

Iraq and Washington's Systemic Failure

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George W. Bush and Dick Cheney may deserve the most blame for the Iraq War, but a core reality shouldn't be missed: the four-year-old conflict resulted from a systemic failure in Washington — from the White House, to congressional Republicans and Democrats, to an insular national news media, to Inside-the-Beltway think tanks.

It was a perfect storm that had been building for more than a quarter century, a collision of mutually reinforcing elements: aggressive Republicans, triangulating Democrats, careerist journalists, bullying cable-TV and talk-radio pundits, hard-hitting and well-funded think tanks on the Right versus ineffectual and marginalized groups on the Left.

"Tough-guy-ism" from Washington's armchair Rambos had become the capital's controlling ideology, especially after the 9/11 terror attacks. In part, the Iraq War could be viewed as a macho parlor game of one-upmanship gone mad, with very few daring to be called unmanly or un-American.

The war that has killed some 3,200 U.S. soldiers and possibly hundreds of thousands of Iraqis also can be traced to conflicting self-interests, pitting what makes sense for Washington insiders against what's best for the broader American public and especially military families.

For the politicians and the think-tankers who wanted the invasion, the war was a win-win-win. They amassed greater power and influence; they had the vicarious thrill of dispatching armies into battle; their friends lined up for the gravy train of war profits and the chance to buy up lucrative oil fields.

While cashing in politically and financially, the insiders knew, too, that the human price would be paid by other people's children and the dollar costs would be passed to future generations. In Washington, a pro-war stance in 2002 and early 2003 was nearly all upside, almost no downside.

However, for those who were sent to fight and for their families, the balance sheet was different. They suffered the casualties, the fear, the uncertainty, the heartbreak. But these two groups — the war's architects and the troops — rarely crossed paths, representing two disparate social classes.

While American soldiers and their loved ones worried about actual death, what mattered most in Washington was political self-preservation.

Even though many in Washington understood the grave risks behind Bush's invasion, it made more sense to join the pro-war herd. Even if the war went badly, there would be very

little danger of career-threatening recriminations because too many important people were in the same position. There was safety in numbers.

The worst that might happen is that you'd have to make a muted mea culpa a few years later while shifting the blame away from yourself onto someone — say, Donald Rumsfeld — for his incompetent execution of the plan.

Ugly Names

By contrast, there was a risk if you stood up to Bush's pro-war juggernaut in 2002 and early 2003. You'd get called ugly names; your career would suffer; you'd be treated like a pariah. Just ask the Dixie Chicks, former weapons inspector Scott Ritter and Al Gore.

Though fear of ostracism didn't compare with the dangers faced by the troops, it's noteworthy on this fourth anniversary of the war how few Washington insiders dared ask tough questions — and how few of those who helped mislead the nation into this foreign policy catastrophe paid any serious price.

President Bush may be a lot less popular but he's still in the White House as is Vice President Cheney. Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice was elevated to Secretary of State. Other war architects, such as Elliott Abrams and Stephen Hadley, got promotions within the National Security Council.

Even the most notorious Iraq War screw-ups — former CIA director George Tenet, Gen. Tommy Franks and pro-consul Paul Bremer — got Medals of Freedom, the highest civilian honor that can be bestowed by the President.

Most pink slips went to officials who were not sufficiently enthusiastic about the Iraq War, from early skeptics like Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill to later doubters like Secretary of State Colin Powell. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld did get fired, but only after he sent the President a memo on Nov. 6, 2006, suggesting a phased military withdrawal. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Gates's Hearing Has New Urgency."]

The most significant accountability exacted on Washington insiders was Election 2006 when voters booted the Republicans from control of the House and Senate and replaced them with Democrats, who have restored some semblance of checks and balances. But even there, it's not yet clear whether the change will be meaningful or just cosmetic.

The future may still be dominated by Iraq War supporters. All announced Republican presidential candidates, including Sen. John McCain of Arizona and former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, are backers, and Democratic front-runner, Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York, voted to give Bush the power to invade Iraq and still doesn't favor a complete U.S. military withdrawal.

Clinton personifies the Democratic Party's instinct for "triangulation," the avoidance of principled stands in favor of nuanced positions that are calculated to be least offensive to the greatest number of people.

Whatever the Democrats who supported Bush's war resolution say now, the most powerful motive behind their decision was the consultant-driven advice that a yes vote was the safest political choice. Indeed, a no vote was viewed by many Democratic consultants as political

suicide for their clients.

In a way, Washington can be compared to a dysfunctional family with the Republicans playing the abusive husband and the Democrats the abused wife, who only recently has begun to speak up for herself.

Unaccountable Media

Yet, while Washington's political hierarchy has changed only marginally in the past four years, the national news media has experienced even less accountability.

With the exception of New York Times reporter Judith Miller whose career imploded over her WMD credulity and Washington Post columnist Michael Kelly who died in a vehicle accident in Iraq, the disastrous Iraq War has caused little shake-up in the line-up of national pundits and top journalists.

One could even argue that the wrongheaded Washington pundits are more deeply entrenched today than they were when the invasion was launched on March 19, 2003. Today's "smart" pundit position on Iraq is to have supported the invasion four years ago but to now complain about poor follow-through.

The few journalists and pundits who were skeptical about the invasion have gotten little reward for their foresight and courage. Washington's powerful insider crowd generally regards them as "ideologues" or "partisans" who were only correct because their irrational hatred of Bush brought them to the right conclusion by accident.

In the up-is-down world of Washington, it was considered an act of courage to join the pro-war herd; conformity was independence; limited second thoughts about the war are now a sign of wisdom.

The national news media also has undergone very little structural change in the past four years. The Right continues to pour hundreds of millions — even billions — of dollars into building media outlets and creating content, from print to radio to TV to the Internet. This investment gives the Right a huge advantage in defining issues and setting the agenda.

Meanwhile, American liberals and progressives have yet to make anything close to that kind of commitment in terms of media infrastructure. [For more on this phenomenon, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege*.]

One of the few liberal broadcast initiatives, Air America Radio, already has undergone bankruptcy reorganization, and progressive Internet sites are mostly expected to somehow fend for themselves.

Yet, while it may be true that only limited progress has been made in reinvigorating the U.S. political/media structure, it can't be denied that a significant change has occurred in public awareness of the problem.

Perhaps the most hopeful sign is that many Americans now understand how little the Washington insiders — whether in political office or in the news media — deserve to be trusted. That skepticism, if it is combined with serious demands for change, could be the start of a rebirth for the American Republic.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His new book, Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'

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