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10th Anniversary Of Iraq War: U.S. Still Hasn't Learned Its Lessons

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March 19 will mark the tenth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. While it is still far too soon to truly assess the impact that it had and will continue to have on the world, a decade is still long enough to at least reflect on an awful war and occupation that is surely one of the most memorable events of my generation.

Although it has now largely faded from Americans' short-term memories, the Iraq War is a great microcosm for the follies and horror of aggressive war, a policy of military interventionism, and the domestic politics that allow both to thrive.

The roots of the war can be traced back to at least 1991 and the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the entire justification for an imperial position around the globe by the U.S. vanished overnight. In Iraq and Saddam Hussein, a former ally of the U.S., the Pentagon found its next target.

The first President Bush invaded to save the King of Kuwait, but that was just the beginning. A decade of sanctions, blockades, and bombings by President Clinton that deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure and prevented basic commercial goods (even medicine) from entering the country killed an estimated 500,000 children. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright infamously declared these innocent lives "worth it."

One would think that this would be enough terror to unleash on a country that had no possible way of attacking us, but the neocons and the War Party inside the Beltway who criticized the elder Bush for not taking Baghdad knew his son was foolish enough to do it. Way before 9/11, plans were set for an even bigger invasion.

I wasn't even sixteen when I remember President Bush Jr. giving Saddam his 48-hour ultimatum. I knew little about politics and less about foreign policy, but there's something about war fever that even back then worried me. The "shock and awe" bombing and subsequent invasion followed, and all hell broke loose.

I am not quite sure most Americans have come to grips with what has been done to Iraq by the U.S. government. Numbers alone don't quite capture it, but they help. Not counting the 500,000 Iraqi children killed by the sanctions, over one million Iraqis have been killed. Millions of refugees, widows and orphans were created. Over 5,000 American soldiers died, including nearly 100,000 casualties. Iraq is now littered with uranium-tipped shells and debris, toxic pollution that has caused increases in infant mortality, cancer, and birth defects in Fallujah.

\$3 trillion were spent, billions more shoveled around, lost and unaccounted for. The human and monetary toll of the war is truly staggering.

The Iraq war was also a perfect example of the lies, propaganda, and corporatism that are a predictable result of large military establishments and an imperial foreign policy.

After 9/11, the Pentagon meticulously saturated the airwaves with former employees that were intertwined in the military-industrial-complex. "Experts" were interviewed on when and how, not if, to invade. Dissenting voices were pushed aside. Every justification that was given for the war — "weapons of mass destruction," spreading freedom and democracy, Saddam's supposed ties to Al-Qaeda and 9/11 — was an outright lie.

The Bush administration knew what they were doing. They knew the secular Saddam was no friend of Osama Bin Laden. That's why the torture program was established. Thousands of detainees were brutally tortured in an attempt to illicit false confessions connecting Saddam to Al-Qaeda. A compliant press and intense fear-mongering were the finishing touches.

Democracy? Freedom? The Iraqi government is now dominated by sectarian Shiite parties with abysmal human rights records that recently crushed pro-democracy protests in Baghdad. Torture is common, and deaths squads are used with increasing frequency. Violence, including bombings, is prevalent (though never mentioned in the U.S.). While there was no Al-Qaeda in Iraq before Saddam, Muslim jihadists from around the world now have intense battle experience fighting U.S. Marines in Iraq and when not terrorizing Iraqis have their eyes on Syria.

Iran now has more influence in the region than they could have ever dreamed of. After the first invasion, the U.S. built large military bases on Muslim holy lands in Saudi Arabia, one of the main reasons Osama Bin Laden attacked on 9/11. The mess left after the second invasion will undoubtedly create more blowback for years to come.

Unfortunately, the lessons of that war — indeed, all war — I fear have been lost or swept under the rug. Americans appear to still buy the "war on terror" propaganda as the U.S. beats the drums for war in Iran with the same lies used in Iraq. While Bradley Manning is ignored or vilified, the neocons who promised a "cakewalk" still have the audacity to show their faces on TV and proscribe more war. Democracy and freedom make great slogans, but have nothing to do with the real intent of American policymakers that have little hesitation in supporting some of the most authoritarian regimes around the world.

But if not for democracy or WMDs, then why did the U.S. invade Iraq? First, war is the health of the state, allowing it to consolidate power, crush dissent, instill nationalism and pass out tax loot to its corporate allies. Israel, oil, and delusions of imperial grandeur played major roles as well.

But fundamentally, the Iraq war and the bloody aftermath is what happens when a country embraces empire and allows militarism and a military-industrial-complex to dominate domestic

and foreign policy. It should come as no surprised that the hawkish Democrats who supported President Bush, like Senators Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, and John Kerry, are now calling the shots under President Obama.

Other than the U.S. war in Indochina, the Iraq War is perhaps the single biggest foreign policy disaster in American history. Here's hoping it doesn't take another decade to learn these lessons.