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Iraq War At 20: Have U.S. Elites Learned Anything?

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As we [mark](#) the [twentieth anniversary](#) of one of the [most disastrous](#) wars in U.S. history, America's foreign policy elite have learned surprisingly few worthwhile lessons. What lessons they have learned seem to be the smaller and less important ones. In that sense, the aftermath of the Iraq War has replicated the Vietnam War's unfortunately limited and temporary beneficial impact on America's foreign policy perspective.

One frustrated colleague observed to me as he witnessed the onset of Washington's regime-change wars and its nation-building ventures in the 1990s and early 2000s that the lesson most Americans seemed to have taken away from the Vietnam debacle was, "Don't fight a war in a country called Vietnam."

Much is the case again as most of the bigger, more fundamental lessons from [Washington's failed crusade](#) on the Euphrates [have gone unheeded](#). Indeed, there are still a few dead-enders who insist that, despite all evidence to the contrary, the Iraq War actually was both justified at the time and [a success](#) in retrospect.

John Bolton [states bluntly](#) that, "The reasons to invade were clear and compelling: Saddam directly threatened U.S. security by pursuing WMD and supporting terrorism."

He adds that this "was well understood and endorsed across America, which is why congressional and public support for the invasion was overwhelming. Indeed, in hindsight, Saddam should have been removed in 1991 after his unprovoked aggression against Kuwait." The turbulent aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion, "for good or ill, cannot detract from the logic, fundamental necessity, and success of overthrowing Saddam." From Bolton's perspective, the two biggest mistakes were Barack Obama's decision to withdraw U.S. troops in 2011, and Washington's timidity in not following up Bush's supposed success in Iraq by conducting a regime-change war in Iran.

However, even some of the hawks who pushed the United States to launch its invasion and occupation have tempered their views. The most celebrated recent shift has come [from Max Boot](#) in a March 10, 2023 article in *Foreign Affairs*. "The neoconservative position — which eventually triumphed in the [George W. Bush administration](#) — was that the United States could not simply topple the old regimes and leave chaos in their wake," Boot wrote. "The Americans had to stay and work with local allies to build democratic showcases that could inspire liberal change in the Middle East. In this way, Washington could finally lance the boil of militant Islamism."

Boot concedes, though, that “regime change obviously did not work out as intended. The occupations of [Afghanistan](#) and Iraq were, in fact, fiascos that exacted a high price in both blood and treasure, for both the United States and—even more, of course—the countries it invaded. As the saying goes, when the facts change, I change my mind.” But not too much. Boot is an enthusiastic supporter of the current U.S. proxy war using Ukraine to bloody and weaken Russia. He seems oblivious to the danger that Washington’s current crusade threatens to create even more chaos in the international system than the Iraq War produced.

Although at least some members of the West’s policy elite now grudgingly concede that their regime-change wars and nation-building experiments did not fare well, they still understate the damaging effects. The multi-trillion-dollar expense of the Iraq War alone has weakened the U.S. economy and inhibited the urgent modernizing of America’s aging infrastructure. Almost any alternative expenditure or tax saving would have been far preferable to wasting that money in trying to bring a democratic revolution to the Middle East.

The Iraq War not only created instability in Iraq, leading to the rise of the Islamic State, but the contagion spread to other portions of the Middle East, especially neighboring Syria where a civil war continues to rage. Such destabilizing waves have produced adverse impacts that are not always obvious. For example, the massive refugee flows from Washington’s regime-change crusades have [led to worrisome political tensions](#) and the rise of extreme nationalist movements in several European countries.

Launching the Iraq War in blatant violation of international law also fatally weakened America’s claim to moral leadership. That point has become glaringly evident with the obstacles that the United States and its NATO allies have encountered in trying to enlist the rest of the world to support a coercive policy toward Russia because of the Kremlin’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Governments throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America [have spurned that effort](#). A key reason for their resistance has been the sense that Washington is being monumentally hypocritical in condemning Russia’s aggression, given the West’s own actions in Iraq and elsewhere.

The most important, unlearned lesson from the Iraq War is the need for greater humility in America’s conduct toward the rest of the world. Ironically, it was George W. Bush who explicitly articulated the case for that change in [a March 1999 address](#). He was correct that a more humble U.S. foreign policy was needed. Unfortunately he did not practice what he preached once he became president.

Instead, Bush and his successors continue to epitomize the arrogance that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright [expressed](#): “We are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.”

It is that arrogance that produced the Iraq War and Washington’s other military misadventures. Until U.S. leaders finally comprehend the inevitable, toxic effects of that mentality, the United States will sink ever deeper into the quagmire of Iraq-style follies.

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