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## Why Did We Invade Iraq?

by Charles Davis

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I was 18 years old and as dumb as an 18-year-old, and even I knew we were invading Iraq for no good reason and that thousands of good people were going to die awful deaths because of it. The 2003 war to end all Gulf wars was sold as a mission to disarm a madman with weapons of mass destruction. But despite the revisionists who claim that everybody thought at the time that this crime was called for, it was clear from the start—from the weapons inspectors on the ground inspecting and not finding a damn thing—that the stated reasons for going to war were as flimsy as the case for invading Vietnam and as fabricated as the non-incident in the Gulf of Tonkin. So why did a couple hundred thousand people have to die?

That's one of the other things that was glaringly obvious to dumb kids like me but not, it seemed, the neoconservatives in the Bush administration or their liberal enablers in the press. This war in Iraq was sold as a war on a bad man and a few of his bad friends, who nobody outside the Ba'ath Party would much miss. But if the history of wars has taught us anything it's that wars against cabals are in fact wars against entire countries. The elites are always the last to suffer. No matter how precise the bomb, that precision isn't worth much if one's intelligence is bad or one's concern for civilian "collateral damage" utterly lacking. And so it was that, according to Human Rights Watch, "Of the fifty aerial strikes against Iraqi leaders, not one resulted in the death of the intended target." A strike at the start of the war that the US was "confident" had killed Saddam

Hussein “missed its target and hit nearby homes, killing at least eight people,” *The Telegraph* reported.

It would take many more months for most of those who supported the war to concede that a “mistake” had been made even though the bloody horror of US-style liberation was clear from the opening volley of cruise missiles. Former supporters of the war complained of the lies used to sell them on the war, and indeed many a mistruth was uttered to make the sale. Still, teens armed with no more than an Internet connection were able to debunk everything the White House said in real time. And a mere perusal of 20<sup>th</sup>-century history would have strongly suggested that the only thing predictable about the extreme violence of war, once unleashed, is that there’s no predicting where it will end.

People fell for the White House’s claims for a variety of reasons. Adhering to the Beltway consensus, for instance, is good for careers in politics and the press, and it’s also an easy way for the dumb to believe they’re smart. But the more interesting and still unsettled question is: If the case for war was so shoddy, which indeed it was, why was the US government so intent on making it?

“Oil” of course immediately comes to mind: The corpses of at least a half-million Iraqis lie on top of a whole lot of it. The military-industrial complex, too, profits whenever and wherever life is taken in the name of freedom or stability. Perhaps that’s too cynical, though. Maybe 9/11 really did scare the hell out of George W. Bush. That fear and the American president’s prerequisite indifference toward foreign life combined to create a perfect war crime. Maybe Bush actually believed all those mangled untruths he said.

We will never know what exactly went on in the middling mind of that mediocre president. But we do know for sure that the Bush administration consciously manipulated the intelligence process to get the most alarming “facts” about WMDs and ties to terrorism it needed in order to sell a policy it had already decided upon. Tony Blair’s chief of staff noted as much in the Downing Street Memo, an account of a January 2003 meeting between Bush and the prime minister of Britain. “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa,” Bush would say later that month in his State of the Union address, a claim based on a forgery exposed by the CIA and British intelligence months before.

### **Neocons Make the Case**

In his new, methodical look at the lead-up to the invasion, *The Road to Iraq: The Making of a Neoconservative War*, Muhammad Idrees Ahmad, a lecturer in journalism at University of Stirling in Scotland, argues that the United States went to war because a small but influential band of far-right hawks. These the neoconservatives successfully spun what they perceived to be good for Israel: the removal of a long-time nuisance (if not an actual threat), Saddam Hussein, as a way to send a message to friends and foes alike that terrible things happen to those who defy Washington. They seized on the opportunity provided by 9/11 to start selling their pet policy of regime change in Iraq to a “war president” convinced he had just done what no one else could: conquer Afghanistan. Another quick invasion to remove a defiant dictator his dad had helped

arm during the 1980s and, in the eyes of the neocons, foolishly left in power in the early 90s? Bring it on.

By 2003, Iraq's military was incapable of even invading Kuwait again, much less posing any sort of threat to the United States. Winning a war against it was not in doubt. Ironically, at least to those who think wars are about national security, the fact that Saddam Hussein was a threat only to his own people was what made him a target. A war would be *easy*, or so those who plotted it thought – and so would be the job of selling it.

For more than a decade, politicians from both major parties demonized Saddam as another in a long line of Adolf Hitlers, with Democrat Bill Clinton and a Republican Congress making regime change official US policy. I was six years old during the first Gulf War, and we kids knew the dictator of Iraq as Saddam *Insane*—and that was at a Quaker school that didn't shy away from informing first graders that our government was killing kids like us. In high school, I recall one of the cool, alternative teens wearing a shirt with the Nike logo that said, "Nuke Iraq: Just Do It." Throw in a major terrorist attack carried out by people from the same general area, of the same general complexion, and the American people, while perhaps not clamoring for another war, were at the very least primed to passively accept the waging of one against a man no one would miss.

The path to war, then, was prepared by years of propaganda and a structural inclination toward militarism; by an "exceptionalist" culture that views American military might as always right and force the only language the Orientalized Other can truly understand; by a massive arms industry that profits from perpetual war and the never-ending preparation for it; and a news media that generally takes its cues on whom to hate straight from the reigning administration. Still, those structural factors that make war an easy sell do not alone explain why the United States invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003. In the end, structures don't kill people, people do, and although war wasn't unlikely, it wasn't inevitable – it took a group of people agitating for it to make it happen. As Ahmad, a Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Stirling in Scotland, writes, "wars would *not* happen without the warmongers."

"Journalists and scholars have frequently treated the Iraq war as the outcome of a coherent strategy rooted in a consensual elite, national or class interest," Ahmad continues. "The explanations are often mono-causal: oil, imperialism, militarism, Israel, democracy promotion and the demonstrative use of power. But these are not mutually exclusive propositions." And although everyone in the administration was an imperialist of one sort or another, "only a few saw war as the preferred means for toppling" the Iraqi dictator. Meanwhile, many of the "realists" who helped bring about the first Gulf War opposed the second one, not because they were bleeding hearts, but because they believed it posed a long-term danger to US strategic interests, imperial-speak for the ability to control the Middle East. Ultra-nationalists like Cheney would come to embrace the case for war. But it wasn't he or Donald Rumsfeld who initially pushed it. Indeed, as Ahmad notes, "They would not have had their war without the neoconservatives' enabling role."

The neoconservatives were warmongers like everyone else in the Bush administration, but they didn't want just any war: they wanted a war on Iraq. From their perches at think tanks such as the

American Enterprise Institute and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, magazines like *Commentary* and *The Weekly Standard*, and letterhead-only organizations such as the Project for a New American Century, the neocons agitated for one. On September 12, they were ready with a policy to pitch and an established network to promote it, both in and outside the government. Ahmad readily concedes that they needed the help of others, including liberal hawks in Congress and at *The New Republic*, but he ably documents that the neocons led the drive to war.

## Who Are the Neocons?

Over the years, “neocon” has come to be a catch-all term meaning “someone who sucks.” Its association with a disastrous war has made it a political insult. This is fine—it couldn’t have happened to a more deserving group of people—but it’s not a particularly useful descriptor in political discourse. According to a more precise meaning, a neocon is a devout militarist deeply devoted to the security of Israel, who casts Washington and Tel Aviv’s security interests as one and the same, possibly even believing it themselves, and for whom World War II shows the failure of “appeasement,” their derogatory term for diplomacy. Their preferred approach to threats that don’t exist is “preemption,” meaning aggressive war to eliminate even the *threat* of a threat someday developing. Neoconservatives are capitalists, yes, but they are not usually free-market ideologues of the Ayn Rand variety. Some, like Irving Kristol, father of Bill, even flirted with Trotskyism and then hawkish, anti-communist liberalism before finally giving up on what they viewed as a hopelessly non-interventionist left. To the neoconservative, war is the first, best option, not the last, regrettable one. It’s an uplifting force that builds character in a nation, or at least in the one that isn’t destroyed.

Unlike their allies-of-convenience on the Christian Zionist right, these neocons have never been an electoral force. But their almost religious faith in the power and glory of military force has proved attractive to the powerful. It’s an ideology that flatters power by assuring those that wield it that they are scholar-kings shaping history and building an “American century.” Although the neocons are few in numbers, it only takes a few billionaires, like Haim Saban and Rupert Murdoch and Sheldon Adelson, to make an obscure ideological offshoot an abiding and persistent force in American politics.

By steering money and positive media attention to candidates who seek and win their favor, neoconservatives have been able to place their ideological kin in key positions as advisors to largely but not exclusively Republican candidates, including the foreign policy blank slate that was George W. Bush in 2002. At first, they had little influence on the policy of a president who had campaigned as a non-interventionist. Indeed, as Ahmad observes, Bush’s first year in office saw policy largely dictated by the “realist” faction led by Secretary of State Colin Powell. And then 9/11 happened. No other group was as prepared for the moment, confident they had the right answers, and in the position to influence those who could order the bombs to be dropped.

“The neoconservative core’s coordination and ideological coherence allowed them to conceive and instigate the 2003 Iraq invasion despite strong reservations of the military and intelligence bureaucracies,” Ahmad writes. Their campaign to turn Washington’s focus on Baghdad started immediately. At a September 15, 2001 meeting with the president and his top advisers, Paul Wolfowitz, then-deputy secretary of defense and a long-time neoconservative ideologue,

“broached the subject of Iraq, suggesting, without evidence that there was a 10-50 percent chance that it was involved in the 9/11 attacks,” Ahmad notes. Few were convinced, and some were even exasperated: “His persistence annoyed both Rumsfeld and Bush, who instructed [chief of staff] Andrew Card to tell him not to interject.” According to Condoleezza Rice, then Bush’s national security advisor, “he was also rebuked by Cheney,” who a day later would tell NBC’s Tim Russert that there was no evidence of a link between Iraq and 9/11.

But the neoconservatives within the administration were persistent. After being rebuked, Wolfowitz went back to the tactics he and his far-right comrades employed in the 1970s to show that the US was losing the arms race to the USSR. They gathered their own intelligence, always of the most alarmist variety, and sought to both bypass and pressure the CIA and its analysts by handing what it found directly to Bush, Cheney, and like-minded members of the press. Then, as before, they were totally wrong: there were no weapons of mass destruction or ties to terrorism just as there was no evidence that the Soviets were on the verge of achieving military superiority or preparing to go to war against the US. But it’s the initial impression one makes on those in power that matters, not the subsequent correction weeks later on page 12 of the paper.

Although their intelligence may not have held up to careful scrutiny, their framing of a developing threat that was being downplayed by a “liberal” intelligence bureaucracy—the one that failed to stop 9/11—appealed to the likes of Dick Cheney. In his 2006 book, *The One Percent Doctrine*, journalist Ron Suskind reported that the vice president believed that “if there was even a 1 percent chance of terrorists getting a weapon of mass destruction . . . the United States must now act as if it were a certainty.”

### **The Neocon Sales Job**

By September 2002, Bush and Cheney were on board, at which point the neoconservative public relations squad focused its energy solely on those outside of government. Their favorite go-to trick was to feed intelligence to sympathetic stenographers. They hooked those reporters up with the say-anything exiles of Ahmad Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress who originally provided that intel. Already convicted of fraud and later accused of being an Iranian agent, Chalabi was eager to supply any “facts” those selling the war needed to close the deal. Then the neocons pushed Bush, Cheney, and Rice to cite the stories as if they provided independent verification of the claims their staffers had planted.

On September 8, 2002, Ahmad writes, “the front page of *The New York Times* carried a story by Judith Miller and Michael Gordon, which claimed, based on the testimony of Iraqi defectors and unnamed officials, that Iraq had ‘stepped up its quest for nuclear weapons’ and had ‘embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb.’ Their evidence was to become infamous: “Iraq has sought to buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes, which American officials believe were intended as components of centrifuges to enrich uranium.”

On CNN, Condoleezza Rice cited Miller and Gordon’s piece to warn, “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,” a line Bush would himself use a month later. On NBC, Cheney professed to know with “absolute certainty” that Iraq was building nukes, thanks to the *Times*’ intrepid reporting. There were, of course, no nuclear weapons, nor were there even any of

the tubes required to make them. But the goal was that initial coverage and sticking an apocalyptic image in the mind of a public that cleverly spun the administration's lack of real evidence as all the more reason to invade. Whether they actually believed any of it themselves is again beside the point – they may have; they probably wanted to – because eliminating the threat of WMDs was not what motivated its neoconservative salespeople. To them, the more important point was that a war in the heart of the Middle East would serve as a reminder to allies and enemies alike that defying the United States can get one killed. And say what you will about America: it never forgets a slight.

“If we really intend to extinguish the hope that has fueled the rise of al-Qaeda and violent anti-Americanism throughout the Middle East, we have no choice but to re-instill in our foes and friends the fear and respect that attaches to any great power,” wrote the American Enterprise Institute's Reuel Marc Gerecht in the December 19, 2001, edition of *The Wall Street Journal*. A former case officer at the CIA, Gerecht maintained that, “Only a war against Saddam Hussein will decisively restore the awe that protects American interests abroad and citizens at home.”

### **Sending a Message**

The US had done this kind of thing before, most obviously in Vietnam, which was targeted by the empire not because of abundant supplies of oil, but because of its defiance. The message such interventions send isn't meant just for official enemies, but ostensible friends. In 2002, invading Iraq was cast as a way of threatening the Saudis: “The very demise of Saddam Hussein, resulting as it would in greater freedom for the Iraqi people, would send a signal to the people of Saudi Arabia, as it would to citizens of other Muslim countries, that regime change is possible,” wrote Terry Eastland, publisher of *The Weekly Standard*. “With the liberation of Iraq, the liberation of Saudi Arabia would be at least thinkable – a thought that horrifies the House of Saud.”

In a 2003 interview with PBS's Charlie Rose, *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman expressed this view of war as a way to send a message to Middle Eastern regimes and the Muslim masses alike in famously crude fashion. “What they needed to see was American boys and girls going house to house from Basra to Baghdad and basically saying, ‘which part of this sentence do you not understand?’” he said. “That, Charlie, was what this war was about. We could have hit Saudi Arabia . . . We could have hit Pakistan. We hit Iraq because we could. And that's the real truth.”

“We” hit Iraq not because it was a threat, but because it wasn't. It couldn't put up a real fight in a battle with the world's most expensive and technologically advanced military. The intervention would also put allies on notice that America's friendship is not something you want to lose. Neocons and their favorite world leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, also viewed the war as good for Israel. Saddam had lobbed missiles at Tel Aviv during the first Gulf War (after Israel bombed Iraq and sold weapons to its enemy, Iran, in the 1980s). Although it could no longer project its military might after that war, Iraq's strategic importance in the eyes of those chiefly concerned with Israel's security had not diminished. As David Wurmser, a neoconservative aide to Dick Cheney, wrote in a 1996 paper published by the Institute for Advanced Strategic & Political Studies, a right-wing Jerusalem-based think tank: “Whoever inherits Iraq dominates the entire Levant strategically.”

Install a reliable ally in Saddam's palace and you prevent your enemies from installing one of their own. It can also serve as a stepping stone. "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad," one British official told Newsweek in 2002 after hanging out with America's think tank warriors. "Real men want to go to Tehran." The first war would be over in a matter of weeks, according to men flush with testosterone from the idea of sending others off to fight a war. Their hubris led them to believe Iraq's long-repressed Shiites would side with their purported liberators, not the Islamic Republic next door whom almost all of Iraq's Shia dissidents called home.

## **The Issue of Oil**

Certainly, America eyed the petroleum under Iraqi soil. But prior to the invasion the US oil industry was actually lobbying for something close to peace with Iraq, or at least an end to the vicious baby-killing embargo. Capital typically prefers stability and has no moral objections to doing business with a dictator who can provide it. Indeed, in an April 18, 2001 letter to Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, the director of government affairs for Halliburton—the same company headed by Dick Cheney until the year before—opined that "American farmers, workers, and companies have sacrificed without any progress toward US foreign policy objectives." As Ahmad notes, "Conoco CEO Archie Duncan likewise protested that 'US companies, not rogue regimes, are the ones that suffer when the United States imposes economic sanctions.'"

Halliburton and other US businesses of course made a killing off the occupation of Iraq, but they weren't the ones actually pushing for the war. Nor, for that matter, were the hawkish "realists" like Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter who drafted the "Carter doctrine" making the military protection of Middle Eastern oil formal US policy. More oil, and contracts to extract that oil, ended up going to China, Iraq's largest trading partner, than to the United States. And whoever extracts the stuff has to sell it on a global market. The Islamic State, for instance, sells petroleum to the very apostate regimes it aims to destroy.

"That is not to say that oil was irrelevant to the administration's calculations, but perhaps in a different sense than that meant by the 'No Blood for Oil' slogan," wrote Jim Lobe, Inter Press Service's Washington bureau chief and a long-time chronicler of neocons:

After all, oil is an absolutely indispensable requirement for running modern economies and militaries. And the invasion was a forceful – indeed, a shock- and awe-some – demonstration to the rest of the world, especially potential strategic rivals like China, Russia, or even the European Union, of Washington's ability to quickly and effectively conquer and control an oil-rich nation in the heart of the energy-rich Middle East/Gulf region any time it wishes, perhaps persuading those lesser powers that challenging the US could well prove counter-productive to long-term interests, if not their supply of energy in the short term.

## **Creating Instability**

Some argue that the goal of the war was what it in fact wrought: the turning of Iraq into an unstable training ground for jihadists from across the Middle East and North Africa. The Bush administration, according to this view, knew that taking out Saddam and disbanding the Iraqi

military would spur an insurgency and a sectarian war between Sunnis and Shiites. They did it anyway to justify US intervention in the region forevermore by leaving it littered with terrorist cells that would in turn destabilize not just Iraq, but its neighbors, one of which, Saudi Arabia, is of course a close US ally.

The US, however, didn't need instability or the presence of terrorists to justify invading and occupying a country that posed no threat to it. The threats it created to justify that crime existed on paper, not in real life. Why jeopardize its interests, such as a stable business environment for US corporations, by deliberately creating threats it couldn't control? Making stuff up works just as well—and unfortunately, there's plenty of evil in the world an interventionist could cite to sell an intervention. The insurgency in Iraq, and the behavior of US troops and private contractors that created and inflamed it, led a strong majority of Iraqis to oppose not just permanent military bases, but any US combat presence, to the point that even the US-installed leader Nouri al-Maliki wouldn't (and, politically, couldn't) agree to let its soldiers stay.

The subsequent rise of the Islamic State, born during the US occupation and helped in its recruitment by the sectarian torture and death squad enthusiast the US government installed in Baghdad, has led to the US Air Force once more bombing the country. But Iran is leading the fight on the ground, having “firmly established its hegemony across Iraq,” as the publication *Al-Monitor* noted. Iranian generals are leading Iranian-backed Shiite militias into battle. Those militias now have more soldiers than the US-backed Iraqi army.

“When the army comes, they're working under our orders,” one militia commander told journalist Matthieu Aikins. “We get our ammunition from the army. If we need tanks, we get the army to coordinate. We borrow heavy weapons from them also.” Those weapons are often US weapons, meaning that the US government is indirectly arming the very militias that fought its occupation of Iraq. Although the sale of those weapons makes US weapons makers a tidy profit, the unwanted “liberator” of Iraq is not the only arms dealer around. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia actually sold Baghdad more weapons than the US in 2014. In the last year alone, the Associated Press reports Iran sold its neighbor \$10 billion in arms. By the logic of *cui bono* and nothing else, it would seem that US imperialists invaded Iraq to enrich Moscow and empower the mullahs.

“Not all imperial projects are about economic predation,” Ahmad writes. “Some simply aim to destroy political enemies.” That the chief motivation for invading Iraq wasn't making money or intentionally undermining regional stability in no way absolves the American empire, just as it doesn't absolve a serial killer to say they killed for the thrill not the victim's wallet. Nor is it to say that vast sums of money weren't made: wars always increase the wealth of those who profit from death. But although they provide a structural incentive for a militaristic foreign policy, that doesn't mean that each war is fought specifically on their behalf. It's an acknowledgment, rather, of the facts Ahmad has skillfully assembled detailing the actual arguments that were made in public and private by those directly responsible for starting a war.

It's comforting, in a way, to think that decisions to go to war are always made by competent sociopaths who, amoral though they may be, are at the very least coldly rational, choosing to drop bombs based on the advice of their accountant, not the feeling in their gut. These people

have the nuclear launch codes, so it'd be nice to believe that everything that happens is in accordance with a 30-year plan drawn up at the Bohemian Grove. Alas, even George W. Bush and Dick Cheney are human, which is to say they might have actually believed their message-sending war of convenience would end in a matter of weeks, leaving behind a stable, business-friendly regime that hated Tehran as much as the “real men” did back in Washington. That they had no plan for a multi-year occupation may just have been the product of power's arrogance, not a psychological operation designed to keep us from figuring out they were competent all along (though not competent enough to plant any WMDs “east, west, south and north” of Baghdad, where Donald Rumsfeld said they were).

The war sold to the public on the basis of weapons and ties to terror that did not exist ended up costing trillions of dollars—billions of which simply went missing—and hundreds of thousands of lives. It dramatically increased the power of Iran and left Iraq itself too unstable for most US oil companies to do business. Through the ultra-violence of shock and awe, however, one of the neocons' original aims was indeed achieved. The world was reminded that although the United States may not always be a great friend, it makes a terrible enemy. Teaching that lesson may have undermined the empire's long-term interests and come at a terrible cost to the people of Iraq. But imperial power is held by vindictive humans who aren't always as exclusively focused on dollars and cents as an executive at an oil company. When it comes to killing foreigners in order to send a message its recipients will never forget, their tactics may differ. But liberals and neoconservatives and al-Qaeda alike, linked by their underlying irrationality, are in agreement: the price is worth it.