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The Iraq war has been a monstrous crime

Politicians crave a whitewash – but Britain must hold a fully open public inquiry into the
bloodbath it helped to create

It's hardly surprising that those responsible for the human and social catastrophe unleashed by the illegal invasion and occupation of [Iraq](#), on both sides of the Atlantic, should be desperate to rewrite its history – or try to salvage the shattered reputation of those armies that carried it out. In Britain, as the bulk of its troops withdraw after a campaign that has already lasted longer than the second world war, that propaganda offensive has now reached fever pitch.

Gordon Brown claimed yesterday that the wreckage of blood-drenched Iraq [was a "success story"](#). The defence secretary John Hutton insisted Britain should be proud of its "legacy" in the devastated cities of the south. Hilary Benn, the environment secretary boasted of his support for the original aggression on [BBC's Question Time yesterday](#), declaring that " we leave Iraq a better place" – a line repeated word for word by the Sun today and echoed across much of the media.

But the politicians' craving for a whitewash is no reason for anyone else to give house room to such an absurd travesty of the truth. The Iraq war has been a monstrous crime. Based on a false pretext, it has left hundreds of thousands dead, created more than four million refugees, unleashed an orgy of ethnic cleansing and laid waste to the broken infrastructure of a country already on its knees from 12 years of sanctions and a generation of war.

On the eve of the 2003 invasion, Tony Blair told parliament that while there would be civilian casualties, Saddam Hussein would be "responsible for many more deaths even in one year than we will be in any conflict". Amnesty International reckoned annual deaths in Iraq linked to repression at the time to be in the low hundreds. Civilian deaths alone in the six years since the US-British attack are now estimated anywhere between 150,000 (the Iraqi government's figure) and a million-plus.

But when paying tribute to the 179 British soldiers killed in Iraq, ministers could not bring themselves to honour the victims of the bloodbath they helped inflict – let alone to

acknowledge the tens of thousands of prisoners held without trial, the massacres and rampant torture Britain shares responsibility for: the very crimes of the former regime used to justify the war.

Yet to this day only one Briton has been found guilty of a war crime in Iraq: [Donald Payne](#), convicted of inhuman treatment of detainees in Basra. No wonder a majority in Iraq and Britain have long wanted all foreign troops withdrawn – or that Iraqis find claims of a "burgeoning democracy", Britain's "successful mission" and tales of "reconstruction" hard to take remotely seriously. From Basra to Baquba, basic services, power supplies, sewage treatment and clean water are in grimly short supply, while a corrupt sectarian carve-up by a tightly licensed political elite survives only with the protection of US firepower.

That's why the prominent Basra-based president of the Iraqi oil workers' federation Hassan Juma'a [wrote this month](#) that history would not look kindly on Britain for its role in Iraq and that its troops' retreat would be the occasion for a "festival".

Of course Britain's withdrawal is welcome in both countries. But the occupation continues. The British army is handing over control of Basra to the Americans, while 400 British troops are to stay on as "advisers" and "trainers" – a reprise of the role they had in Iraq before 1958. In an ominous marker for the future, Brown yesterday declared he was anxious for Britain to [get involved in "protecting" Iraqi oil supplies](#) – which of course lay behind the invasion in the first place.

The British refusal to let go reflects the continuing slippage on a much larger scale of Barack Obama's own staged withdrawal plans. Not only does it seem all US combat troops will not after all be [pulling out of Iraqi cities by the end of June](#), but there are persistent US hints that ["agreement" may be reached with the Iraqi government](#) to stay on after the announced full withdrawal [by the end of 2011](#). The aggressors are clearly not going to go quietly.

Meanwhile, all the extravagant claims about a post-surge transformation of Iraq's security are once again looking foolishly premature. The killing of three US soldiers in Anbar province on Thursday confirmed a [rising trend of resistance attacks in April](#), combined with a string of horrific suicide bombings and increasing civilian deaths, now running at over 400 a month.

There can only be a durable stabilisation of Iraq once the occupation has ended and all representative political forces are brought into a negotiated settlement. In the meantime, a political accounting for what has been inflicted on Iraq – which must include a fully open public inquiry – has yet to begin in Britain. That is essential for Britain's own corroded political culture – but also because the same blunders and crimes are now being repeated in the escalation of another US-led war: in Afghanistan and Pakistan.