

Impacts of the 2003 iraq war



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The impact of the 2003 Iraq war on both the “ war on terror” and the prospects for peace in the Middle East

Introduction

The reasons for the U. S. led war in Iraq in 2003 were numerous and, as it turns out, rather complicated. But, for better or worse, the U. S. led coalition of nations invaded Iraq with “ shock and awe” in 2003. This war in Iraq was conducted under the banner of “ the war on terror.” This second U. S. led military endeavor into Iraq had a twofold mission, which was combative and aggressive on the one hand, and more conciliatory and democratizing on the other. These were the original intentions. The questions to be explored in this paper revolve around these dual aspects of the 2003 Iraq war. How has it affected the overall and global “ war on terror,” and has it achieved a measure of peace and stability in the Middle East?

From the beginning of the recent U. S. led war efforts in Iraq, there has been a twofold mission announced by President George W. Bush. The first mission is centered in the war against all terrorists and those who harbor terrorist organizations. ^[1] The second has been the desire to plant the seed of democracy in the Middle East; a desire which the President hoped might flourish into an eventual, lasting peace. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush said, “ We seek a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror.” ^[2] In this line, his commitment to a war against terror is evident, but so is his desire to help bring about a peaceful world. The very name of the military offensive dubbed by the Bush Administration was “ Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

A “ Just War” and the Necessity of Peace

In all recent discussions of Just War theories, scholarship is united at least in the aspect of the theory that involves the attempt at peace following the war. That is, no war can be considered “ just” if the winner merely walks away from the loser of a given war without any attempt to bring about a measure of stability, security, and peace. Much of this reasoning has to do with the ideas bound up within the just-war tradition. There are many scholars, secular, Catholic, and otherwise, writing within this tradition, as it pertains to the 2003 Iraq war. As George Weigel notes in a recent essay, in the writings of contemporary scholars in this tradition (e. g., James Turner Johnson and Michael Walzer), one encounters the essence of an approach to war that is commensurate with the U. S. President’s intentions expressed above.

To engage in a war justly is not only to fight those forces of evil that seek to dominate or corrupt one’s society, nor is it merely about how nations ought to engage in warfare. Although those are considerations brought to bear on just-war theorizing, the fundamental underpinning of this approach to thinking about war “ is ultimately about the peace we seek to establish in contrast to the war the terrorists have set in motion.” ^[3] That is, the overarching goal in all wars (including the war on terror) should be the eventual achievement, not merely of removing immediate threats to national security or of pacification of an enemy, of using war as an instrument to establish peace in a land. Peace brings prosperity, whereas continual war and factionalism never bring about progress or prosperity – only suffering which seems endless to those affected by it.

The Successes, Trials and Tribulations of the War

Perhaps because we are still so near the beginning of the war and because the operation continues to this moment, it is difficult to gauge the relative success of the war efforts themselves and as regards the broader “war on terror.” In fact, the situation today is still the reality that the success or failure of the war depends largely on who you ask. The war effort has been a politically polarizing issue, which has certainly affected the press, as well as the scholarly community. A simple survey of the books on the shelves to the articles and essays within journals will reveal this truth. It is therefore somewhat difficult to get a proper understanding of exactly what the ramifications of the 2003 Iraq war may be for the broader war on terror, but there is at least some consensus in a few areas useful for exploration in this regard.

There are those who, like Charles Hill, can find little more than wide-reaching success in the current war efforts. He writes, “Iraq is moving toward the full legitimacy that Saddam Hussein stole from the Iraqi people. Sovereignty has been restored, free elections have been held, and a constitution has been approved.”^[4] The press and other scholars have, on the other hand, not been so friendly in their detractions and perceptions of the war efforts. The “Reviews & Responses” section of recent editions of the journal *Foreign Affairs* have been filled with review essays of books very critical of the war.^[5] Sometimes the reviews are sympathetic; often times they are not. All of this is supportive of the difficult task ahead of scholars regarding the effort to separate the hubris from the reality of what implications the 2003 Iraq war may have for peace and the larger war on terror. There is no denying the

success of disposing of the Taliban in Afghanistan and of Saddam Hussein and his regime in Iraq. This success was decisive, dramatic, and, in the words of Victor Davis Hanson, “audacious.”^[6] Both of these regimes were legitimately argued to have been the most oppressive and potentially dangerous in the region. This is perhaps one of the most compelling reasons adhered to by most Americans originally supporting both war efforts. The question on the minds of most in the scholarly community is whether there was adequate planning for the immediate post-war environment.^[7]

However, even for those who were very supportive of the initial decision to invade Iraq, recent events over the last year at least, have been sobering. In an article written for the April edition of the journal *First Things*, George Weigel identifies four distinct wars that have constituted the entire Iraq war since 2003. The first war was the obvious one of deposing Saddam Hussein and creating conditions for the responsible establishment of an interim government and relative stability. This war was concluded quickly and successfully, most all scholars agree. The second war erupted shortly after the first had ended, and this one was against the Baathist loyalists and recalcitrants. The third war broke out as Jihadists (i. e., “al-Qaeda in Iraq”) began to flood into Iraq through the under-watched and unprotected borders and tried to disrupt the democracy being established there as well as drive out the “infidels” from the Gulf. The fourth, and perhaps most dangerous today, is the practical civil war that broke out in earnest between Sunnis insurgents and Shia militias after the bombing of a major Shia shrine in February, 2006. Weigel argues that only the first of these four wars has ended. The other three continue to this day and overlap each other.^[8] Is it

possible that the U. S. led coalition could have anticipated these mini-wars which followed the success of the first? Is it likely that the coalition did all it could to establish a peaceful, post-war environment?

Reconstruction Challenges

One of the sharpest criticisms of the 2003 Iraq war, even by those who originally supported it, is that there was not enough planning in terms of rebuilding the nation after the decisive defeat of the Iraqi military. First, by any reasonable standards, the amount committed to the reconstruction of Iraq after the war was not nearly enough. In hindsight, all seem to recognize this. Though the intentions of the Bush Administration were admirable in that they sought the just-war approach, which was to replace the dangerous regime with democracy, freedom, and a re-built nation, the reality was that through the combination of inadequate funds and bloated bureaucracy, the U. S. did not adequately anticipate what would realistically be needed to bring their intentions about. ^[9] George Weigel points out that only \$2.5 billion had been originally budgeted for reconstruction assistance, and this was far away from the actual amount needed, given the dilapidated state of the nation due to Saddam's misrule and a decade of U. N. sanctions. ^[10]

Peace through Civil War?

The war created what most analysts have agreed to be a political vacuum. Once the rule of Saddam Hussein was done away with, there was not a quick enough turnaround time for a new and, perhaps most importantly, *legitimized* ruling government. The largest looming danger now is the risk of civil war in Iraq, which will almost certainly follow from the near-future

withdrawal of U. S. forces from the country, as most scholars agree. “

Especially if the United States withdraws from Iraq, the odds are good that a military coup in which some subset of the Iraqi army leadership declares that the elected government is not working and that a strong hand is necessary to impose order will result.”^[11] As alluded to above, the civil war began to erupt after the bombing of the Shia holy site in February, 2006. At this point, it seems that the Sunni minority in Iraq, which has been a constant trouble from nearly the beginning, is only exacerbating its violence against the Shia to the south. Under the self-styled leadership of Muqtada al-Sadr, the various Shia militia forces have engaged in gross acts of terror in return.^[12]

Conclusion

In a recent article, Victor Davis Hanson takes a realistic approach to the successes in Iraq. They cannot be underplayed, nor devalued. The overturning of the Iraqi regime, which was the main goal of the war, was achieved and likely the world is better for it. On the other hand, in retrospect the post-war aftermath was not fully appreciated until it was far too late. Three separate wars therefore erupted, and the most significant (the civil war) looms on the not-too-distant horizon. The prospects for peace are still available to the Middle East but only with properly calculated U. S. led coalition strategy for the future. If nothing else, the various shortcomings of the recent war will hopefully serve as a corrective and impetus to future successes in the war on terror. Successes have occurred, to be sure, but so have enormous challenges to peace, world-wide.

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[1] These commitments are very readily found in his 2002, 2003 and 2004 "State of the Union" addresses, as well as in his "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," given on September 20, 2001. All of these speeches are available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

[2] It would seem that there are few who disagree with the President's intentions in this regard. Renowned Middle East scholar, Bernard Lewis has long argued that the war on terror and the search for freedom are bound up the one with the other. The two must exist side by side and cannot exist one without the other. NYU law professor Noah Feldman argues that "the most defensible account of our nation-building policies in Iraq 2003-4, and the standard to which future U. S. efforts should be held, is the production of a basically legitimate, functioning democracy there." *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 20.

[3] George Weigel, "Just War and Iraq Wars," *First Things*, April, 2007, no. 172, p. 14. Weigel is here quoting James Turner Johnson.

[4] Charles Hill, “ The Rogues are Losing: Why the Rogues of the Middle East Have a Very Short Future,” *Hoover Digest*. 2005, no. 4, p. 68. In this same essay, he goes on to point out the various ramifications of the initial stages of success of the Iraq war: Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Lebanon all having positive moves and reactions to the strength of the initial war in 2003. Libya’s decision to give up its arsenal is probably the most dramatic ramification of the initial successes of the war that supporters can point to, as Hill does in his essay.

[5] The January/February 2006 edition of *Foreign Affairs* is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Every single review essay of that edition deals with the Iraq war.

[6] “ Five Years On.” *Hoover Digest*, 2006, no. 4, p. 84. Regarding the progress wrought by the Iraq war, Hanson writes, “ thousands of terrorists killed, Al Qaeda scattered, Europe galvanized about Islamism and sobered about the consequences of its cheap anti-U. S. rhetoric, Iran’s nuclear antics revealed, democracy birthed in the Middle East, Palestinian radicals exposed for their fraud, the United Nations under overdue scrutiny, America much better defended at home” came largely as a result of the war on terror, beginning with Afghanistan and culminating in Iraq. There is much significant impact there to be pondered.

[7] Victor Davis Hanson, “ Hard Pounding,” *Hoover Digest*, 2006, no. 3, pp. 14-15.

[8] Weigel, “ Just War and Iraq Wars,” p. 15. Frederick W. Kagan agrees with this assessment of the various wars being fought in Iraq, although he believes that Weigel’s second war largely ended with the capture of Saddam Hussein. Cf. “ Iraq is Not Vietnam,” *Policy Review*, Dec, 2005 & Jan, 2006, no. 134, p. 6.

[9] Although, to be fair, it should be pointed out that former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, did anticipate that the cost of military operations and rebuilding efforts would amount to \$3.9 billion per month in 2003. Cf. John Yoo, *The Powers of War and Peace: The Constitution and Foreign Affairs after 9/11* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 157.

[10] Weigel, p. 17.

[11] James D. Fearon, “ Iraq’s Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs*, Mar/Apr, 2007, vol. 86, no. 2, p. 6. For concurring opinions see Larry Diamond, “ The Pressure Builds,” *Hoover Digest*, 2006, no. 3, p. 29 and Weigel, p. 19.

[12] Diamond, “ The Pressure Builds,” pp. 26-8.