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Rehabilitating Rumsfeld, Erasing Empire: On All Those U.S. War Crimes in Iraq



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Former Bush Administration Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's death was accompanied by many of the apologies for state crimes that we've come to expect from the worshippers of U.S. militarism. This includes those emanating from journalistic elites – *The New York Times* being the most obvious case in point. The paper's profile on Rumsfeld's life reflects that "he was widely regarded" as "the most powerful defense secretary since Robert S. McNamara during the Vietnam War." The paper weighs in on Rumsfeld's management of the war in Iraq, which the paper deemed "A costly and divisive war that ultimately destroyed his political life and outlived his tenure by many years. But unlike McNamara, who offered mea culpas in a 2003

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documentary, 'The Fog of War,' Rumsfeld acknowledged no serious failings and warned in a farewell valedictory at the Pentagon that quitting Iraq would be a terrible mistake, even though the war, the country learned, had been based on a false premise – that Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader, had been harboring weapons of mass destruction.”

“Costly.” “Divisive.” “Failings.” “Mistake.” “Based on a false premise.” These are specific descriptors that *The New York Times* used to describe the Iraq war. It could have used other descriptions that would have been far more critical of what the U.S. did. Words like: Illegal. War crime. Deception. Lies. Immoral. Mass murder. These are strong words, and for those who did not live through the disturbing years of that war as adults, or who did, but whose memories are beginning to fade, or who never paid much attention at the time at all, I'll elaborate on the points above.

Illegal, and a War Crime: The U.S. invasion of Iraq represented one of the worst war crimes of the last century. It was a blatant violation of the United Nations Charter, which outlaws the use of force unless authorized by the Security Council (Article 48), or when a country uses force in self-defense against an ongoing attack (Article 51). The U.S. could claim neither with Iraq, meaning that its invasion was a blatant violation of not only the U.N. Charter, but also the principles of the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal, which were created by the UN to punish Nazi party officials for their crimes of aggression during the Second World War. These crimes included 1. “planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances,” or 2. “participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the acts mentioned” in point 1. above. Clearly, U.S. actions in Iraq constitute a violation of the Nuremberg principles, considering they were planned, prepared, initiated, and waged by a hostile power against a country that was not engaged in belligerent activities toward the U.S., and U.S. acts were pursued in violation of the explicit principles laid out in international treaties and agreements to which the U.S. was bound (the U.N. and the U.N. Charter).

Deception, Lies: It's much more pleasing for the sycophants to power to use euphemisms like “based on a false premise” than to deal with the harsh reality that presidents and their administrations simply lie to pursue criminal wars. There were two types of lies the Bush administration pursued with Iraq: blatant lies, and the sorts of lies that existed in a grey area of plausible deniability, in which their public rhetoric did not at all match what they were saying in private.

On the first front, in terms of blatant lies. The administration claimed that Iraq might provide nuclear weapons or technology to terrorists, projecting fears into the public mind of a threat that would make 9/11 look bush league by comparison. This propaganda was blatantly contradicted by what the administration had been told by numerous international and national weapons and counter-terror experts. An investigation of the Bush administration's claim that Iraq was trying to secure uranium from Niger had been very publicly debunked, and the International Atomic Energy Agency also concluded that claims that Iraq had aluminum tubes suitable for enriching uranium to a weapon-grade level were false. And the administration was made aware of all of this, and knowingly ignored all of these assessments when it lied to the public about an Iraqi-terrorist alliance. Furthermore, the Bush administration's own counter-terrorism advisor Richard Clarke explicitly informed former President Bush numerous times that there was no evidence whatsoever of any sort of collaboration or connection between Saddam Hussein's regime and al Qaeda. To put it bluntly, the administration lied through its teeth about a tie between Iraq and terrorism.

It is also well documented that Rumsfeld was directly involved in the second form of deception – grey area plausible deniability-style lies in which the Bush administration's public rhetoric clearly contradicted private discussions about Iraq. This is all clearly captured in a January 2016 *Politico* report by investigative journalist John Walcott, titled “What Donald Rumsfeld Knew We Didn't Know About Iraq.” The report explores the details of a formerly classified report from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which Rumsfeld had sent to Air Force General Richard Myers attached with a note that read “Please take a look at this material as to what we don't know about WMD” in Iraq.

And there was much that the administration simply didn't know. Regarding Iraq's alleged WMDs, the report assessed that “We've struggled to estimate the unknowns... We range from 0% to 75% knowledge on various aspects of their program.” A similar uncertainty pervaded assessments of Iraq's alleged (in reality non-existent) nuclear program, of which the report said, “Our knowledge of the Iraqi (nuclear) weapons program is based largely – perhaps 90% – on analysis of imprecise intelligence.” More broadly, the report admitted the following about the U.S. understanding of Iraq's alleged WMDs – again WMDs that did not exist – “Our assessments [of Iraqi nuclear, chemical, and biological programs] rely heavily on analytic assumptions and judgment rather than hard evidence. The evidentiary base is particularly sparse for Iraqi nuclear weapons.”

In public, the claims made by the Bush administration were of a very different nature. Former Vice President Dick Cheney claimed that “Many of us are convinced that Saddam Hussein will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon.” Bush claimed definitively that Iraq “possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons” – “it is seeking nuclear weapons,” and “it has given shelter and support to terrorism, and practices terror against its own people.” These lies were contradicted by the uncertainty that the administration expressed behind closed doors, in private conversations to which the public was not granted access.

Immoral, and Mass Murder: The mass murderous fallout of the criminal war in Iraq is difficult to avoid, short of willful ignorance. The conclusion that this was fostered mass murder was a long-time coming, with numerous surveys done during the 2000s showing that the body count was quickly piling up, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians being murdered in a rapidly escalating civil war. That civil war emerged *because* of the United States, which had been steadily weakening the country via a sanctions regime that the U.S. had been leading through the United Nations during the 1990s and early 2000s, followed by the invasion, after which the U.S. dissolved the basic institutions of the Iraqi state, including its government, military, police, and other infrastructure. These actions led to state failure on a critical level, as Iraq devolved into anarchy, chaos, and madness, and as rival ethnic forces and militias stepped in to fill the power vacuum. Iraq’s collapse resulted in a massive conflict and ethnic cleansing between these factions, including the nation’s Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds. This conflict, alongside all the violence from Iraqis fighting the illegal U.S. occupiers, resulted in staggering death and destruction, and in an estimate of more than one million deaths.

Americans increasingly recognized that this war was fundamentally wrong and immoral, and as national surveys demonstrated throughout the 2000s and into the early 2010s. As *CNN-ORC* polling showed, while 47 percent of Americans agreed that “the United States’ action in Iraq” was “not” “morally justified” in 2006, that number had grown to 54 percent by 2007, and remained over half into the early 2010s, as surveys from 2011 and 2013 revealed. As my own original statistical analysis of this data demonstrates, public sentiment that the war was not morally justified was a significantly stronger predictor of overall opposition to war and support for withdrawing U.S. troops, compared to other factors such as feelings about whether the U.S. would succeed or fail in the war, feelings about whether the U.S. was making progress, attitudes about whether (retrospectively after

the war was over) it was a success, or individuals self-declared ideology (conservative or liberal) or political party (Democrat or Republican).

Nearly twenty years out from the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it's much more comforting to continue nursing establishment narratives about the war that emphasize it as a failed or bungled effort – as costly mistake of the past. Facing harsher realities is more difficult, that the war was one of the worst war crimes of modern times, that it produced mass murder on a level comparable to the worst genocides in history, and that it was all done by a group of leaders who engaged in conscious deception, fraud, and manipulation, ruthlessly manipulating the mass public in pursuit of a criminal war that came to be widely seen by the mass public as fundamentally wrong and immoral. The Iraq war may now be a memory, but that doesn't mean we should allow the propaganda of the powerful to pervert how we remember these critical historical events. Rumsfeld's passing should not be a moment for sweeping past U.S. crimes under the rug, but for facing them head on, and without illusions. We owe the people of Iraq that much.

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