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By Katrina vanden Heuvel  
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## ***20 Years after Catastrophe in Iraq, the War Apologists Still Dominate U.S. Foreign Policy***

In Warsaw last February, President Joe Biden [condemned](#) the lawless Russian invasion of Ukraine: “The idea that over 100,000 forces would invade another country—since World War II, nothing like that has happened.” One month later marked the 20th anniversary of the greatest U.S. foreign policy debacle since Vietnam: America’s “war of choice” against Iraq, with 130,000 U.S. soldiers invading the country to overthrow its government.

Given the scope of the folly, it is understandable that Biden would want to bury it in a memory hole. Although not as Orwellian as Biden, much of the commentary around the 20th anniversary similarly sought to explain or justify or diminish the calamity. This isn’t surprising, since few of the perpetrators, propagandists, and cheerleaders who drove us into the war suffered any consequence. Their reputations were re-burnished; their stature in America’s foreign policy establishment was retained. Bizarrely, those who led us into the disaster continue to dominate America’s major media platforms, while those who warned against it are largely pushed to the margins.

Putting a blush on the Iraq War is not an easy task. The Bush administration touted its preventive war doctrine, scorned the need for America, at the height of its unipolar moment, to seek authority from the United Nations, approval from NATO allies, or adherence to international law. Iraq was a target for neoconservatives long before 9/11, as the propagandists at the Project for the New American Century made clear. The push for the war began hours after 9/11, despite the fact that Saddam Hussein was an avowed enemy of Al Qaeda. The Bush administration campaigned to sell the threat, making it—as Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote at the beginning of the Cold War—“clearer than

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the truth.” For message advice, the administration [hired professional PR gurus](#)—like Charlotte Beers, the Queen of Madison Avenue, straight from award-winning campaigns hawking Uncle Ben’s Rice and Head & Shoulders Shampoo. From the president on down, they sought to associate Saddam Hussein with 9/11, although they had no evidence of a connection that did not exist. Then they focused on the threat posed by Hussein’s alleged weapons of mass destruction. To overcome skeptical CIA analysts, Vice President Dick Cheney formed his own intelligence group, while über-lobbyist John Rendon invented an Iraqi National Congress headed by the nefarious financier Ahmed Chalabi, who provided “intelligence” on demand.

Despite the fearmongering, the administration faced the largest demonstrations ever organized against a war before it began—what *The New York Times* termed “[a new superpower](#).” Germany, France, and NATO refused support; the UN denied sanction. But reporters and editorialists for the mainstream media echoed the administration’s claims; liberal pundits rushed to show their patriotic fervor. With few exceptions, liberal politicians signed on to preserve their “credibility.” The daily barrage of distortions and deceptions worked: on the eve of the war, [two-thirds](#) of Americans thought Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11, and nearly [four-fifths](#) thought he was on the verge of having nuclear weapons.

And so the catastrophe. The war cost the United States 4,600 dead, and over 30,000 wounded. Estimates of Iraqi casualties top 400,000, with a staggering 7 million refugees and millions more internally displaced. Sectarian conflict savaged Iraq. A new generation of jihadists arose and spread. Iran gained influence in the region.

America’s reputation has not recovered to this day. Most of the world has stayed out of the Russian-Ukraine conflict, dismissing U.S. hectoring about the “rules-based international order” as hypocrisy. China’s influence spread as the United States floundered in the endless wars in the Middle East. Americans are tired of wars without victory. The press squandered its credibility. And the arrogance and irresponsibility of foreign policy establishment was exposed—all contributing to Donald Trump’s victory in 2016.

Twenty years later, the war’s advocates and apologists struggle to justify their calamitous course, or to mollify judgments and achieve, in the words of Richard Haas, former president of the Foreign Policy Association, “an elusive consensus about the war’s legacy.”

One frequent excuse is that the war was a mistake or a tragedy, not a crime. The administration, it’s argued, really did believe that Hussein had weapons of mass

destruction. It was, Hal Brands writes in *Foreign Affairs*, “an understandable tragedy, born of honorable motive and genuine concerns.” Despite the lack of evidence, a “critical mass of senior officials...talked one another into believing the most readily available justification,” concluded Max Fisher in the *Times*. In fact, the “war of choice” was the product of hubris, at a time when the United States was at the height of its power, driven by zealots who scorned law, evidence, and the “rules-based order.” Or as Secretary of State Colin Powell put it, reviewing the material provided for his UN speech, “This is bullshit.”

Others, risibly, suggest that Iraq is better off today as a result of the invasion. Saddam Hussein was a bad man, “the one indisputably real WMD in Iraq,” *Times* columnist Bret Stephens writes, justifying his support of the war. Getting rid of him is a boon for the Iraqis, Stephens argues, with “Iraq, the Middle East and the world better off for having gotten rid of a dangerous tyrant.” This breathtaking conclusion can only be made by ignoring the devastation wrought on the country, the region and America’s credibility. It is the same arrogance that led to regime change in Libya, with the result once more a bloody civil war.

Some, like David Frum, the Bush speechwriter said to have coined the term “the Axis of Evil” (the preposterous grouping of Iraq and Iran—two fervid enemies—with a North Korean regime that neither had any connection to), suggest the Iraqis bear much of the blame. We “offered Iraq a better future,” Frum [tweeted](#). “Whatever West’s mistakes; the sectarian war was a choice Iraqis made for themselves.”

The price for failing to hold the perpetrators of this debacle accountable is that their worldview still dominates America’s national security establishment. Biden came into office pledging to create a foreign policy for the middle class, but he has proceeded to reaffirm America’s imperial delusion—that we have the resources, wisdom, and charter to police the world, to counter Russia and China in their own neighborhoods, while chasing terrorists, dropping bombs from drones in seven countries, and dispatching forces to over 100 countries across the world. We sensibly condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a violation of international law. Yet Richard Haass, a charter member of our foreign policy establishment, can write—apparently without irony—that the lesson to be drawn from Iraq is not opposition to aggressive war but that “wars of choice should be undertaken only with extreme care and consideration of the likely costs and benefits.” Surely, one of the enduring horrors of Iraq is that despite the calamity, our foreign policy establishment remains unshaken, and its worldview remains unchanged.

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