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The Iraq War: 18 Years Later



Still from Wikileaks' Collateral Murder video.

'You sit in your room, and you talk to the wall

You're feeling small but still have a ball

And you can't explain what's anyway in vain

And you paint your face and dress in black

Wear your shades and still can't express

The way you feel about a lousy fill

And you dance until the morning

All by yourself

And somehow you know

You're not alone

And you dance until the morning

All by yourself

And somehow you know

You're not alone'

—'You're Not Alone,' Amon Düül II

Eighteen years ago, I was perched on my bunk in a makeshift squad bay, awaiting final orders to cross the border from Kuwait to Iraq. Fellow marines wrote letters to their sweethearts, checked their gear for the thousandth time, jerked off in the bathroom, or nervously smoked cigarettes. Others joked about fucking Iraqi women and who would kill the most Iraqis. You know, all American boys, fighting the good fight, with God on our side, as Dylan once sang. After several months of boot camp and infantry training, it was time to rock n' roll. Finally, the war had arrived.

Back home, a halfwit loser and draft dodger who, eager to compensate for his father's political failures and yearning for his own, serenaded Americans with a trite speech that marked the beginning of the most destructive and consequential war of the 21st century. At the time, few understood the catastrophic gravity of Bush's decision, both for the United States and the rest of the world, though to be fair, many antiwar activists did.

At the time, the Bush administration had spent several months lying to the American public about Iraq's supposed connections to the attacks of 9/11. Dick Cheney argued that Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden were good pals, but the relationship never existed in reality. They argued that Saddam had Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), but those too didn't exist. Phantoms haunted Bush and his Cold War-era neoconservative comrades, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. And they turned those ghosts into fear—the ammunition needed to remake the world in their vision, or so they thought.

Before long, morale sank in our platoon. Weeks turned into months, and months turned into many more. What was supposed to be a repeat of the 1991 Gulf War quickly morphed into a violent counterinsurgency campaign, the likes of which U.S. troops hadn't experienced since their failed attempt to defeat anti-imperialists in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Car bombs and IEDs replaced punji sticks and highly-coordinated mobile attacks and ambushes. Men in white pajamas replaced the men in black pajamas.

In the U.S., people remained disorganized after several decades of neoconservative and neoliberal political victories, particularly the destruction of organized labor. The left, barely alive, mounted antiwar rallies and protests but never developed much of a vision beyond large mobilizations. And even if it would have, the social and political infrastructure to carry out such a concept didn't exist.

That said, I give tremendous credit to those who spoke out at the time. Young people might not remember, and older folks might choose to forget, but protesting the war in the years following 9/11 took some courage. People who spoke out about the war were called traitors and terrorist sympathizers by rightwing media personalities, conservative activists, and mainstream Republicans. To oppose the war was to hate veterans and the flag. At least that was the line at the time.

Of course, the dreams, desires, and fears of the Iraqi people, who, after the devastating Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the quick, bloody, and chemically infused Gulf War (1990–1991), and murderous sanctions (1991–2003), were never discussed or considered. According to the Marine Corps and the men who trained me, Iraqis were “sand niggers,” “hajis,” and “camel jockeys.” Back home, they were called “terrorists” or “towel heads.” American xenophobes confused Sikhs for Muslims, harassing the former in search of the latter.

On September 15, 2001, less than a week after 9/11, Balbir Singh Sodhi was attacked and killed by 42-year-old Frank Silva Roque outside of the Chevron gas station Balbir owned in Mesa, Arizona. At the time, Balbir was planting flowers outside of his store when Roque pulled up in his pickup truck and shot him five times with a semiautomatic handgun. Balbir’s younger brother, Sukhpal, was killed by a stray bullet while driving his taxi in San Francisco less than a year later. Only in America.

In Iraq, things went from bad to worse and from worse to untenable within a few years. By our second deployment (August 2004—April 2005), we could see the writing on the wall: Uncle Sam wasn’t leaving Mesopotamia anytime soon. Unlike Vietnam, this war had genuine geopolitical significance: oil. Even George F. Kennan, the godfather of the ‘Domino Theory,’ testified against U.S. involvement in Vietnam to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1966.

But oil alone wasn’t enough to keep the U.S. in Iraq. Bush and Co. had to save face. International embarrassment wasn’t an option. Even though the Iraqi resistance had already thoroughly weakened the U.S. military effort, George Bush couldn’t admit defeat, not then, not now, not ever. The war was just. The cause was righteous. “To hell with the naysayers!” chanted the neoconservatives and evangelical Christians who so fervently backed the war, few having served themselves. Unsurprisingly, most of them still defend the war.

It turns out, hubris and ideological dogma are just as potent powerful forces, especially when combined, as material interests or perceived realpolitik. In the end, however, none of

that mattered. The Iraqis, much like the Vietnamese, engaged with U.S. troops, always knowing one thing: no matter what happened, they were fighting in their homeland. The U.S. was temporarily visiting. And whether that momentary stay lasted fifteen years or five decades, the Iraqis would always endure. A culture that stretched back to the dawn of civilization was fighting a culture that grew up on BigMacs. The outcome was predictable, regardless of America's military, technological, and economic superiority.

In Iraq, Marines went from dodging IEDs and shooting at civilians to torturing prisoners all in a day's work. Mechanized units terrorized peasants and slapped sandbags on the heads of innocent young Arab men who were considered 'High-Value Targets' (HVTs). Most couldn't speak English and never understood why they were taken captive. Too bad for them, eh? They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's how it goes. Wars are messy, at least that's what our generals told us.

Morale sunk to an all-time low at the end of the second deployment when our commanders informed the battalion that some of us would deploy a third time. By then, cocaine and weed had become mainstays at the basecamp. Some of us were blowing lines and smoking bowls on patrol and while standing duty on observation posts. Marines were getting drunk regularly and patrolling without their proper equipment. No one gave a fuck. Those who did were laughed at or ignored.

By the time we came home, most of the platoon was full-blown alcoholics, drug addicts, sex fiends, or some mixture of the three. Divorces, assault charges, DUIs, and stints in rehab facilities commenced, including suicides, drug overdoses, and cancer diagnoses. You know, the sort of shit they don't show you on the commercials or talk about at the recruitment center.

But that's only half the story. The aftereffects of combat are often more devastating than the action itself, which, to be honest, was quite fun at times. Nothing beats the adrenaline dump of a firefight. Nothing. That's why so many guys miss it. That's why so many seek adventure in civilian life, sometimes to the detriment of themselves and others. Fast cars and motorcycles leave mangled corpses. The needle can only bring so much comfort: the bottle, the same. It's true: civilian life is boring. Everyone who has experienced combat understands that much. On a very personal level, at the cellular level, war permanently changes you.

At the geopolitical level, we have yet fully understood the long-term impacts of the Iraq War. Perhaps we never will. The human toll is staggering: anywhere from 250,000–1,000,000+ dead, with millions displaced externally and internally. Hundreds of thousands

endure lifelong illnesses due to chemically-laced munitions such as depleted uranium or maimed bodies due to bombing raids, drone strikes, a stray bullet, or some garden variety shrapnel. The Iraq War caused the greatest refugee crisis since World War II. It unleashed forces across Libya, Syria, and beyond that resemble the most reactionary and murderous forces of the Middle Ages.

Thousands of U.S. troops died because of lies and hubris. Their families are forever emotionally, socially, and spiritually scarred. The same is true of the families of the nameless Iraqis who perished on the dusty battlefields of Mesopotamia. Tens of thousands of veterans have killed themselves, leaving behind broken families and generations of emotional trauma. Picking up your dead friend or his shredded and bloody limbs is terrible enough, but it's much worse when you finally realize it was all for nothing, otherwise known as 'Moral Injury.' Well, not exactly nothing—we made many people a hell of a lot of money and stoked the egos of insecure men who thought they controlled the world.

In the future, I can imagine young people talking about the 'Great Oil Wars of the 21st Century.' Fighting wars for oil, the very commodity that might cause the end of civilization. Oh, the irony. Within a few months, a young man or woman who wasn't even born when the Iraq War started will step onto the sands of Iraq as a contractor, DoD official, or military personnel. Can you imagine?

Back home, the war helped destroy what was left of an already undemocratic and antiquated political and legal system. Americans have less trust in the media due mainly to the lies journalists, and news outlets told during the lead-up to the war. The Iraq War ushered in a period of cynical distrust in liberal institutions. Without question, a trend growing long before 2003, but one accelerated by lies justifying costly imperial adventures (\$2 trillion and counting).

By 2008, however, reality truly lifted the veil of American Empire and capitalism. The same press and government that had lied about WMDs were now lying about the origins (blaming poor people and unions instead of bankers and corporations) of the Great Recession, the most significant economic calamity to strike the U.S. since 1929 (until COVID hit). As a result, by 2010, the Tea Party took power. In 2017, Trump entered the White House, and the rest is history.

Now, eighteen years after W's criminal decision to invade and occupy Iraq, humanity finds itself at a unique historical precipice. Climate Change alone will reconfigure the global landscape and every aspect of our lives in ways that none can imagine. It's already doing so. The global economy, dependent on a never-ending growth model, can't provide

a decent and dignified living to most people, pushing billions to the margins of society. Our political and legal systems remain wholly dysfunctional, outdated, and inadequate. Authoritarian governments are on the rise. And so far, the global left hasn't provided an organized, serious, and coherent alternative. Yet, alternatives are needed now more than ever. Indeed, radical changes are required, not for ideological, moral, or ethical purposes but for the sake of survival.

Today, however, I will take a moment and think about my dead friends and the lives I took on Iraq's battlefield, a distant topography of forgotten dreams and splintered memories. Unlike previous years, I won't cry. My reservoir of tears dried up long ago. My gas tank, usually filled with anger, is currently running on empty. I'm worn out. The war has taken its toll. Eighteen years of reflections, protests, nightmares, essays, speeches, interviews, documentaries, conversations, and ghosts have rendered me somewhat bewildered and suspicious, sometimes cynical, yet more curious and committed than ever.

Yes, I continue to speak out about the war. It's my responsibility. I have to answer to two groups of people: my loved ones (family and friends) and the people of Iraq. They are the only people on this planet to whom I owe an outstanding debt, one I will spend the rest of my time repaying. And that's okay. That's life.

Without responsibility and accountability, love and respect, and the prospects of redemption and rebirth, where would we be as a society, as a species? I long ago forgave myself for participating in the war. I no longer lose sleep over it. These days, I lose sleep over our inability to develop political institutions capable of providing an alternative to capitalism and empire, racism and patriarchy, ecological devastation, and violence.

In the end, human beings are resilient and highly adaptive creatures. We're not inherently peaceful or violent—we're a bit of both. That, among other things, is what makes us so unique, complex, and volatile. Evolution gave us these gigantic brains, but we still haven't perfected how to use them—what a fascinating challenge.

Someday, perhaps humanity can live in peace. Until then, we should fight like hell to nudge the species in that direction. That starts by telling the truth. That starts by remembering our collective history and our subjective location within it. Eighteen years later, let's not forget the Iraq War.

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