published.<sup>3</sup>

The UK's Chilcot Inquiry found that Iraq did not pose a direct threat and that there was a rush to war. It also deter-



mined that the intelligence services identified the weapons programs of Iran, North Korea, and Libya were a far greater danger to Anglo-American interests. However, Foreign Minister Jack Straw actively lobbied and manipulated the services to make sure that the intelligence assessments aligned with Washington's narrative. Straw explained that the assessment that was produced "has to show why there is an exceptional threat from Iraq."<sup>4</sup>

The scare tactics worked. A year after September 11, as the Bush administration was building the case for war in the public and in Congress, the Pew Research Center found that two-thirds of Americans believed Saddam Hussein had aided al-Qaeda.<sup>5</sup>

In June 2004, *The New Republic* magazine published a special issue that asked: "Were We Wrong?" The magazine's editors attempted to explain their strategic and moral reasons for supporting the invasion in the midst of a raging insurgency and the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal. Even though their strategic reasons had been exposed, they wrote that "we feel regret—but no shame." As for the moral reasons, the editors reverted to blatant stereotypes and Islamophobia. But they asserted that the future was up to the Iraqis.<sup>6</sup>

This line of reasoning was not limited to *The New Republic*. Indeed, the major media outlets, which had been accomplices in the Bush administration's deception and cheerleaders for the invasion, favored pro-war voices that had since become critics. Those who were opposed to the war from the beginning continued to be suspect and were ignored or silenced. The prevailing ethos, to paraphrase the late Tony Judt, was "You and your kind were wrong to be right; we were right to be wrong."<sup>7</sup>

Absent from the discussion of regret and shame are the Iraqi casualties. Two decades later, an accurate and consistent number is difficult to obtain. Estimates range from 300,000 to 1,000,000 or even more. There remains a deliberate silence about the casualties and the refugees created by the conflict. Both London and Washington downplayed the casualties. The Chilcott Inquiry criticized the UK's Ministry of Defense for focusing its efforts on refuting charges that it was responsible for civilian casualties.<sup>8</sup>

By the fifth year of the war, the International Organization for Migration reported that sixty thousand Iraqis a month continued to leave their homes. By that time, there were already two million Iraqi refugees and two million internally displaced people. The devastation to Iraqi families—especially Iraqi women and girls—cannot be understated. Thousands of women and girls have been forced into prostitution and sexual slavery since 2003.<sup>9</sup>

Others faced a different fate. Abeer Qassim al-Janabi, age 14, lived with her family near Al-Mahmudiyah in a house about two hundred meters from a U.S. checkpoint. On March 12, 2006, five soldiers from the 101st Airborne went to the al-Janabi home and took her parents and her 6-year-old sister into one room where they were murdered. The five soldiers then raped and killed Abeer. They attempted to burn the bodies to conceal their crimes, but neighbors extinguished the fire and discovered the massacre. The soldiers were eventually arrested and tried. Steven Green, the alleged nineteen-year-old ringleader, was given five life sentences.<sup>10</sup>

Green later attempted to explain how his combat experience in Iraq and the deaths of fellow soldiers a few months before had left him embittered and scarred. This reaction was coupled with the derogatory view of Iraqis that was pervasive in the U.S. military. "There's not a word that

would describe how much I hated these people," Green said. "I wasn't thinking these people were humans." Green died in prison in 2014 in an apparent suicide.<sup>11</sup>

Proponents of the war inside and outside the administration argued that Iraq and the Middle East could be reshaped under the benevolent guidance of an American empire. This utopian vision was to be implemented through lightning victories and high-tech weapons with minimal or no occupation. Although President Bush praised this strategy in his "Mission Accomplished" speech, it quickly became apparent that the United States did not deploy a sufficiently sized or equipped force to maintain an occupation or fight an insurgency. By the sixth year of the war, mounting U.S. casualties also revealed that Veterans Administration facilities were underfunded and understaffed. The descriptions of care for wounded U.S. soldiers—some with devastating injuries—were similar to those that were documented by veterans during the Vietnam War era.<sup>12</sup>

Twenty years ago, those protesting against the war were derided as Saddam's useful idiots or worse. The largest antiwar protests since the Vietnam War have been erased from history. The opposition by leading scholars of International Relations and Middle East specialists, scorned at the time as unrealistic or harboring anti-American sentiments, is a mere footnote. The resignation of a few State Department officials has been forgotten. And the French and the Germans are still being disparaged for their opposition.

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Today, the architects of the war and its proponents are claiming vindication, if not victory. Saddam Hussein is gone and Iraq is a struggling democracy, but a democracy. They deliberately ignore the corruption, the sectarian political structure, the competing militias, the stronger ties to Iran, the casualties, the ethnic cleansing, the refugees, the environmental damage, the devastated infrastructure, the continued presence of the Islamic State, the looting, the assassinations, the torture of political prisoners, etc. "We were right," they insist.<sup>13</sup>

Yet America's war in Iraq continues. U.S. Central Command reported that as part of the "Defeat ISIS Mission in Iraq and Syria," the United States continues to provide advice and support on thirty-seven partnered operations with Iraqi and Kurdish forces against the Islamic State in March 2023. As much as Americans have tried to forget or ignore the Iraq war, it was and remains a crime. But none of the perpetrators will be held accountable.<sup>14</sup>

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## A Bad War Story, On Repeat: The Ongoing Threat of Toxic Saturation in Iraq and Vietnam<sup>1</sup>

Carly A. Krakow

March 2023 marked twenty years since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, and fifty years since the United States officially ended combat operations in Vietnam in 1973. In August 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden signed the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act (PACT).<sup>2</sup> The PACT Act devotes \$280 billion to healthcare and compensation for approximately 3.5 million U.S. veterans who have been harmed by war toxins, including burn pits, during military service in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries as part of the "War on Terror." It also extends coverage for Vietnam War veterans harmed by herbicides, including Agent Orange, and veterans exposed to toxins during the 1990–91 Gulf War.

The PACT Act provides overdue assistance for veterans with numerous cancers, severe lung conditions, and more. Prior to the act, 78 percent of disability claims linked to burn pit exposure were denied by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).<sup>3</sup> Now, nearly 85 percent of claims are being approved.<sup>4</sup> No comparable structure exists, however, to assist civilians injured by war toxins, including in Iraq and Vietnam. The use of war toxins in Iraq and Vietnam demonstrates the United States' destructive pattern of deploying war toxins abroad, delaying recognition for U.S. veterans harmed by these toxins, and leaving civilians behind to face ongoing toxic assaults in contaminated environments for years.

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen asks, "What is a war story, and what makes a good one?"<sup>5</sup> He describes the conventions of the "good" war story as it has been typically understood: it is a story that "pump[s] us up" and "through spectacular battles and sacrificial soldiers . . . affirm[s] the necessity of war."<sup>6</sup> However, he notes,

This rhetoric is deceptive because what it really permits is continual war-making. It is cynical because the troops often are not supported when they come home, unprotected or inadequately protected from depression, trauma, homelessness, illness, or suicide. A true war story should tell not only of the soldier but also what happened to her or him after the war's end. A true war story should also tell of the civilian, the refugee, the enemy, and, most importantly, the war machine that

encompasses them all.<sup>7</sup>

Twenty years later, the true story of the United States' invasion and occupation of Iraq is, bluntly, a bad war story. In the lead-up to the war, the U.S. "war machine" made tremendous efforts to depict the invasion as necessary—as hitting all the notes of a good war story—despite the Bush administration's knowledge that there was no evidence of a connection between Iraq and the 9/11 attacks. As Moustafa Bayoumi writes, we cannot forget how the Bush administration "manipulated the facts, the media and the public after the horrific attacks of 9/11, hellbent as the administration was to go to war in Iraq."

Weapons of mass destruction were never found in Iraq, but warnings about the threat of a "mushroom cloud" relentlessly "flooded the airwaves."<sup>8</sup> The Costs of War project estimates the number of "indirect deaths" from the post-9/11 wars is between 3.6 and 3.7 million.<sup>9</sup> The number of Iraqis killed because of the Iraq War is as high as one million or more.<sup>10</sup> As Osamah Khalil emphasizes, "Iraq remains with the United States and will be for a long time to come."<sup>11</sup>

On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush infamously gave a speech standing in front of a "Mission Accomplished" banner, six weeks into a war that would last many years and would go on to cause devastation that will affect many generations.<sup>12</sup> In *The Long Reckoning: A Story of War, Peace, and Redemption in Vietnam*, George Black writes that "the truth of all wars is that they never really end."<sup>13</sup> This is certainly true of Vietnam, where poisonous dioxin from Agent Orange remains an ongoing health and environmental threat, and new victims continue to suffer from birth defects forty-eight years after that war's end. It is true in Iraq, too, where war toxins remain an ongoing threat.

The United States must be held accountable and provide assistance for sickened civilians. This is not solely a matter of correcting past harms. Just as the PACT Act has saved the lives of American veterans, recognition of the damage in Iraq could save Iraqi lives *now*. Environmental clean-up and access to medical care reduces the acceleration of damage. The bad war stories of Iraq and Vietnam are not over. These stories demonstrate how the United States' repeated use of war toxins harms an unknowable number of future generations.

Whenever I explain the brutal impact of war toxins in Iraq, I refer to statistics that convey the scale of toxins that the United States introduced to the country. More than 780,000 rounds of depleted uranium were used in 1991, and more than 300,000 rounds in 2003.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. military used white phosphorus as an incendiary weapon in Fallujah in 2004.<sup>15</sup> Until at least 2010, burn pits were used widely.

As explained by the VA, depleted uranium "is a potential health hazard if it enters the body, such as through embedded fragments, contaminated wounds, and inhalation or ingestion."<sup>16</sup> Incendiary weapons can "cause excruciating burns and destroy homes."<sup>17</sup> Burn pits are open pits of waste, sometimes as large as football fields, in which weapons, chemicals, plastics, and medical and human waste are burned, typically using jet fuel.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the post-9/11 wars, they were often operated by private military contractors.<sup>19</sup>

The scale of toxic infrastructure created by the United States in Iraq is staggering. But it is the human toll that best conveys the full scale of destruction. In my work, I call this "toxic saturation" because Iraqis are not merely "exposed" to toxins, they are forcibly "saturated" with them from before birth until death.<sup>20</sup> Iraqi civilians suffer from high rates of congenital anomalies (birth defects) and cancers. In his poem "To an Iraqi infant," Iraqi novelist, poet, and scholar Sinan Antoon describes an Iraqi mother's breast milk as "bursting with depleted uranium." As she awaits



the birth of a child she is “already mourning,” the child’s “grave is looking at its watch.”<sup>21</sup>

A 2019 study in *Environmental Pollution* found that children living in proximity to Tallil Air Base, a U.S. military base near Nasiriyah, Iraq, had an increased likelihood of congenital anomalies including spina bifida<sup>22</sup>, anencephaly, hydrocephalus<sup>23</sup>, heart diseases, and musculoskeletal malformations including missing right hand and paralyzed clubfoot.<sup>24</sup> These are severe, often fatal, conditions. Anencephaly, for example, is when an infant is born without parts of the brain and skull.<sup>25</sup> Doctors in Fallujah have reported dramatic increases in serious birth defects since the United States attacked the city in 2004. Dr. Samira Alani, a Fallujah pediatrician, has described conditions for which “[t]here are not even medical terms” because “we’ve never seen them until now.”<sup>26</sup>

The event celebrating President Biden’s signing of the PACT Act in August 2022 was heart-wrenching.<sup>27</sup> His speech referenced his son Beau, who died of brain cancer following burn pit exposure. The event also featured the widow and young daughter of the late Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson, for whom the law is named. But when I watched Biden’s speech, knowing about all the Iraqis suffering with cancer or birth defects that are often fatal, I thought the speech played like a scene from a work of science fiction. How can the U.S. government rightly embrace one community—U.S. veterans—unjustly affected by war toxins, without even acknowledging the existence of another one—Iraqis—that continues to be saturated by these same toxins?

As Rob Nixon writes with regard to the Gulf War and other sources of what he terms “slow violence,” “War deaths from environmental toxicity demand patient, elaborate proof.”<sup>28</sup> The PACT Act removes this burden of proof for veterans by providing “presumptive” benefits for numerous conditions. Why have Iraqi and Vietnamese civilians been held to a higher standard of proof?

The U.S. government’s failure to acknowledge Iraqi victims and all civilian victims of war toxins used during the “War on Terror” is even more disturbing, but not surprising, when viewed in historical context. From 1962 to 1971, during the Vietnam War, the U.S. military sprayed an estimated twenty million gallons of herbicides on Vietnam, including Agent Orange (which contained dioxin), to destroy foliage that was a food source and provided cover for Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces.<sup>29</sup> “The Vietnam Red Cross estimates that three million Vietnamese have been affected by dioxin, including at least 150,000 children born after the war with serious birth defects,” notes Andrew Wells-Dang of the U.S. Institute of Peace.<sup>30</sup> Vietnamese people have birth defects including spina bifida and malformed arms and legs. “Most live at home, where they are sustained by around-the-clock care by a parent or sibling,” explains Charles R. Bailey, former director of the Ford Foundation’s Agent Orange program.<sup>31</sup>

Dioxin was left in the soil for decades in Vietnam. In 2019, the United States began a clean-up of Bien Hoa airbase, believed to be the largest remaining dioxin “hotspot.”<sup>32</sup> Though the United States has spent around \$400 million on the environmental and health effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam, there is no comprehensive funding structure in place to assist dioxin victims in Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia.<sup>33</sup>

*New York Times* war correspondent Gloria Emerson wrote, in reference to photographer Philip Jones Griffiths’ harrowing photography book, *Agent Orange: “Collateral Damage” in Vietnam*, that it is “almost unbearable” to look at the images of Agent Orange’s victims, “but to turn away and not see the photographs is to compound the crime.”<sup>34</sup>

By failing to provide sufficient care and compensation for the victims of Agent Orange, the United States has “compound[ed] the crime.” And by allowing Iraqi victims of war toxins to suffer unrecognized and unsupported, the United States has repeated the injustice it committed in Vietnam.

In principle, international law prohibits the use of war toxins that destroy civilian lives and infrastructure. Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Geneva Conventions addresses the illegality of environmental damage and health destruction and the expectation that reparations for harm caused will be provided.<sup>35</sup> Article 55 requires that “Care shall be taken in warfare to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage.” This protection prohibits methods that “prejudice the health or survival of the population.” Article 91 states that parties that violate international humanitarian law shall “be liable to pay compensation.” The Environmental Modification Convention forbids military “environmental modification techniques having widespread, long-lasting or severe effects as the means of destruction, damage or injury.”<sup>36</sup>

Alex Lubin, who writes about “previous incidents of US-led state violence” in his book *Never-Ending War on Terror*, explains that “the past is never fully concealed or subjugated, and it frequently emerges in the US War on Terror as something of a haunting.”<sup>37</sup> Despite international law, the United States created a pattern of exporting war toxins overseas, harming its own soldiers, and then leaving civilians behind to cope with the health and environmental destruction that inevitably ensued. The United States’ harmful actions in Vietnam and Iraq are alarming but not unique. Domestically, the United States has an abundance of “sacrifice zones.”<sup>38</sup> For example, U.S. Navy activities on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques contaminated the land with arsenic, lead, cadmium, and cyanide.<sup>39</sup> The cancer rate on the island is 27 percent higher than in the rest of Puerto Rico.<sup>40</sup>

The United States’ past environmental injustice haunts the present. The parallels between Vietnam and Iraq show the atrocities that occur when past injustice collides with the production of new victims in the present. The harms inflicted have created a reality in which new victims will inevitably continue to be born in the future. This pattern of the bad war story—the true war story—must first be acknowledged, and then it must end.

As Viet Thanh Nguyen and Richard Hughes explain, “Americans created Agent Orange here in a laboratory, shipped it overseas and dumped it with abandon.”<sup>41</sup> Estimated costs for remaining healthcare and clean-up in Vietnam are, to use their term, “inconsequential,” when compared to the original cost of deploying herbicides and to the annual U.S. military budget of more than \$800 billion.<sup>42</sup> Morally, “[d]enying the reality of the need” takes “an unacceptable toll here in the United States.”<sup>43</sup> Yet the U.S. government has been reluctant to act. The U.S. government can begin to address the ongoing harm inflicted by its use of Vietnam War herbicides and Iraq War toxins by responding to the needs of civilians. This requires acknowledging all people who were unjustly harmed, including the Iraqi infants who continue to be born severely ill because of America’s use of war toxins.

Notes:

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## On Truths, Illusions, and Delusions: The American Media and the Invasion of Iraq

Moustafa Bayoumi

We in the United States are often taught to think of journalism as a righteous institution that searches for uncomfortable facts and is guided by a noble mission. "There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and to shame the devil" (13), wrote Walter Lippman in 1920 in his book *Liberty and the News*, and virtually every Hollywood movie about a newspaper confirms this view, including *Shock and Awe*, a 2017 film about the media and the Iraq War.

Of course, not everyone sees the media this way. For critics like French Marxist Louis Althusser, the media is part of the ideological state apparatus and as such functions to support the ruling ideas of the ruling class.<sup>1</sup> In Lippman's view, journalism is an essential component of a liberal society. "Democracy Dies in Darkness," the *Washington Post* tell us daily on the paper's masthead. In Althusser's view, journalism buttresses a fundamental illusion of our age, the illusion that we live in a liberal, meritocratic society, rather than a rapacious, capitalist society.

But when it comes to American journalism and the war on Iraq, perhaps it is time to put away all the talk about journalism as beacon of truth or purveyor of illusion. Instead, we need to talk about journalism as delusion. From before the run-up to the Iraq War of 2003 until its twentieth anniversary this month, delusion appears as the common thread in so much of the American media's discourse. What I mean here by delusion is the propensity to believe something—here, American virtuousness, above all—despite copious evidence to the contrary.

My examples will follow in a moment, but first I would like to suggest that the reason why delusions play such a large part in discussions of the Iraq War, even twenty years later, may be in part structural. There is an increasingly dissolving or fuzzy line between the news-gathering parts of the media and opinion journalism, a border that has only gotten hazier in the American media ecology of the twenty-first century. There have always been fundamental differences in how these two parts of a newsroom function, and those differences remain. However, particularly as the news media continues to consolidate into ever larger

conglomerates, wiping out a lot of local news organizations in the process, and as the ever-expanding drive for greater profit translates into fewer resources put into expensive news bureaus around the world, the role and prominence of opinion journalism has grown. In the internet age, many of the new media innovations, from blogging to Substack newsletters, have also favored opinion journalism, and many prominent careers in today's journalism (think Glenn Greenwald or Heather Cox Richardson, though there are many others) have been forged more by the force of informed opinion than by the ability to report a story.

I say this as someone who comes from the scholarly world but who has in recent years also joined the world of professional journalism. Personally, I write more opinion journalism than reported stories, though I certainly have also been on the news-gathering side of the enterprise and have reported my share of original stories. But looking across the media landscape today, what I see is a media that does not seem to have learned from its mistakes in 2003, when it freely and gullibly went along with the false notion that Iraq had a stockpile of weapons of mass destruction. There was a kind of collective delusion around this issue then, and there is a collective delusion around this issue now, facilitated today, in part, I think, by the cultural tilt toward opinion journalism.

Consider, for example, recent comments by Richard Haass. Since 2003, Haass has been the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, an influential post in the American foreign policy establishment. Prior to this appointment, he was the former director of policy planning in Colin Powell's Department of State. He was, in other words, a key player in the run-up to the War in Iraq.

Recently, Haass wrote an opinion piece on the Iraq war and its anniversary, published online in *Project Syndicate*, which he summarized with the following tweet from 2023:

The US Govt & my boss at the time Colin Powell did not lie about WMD. The word "lie" involves intent. There was no intent; we got it wrong. We misinterpreted intelligence & assumed Saddam was hiding WMD when he was hiding his lack of WMD. No more. No less.<sup>2</sup>

You will forgive me if I call balderdash on this notion, and not just on the tweet but also on the article itself. One would think that Haass would have some regrets for destroying an overseas nation on the basis of phantom WMDs, a threat that he and his boss helped propagate at the United Nations Security Council. Instead, he suggests that U.S. decision-makers were, well, just doing their best. If the region was destabilized for at least a generation, if hundreds of thousands if not millions of lives were lost, if the environment was catastrophically ruined (perhaps beyond repair), well, it's not the fault of Richard Haass or Colin Powell or the American foreign policy establishment. They did what they could with the information they had.

Haass's position strikes me as delusional. The invasion of Iraq was always a choice and never a forgone conclusion. That choice, like all choices, comes with an ethics of responsibility. To avoid looking squarely at that responsibility is to accept delusion for reality.

David Frum has a similarly delusional article in the *Atlantic*.<sup>3</sup> Frum was an influential thinker among the neocons of the Iraq war era. He coined the phrase Axis of Evil as a speechwriter for George W. Bush and was also the author, with Richard Perle, of *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror*.<sup>4</sup> (If the first part of that title—an end to evil—is not also delusional, I'm not sure what is.) In his 2023 *Atlantic* article, Frum says we can only guess how the Saddam Hussein story would have ended had the United States not invaded, but, he says, what happened next door in Syria is a clue.

The presumption behind such a claim strikes me not only as counterfactual but basically clueless, as if what happens in one country doesn't affect what happens in another that is right next door. The Iraq War had a profound effect on the destabilization of Syria, as the opposition quickly moved to Syria and operated a state within a state there, organizing much of the Iraqi resistance from Iraq's northern neighbor. Frum's proposition is an intellectual game that sees the different parts of the region as independent of each other but the behavior of Arabs as grossly predictable. In that regard, his intellectual exercise isn't just useless, but borders on Orientalist. Moreover, by letting the United States off the hook for the havoc it unleashed in the region for the last twenty years, his intellectual exercise is fundamentally delusional.

Similarly, we can go back to the beginnings of the Arab Spring. In 2010 and 2011, there were popular uprisings throughout the region, with a particularly important one in Egypt, the biggest country in the region in terms of population. In fact, there is a cliché that states that whatever happens in other Arab countries may not happen in Egypt, but whatever happens in Egypt will assuredly happen in the other Arab countries.

But of course, right after the Arab Spring happened, we soon started hearing from the same Iraq War Group—that is to say, former members of the Bush administration and its supporters for the invasion of Iraq. This cast of wishful war makers began penning essays and op-eds that appeared in various parts of the U.S. media, saying essentially that the Iraq War paved the way for the Arab Spring. Kanan Makiya's *New York Times*' op-ed was even titled "The Arab Spring Started in Iraq."<sup>5</sup> Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security advisor at the time of the invasion, told an interviewer in 2011 that the popular uprisings stemmed in part from the "freedom agenda" of George W. Bush's government. "The change in the conversation about the Middle East, where people now routinely talk about democratization is something that I'm very grateful for and I think we had a role in that," she said.<sup>6</sup>

Again, I think this is delusional. The Arab uprisings were formed by generations of repression, much of it backed by the United States. And seeing Iraq destroyed by invasion, Arab populations hardly saw Iraq as worthy of emulation, but instead saw the ongoing carnage and the social and ecological disasters as dire warnings.

Then, we can go back to the origins of the Iraq War itself. After the lies that launched the war were exposed, the *New York Times* staff finally offered some sort of soft apology for their role in priming the public for war.<sup>7</sup> (Incidentally, it is shameful that the *New York Times*, which played such a prominent role in creating the public consensus for the war in 2003, did not publish an op-ed by an Iraqi about the war twenty years later.) The *Times* was in fact admitting to its own delusions, albeit with all kinds of caveats—blaming the Iraqi exiles for the lies more than its own paper for falling for them—that seemed to allow the paper to avoid the responsibility that it was ostensibly owning up to.

In fact, delusion and American warfare on Iraq may even go back as far as Operation Desert Storm, the 1991

Gulf War. At the time, French theorist Jean Baudrillard wrote a book titled *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* because, as he argues, it didn't happen in our reality. It happened on our screens. It didn't happen on the ground, as in fighting and combat. It happened from the air, with jets dropping bombs from above. It was, in Baudrillard's view, a war that was not a war. It was a war that was a spectacle. It was a simulacrum of war. This may be the origin point of the delusions of the long view of the Iraq War.

Baudrillard is right to point to the ways in which war is viewed, represented, encountered, and experienced today. In the United States, some wars have gained more clarity as time passes. While people may disagree as to the reasons why, the American war in Vietnam is now largely seen as a tragedy and as a failure. But twenty years after the invasion of Iraq, the delusions that propped up that war not only continue but have actually strengthened. The lies about WMD in Iraq no longer hold water, but the idea that the war was a net-positive for the United States, Iraq, and the world—that idea, or delusion, continues. Why?

Taking responsibility requires coming face-to-face with one's actions, but that is certainly not what's happening here. Instead, our own exalted opinion of ourselves functions as a way for us to maintain our own delusions about ourselves, enabling the same catastrophic decisions to happen again and again in the future. Our delusions are an American danger, and not just to others. In our inability to see our actions for what they are, our delusions, like all delusions, are fundamentally a danger to ourselves.

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