TRUTHS AND MYTHS ABOUT THE INVASION OF IRAQ*

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The invasion of Iraq cannot seriously be described as a war with Iraq, any more than the Nazi invasion of Belgium in 1940 was a war with Belgium. Iraq’s capacity to resist was so limited that it cannot even be described as an uneven war. The declaration by President Bush, wearing a combat suit and standing on the deck of the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, that ‘the United States and our allies have prevailed’, completed a carefully constructed myth.1 It is important to remind ourselves of some salient facts.

THE OFFICIAL REASONS WERE SPECIOUS

Bush and Powell and the rest went out of their way to make sure we understood this, by a steady dose of self-contradiction from September 2002 when the war drums began to beat. One day the ‘single question’ was whether Iraq would disarm: ‘We have high confidence that they have weapons of mass destruction – that is what this war was about and is about’, said White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer. That was the pretext throughout the whole UN-disarmament farce. In reality UNMOVIC was doing a good job of carrying forward the disarmament of Iraq, and could have continued if that had been the goal. But after Colin Powell and others had stated solemnly that this was the ‘single question’, President Bush went on at once both to affirm that claim, and also to reject it by announcing that it wasn’t the goal at all: even if there wasn’t a pocket knife anywhere in Iraq, the US would invade anyway, because it was committed to

* This essay is partly based on interviews with V. K. Ramachandran on April 3, 2003, in Frontline (India), and with Michael Albert on April 13, 2003, both posted at Znet (www.zmag.org).
‘regime change’. Then we heard that there was nothing to that either: at the Azores summit, where Bush and Blair issued their ultimatum to the UN – do what we say or render yourselves ‘irrelevant’ – they made it clear that they would invade even if Saddam and his gang left the country. So ‘regime change’ was not enough: it has to be the right regime, one that provides the US rulers with an ‘Arab façade’, to borrow Britain’s terminology as it ruled the region during its day in the sun. On other days we heard that the goal was ‘democracy’ in the world. Pretexts depended on audience and circumstances. No thinking person could take this charade seriously.

Iraq was not much of a military force to begin with, and had been largely disarmed through the 1990s, while much of Iraqi society was driven to the edge of survival by the US-UK sanctions, using the UN as a cover. Its military expenditures and economy were about one-third those of Kuwait, with 10 per cent of Iraq’s population, far below others in the region, and even farther below the regional superpower, Israel (by now virtually an offshore military base of the US). And the invading force not only had utterly overwhelming military power, but also extensive information to guide its actions from satellite observation and overflights for many years, and more recently U-2 flights on the pretext of disarmament, surely sending data directly back to Washington.

‘DEMOCRACY’ WAS ANYTHING BUT THE GOAL

The US has consistently opposed democracy inside Iraq, as elsewhere, unless it remains within narrow bounds. Their nature emerges with great clarity from the historical and documentary record. One prominent scholar, who also served in the Reagan administration’s ‘democracy enhancement’ programs, accurately describes the goal as ‘limited, top-down forms of democratic change that did not risk upsetting the traditional structures of power with which the United States has long been allied’.

In 1991 Saddam Hussein was authorized to suppress, brutally, an uprising that might have overthrown him, but would have left the country in the hands of Iraqis who might not have subordinated themselves sufficiently to Washington. That was understood very well by those who now pretend to be appalled by the mass graves they always knew existed, and who now choose to suppress the explanation they gave at the time, that it was right for Washington to authorize the slaughter because Saddam ‘offered the West and the region a better hope for his country’s stability than did those who have suffered his repression’. The chief diplomatic correspondent of the New York Times, who now writes that the mass graves justify his moral argument for the invasion, told a rather different story when the decision was made not to permit Iraqis to overthrow Saddam in 1991: ‘the best of all worlds’ for Washington, he explained, would be ‘an iron-fisted Iraqi junta without Saddam Hussein’ that would rule as Saddam did. But since this wasn’t available, we would just have to settle for Saddam, Washington’s friend and ally, who had fallen from favour when he disobeyed (or maybe misunderstood) orders by invading Kuwait in August 1990 but was nevertheless
a better choice than an Iraq run by the Iraqi people. The Azores summit merely reiterated this position twelve years later: Iraqis can run Iraq as Washington’s Latin American friends could run the USA’s ‘backyard’, or as Iraqis ran their country under Britain’s supervision after World War I.

The murderous US-UK sanctions regime of the following years devastated Iraqi society but strengthened the tyrant, compelling the population to rely for survival on his (highly efficient) system for distributing basic goods. The sanctions thus undercut the possibility of the kind of popular revolt that had overthrown an impressive series of other monsters who had been strongly supported by the current incumbents in Washington: Marcos, Duvalier and Ceausescu up to the end of their bloody rule, along with Mobutu, Suharto and a long list of others, some of them easily as tyrannical and barbaric as Saddam. Had it not been for the sanctions, Saddam might well have gone the same way, as has been pointed out for years by the westerners who know Iraq best, Denis Halliday and Hans van Sponeck, who were the chief UN humanitarian coordinators in Iraq, with an international staff of hundreds of investigators travelling daily through the country.

In the early days of the invasion, Leith Kubba, one of the most respected secular Iraqi opposition voices abroad, who is connected with the congressional National Endowment for Democracy, demanded that the UN play a vital role after the end of the fighting and rejected US control of reconstruction or government. And one of the leading Shi’ite opposition figures, Sayed Muhamed Baqer al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), in exile in Iran, informed the press that ‘we understand this war to be about imposing US hegemony over Iraq’, adding that they perceived the US as ‘an occupying rather than a liberating force’. He stressed that the UN must supervise elections, and called on ‘foreign troops to withdraw from Iraq’ and leave Iraqis in charge. He reiterated this stance on his return to Iraq on May 10, 2003.

Speaking generally, the Shi’ite majority is likely to join the rest of the region in seeking closer relations with Iran, the last thing the Bushites want; and the next largest component of the population, the Kurds, are likely to seek some kind of autonomy within a federal structure that would be anathema to Turkey, a major regional base for the US. Throughout the region genuine democracy would have outcomes that are inconsistent with the goal of US hegemony. Recent studies indicate that from Morocco to Lebanon to the Gulf, a large majority of the population want a greater role in government for Islamic religious figures, and about 95 percent believe that the sole US interest in the region is to control its oil and strengthen Israel.

It was always fanciful to imagine that Washington would tolerate truly democratic elections in Iraq, and respect the outcome. What US policy-makers wanted was a client regime, following practice elsewhere in the region, and most instructively in the regions that have been under US domination for a century, Central America and the Caribbean. Brent Scowcroft, National Security Adviser to Bush I,
just repeated the obvious: ‘What’s going to happen the first time we hold an election in Iraq and it turns out the radicals win? What do you do? We’re surely not going to let them take over.’

The Bush administration’s contempt for democracy was even more blatant in relation to the states which declined to join the invasion. The failure of its so-called ‘diplomatic efforts’ to gain their support – in fact, a failure of coercion, by bribes and threats – was due to the massive opposition of the vast majority of their populations. The most dramatic case was Turkey. Turkey was very vulnerable to US punishment and inducements. Nevertheless, to everyone’s surprise the new government was unable to get the Turkish parliament to endorse the role the US wanted Turkey to play, which was opposed by 95 per cent of the population. Turkey was bitterly condemned for that in the US, just as France and Germany were bitterly condemned because the governments also took the position of the overwhelming majority of their populations. The countries that were praised were countries like Italy and Spain (and of course the UK), whose leaders agreed to follow Washington over the opposition of an even larger majority of their electorates than in the reviled Old Europe. The criterion distinguishing Old Europe (denounced and punished) and New Europe (praised and rewarded) was quite sharp: if a government took the same position as the vast majority of the population, it belonged to Old Europe; if it followed the marching orders from Crawford, Texas, and dismissed the views of the vast majority of its population, it joined the exciting and promising New Europe, the wave of the future in the crusade for democracy.

All of this proceeded along with much media acclaim for the dedication to democracy of these leaders who were actually expressing their hatred of it with such dramatic clarity. It might have been amusing if it had been happening in Andorra, but not when it was happening in front of our eyes in the most powerful state in history, which had just proclaimed its intention to rule the world, by force if necessary.

Fear and hatred of substantive democracy among elites is neither new nor surprising. But I do not recall any precedent for such open and brazen contempt for the belief that in a ‘democracy’ the voice of the people should have some role. It was not just government officials who reacted in this way, with remarkable uniformity, but also many commentators. That includes liberals like Thomas Friedman who informed us that ‘France, as they say in kindergarten, does not play well with others’, and should therefore be replaced on the Security Council by India, which is ‘serious’ now that it is governed by an ultra-right nationalist party which, he believes, is more willing to ‘play well’ with the righteous in Washington. The populations of Europe must be in pre-kindergarten, then, by his standards, since according to an international Gallup poll at the time, which was not reported, most were even more opposed than the French to the Bush-Blair war. A whole literature was spawned to explain why France, Germany, Turkey and others were trying to undermine the United States. It appeared to be inconceivable to these commentators that when the overwhelming majority
of a population has an opinion, a government might want to pay some attention to them.

This contempt for democracy on the part of the Bush administration and its supporters was matched by contempt for the international system. There were even calls to disband the United Nations, which was widely described as having ‘failed’ – i.e. having failed to endorse US policy. The US will not try to dismantle the UN but will aim to ensure that its role is diminished even further, because if it won’t follow orders, of what use is it? As the official administration moderate Colin Powell put it, the UN can authorize the US to do what it intends to do, or it can ‘go off and have other discussions’, but those are its choices: follow orders, or be a debating society. There’s nothing particular novel about that, as the record of vetoes reveals since the UN achieved a limited measure of independence in the 1960s (the US far in the lead, UK second, no one else close). But the extremism of recent stands is, nevertheless, of no slight significance.

**THE PRIME MOTIVE WAS TO TAKE ‘EXEMPLARY ACTION’**

In September 2002 the Bush administration released its National Security Strategy, sending many shudders around the world, including within the US foreign policy elite. The Strategy had many precedents, but did break new ground: for the first time in the post-war world a powerful state announced, loud and clear, that it intended to rule the world forever, crushing by force any potential challenge it might perceive. This is often called a doctrine of ‘pre-emptive war’. That is wrong; it goes vastly beyond pre-emption. Sometimes it is called, more accurately, a doctrine of ‘preventive war’, but that too understates the doctrine. No military threat, however remote, need be ‘prevented’; challenges can be concocted at will, and may not involve any threat other than ‘defiance’. Those who pay attention to history and the documentary record will be aware that ‘successful defiance’ has often been taken to be justification for resort to force in the past, sometimes called ‘maintaining credibility’, in the style of a Mafia Don.

At the outset, the doctrine was interpreted as authorizing the US government to resort to war against a country that has or is developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Perhaps the most important consequence of the collapse of US–UK claims with regard to WMD in Iraq is that the doctrine has been re-interpreted. As Bush and others have made clear, for a country to be selected as a target for attack, it suffices that it have the ‘potential’ to develop WMD. The President announced that the search for WMD was successful, because two trailers were found that might be usable for production of WMD. By these criteria, virtually every country is a legitimate target of attack, now and in the indefinite future. The new doctrine therefore becomes quite impressive in its scope.

When a new doctrine is announced, action must be taken to demonstrate that it is seriously intended, so that it can become a new ‘norm in international relations’, as legal and academic commentators will soberly explain, and it is
important to establish such a norm if you expect to rule the world by force for the foreseeable future. The action needed in this case was a war with an ‘exemplary nature’, as Harvard Middle East historian Roger Owen pointed out, discussing the reasons for the invasion of Iraq. Exemplary action teaches a lesson that others must heed, or else.

The target must have certain crucial qualities: it must be important – there’s no point illustrating the doctrine by invading Burundi – and it must be defenceless. Iraq qualified perfectly in both respects. Its importance is obvious, and so was the required weakness. It was therefore a perfect choice for an exemplary action to establish the doctrine of global rule by force as a new ‘norm’. This was recognized as soon as the test case was declared a success. Publication of the National Security Strategy ‘was the signal that Iraq would be the first test, not the last’, the New York Times reported: ‘Iraq became the petri dish in which this experiment in pre-emptive policy grew.’ A high official added that ‘We will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defence by acting pre-emptively’ – now that the norm had been established. Throughout, the concept of pre-emption has been redesigned to refer to what the Nuremberg Tribunal called the ‘supreme crime’ of waging unprovoked war – which the Bush administration now undertakes to do whenever it sees fit.

It was plausibly assumed that Iraqi society would collapse, that the soldiers would go in, and that the US would be able to establish a regime of its choice, and military bases. The US would then be in a better position to take on harder cases, some already named: North Korea, Iran and Syria. But there are other possible targets too. The Andean region qualifies, for example. It has very substantial resources, including oil. It is in turmoil, with dangerous independent popular movements. It is surrounded by US military bases, with US forces already on the ground.

THE ATTACK ON IRAQ BELONGS TO ESTABLISHED REPUBLICAN ELECTORAL STRATEGY

The declaration of the new National Security Strategy and the propaganda drive to prepare American public opinion for the invasion coincided with the opening of the mid-term election campaign, all in September 2002. Karl Rove, the administration’s campaign manager, had already explained that Republicans have to ‘go to the country on the issue of national security [because voters] trust the Republican Party [for] protecting America.’ One didn’t have to be a political genius to realize that if social and economic issues had dominated the election the Bush administration would not have a chance. Accordingly it was necessary to concoct a threat to national survival which the President would brilliantly overcome. For the mid-term elections the strategy worked, if only just barely. Polls reveal that voters maintained their preferences, but suppressed concerns over jobs, pensions, benefits, etc., in favour of security. Something similar will be needed for the presidential campaign in 2004, as Rove has also been kind enough to explain. The Wall Street Journal was quite accurate in reporting that
the PR operation on the USS Abraham Lincoln was not a declaration of the end of the war, but of the opening of the presidential campaign of 2004 – which, merely by coincidence, was being delayed by several weeks so as to open in New York right after September 11.

All of this was second nature for the Bush administration. They were mostly recycled from the more reactionary sectors of the Reagan-Bush I administrations, and knew that they had been able to run the country for twelve years, carrying out domestic programmes the public largely opposed, by periodically pushing the panic button: Libyans attempting to ‘expel us from the world’ (in Reagan’s words); an air base in Grenada from which the Russians would bomb the USA; Nicaraguans (only ‘two-days driving time from Harlingen Texas’, Reagan again) planning to take over the hemisphere; black criminals about to rape your sister (Willie Horton in the 1988 presidential campaign); Hispanic narco-traffickers about to destroy us; and on and on. It was one such thing after another, every year. The Reagan Administration actually declared a National Emergency in 1985 because of the threat to the security of the United States posed by the government of Nicaragua. Virtually the same words were used in the congressional authorization for invading Iraq in October 2002, shortly after the propaganda campaign began.

If the narrow – and unusually corrupt – sectors of private power and privilege represented by the Bush administration are to carry out their reactionary domestic program over strong popular opposition, and ensure that what they are dismantling will be very hard to reconstruct, the American public has to be made to feel under constant threat. Bush’s declaration that Americans ‘refuse to live in fear’ was precisely the opposite of the aim and consequence of the propaganda and domestic ‘security’ policies instituted by his administration.10

THE MEDIA PLAYED A CRUCIAL PROPAGANDA ROLE

The drumbeat for war began in September 2002, and the government-media propaganda campaign achieved spectacular success. The media relayed government propaganda about the threat to US security posed by Iraq, its involvement in 9-11 and other terrorism, etc., sometimes embellishing it on their own. A majority of the population quickly became convinced that Iraq was an imminent threat to US security. Soon, almost half were convinced that Iraq was responsible for the 9-11 attacks (as compared with 3 per cent after the attacks). Not surprisingly, these carefully manufactured beliefs correlated closely with support for the war. These beliefs were unique to the US. After September 2002, the US became the only country in the world where 60 per cent of the adult population believed that Iraq presented an imminent threat to its security. Even in Kuwait and Iran, which Saddam Hussein had invaded, he was not feared, though he was despised. Kuwaitis and Iranians knew perfectly well that Iraq had become the weakest state in the region. But a highly effective propaganda assault drove the American public far off the spectrum of world opinion. These were impressive successes of what Anatol Lieven called ‘a propaganda programme which for
systematic mendacity has few parallels in peacetime democracies’ – though in fact it is not that unusual. The achievement is surely understood by the perpetrators, and should not be ignored by those who care about the fate of the world.

As a result of these successes, Bush was even able to proclaim in his USS Abraham Lincoln extravaganza that the conquest of Iraq was a victory in the ‘war on terror’. His advisers and speech-writers were surely aware that the only known relation between Iraq and al Qaeda-style terror was that the invasion led to a sharp ‘spike in recruitment’ for al Qaeda and was ‘a huge setback in the “war on terror”’, as high officials and other specialists observed, and as had been widely predicted before by intelligence agencies and others. But in a well-managed doctrinal system, even as outlandish a proclamation as this can be produced with little fear of meaningful contradiction in the mainstream.

Pre-invasion discussion was overwhelmingly restricted to ‘pragmatic grounds’: would the US government get away with its plans at a cost acceptable at home. Once the attack on Iraq began, reporting it became to a large extent a shameful exercise in cheering for the home team, appalling much of the rest of the world, and many at home as well. But the effect of the panic induced by government-media propaganda persisted. Studies released in June revealed that 34 per cent of the population believed that the US had found WMD in Iraq (an additional 7 per cent were unsure), and 22 per cent believed that Iraq had used chemical or biological weapons during the war (an additional 9 per cent were unsure).

GLOBAL ELITES ARE DIVIDED

Planners expect their version of globalization to proceed on course. US intelligence predicts that it will lead to a ‘widening economic divide’ and ‘chronic financial volatility’, extending the generally poor economic record associated with adherence to ‘neoliberal reforms’. Intelligence also predicts that ‘deepening economic stagnation, political instability, and cultural alienation [will] foster ethnic, ideological and religious extremism, along with the violence that often accompanies it’, much of it directed against the United States. Military planners make similar predictions; this has been part of the motivation for militarization of space since the Clinton years.

It is well understood that the Bush administration is aggravating these problems by telling the world: if you are defenceless, we will feel free to attack you when we want, but if you have a deterrent, we will back off, because we only attack defenceless targets. Compare North Korea and Iraq. Iraq was defenceless and weak. While there was a horrible monster running it, it did not pose a threat to anyone else. North Korea, however, was not attacked because it has a deterrent. It has massed artillery aimed at Seoul, and if the United States attacks, it can wipe out a large part of South Korea, and cause substantial casualties among US forces near the border – now to be withdrawn to the south, a decision causing considerable concern in Korea because of fears of what it implies.

So the US is telling the countries of the world that they had better develop a terrorist network or weapons of mass destruction or some other credible deter-
rent. The CIA and other intelligence agencies, along with many prominent specialists in international affairs and terrorism, have warned that the new US doctrine of ‘preventive war’ carries serious risks, and some have warned specifically of the likely stimulus to terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.14

This is surely a large part of the reason why the invasion of Iraq was strongly opposed in the main centres of corporate capitalism. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, in January 2003, opposition was so strong that Powell was practically shouted down when he tried to present a case for the war. With the last remnants of a functioning system of world order being torn to shreds, the Bush administration is telling the world that nothing matters but force – but economic and foreign policy elites are concerned that others are not likely to tolerate that for long. They fear that the Bush administration’s militarism may prove very costly to their own interests, or even to their survival.

US military planners realize the dangers very well. This forms a good part of their rationale for increasing military spending, and for the militarization of space that the entire rest of the world has been trying to block – without much hope as long as the matter is kept from the sight of Americans, who have the prime responsibility to stop it. And can stop it, if they know about it. That is perhaps why some major events that occurred in October 2002 were not even reported, among them US refusal, alone with Israel, to support UN resolutions reaffirming the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning biological weapons and strengthening the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which prohibits the use of space for military purposes, including offensive weapons that may well bring biology’s experiment with human intelligence to an inglorious end.

THE STRENGTH OF WORLD-WIDE OPPOSITION WAS UNPRECEDENTED

Opposition to the invasion throughout the world was enormous and unprecedented, much of it motivated not just by the attack itself but by the overarching strategy for which it was a test case, establishing the ‘new norm’. Pre-war polls indicate less opposition in the US than elsewhere (wartime and post-war polls have completely different significance), but that is misleading. It is necessary to take into account the panic factor, unique to the US. When that is extracted, US opposition was probably not much different from the global norm, which was overwhelming.

Comparisons are often drawn to Vietnam, in revealing ways. Article after article asks ‘where are the Vietnam-era protestors?’ The comparison reveals that the remarkably low level of elite opposition to the Vietnam war at the time still persists, so much so that the facts are not even recognized. In fact, for several years there was very little protest in any circles. The US attacked South Vietnam in 1962, when the Kennedy administration announced that the US air force was bombing South Vietnam, and also initiated use of napalm, chemical warfare to destroy food supplies and ground cover for the indigenous resistance, and
programs that drove millions of people into what amounted to concentration camps. That is what we call the war crime of aggression when carried out by enemies. Protest was virtually non-existent.

It did not begin on any substantial scale until several years later. By then South Vietnam had been devastated, hundreds of thousands of US troops were on the ground, and Washington had extended the war to the rest of Indochina. As late as 1965, in liberal Boston, years after the aggression began, peaceful demonstrations were broken up by force with the support of the liberal press and radio which denounced people who dared to protest against an American war. In 1966 even meetings in churches were attacked by counter-demonstrators.

The reaction to the invasion of Iraq was dramatically different. There were enormous protests well before the attack began, and again on the day it was launched – with no counter-demonstrators. That is a radical difference. And had it not been for the spectacular government-media propaganda campaign that frightened much of the population, there would have been be much more opposition.

We should not underestimate the significance of this change in public attitudes. Protest against the wars in Indochina was slow in developing, but once it began, as part of much more wide-ranging activism, it had substantial effects. By 1968, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were unwilling to send more troops to Vietnam because they feared they would need them for control of the population in the United States. The Reagan administration at first adopted the Kennedy model for the ‘war on terror’ it declared in Central America, but drew back as a result of unanticipated popular protest, and turned instead to ‘clandestine terror’ – meaning that the American population is kept in the dark, though everyone else knows. A leaked document of the first Bush Administration in 1989 described how the U.S. would have to fight wars in the future. It said that in conflicts with ‘much weaker enemies’ – the only kind it is sensible to fight – US military forces must ‘defeat them decisively and rapidly’ or popular support will erode. It is no longer like the 1960s, when a war could be fought for years with no opposition at all. The government knows that it cannot carry out long-term aggression and destruction as in Vietnam because the population will not tolerate it. The doctrinal system has invented a ‘Vietnam syndrome’, based on fear of casualties, but that is just a device to conceal the real reasons, which are doctrinally unacceptable: far less public tolerance for aggression and violence.

The anti-war movement’s agenda now should be to work to ensure that Iraq is run by Iraqis who are genuinely representative and independent, and that the US and Britain provide massive reparations for what they have done to Iraq for 20 years (by supporting Saddam Hussein, by two wars, and by brutal sanctions which probably caused a great deal more damage and deaths than the wars); and if that is too much to expect, then at least massive aid, to be used by Iraqis, as they decide, aid which will be something other than US taxpayer subsidies to Halliburton and Bechtel. Also high on the agenda must be ending the extremely dangerous policies announced in the National Security Strategy, and carried out in the ‘petri dish’. And related to that, there should be serious efforts to block
the bonanza of arms sales that is happily anticipated as a consequence of the war, which will also contribute to making the world a more awful and dangerous place. But that’s only the beginning. The anti-war movement is indissolubly linked to the global justice movements, which, properly, have much more far-reaching goals.

NOTES

7 In Al-Ahram Weekly, 3–9 April, 2003.
10 Address by President Bush in Cincinnati, October 7 2002.
14 See, among others, articles in the two leading foreign policy journals, Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy; an unusual study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, War in Iraq; Kenneth Waltz in Ken Booth and Tim Dunne, eds., World in Collision, London: Palgrave, 2002; and the Hart-Rudman Commission report on terrorist threats to the United States.