

# The American Conservative

## A Litany of Pride

Doug Bandow

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Two decades ago, the worst president in modern U.S. history plunged the country into a foolish and needless war. Thousands of Americans died. Hundreds of thousands of foreigners lost their lives. Trillions of dollars were squandered. Yet few Washington policymakers have learned anything from the experience.

Indeed, some members of the blob, as the foreign policy community is indecorously known, are most worried about the American people opposing new misadventures. Journalist Natalia Antonova sees “defeatism in the words and actions” of those who oppose Washington’s once unstoppable War Party. AEI’s Hal Brands fears “the ‘no more Iraqs’ mindset.”

Washington, D.C., has long been full of people full of themselves—convinced that they saw further into the future than others, had the mandate of heaven to remake the world, and needn’t concern themselves about the human cost of their grand ambitions. The collapse of the Soviet Union unleashed an especially toxic mix of hubris and sanctimony.

In 2001 the neoconservative war lobby found its president, the ideological simpleton George W. Bush, and its moment, the horrific 9/11 terrorist attack—tragic retaliation for years of foreign meddling. Encouraged by modern political Know Nothings, Americans imagined that they were targeted for their virginal innocence. However, people in the Middle East and beyond saw something very different: multiple military interventions, sustained support for dictatorships and occupations, and endless hypocrisies.

Bush plunged the U.S. into a misguided military crusade and nation-building campaign, justified by lies and designed by fantasists. The president’s minions advanced their convenient falsehoods even though abundant contradictory evidence circulated within the administration. Factotums and pundits alike believed what they wanted to believe, unconcerned with the consequences. Even today, few war advocates acknowledge error let alone express regret for the catastrophic consequences of their policy.

Republicans were the woke warriors of their time, seeking to silence anyone who questioned their Great Leader in Washington. When challenged over sources and evidence, members of the

war party responded with vitriol and bile. To oppose aggressive war meant one was an idiot, traitor, or both. To oppose an illegal invasion meant one was pro-Saddam Hussein. To oppose a preventive war against a phantom power meant one was unconcerned that the smoking gun might yield a mushroom cloud.

Amid the tsunami of neocon misinformation, conservative betrayal, and Republican opportunism, the mid-2000s were a bleak time to be a dissenter. A once friendly newspaper essentially stopped running my articles, even on other subjects; online conservative publications lost interest in my submissions, despite claiming to be open to all; one site retrospectively purged my anti-war columns from its archives. Within my own organization a senior staffer in another department advocated war on a nominally libertarian website. *The American Conservative* was one of the few publications to stand on principle, despite the resulting torrent of insults and obloquy.

Of course, Iraq was not the Bush administration's only misadventure. Dubya also imagined that Afghanistan could be turned into a liberal democracy, a shining city on a Central Asian hill. Instead of making a deal with the demoralized, defeated Taliban, the faux warrior president left American troops in Afghanistan, fighting to turn that ancient land half a world away into a U.S. client and military base. This effort, too, came to a calamitous end. There, as in Iraq, other people paid the highest price for Washington's arrogance and incompetence.

The consequences of the Iraq debacle have been many and ghastly. The first was to *wreck Iraq and the region*. The country was looted, occupied, then turned over to sectarian rule. Corruption and incompetence dominated, as the Shia majority regime, in league with neighboring Iran, also with a Shia majority, exacted revenge on the formerly ruling Sunnis. This further fueled civil war as many of the latter supported Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which morphed into the Islamic State, or ISIS.

The latter swept Iraqi forces from Mosul, Iraq's second most populous city, and much of the surrounding Nineveh Plain, launched genocidal attacks on religious minorities, and advanced on Kurdistan, until then largely secure from the conflagration elsewhere. ISIS also spread to Syria, occupying much of the country amid a horrific civil war. Only with great effort, as well as U.S. and Iranian support, did the Baghdad government recover control of its territory.

Second, when all the accounts are finally settled, Dubya's disaster on the Euphrates will likely *have consumed nearly \$3.2 trillion*. Even in Washington, that is real money. Imagine the good that could have been achieved by spending, investing, or saving so much. Devoting it to almost any purpose other than the Iraq conflict would have been better.

What did the American people get for their money? A bloody civil war that, two decades later, has yielded a state rated "not free" by Freedom House: "democratic governance is impeded in practice by corruption, militias operating outside the bounds of the law, and the weakness of formal institutions."

Third, Washington's wannabe global social engineers are *responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths*. There were nearly 8,300 U.S. military personnel and contractors killed, with many

lives thankfully reduced by quality medical care. However, more than 30,000 U.S. military members were wounded in Iraq, many grievously. A similar number, who fought in both Iraq and Afghanistan, suffer from PTSD. Casualties should include those who later took their own lives, also around 30,000 of those who served in the two conflicts, an astonishing and horrifying toll.

Then there are the lives of other security personnel—323 allied service members, and close to 50,000 Iraqis, dragged along by America on the much deadlier than expected ride. Finally, the Iraq Body Count (IBC) documented some 200,000 civilian lives lost. Yet the brutal sectarian strife yielded a multitude of unrecovered and unreported dead. The IBC figured that doubling its official number would be closer to the real total. Respected, though controverted, surveys figure the number of dead in the hundreds of thousands and perhaps even more than a million. Many more Iraqis were injured, and an estimated third of the population, 9.2 million people, were displaced at some point, with more than two million driven overseas. The numbers are shocking, a special outrage for an aggressive war based on falsehoods that failed to fulfill its objective and left behind a sometime failing state.

Fourth, Washington's destruction of Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime *removed a significant constraint* on the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hussein's ouster allowed Tehran to directly intervene in Iraqi politics and empower autonomous paramilitary forces, which Baghdad is still struggling to control. Having removed an important barrier to Iranian regional influence, three subsequent U.S. administrations battled to contain Tehran. After the Trump administration junked the nuclear deal, Iran expanded its nuclear activities, approaching the status of a nuclear threshold state. Washington's blundering approach to Tehran, which lost ground with an Iranian public whose young leaned West, was almost as stupid as the decision to invade Iraq.

Fifth, the Bush administration's illegal and murderous aggression *became the gift that kept on giving*. Important U.S. allies, including France and Germany, refused to back Washington's war. In America's invasion of Iraq, along with NATO's unprovoked attack on Yugoslavia and intervention in Libya, Russia's Vladimir Putin saw evidence of Washington's aggressive intentions. At the 2007 Munich Security conference he declared, all too accurately: "Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force—military force—in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts." Today the Global South is reluctant to line up behind the U.S. and Europe against Russia. Developing states see Iraq as evidence of the West's readiness to sacrifice them whenever convenient.

Sixth, the Iraq invasion *highlighted Washington's almost unique carelessness and callousness*. The willingness to wreck other nations and ravage other societies to advance purported U.S. interests was evident in Vietnam, in which foreign peoples were killed in the millions. At least Washington could point to a communist threat, though the cure ultimately proved more deadly than the disease.

Iraq became a Washington fixation for multiple administrations. When then-United Nations ambassador Madeleine Albright was asked about the sanctions-induced deaths of a half million Iraqi children, she replied coldly: "we think the price is worth it." That judgment was repeated when the Bush administration went to war in Iraq.

Alas, Washington demonstrated a similar indifference about casualties elsewhere. Wrote Baktash Ahadi, a combat interpreter for America: “U.S. forces turned villages into battlegrounds, pulverizing mud homes and destroying livelihoods. One could almost hear the Taliban laughing as any sympathy for the West evaporated in bursts of gunfire.” Washington promoted regime change in Libya, yielding a costly decade of on-and-off civil war, which still has not concluded. And three administrations backed Saudi Arabia’s murderous attack on its impoverished neighbor Yemen to reinstate a puppet regime, an effort now in its eighth year that also has cost hundreds of thousands of civilian lives.

Seventh, the war *further deformed the American political system*. Demagoguery determines policy, presidents subvert congressional responsibilities, activists put party above country, and elections reward incompetence and deceit. Instead of more closely policing executive war-making, Congress ran from its constitutional duties, allowing successive presidents to make war at will.

Finally, the disastrous denouement demonstrated that in the U.S. virtually *no one is held accountable even for the most calamitous government failure*. Who among those who misled Americans, railroaded Congress, destroyed Iraq, empowered Iran, wasted wealth, and unleashed death paid the slightest price? Whose career suffered? Who endured personal shame? Most of the war’s proponents remain unrepentant yet respected, busy fantasizing about new interventions.

Two decades ago a reckless, politically-ambitious administration lied America into war. We, and even more, the rest of the world, continue to pay for that atrocity of a war. The lives lost and money squandered cannot be recovered. However, there is still time to hold policymakers responsible for their actions, which would finally provide a measure of justice and closure.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.*