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## The Horrific Legacy of the Invasion of Iraq

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This Monday marks the eleventh anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq—a solemn punctuation mark to the steadily increasing violence that has gripped that country over the past two years. Sectarian violence claimed more than 8,000 Iraqis in 2013 alone, and this year’s toll has already surpassed 2,000. Iraq today is a broken and failing state: the war that many would prefer to believe ended in 2011 continues unabated, with Iraqis continuing to suffer, as much as ever, the fallout from this country’s callous lies and avoidable mistakes. Despite Colin Powell’s sanctimonious “Pottery Barn rule,” John Feffer wrote on his Foreign Policy in Focus blog at TheNation.com last month, the United States has made no effort to “own up to our responsibility for breaking the country.”

To a regrettably unsurprising extent, the issue of *The Nation* that went to press just as American tanks crossed over the border from Kuwait accurately predicted what would happen in the wake of an invasion. Our lead editorial in that issue began:

The Bush Administration has launched a war against Iraq, a war that is unnecessary, unwise and illegal. By attacking a nation that has not attacked us and that does not pose an immediate threat to international peace and security, the Administration has violated the United Nations Charter and opened a new and shameful chapter in US history. Moreover, by abandoning a UN inspection and disarmament process that was working, it has chosen a path that is an affront not only to America's most cherished values but to the world community. The UN did not fail; rather, Washington sought a UN imprimatur for a war it had already decided to wage and scorned it when the Administration couldn't get its way.

Jonathan Schell, in an article in the same issue titled "American Tragedy," described the wider implication of the Bush administration's action: an existential threat to the separation of powers, the protection of civil liberties, the commitment to the international and domestic rule of law.

The decision to go to war to overthrow the government of Iraq will bring unreckonable death and suffering to that country, the surrounding region and, possibly, the United States. It also marks a culmination in the rise within the United States of an immense concentration of unaccountable power that poses the greatest threat to the American constitutional system since the Watergate crisis. This transformation, in turn, threatens to push the world into a new era of rivalry, confrontation and war. The location of the new power is of course the presidency (whose Augustan proportions make the "imperial" presidency of the cold war look like a mere practice run). Its sinews are the awesome might of the American military machine, which, since Congress's serial surrender of the constitutional power to declare war, has passed wholly into the President's hands. Its main political instrument is the Republican Party. Its financial wherewithal is the corporate money that inundates the political realm. Its strategy at home is restriction of civil liberties, deep secrecy, a makeover in its image of the judiciary, subservience to corporate interests across the board and transfer of personal wealth on a colossal scale from the average person to its wealthy supporters. Its popular support stems from fear engendered by the attacks of September 11—fear that has been manipulated to extend far beyond its proper objects. Its overriding goal, barely concealed behind the banner of the war on terrorism, is the accumulation of ever more power, whose supreme expression is its naked ambition to establish hegemony over the earth....

The tragedy of America in the post-cold war era is that we have proved unequal to the responsibility that our own power placed upon us. Some of us became intoxicated with it,

imagining that we could rule the world. Others of us—the Democratic Party, Congress, the judiciary, the news media—abdicated our obligation to challenge, to check and to oppose, letting the power-hungry have their way. The government of the United States went into opposition against its own founding principles, leaving it to the rest of the world to take up our cause. The French have been better Americans than we have. Because the Constitution, though battered, is still intact, we may still have time and opportunity to recoup. But for now, we will have to pay the price of our weakness. The costs will be heavy, first of all for the people of Iraq but also for others, including ourselves. The international order on which the common welfare, including its ecological and economic welfare, depends has sustained severe damage. The fight for “freedom” abroad is crippling freedom at home. The war to stop proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq has provoked that very proliferation in North Korea and Iran. More ground has already been lost in the field of proliferation than can be gained even by the most delirious victory in Baghdad. Former friends of America have been turned into rivals or foes. The United States may be about to win Iraq. It has already lost the world.

In her column, “War: What Is It Good For?” *The Nation*’s Katha Pollitt wrote about the consequences of the US invasion at home and abroad:

Whatever the immediate results—this many dead children versus that much freedom from repression—the fundamental issue has to be the perils of “pre-emptive war” in volatile times. However it works out for the Iraqis, invading their country will be bad for the rest of the world. It will aid terrorist recruitment, it will license other countries—India and Pakistan, for example—to wage pre-emptive wars of their own, it may even consolidate Islamic fundamentalism as the only alternative to American power in the Middle East. Those are the fears not just of the American antiwar movement but of the majority of people around the world, even in the nations whose leaders have joined with ours.

But who cares about the majority of the world’s people? We’ll go to war unilaterally, with our pathetic collection of allies (Britain, OK. But Spain? Italy? Latvia?), while the rest of the world stands by appalled. We’ll boycott the Dixie Chicks, eat our freedom fries and even, as documented in the *New York Times*, pour Dom Perignon by the gallon down the toilet (“I’ll bet it was just water,” said the manager of my local liquor store. “Nobody would waste great champagne like that!”). People will be called traitors if they wear peace T-shirts, fail to salute the flag or dare to suggest that anyone in the Administration has lower motives than the selfless

salvation of humanity. Journalists “embedded,” as the odd phrase goes, in military units will send back an endless stream of heartwarmers that will reinforce the confusion of “support the troops” with “support the war.” If, in the end, the Iraqis turn out to hate and resent the nation that bombed them into freedom, we’ll shake our heads in angry bewilderment: After all we did for you, this is the thanks we get!

The issue raised by the invasion of Iraq is American imperialism. That won’t go away, no matter how this particular adventure turns out. See you at the demonstration.

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Finally, the issue carried a report from “Inside Baghdad” by Jeremy Scahill, whom *The Nation* nurtured as a journalist, publishing his dispatches from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, and ensuring that they became the bestselling books, *Blackwater* and *Dirty Wars*. On the eve of the Iraq War, Scahill wrote of the hopes and fears of the Iraqi people, as one horrific chapter of their nation’s history was about to end and another to begin:

Perhaps it’s twenty years of unending war and sanctions; perhaps it’s the tremendous repression; likely, it’s everything together, but Iraqis want it all to end. They are exhausted and, most of them, miserable. In the early stages of the imposition of the US-led sanctions against Iraq, US officials made clear that Iraqis would be made to suffer until Saddam Hussein was no longer in power. The last decade has represented one of the most brutal campaigns of targeting innocent civilians to achieve Washington’s policy aims. The constant bombing, the massive shortages of medicine, the rapid decimation of a once-proud middle class, the tens of thousands of innocent children withering away in filthy hospital beds, the unclean drinking water, the total dependence on the government for food, have all made ordinary Iraqis pay an incredible price for a government over which they have no control....

There is no question that hatred of the US government is strong in Iraq, regardless of what people think of Saddam. And few accept that America has any right to overthrow the Iraqi government. Iraqis have seen what occupation looks like, both through British colonization of Iraq and through the lens of the Palestinians. “We don’t want Saddam, but that doesn’t mean we want America, either,” said Mazen, an unemployed engineer. He said his father’s name is Jihad. The name, Mazen said, was given because his grandfather fought against the British colonialists

in the 1920s. “It’s in my family blood. We will not accept a foreign invader or occupier, even if it damns us to more years under an Iraqi dictator. At least he is one of us...

But even those people who would welcome a US victory over Saddam are concerned about what might come after. People across the map say they fear a civil war that would pit the surviving Baathists and loyalist forces of the regime against masses of angry civilians and disaffected army deserters. Some Christians say they also fear that Islamic fundamentalists will attack them. Over the past twelve years, Iraq has seen a rapid desecularization of its society, and Islamic groups hope to replace the Baathist government with an Islamic state. “You know why we Christians want Saddam to stay in power?” asks a restaurant owner in Baghdad. “Because he is protecting us from radical Muslims. He always has done this, and if he goes, we are afraid what will happen to us.”

Scahill also interviewed Iraqis who looked forward to the Hussein regime’s downfall, even at the price of a US invasion. But that didn’t change the fact that even if that happened quickly and relatively smoothly, the violence would be by no means at an end:

Even if some Iraqis celebrate in the streets if Saddam’s government is brought down, it will reflect no success of US policy. It will simply represent a violent end to a horrifying chapter in the vast, unfinished book of Iraq. It will be the fruits of a merciless economic and military war waged against the innocent for twelve years. Regardless of what happens, it is the ordinary Iraqis—the doctors, the engineers turned taxi drivers, the shoeshine boys, the mothers and fathers—who should be praised for having found the will to live and the will to survive a heartless war waged against them by a superpower and a tyrant.

Though both are now gone, their entwined legacies remain disastrously oppressive to the Iraqi people.