

Death and Impunity: Iraq Fifteen Years After

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Featured image: At the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush ordered the U.S. military to conduct a devastating aerial assault on Baghdad, known as “shock and awe.” (Source: Consortiumnews)

It might have made a bit more than a whimper had the US political scene not found itself in yet another paroxysm of the drama known as the Trump White House. Fifteen years before, governments aligning with the dogs of war decided, in defiance of millions of protestors globally, to invade a sovereign state. Papers cheered with blood lust; propagandists and public relations firms were hired to push the politics of regime change in a country that was already hemmed in by sanctions and surveillance.

The invasion of Iraq must, over time, be given its own specific criminal gravity. It sundered the Middle East, it tore at the artificially imposed borders contrived by former colonial masters. It emboldened new foes and generated further disagreements. For generations, chaos will be guaranteed on the heaped folly of the 2003 decision.

“The results are in,” went a sombre Charles P. Pierce for [Esquire](#). “Iraq never recovered. Syria devolved into civil war. We got closer than ever to the inhumane regime in Saudi Arabia, now engaged in mass slaughter in Yemen with weapons we supplied, because there’s never been a problem with that before.”

As [Matt Taibbi](#) reflected, the invasion had the element of “awesome drama, made more thrilling by the seemingly obvious craziness of it all.” The subtext was a lack of sensible reason, distorted by the mania that Iraq had somehow become a global threat with a trigger happy maniac. In place was ample hysteric delight, characterised by the opening phase of the campaign: “Shock and Awe”.

As with the Indochina War, the invasion mirrored an emerging malaise back home. Invading Iraq was “one of the great crimes of this or any age and destined to be a crossroads event in the history of America’s decline”. It was “a cold, calculated, opportunistic power grab, aimed as much at future targets, and even our own population, as at the Iraqi ‘enemy’.”

The US allies who, with unfazed enthusiasm went in with similar destructive intent, were also showing mixed degrees of reflection. In Australia, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd saw a chance to chastise his predecessor, John Howard, for having joined the US-led enterprise.

“John Howard’s decision to commit thousands of Australian troops to the invasion of Iraq 15 years ago,” began [his opening salvo](#), “ranks as one of the two great failures of Australian foreign policy since the Second World War.”

Rudd can show periods of sensible reflection. The decision to invade Iraq had to also rank alongside another US-led mission that was doomed: the Vietnam War. Again, the leadership in Canberra felt it logical and automatic that the soldiers of the South Cross should shed blood alongside those of the Stars and Stripes.

In Rudd’s reflection, analysis of legitimacy and interest was lacking. There was no specific Australian take on it, not a consideration of “the credibility of American military strategy to both win the war and secure the peace, as well as the long-term consequences for Australian national interests.”

Being a former diplomat, Rudd’s survey of the grotesque consequences is even deeper than Pierce. Sectarian violence between the Shia majority and Sunni minority was unleashed; Christians, having co-habited with Muslims for some 1,300 years were, were brutally expelled; Iraq was pushed into Iran’s orbit while Iraq duly imploded, becoming the base for regional terrorist influences.

The apologist’s tactic in these instances is one tried in history. We were sincere in inflicting our butcheries; we were solemn in making our errors of judgment. We only did what was appropriate at the time. Even if those weapons of mass destruction had never turned up, Saddam Hussein was vicious, a sadist, murderer and torturer. Never mind those who knew better.

For [John Howard](#), it was a case of making a decision on “available evidence” from Australian intelligence agencies at the time tying the Saddam regime with those ultimately elusive weapons of mass destruction. Howard duly “concluded that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction” and insisted that Rudd place himself in “the shoes of the government at the time”.

In the case of the evangelised Tony Blair of Britain, such ham sincerity is pure theatre, even convincing the likes of Sir John Chilcot, chairman of the public inquiry examining the lead-up to the 2003 invasion. While he was not “straight with the nation” about the reasons for invading Iraq, he was “emotionally truthful”.

As Chilcot [explained](#) to the BBC’s political editor, Laura Kuenssberg last July,

“Tony Blair is always and ever an advocate. He makes the most persuasive case he can. Not departing from the truth but persuasion is everything.”

As for President George W. Bush, he remains, along with Howard and Blair, elusive from the judicial bench of any tribunal, foreign or domestic. War criminals have received weighty sentences for less but this triumvirate are at little risk of being apprehended. In the autumn of their lives, they are witnessing a conflagration they happily initiated when in office.

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