

Reflections On The War In Iraq: Past Lessons, Future Prospects And Present Commitments

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One year ago today the Bush administration launched the invasion and occupation of Iraq. On the occasion of this first anniversary of the current war in Iraq, I ask that we pause and reflect on the past, future and present concerning this tragic event. I ask that, with regard to this illegal and unnecessary war, we consider what lessons we may draw from the recent past, what prospects we can envision for the near future, and what commitments we must make in the present.

My ordering of past, future and present may seem a bit strange, but here I am drawing on the French philosopher August Comte who offered the following insight:

The chronological order of historic epochs is not their philosophical order. In place of saying: the past, the present and the future, we should say the past, the future and the present. In truth it is only when we have conceived the future by aid of the past that we can with advantage revert to the present so as to seize its true character.

Past Lessons

As we look back on the Bush administration's march to war it is important to emphasize that the goal of invading and occupying Iraq grew out of what our good friend Professor Gary Dorrien, in a soon to be published book, calls the "imperial designs" of a group of neoconservative policymakers and intellectuals. Dorrien argues that when the Soviet Union collapsed and the cold war ended, these neoconservatives saw an opportunity to create an American-dominated world order. It was often called the unipolarist imperative. While many of us saw the end of the cold war as an opportunity to reduce military spending and realize a "peace dividend," the neoconservatives called for an expansion of American military power and an aggressive unilateralism in foreign policy that could then be used to create a new Pax Americana.

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The first attempt to spell out the unipolarist imperative came during the first Bush administration in a 1992 Defense Planning Guidance document prepared by two prominent neocons, Paul Wolfowitz and I. Lewis Libby. The diplomatic realists in the elder Bush's administration rejected the militaristic unilateralism contained in this document and it was toned down. Then when Bill Clinton was elected president, Wolfowitz, Libby and the other neoconservatives found themselves out of power. They regrouped in a variety of right-wing think tanks in an effort to influence the shape of US foreign and military policies. The most important of these think tanks was the Project for the New American Century (PNAC). The members of PNAC wrote a letter to President Clinton in 1998 urging him to invade Iraq and depose Saddam Hussein. In early 2000, PNAC issued a report entitled "Rebuilding America's Defenses." As William Hartung

has observed, this report was “a neo-imperial call for an expanded American security perimeter that would be capable of multiple constabulary missions aimed at preserving a Pax Americana based on a drive to secure and expand zones of democratic peace, deter the rise of a new great power competitor, defend key regions and exploit the transformation of war.”

Two crucial events gave the neoconservatives the opportunity to begin implementing their plan to reshape the world through the use of American power. The first was the selection of George W. Bush as president in 2000. More than 20 neoconservatives won high-ranking positions in the new administration, and the Pentagon and the Vice-President’s office in particular became neocon strongholds. But the unipolarists in the Bush administration were frustrated until September 11, 2001. The PNAC report, “Rebuilding America’s Defenses” had predicted that “the process of transformation is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic or catalyzing event-like a new Pearl Harbor.” The 9-11 attacks presented them with a new Pearl Harbor and a political opportunity to promote their aggressive agenda. As Gary Dorrien notes, “On 9-11, Bush discovered what his presidency was about, and joined his own administration. He turned to the politics of an administration that was already in place.”

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As former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill has recently revealed, the goal of the Bush team from day one was to attack Iraq and oust Saddam Hussein. According to O’Neill, it was all about finding a way to do it. The day after 9-11, some in the administration advocated attacking Iraq immediately in response. However, the eventual decision was to launch a general “war on terrorism” and begin by taking out the Taliban government of Afghanistan that had allowed al Qaeda to operate freely within their country. Once the Taliban government was ousted, Iraq became the next target.

For the neoconservatives, invading Iraq had always been viewed as the first step in implementing their grand geo-political strategy of American global dominance. The invasion and occupation of Iraq would allow the United States to consolidate its power in the strategically significant Middle East and change the political culture of the region. As Gary Dorrien points out:

The war was a species of social engineering. The Bush administration wanted to change the Middle East, creating a pro-American Iraq that gave the United States a direct power base, ensured the oil supply, set off a wave of political reform, gave relief to Israel, and got rid of a thuggish enemy. The visions of a new American power base and the political/cultural transformation of the region were tightly intertwined.

9-11 and the war on terrorism gave the neocons the opportunity they had been seeking to achieve this agenda. Throughout 2002, plans for the war on Iraq were formulated. The PNAC vision of unilateral American military domination was rolled out as a central part of the new National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS). The NSS also

enshrined preemptive war as a right that the US reserved for itself and itself alone. In the new environment after 9-11, as part of the war on terrorism, the US would strike first against any perceived threat.

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The campaign to convince the American people and the Congress to support an unprovoked invasion of Iraq was rolled out in September of 2002 because, as Andrew Card, Bush's Chief of Staff stated, "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce a new product in August." The problem for the Bush PR campaign, however, was that the war could not be marketed as an effort to create a new American power base and reshape the Middle East. The new product of a Pax Americana could not be sold to the American people. Most Americans would not support the squandering of American lives and money to achieve the unipolarist's dream of global domination.

Thus, the Bush administration decided that to sell the war they would have to convince the American people that Saddam Hussein threatened their safety. In the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks and the fear, grief and anger they caused, this was not hard to do. Iraq was alleged to have weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. Saddam Hussein was alleged to have ties to al Qaeda and insinuated to have been involved in the 9-11 attacks. Iraq was alleged to have the intent to harm the US either by attacking us directly or by passing off its weapons to terrorists.

This effort to sell the war on Iraq as a necessary action to protect Americans from further harm can only be described as a massive propaganda campaign. It was a monumentally dishonest effort. Lies and distortions were used at every turn to scare Americans into supporting a policy of preventive war. Intelligence reports were manipulated and cherry-picked. Some "evidence" was outright fabricated. The corporate media fully cooperated in this campaign of deception. The infamously "fair and balanced" Fox News network was a shameless cheerleader for the invasion of Iraq. Few reporters challenged the lies and distortions of the Bush administration or provided any kind of broader historical or political context for people to use in interpreting the propaganda they were being fed. In the post 9-11 America it was deemed unpatriotic to think for your self about foreign policy issues, to ask critical questions, or to do anything except blindly support the president. A cowardly Congress abdicated its constitutional authority to declare war and passed a resolution granting a blank check to President Bush to

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attack Iraq. The United Nations was deemed irrelevant and, after it would not pass a resolution authorizing the war, was ignored.

And yet in the midst of this fear and unrelenting war hysteria a new peace movement was born. Millions of Americans organized the largest and most diverse peace movement this country has ever seen. Here in Kalamazoo we came together to create Kalamazoo

Nonviolent Opponents of War (KNOW). Through a wide variety of actions: vigils, teach-ins, demonstrations, yard signs and much more, we stood up and said no to war! In the end, millions of people around the world rose up to say no to war! After major demonstrations around the world on February 15, 2003 The New York Times observed that now there were two superpowers in the world: the United States and world public opinion.

But despite our great efforts, the war came. In flagrant violation of the UN Charter and other international laws, the Bush administration committed what the Nuremberg Charter calls the “supreme international crime” of aggressive war. Iraq was quickly defeated and occupied. As we predicted, thousands died and thousands more were injured. As we predicted, the occupation was not a cakewalk, but was violent and ugly. As we predicted, Iraq teeters on the brink of civil war. As we predicted, no weapons of mass destruction were found. As we predicted, no ties to al Qaeda were found. As we predicted, Iraq was opened up to Halliburton and other corporate war profiteers. As we predicted, the Bush administration has moved to create a pro-American puppet government in Iraq. As we predicted, the US has moved to construct permanent military bases in Iraq. As we predicted, the invasion and occupation have cost American taxpayers billions of dollars.

As we look back on the events of the past two years, what lessons can be learned? The first lesson is that the Bush administration is the most radical and dangerous government we have ever had. Even though they have experienced some set backs in the occupation of Iraq and have had to trim their sails a bit, the neoconservatives who have hijacked our government still plan to carry out their extremist foreign policy agenda through the cynical

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exploitation of 9-11 and under the cover of their phony war on terrorism.

The second lesson is that the Bush administration is, to an unprecedented extent, willing to lie to the American people in order to carry out this radical geo-political strategy. No administration in history has ever been as fundamentally dishonest as this administration. The magnitude of the deceptions and distortions employed to justify this war is staggering. Over 560 American soldiers and over 10,000 Iraqi civilians have been sent to their death on the basis of a pack of demonstrable lies.

The third lesson is that the corporate media cannot be counted on in general to counter the lies and distortions of the Bush administration. The abject failure of the media to present accurate information to the American people in the buildup to the war, to say nothing of the willingness of many in the media to be used as propaganda tools to sell the war, presents an enormous obstacle to those of us who seek to block the neoconservative agenda and work for peace and justice.

The final lesson to be learned from this short history is that the international peace movement is alive and well. Even if we could not prevent the invasion of Iraq we have

re-established ourselves as a formidable opponent of the militarism and aggressive unilateralism of the neoconservatives in the Bush administration.

Future Prospects

Given these lessons and the actions they portend, what are the prospects for the future concerning Iraq and American foreign policy in general? First, there is the prospect of the continuing US occupation of Iraq, continuing resistance to the occupation, and continuing violence and death in Iraq. Even if the Bush administration can successfully hand over sovereignty to a pro-American Iraqi government by June 30th, US military forces will remain in the country for a long time. In fact, the long-term plan is to construct and operate at least three or four permanent

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military bases in Iraq. The Bush administration went to war to establish a new American power base in the Middle East and it does not plan to leave. If the new Iraqi government cannot attain legitimacy in the eyes of all the contending factions within the country, the prospect of a bloody and disruptive civil war in Iraq cannot be dismissed out of hand.

The second prospect is for more terrorist attacks around the world, including more strikes within the United States itself. The recent train bombing in Spain shows that the war on Iraq has done nothing to deter terrorist attacks by groups like al Qaeda. Prior to the war, many of us pointed out that Iraq had nothing to do with recent terrorist events, particularly 9-11. Furthermore, we argued that attacking Iraq, far from making us safer, would actually provoke more terrorism. That seemed like a logical prediction. If you stick your hand in a hornet's nest you can expect to get stung. The invasion of Iraq, far from changing the political culture of the Middle East, has only intensified Muslim and Arab hatred of the United States. As reporter Robert Fisk argues, our leaders have taken us into an insane conflict. The placement of US troops in the heart of the Middle East constitutes, in the words of Gary Dorrien, a "radioactive presence." As Dorrien points out, "America provoked revulsion throughout the Muslim world as the occupier of Iraq. Ordinary Muslims and Arabs experienced the occupation as an unbearable humiliation, even while expressing relief that Saddam Hussein had been overthrown." It's hard to believe that this radioactive presence won't generate more terrorism against the West and more appalling suffering in the future.

The third prospect is for the US to wage more preventive wars. With the doctrine of preemption enshrined as an official part of the National Security Strategy of the United States, the Bush administration has indicated that it will indeed respond to perceived threats to American vital interests with military force. That was part of the lesson to be imparted by the war in Iraq. Neocons within the Bush administration, as well as those outside it, have variously identified Syria, Iran, North Korea, Libya, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, among others, as targets for regime

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change. Even though the current quagmire in Iraq has cooled some of this rhetoric, we can expect the Bush administration to continue to carry out the policy of preventive war around the world should Bush win re-election.

A fourth prospect is the demise of the United Nations and the collective security system contained in the UN Charter. As the world's sole superpower the United States told the UN that it could either endorse its unprovoked attack on Iraq or it could be irrelevant. In either case, the UN's collective security system would have been seriously damaged. If the United States can continue to violate the UN Charter's Article 2 Section 4 prohibition on the use of force (the highest peremptory norm under international law), what is to stop other nations from adopting the same lawless policy? If the most powerful nations feel that they can wage preventive wars whenever it is their interest to do so, the international legal system that was constructed over the past century will fall apart and the central purpose of the UN, to save future generations from the scourge of war, will be lost, perhaps irretrievably.

The final prospect for the future that can be predicted to flow from the war on Iraq concerns its impact on domestic social problems. We have already squandered \$149 billion on this war. The occupation costs us \$9 billion a month. Congress estimates the overall cost of pacifying and rebuilding Iraq for the next two fiscal years to reach \$200 billion. The military budget is now well over \$400 billion a year and soaring toward \$500 billion. When these expenses are added to the massive tax cuts for the wealthy, which the Bush administration now wants to make permanent, we can expect the current budget deficit of close to \$500 billion to continue to grow. With huge deficits like this, money for social security, education, health care and other types of social investment will be in jeopardy. We will have no ability to respond to any of our domestic social problems. Under these conditions we can expect that the standard of living for the middle class, the working class and the poor will sharply decline.

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Present Commitments

Now that we have conceived the future by aid of the past, we can return to the present to better understand the commitments that we in the peace and justice community must make, and the work that we must do in the coming weeks. We must, of course, commit ourselves to respond to each of the future prospects that have been identified. We must call for an end to the US occupation of Iraq and insist on an international effort, led by the United Nations, to stabilize and re-build that war and sanction ravaged nation. We must insist that the crime of terrorism be responded to by the international community as a whole through the framework of international criminal law and legal institutions. And that furthermore, the international community, led by the United States, must work to identify and eliminate the root causes of terrorism around the world. We must insist that the doctrine of preventive war and the waging of aggressive war be utterly renounced again as it was after World War II by the Nuremberg Charter and the United Nations.

We must work to rebuild the collective security system of the United Nations so that conflicts between nations can be resolved through multilateral negotiations under international law. We must work to reduce the military budget and the power of the military-industrial-congressional complex here at home so that public investments can be made in an effort to solve domestic social problems.

All of these are things we must commit ourselves to do as peace and justice advocates. Through our protests, our educational activities, and our involvement in the political process we must work hard on these critical issues.

We must recognize, however, that none of these issues can be successfully addressed if George W. Bush wins re-election this November. If the recent past is an accurate guide, the future prospects for these critical peace and justice issues will be very bleak indeed unless we commit ourselves in the present to work for the defeat of the Bush administration and the neoconservatives who control our government. As William Hartung has argued “The Bush

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crowd can't be reasoned with. All we can do is take their power away, as quickly and efficiently as possible.” And columnist Robert Scheer adds that, “The lies of this administration concerning Iraq rise to the level of the greatest scandals in American history. Now it is time to clean up the mess and reinvigorate our democracy.”

The coming election is the most important election in our lifetime. Our number one priority from now until November must be the defeat of George W. Bush. Now I know that many of us in this room preferred Dennis Kucinich or Howard Dean for the Democratic nomination, or may favor Ralph Nader in November. But I strongly believe that we must now come together and unite behind the candidacy of John Kerry. Kerry is not perfect, but under a Kerry presidency we at least have a fighting chance to make progress on the issues of greatest concern to us. There is too much at stake in this election to do anything other than to put our heart and soul into the candidacy of John Kerry. A second Bush term would be an absolute nightmare. Bush and the neocons must be removed from office. And we can do it if we dedicate ourselves to the task.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.” Those words should speak to us today. We have urgent tasks ahead. We must continue to educate ourselves and our community concerning the important issues we face. We must join together in local groups like KNOW or The Interfaith Coalition for Peace and Justice to work for social and political change. We must join together with national organizations such as Moveon.org or United for Peace and Justice to achieve greater effectiveness. We must volunteer our time and money to the Kerry campaign. We must register people to vote and help to turn them out to cast their votes on November 2nd. And as William Hartung suggests, “The most important thing in all of this is to find a way to build activism into your daily life, at whatever level you are comfortable with.” Working together, I know

that we can defeat Bush and the neocons and advance the agenda of global peace and justice in our time.

Text of a speech delivered by Dr. Ron Kramer, professor of sociology, Western Michigan University, at the “The World Still Says No To War” rally at the First Presbyterian Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan, March 20, 2004.