

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## Who Failed to Stop the Iraq War?

By: Christopher Preble – March 19, 2013

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With thanks to Mark Thompson at *Time's* Battleland for calling this to my attention, the discussion March 17 on *CNN's "Reliable Sources"* concerning the decision to invade Iraq was more interesting than the others that I've seen or read.

Host Howard Kurtz noted that editors at the *New York Times* had admitted to having "printed too many credulous claims about Saddam and Iraq." Kurtz explained that Len Downie, then the editor of the *Washington Post*, had admitted "he had made a mistake of not putting more skeptical stories on the front page. Even the people who ran the news organizations seem to acknowledge that they had fallen short." Given all this, Kurtz asked the panelists, "Didn't most of the media...get rolled by the Bush administration during this run-up to war?"

The panel, which included Thompson, and Fred Francis, formerly with NBC, explained why the press got the story wrong: Saddam fooled a lot of people, including his own people and his neighbors. He fooled many people in the U.S. government, too.

But the *Washington Post's* Rajiv Chandrasekaran properly looked past the distractions of phony Iraqi connections to 9/11 and Iraq's nonexistent nuclear weapons. Chandrasekaran agreed with Kurtz that "there was far more that we all could have done. You could go to Iraq. I was in Iraq for the bulk of the six months leading up to the war. What you couldn't really do is get an independent assessment of what Saddam really had."

But, he continued:

"it wasn't just the issue of weapons of mass destruction. It was the broader questions. What is the political transition plan? Truth squadding the White House's claims that Iraq could pay for it, the reconstruction of its country, the questions of the long simmering tensions between the principal religious and ethnic groups in the country. These were questions that were all easily reportable. They should have had more coverage. We didn't do enough in really aggressively looking at all of that."

Chandrasekaran is right. The greatest argument against launching a war to overthrow Saddam Hussein was what would come after him. The advocates for the war hyped the threat of Saddam's weapons, and what he would do with them, to build a case for the benefits that would obtain from the war. We now know that they exaggerated these benefits because Saddam didn't have nuclear weapons. But the claim that Saddam would use the weapons, or give them to terrorists, was also dubious, and was noted as such at the time (and well before) by some of the leading opponents of the war.

But the war hawks also downplayed the costs of invading Iraq by claiming that there would be no need for a long-term U.S. troop presence, and certainly not as large as Army leaders had estimated. They dismissed the overwhelming evidence that Iraq was beset by ethnic and sectarian divisions. Bill Kristol famously dismissed the notion that "somehow the Shia can't get along with the Sunni" as so much "pop sociology." I suspect that they were aware of these divisions, because it would have been far harder to convince the American people to support a conflict if they knew that it was going to be long and costly, instead of the "cakewalk" that the war's supporters claimed.

I cannot prove the war hawks knew the truth about Iraq and concealed it. I'm certain that they should have known. But they weren't trying to stop a war; they were trying to start one.

And that is why those who should have known better and did not speak up, or who lent their credibility as experts to the side making the case for war, deserve special scorn on the 10-year anniversary of the start of the Iraq war. They failed to stop the war. The news media's coverage was inadequate and lazy. In retrospect they should have paid more attention to the vocal few who raised serious objections. But reporters cannot be blamed for not finding experts who did not speak publicly. Or at all.

That is where Colin Powell comes in. He is likely to be remembered for his crucial role in making the case for war at the United Nations on February 5, 2003. But Powell should also be remembered for his words of caution six months earlier, in August 2002.

It is known today as the Pottery Barn principle -- "If you break it, you own it." But what Powell actually said reflects a deep appreciation for the folly of regime change and preventive war: "You are going to be the proud owner of twenty-five million people," Powell warned the president. "You will own all their hopes, aspirations, problems... . It's going to suck the oxygen out of everything."

We know about this exchange from Bob Woodward, and Powell was probably the veteran reporter's source, so the words could be dismissed as self-serving, or simply invented after the fact. But they shouldn't be. Because what Powell allegedly said to Bush then could just as easily have been said by Condoleezza Rice in 2007 with respect to war with Iran, or by Hillary Clinton in 2011 regarding Bashar al-Assad in Syria, or by John Kerry in response to North Korea's latest antics today. And even if Powell never said them, the sentiment is spot on. I only wish he had said them in public.

Whenever reporters, scholars, academics -- or anyone in the public at large, for that matter -- hears someone making the case for preventive war, the Pottery Barn principle, Powell's unspoken warning from a war that never should have happened, should be burned in their brain. I think that it is. And that explains why Bill Kristol's modern-day Project for a New American Century has proved far less effective than its predecessor.

I sincerely wish that we didn't have to suffer the loss of blood and treasure, the thousands of American dead, and tens of thousands wounded, to learn these lessons. But I especially hope that we're not already forgetting them.