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Bush case for Iraq war: Does it matter if it was an honest mistake?

Karl Rove says President Bush really believed Iraq had WMDs. But that doesn't excuse an action that endangered the lives of thousands.

By Stanley Kober

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Washington —

What if former President Bush did not lie about the case for war in Iraq, but made an honest mistake, one that was made by many others?

That's the argument Karl Rove, one of his closest aides, is making in his new book, "Courage and Consequence." He claims that the president truly believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

But even if true, this argument is not exculpatory.

Since when has honesty been an excuse for starting a war under erroneous assumptions? In what other profession would such an argument be made and taken seriously?

Imagine a medical doctor who diagnosed cancer in a limb and amputated – only to have a biopsy reveal there was no cancer. If the doctor then insisted it was an honest mistake, would such an explanation be accepted with no further action taken, or would the doctor come under professional scrutiny for incompetence?

If that is the level of accountability we expect from medical professionals if they endanger the life of a single individual, should we not hold our highest political leaders to the same standard when they propose war – an action that endangers the lives of many thousands?

Mr. Bush's decision to initiate the war was not the only government error that endangered lives. In his recent testimony before the Chilcot commission, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair admitted that both the US and British governments had planned for a potential humanitarian crisis – which did not occur – but failed to foresee the role that Al Qaeda and Iran would play in postwar Iraq.

Yet the rationale for the invasion of Iraq was the result of a threat assessment directly correlated to the terrorist attack of 9/11 – which was undertaken by Al Qaeda. So the response was to raise the threat profile of Iraq, but to ignore Al Qaeda?

Al Qaeda had attacked in Africa and Yemen, it had gone all the way to the United States, but it never crossed the minds of Washington policymakers that it would go to Iraq?

Can Mr. Blair be serious? Is this the care a responsible leader shows before sending troops off to war?

In concluding his testimony, Blair accepted responsibility for the decision to go to war. But what obligations does such responsibility entail?

The philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated what he called the "categorical imperative" to guide moral behavior: "I ought never to act in such a way that I couldn't also will that the maxim on which I act should be a universal law." In other words, our actions should be guided by the following question: What would the world look like if everyone acted the same way I do?

Blair has been an advocate of liberal interventionism, yet he never joined the armed forces himself. He is not alone in this; many of those who favor interventionism, liberal or otherwise, never joined the armed forces.

That does not deprive him of the right to favor the use of military force, if he thinks it necessary. But it does raise a fundamental question:

Why expect others to show the courage of your convictions if you do not demonstrate them?

The ethics have a practical implication. Let us apply Kant's rule and assume that everybody believes in interventionism, so long as someone else does the fighting.

What would be the result? We would be involved in a number of wars, which would not go well because of insufficient resources to fight them.

Britain and the US now find themselves in this situation. And astonishingly, rather than learning from this experience, Blair seems to think another war – against Iran – might be advisable.

To be sure, the soldiers will obey their orders. But how much can we ask of them, especially if we do not ask it of ourselves?

"Every time [Blair] was asked about his reasons for going to war, he said it was all about the people in Iraq," complained Sarah Chapman, whose brother was killed in Iraq, according to one British newspaper. "He showed a complete inability to acknowledge the sacrifice that has been made on the part of the armed forces in this country."

Her anguish speaks for itself. "Responsibility" must be more than a word, ritually invoked and then forgotten. In a democracy, especially, it must have meaning. Democracy is based on accountability. If we do not hold our leaders accountable for errors, we weaken the fabric of democracy.

And nowhere is that accountability more necessary than with the decision to go to war.

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