

Derailing Chilcot: The Red Herring of Post-War Planning in Iraq

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"If they can get you asking the wrong questions," the American novelist Thomas Pynchon once wrote, "they don't have to worry about answers."

When it comes to the US and UK's invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent occupation, the British establishment have conveniently and repeatedly asked the wrong questions.

Quoting a senior, unnamed source, last month the Times newspaper [reported](#) that Tony Blair, former foreign secretary Jack Straw and the former head of MI6 Richard Dearlove "will face serious 'damage to their reputations' from the Chilcot report into the Iraq War, which has delivered an 'absolutely brutal' verdict on the mismanagement of the occupation". According to the Times "the section [of the inquiry's report] on the occupation will be longer than that on the build-up to" the invasion, and the Times reporter [blogged](#) that the section on the occupation "is where some of the most damning verdicts are drawn".

As they have done with every previous public utterance he has made in recent years, the Guardian happily provided Blair with a platform in June to pre-empt the inquiry's findings – and shift the focus to the occupation and away from the most damaging and dangerous areas for the former prime minister. [According](#) to the Guardian, Blair will "argue the ultimate cause of the long-term bloodshed in Iraq was the scale of external intervention in the country by Iran and al-Qaeda". (Come on, stop laughing, this is serious). He will also "accept that the planning for the aftermath of the war was inadequate" and admit "the West did not foresee the degree to which complex tribal, religious and sectarian tensions would be uncorked" by overthrowing Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Let's be clear: the US-UK military occupation of Iraq – full of [massive amounts](#) of deadly violence dished out by the US and UK armed forces, torture and destructive [divide-and-rule](#) tactics – was a catastrophe for the people of Iraq. And it was hugely unpopular, with a secret Ministry of Defence 2005 poll of Iraqis [finding](#) that 82 percent "strongly opposed" the presence of coalition troops, with 45 percent saying attacks against US and UK forces were justified.

However, it is a complete red herring to suggest better planning is the crux of the issue. "The problem wasn't the way that this was implemented, the problem was that we were there at all," [argued](#) Rory Stewart, who served as the coalition's provisional authority deputy governorate co-ordinator in Maysan province in Iraq, in 2013:

“All these people who think ‘If only we had done this, if only if we hadn’t de-Ba’athified, if only we hadn’t abolished the army’ misunderstand the fundamental tragedy of that encounter between the international community and Iraqis... it wasn’t the detailed, tactical decisions that were made, it was the overall fact of our presence. The problem was so deep that if we hadn’t made those mistakes we would have made other mistakes. It was a wrecked intervention from the beginning, from the very moment we arrived on the ground.”

Moreover, the assumption behind the establishment’s fretting over post-war planning is that if the occupation had gone smoothly, then everything would have been OK. In reality, it would not have changed the fact that the US and UK aggressively invaded an [oil-rich](#) nation in [contravention](#) of international law, based on a [pack of deceptions](#). It was a “crime of aggression” – as [explained](#) by the chief legal adviser at the Foreign Office at the time – whether the occupation was successful or not. Bluntly, if I plan and execute a robbery, whether it goes “smoothly” with minimal violence and resistance or is a complete mess is immaterial – it’s still a crime.

The limited, self-serving debate surrounding post-war planning in Iraq echoes the liberal media’s belief that, to [quote](#) Cambridge Professor David Runciman, the US and UK invaded Iraq “to spread the merits of democracy”. Yes, it all went wrong, but our intentions were good. This kind of thinking can lead to spectacularly convoluted and offensive conclusions, as the BBC’s John Humphrys proved in October 2012 when he [asked](#) about the British occupation of Iraq: “If a country has sent its young men to another country to die, to restore – create democracy, you’d expect, well you’d expect a bit of gratitude, wouldn’t you?”

British historian Mark Curtis has [coined](#) a term for this blinkered power-friendly framing: “Britain’s basic benevolence.” Criticism of foreign policies is possible, notes Curtis, “but within narrow limits which show ‘exceptions’ to, or ‘mistakes’ in, promoting the rule of basic benevolence”.

The West’s support for democracy in the Middle East is also evidence-free. “It is presented as though the invasion of Iraq was motivated largely or entirely by an altruistic desire to share democracy,” [notes](#) Jane Kinninmont, deputy head of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House.

“This is asserted despite the long history of Anglo-American great-power involvement in the Middle East, which has, for the most part, not involved an effort to democratise the region,” she explains. “Rather, the general trend has been to either support authoritarian rulers who were already in place, or to participate in the active consolidation of authoritarian rule, including strong military and intelligence cooperation, as long as these rulers have been seen as supporting Western interests more than popularly elected governments would.”

Back to Chilcot. Blair’s government and its supporters successfully deceived – or at least bamboozled – large sections of the press and key sections of the establishment in 2002-3, in what Curtis calls “a government propaganda campaign of perhaps unprecedented heights in the post-war world”.

By steering the debate onto questions surrounding the occupation of Iraq, Blair and co, assisted by a pliant press and Chilcot, are once again shifting the narrative to their

advantage. We cannot allow them to triumph over us again. Therefore, it is imperative that everyone interested in uncovering the truth and seeking justice for Iraqis keep the focus on the key issue – the deceptions, lies and legal questions surrounding the run-up to the initial invasion.

As the judgement of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg – a key influence on the development of international law – [declared](#), “To initiate a war of aggression... is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

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