

Recovering Memory

This is a reflection on all the shifting rationalizations that were given for our invasion of Iraq. Since my brief visit to Iraq just before the war, I paid lots of attention to those rationalizations, and I was astonished at how quickly they changed. The article was written in March of 2005.

Reflect with me a little on the justifications that have been offered for the conflict with Iraq. Too often, I fear, we rush from one issue to the next, trying to parse the meaning of current events, but we rarely pause to “connect the dots.” And current events simply cannot be understood without paying attention to history, to memory. American foreign policy in Latin America during the 1970s and 80s is a good example. Look at any particular action of ours, and perhaps you can justify it. Take them as a whole and they become a depressingly coherent: illegal invasions, assisted coups overthrowing democratically elected leaders, support for brutal dictators, official lies, and defiance of the UN and the international community.

With that in mind, let’s try to remember the serial justifications our government has offered for the war in Iraq.

They morphed or slid uncomfortably into one another as events dictated. None has stood the test of time. All will be familiar to most of you, but it’s instructive to put them next to one another.

1. Sanctions:

Immediately after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in January 1990, in an effort to force its withdrawal yet avoid war, the United Nations imposed economic sanctions, officially blocking all Iraqi trade with any other member nation. (This was widely supported as a humanitarian response to an egregious violation of international norms.) Ultimately, the sanctions were declared a failure, however, and under a UN resolution “coalition forces” attacked.

Iraq quickly withdrew from Kuwait in defeat, but the sanctions were continued even as their justification changed to forcing Iraq to “destroy weapons of mass destruction” (WMD). I put the

phrase in quotes because Iraq was never given a list of specific, concrete actions that, if performed, would lift the sanctions. It was always: “Allow inspectors into the country, give us this documentation, cooperate more with the inspectors ... and we’ll see.”

Originally meant only as a temporary measure, the sanctions were extraordinarily tight, not allowing even food or medicines to enter the country. They were supposed to be incompatible with national survival, and the almost immediate collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime was expected. Once the enormity of the humanitarian disaster caused by the sanctions became clear (and it became less and less likely that the disaster was even going to change Saddam’s behavior, much less cause him to fall from power), most Security Council members were in favor of lifting or modifying the sanctions. The wording of the original sanctions resolution, however, included no provision for lifting them, so a new Security Council resolution was needed, which automatically gave the US veto power over events. Although the sanctions were modified in 1996 to allow food and other humanitarian goods to enter Iraq, the US began blocking billions of dollars of requests. Soon enough, the sanctions became the only truly documented weapon of mass destruction used in Iraq since 1990, accounting for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children.

2. Protecting the Shias and Kurds:

Immediately after the first Gulf War, Kurdish rebels in the north and Shiites in the South--acting on promises of US assistance--revolted against Saddam’s regime. The assistance was not forthcoming and the revolts were brutally crushed. Shortly thereafter, in April 1991, the United States declared a “no-fly zone” over northern Iraq, preventing Iraqi planes (but not Turkish or Iranian) planes from flying over the area. The original justification was to protect US airdrops into Kurdish areas. This justification soon changed to protecting Kurds from further Iraqi aerial attacks. In the summer of 1992, a large swath of southern Iraq was also named a no-fly zone in order to protect the Shiites from Saddam’s planes. In 1996, this southern zone was expanded to a line just below Baghdad, so the two zones together added up to more than half of all Iraq. There has never been UN approval for these zones; indeed, permanent Security Council members Russia and China consistently condemned them as illegal infringements on state sovereignty. The original justification gradually changed to keeping Saddam’s air force away from surrounding countries. Under Bill Clinton’s policy of “containment,” the justification changed to “keeping the pressure on” Saddam. British and US planes patrolled these zones (France withdrew participation in 1996), intermittently attacking military (and sometimes civilian) sites. Under the current administration, the justification has never been explicit but seemed to merge into the “destroying WMD” demand (see below).

3. 9/11:

It's important to remember that the most basic, if only half-stated, justification for the recent war was the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Although we now know that several important figures in the Bush Administration had been actively planning and lobbying to topple Saddam as far back as 1992 (and tried to convince President Clinton to strike preemptively against him during his administration), it was the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington that gave these plans public cover. Immediately after the September 11 attacks, some officials in the Administration may indeed have assumed that Iraq had connections with al-Qaeda and that Saddam Hussein was even involved in the attacks. There was never any documentation of this connection, however, and it is highly unlikely that any existed because of the mutual enmity between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. So when President Bush declared Iraq part of the Axis of Evil in his 2002 State of the Union Address, he never explicitly accused Iraq of involvement in the September 11 attacks. Still, administration spokesmen and officials right up to the president persistently referred to Iraq and al-Qaeda in the same breath, often declaring Iraq a "terrorist nation." The clear intent was to convince Americans that Iraq was indeed an actor in the September 11 attacks, a remarkably successful propaganda exercise that (according to repeated polls) succeeded in convincing a majority of Americans of Iraqi involvement. So, although September 11 was never officially stated as a justification for the invasion of Iraq, it was for all practical purposes used as one, and a major one, anyway.

4. Weapons of Mass Destruction:

As the rhetoric coming from the White House heated up, the Administration began using Iraq's alleged WMD as its primary rationale for threatening Iraq. The alleged possession of such weapons, of course, had been one on-going justification for the economic sanctions and the continuing attacks in the no-fly zones; and Iraq had indeed used chemical weapons extensively during the 1980s in its war against Iran and in repressing a Kurdish rebellion, but the United States did not protest at the time because Iraq was then seen as an ally against the more dangerous Iran of the fundamentalist cleric Ayatollah Khomeini. (In fact, the Reagan administration managed to scotch a Senate resolution and a separate House resolution condemning the use of these weapons by Iraq and blocked a similar UN Security Council resolution.) It is also clear that in the early 1990s Iraq did have on-going programs to develop nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

What is not remembered is that UN inspections (imposed as part of the peace agreement following the first Gulf War) were quite successful in destroying the vast majority of these weapons, at least according to Scott Ritter, the American ex-Marine who was a chief UN

weapons inspector at that time and estimated that they got rid of “90 - 95% of all weapons.” While there were intermittent statements from defecting Iraqi leaders about continuing ultra-secret programs, there were also statements from other defectors indicating that Iraq had discontinued these programs. Saddam’s son-in-law, Gen. Hussein Kamel, for instance, told the UN arms inspection agency and the CIA that he had personally supervised the destruction of all Iraq’s biological and chemical weapons in 1995. Such statements were suppressed or received minimal coverage in the media here. The US has continued to insist that such weapons exist without offering proof. (Well, it has offered proof, but none that has stood the test of time.)

5. Regime Change:

While continuing to use the weapons-of-mass-destruction justification, the Administration intermittently described its real purpose in Iraq as “regime change.” Referring to Saddam’s use of chemical weapons, his egregious human rights violations, and the brutality of his dictatorship, the Administration asserted that removing such a government would be the only satisfactory policy. When it was consistently pointed out that “regime change” was not a purpose recognized as legitimate according to international law, the justification was quietly withdrawn for a time, only to reappear later.

6. The Threat to the United States:

Intermittently, the Administration also asserted that Iraq presented a threat to the United States and a clear and present danger to our national security. Except for the possibility that Iraq might give the WMD it supposedly possessed to terrorists at some point, it was never explained how Iraq could actually threaten the US. Although serious observers scoffed at this justification, according to polls most Americans were convinced of its reality ... at least in part because the media were not doing their proper job of debunking absurdities.

7. The Refusal to Allow Inspectors Access:

As the threats against Iraq escalated in the fall of 2002, the US used as justification Iraq’s refusal to allow inspectors unfettered access to any site at any time or to give the inspectors permission to interview all Iraqi scientists suspected of being involved in the country’s WMD program. Within weeks of this ultimatum, however, Saddam opened the country to the

inspectors and in the last weeks before the war gave them access to the scientists at well. (The issue became whether the scientists could be interviewed “privately.” Although the Iraqi government insisted it would allow such interviews, the scientists themselves refused. It was never clear whether they refused because of secret orders to do so or because they were afraid that Saddam would view any UN discoveries after such a private interview as their responsibility, leading to certain reprisal.)

8. The Refusal of Full Cooperation

Following the entry of the inspectors into the country and their subsequent inability to produce the offending weapons, the Administration began to say that just allowing the inspectors into the country with freedom to search anywhere any time was meaningless if Iraq didn’t offer its “full cooperation.” It was never clear exactly what this meant. Apparently, it meant that Iraq had to reveal its WMD to the inspectors. This was a classic Catch-22. If Iraq didn’t produce the weapons, it wasn’t cooperating; if it did, it was guilty of possessing them. Iraq, of course, had been denying that it had such weapons. (If this turns out to be true, then it will be obvious that nothing Saddam could have done would have prevented the invasion.)

9. Intelligence Evidence:

In February, when Secretary of State Powell went before the Security Council to argue for a resolution that would lead to war, he stated flatly that the US knew that Iraq had WMD. In an effort to persuade the Security Council, Powell * revealed documents from the African country of Niger proving Iraq had tried to purchase uranium from Niger * described aluminum tubing purchased to enrich uranium * revealed the presence of an al-Qaeda camp in northeastern Iraq that was manufacturing chemical weapons * showed satellite evidence of mobile weapons manufacturing labs, and * pointed to a English dossier documenting Iraq’s WMD program.

In fact, the Niger documents were poorly done forgeries (provided, according to UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix, by US intelligence); the aluminum tubing had already been shown to be for (allowable) rocket development; the al-Qaeda camp was a deserted village that was in a Kurdish region not under the control of Saddam Hussein’s government; the “mobile weapons manufacturing labs” had already been identified by Blix as food-testing labs, and the English dossier had been cribbed from several academic sources including a ten-year-old graduate thesis. Even more damning, US intelligence sources have repeatedly said they don’t, in fact, know if Iraq has WMD.

10. Liberating Iraq, Establishing Democracy:

As it became increasingly clear that UN weapons inspectors were not going to find any WMD, the justification for war with Iraq changed yet once more, this time becoming the establishment of democracy in Iraq as part of the “liberation” of the Iraqi people, and this seems to have been the official rationale under which war actually commenced -- until at least weapons of mass destruction could actually be found in the country (which has yet to happen).

Shifting Sand

The spectacle of these shifting sands of justification would be humorous if it were not all so tragic. It is clear that for reasons that are still debatable the President had long ago decided to remove Saddam from power, and the often overlapping “justifications,” offered one after another over the months and then discarded when they proved less than useful, were purely fig leaves. What is remarkable is how flimsy and full of holes those fig leaves turned out to be. In the coming weeks or months we’ll find out whether or not Iraq did indeed have WMD. (And if a snake oil salesman tries to tell you they can’t be found because they were actually moved to Syria, don’t buy it.) I have all along suspected that Iraq does have some quantities of these weapons, but even if so, it should be clear that they were only wielded as pretexts in a propaganda war launched largely against the American people.

We can apparently no longer expect our media to have a memory. That places a special burden on us to remember.

Saddam was a terrible tyrant who committed serious crimes and massive human rights abuses; Iraq was a tyranny; Iraq may have had WMD even after the mid-1990s; it may turn out that Iraqis will be better off in a post-Saddam world (although that is by no means a given). None of those facts or possible facts alone or in any combination justifies the aggressive, “preventive,” elective war we have just waged on Iraq. A civilized world depends on certain principles. One of them is that one nation (or group of nations) cannot attack another unless it is actually under attack or *immediate* threat of attack. We can only pray that somehow this toothpaste can be put back into the tube.

