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The Vocabulary of War Criminals

Invading Iraq Was a “Mistake”

by Rev. WILLIAM E. ALBERTS

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In the land of American exceptionalism, bipartisan political leaders make “mistakes” in foreign policy; they do not commit war *crimes*. The invasion of Iraq offers a much needed case study; and the brother of the president who launched the invasion sets the stage.

Megyn Kelly of Fox News asked 2016 Republican presidential hopeful Jeb Bush about his brother’s pre-emptive war against Iraq: “Knowing what we know now, would you have authorized the invasion?” Bush replied, “I would have and so would have Hillary Clinton, just to remind everybody, and so would have about almost everybody that was confronted with the intelligence they got.” Kelly responded, “You don’t think it was a “mistake?” Bush answered, “In retrospect, the intelligence that everyone saw, that the world saw, not just the United States, was faulty.” (“Exclusive: Jeb Bush on relying on brother’s foreign policy advice,” the Kelly file, *Fox News*, May 12, 2015) The slant of Kelly’s question itself reveals much about the role of mainstream media in redefining a horrible war crime as a “mistake.”

Regarding Jeb Bush, it took him four tries with the press to finally agree with Megyn Kelly that the invasion of Iraq was a “mistake.” The day after putting his brother’s foot in his mouth on *Fox News*, he was given the opportunity to correct himself with accommodating radio host Sean Hannity. “I interpreted the question wrong, I guess,” he told Hannity. “Clearly there were mistakes as it related to faulty intelligence that led up to the war.” The following day, at a town hall meeting in Reno, he hid behind the American families whose sons and daughters were killed and wounded in Iraq: “Going back in time and talking about hypotheticals . . . does a disservice to them.” And at the same town hall meeting, he finally agreed with conventional hindsight: “Of course, given the power of looking back . . . anybody would have made different decisions. There’s no denying that.” (“The Note: Jeb Bush: 3 Days, 4 Different Answers About Iraq,” By Michael Falcone, *ABC News*, May 14, 2015) He denied it as long as he could.

Jeb Bush reveals just how deeply ingrained the denial of criminality is in the American exceptionalism psyche. A *New York Times* story reported on his brush with his brother’s criminality: “Mr. Bush said he would answer the question despite his reservations about the feelings of military families. ‘It is very hard for me to say their lives were lost in vain,’ he said. *‘In fact, they weren’t.’*” (italics added) (“Asked, Again, Bush Says No on Invasion of Iraq,” By Michael Barbaro, May 15, 2015) Never mind the hundreds of thousands to over a million Iraqi civilian lives “lost in vain” in a pre-mediated war against a non-threatening, defenseless country. Bush’s obliviousness is about as immoral as one can get.

Jeb Bush would not dare say American “lives were lost in vain,” even if the invasion of Iraq were seen as a “mistake.” Thus how much anger and rebellion of citizens against the political status quo would arise in America—*like in Iraq today*—if the war were seen as *criminal*. Perish the thought! And the conventional “hindsight” of “faulty intelligence” has done just that!

“In retrospect,” Jeb Bush said, “the intelligence that everyone saw, that the world saw, not just the United States, was faulty.” For emphasis, he then told Megyn Kelly, “By the way, guess who thinks those mistakes took place as well? George W. Bush.” (“Exclusive: Jeb Bush on relying on brother’s foreign policy advice,” *Ibid*)

Actually, George W. Bush is trying to have it both ways. In his memoir *Decision Points*, for which he was reportedly paid a hefty \$7 million advance, he wrote, “No one was more shocked or angry than I was when we didn’t find the weapons . . . The false intelligence proved to be ‘a massive blow to our credibility—my credibility—that would shake the confidence of the American people.’” But Bush had no doubt about his *rightness* in invading Iraq: “Imagine what the world would look like today with Saddam Hussein still ruler of Iraq . . . He would still be threatening his neighbors, sponsoring terror and piling bodies into mass graves.” (“Unlike His Brother, George W. Bush Stands by His Call to Invade *Iraq,” By Peter Baker, *The New York Times*, May 15, 2015)

Let’s “imagine what the world would look like today” if George W. Bush had not been president of the United States. There would probably be far more than a million Iraqi mothers and fathers and their children alive today—rather than many “piled into mass graves.” There would not be 1 to 2 million Iraqi widows, nor 5 million orphans. Nor the destruction of Iraq’s infrastructure and diminishing of the Iraqi people’s quality of life. Nor the terrible sectarian violence between

Sunnis and Shiites. Nor the birth of the Islamic State, or Isis, which, today, is seeking to match America's brutality with its own revengeful pursuit of territory.

If George W. Bush had not become president, some 4,500 American military persons would still be alive, with hundreds of thousands more whole, rather than wounded— many struggling to find adequate treatment in a broken VA health care system. Without Bush in power, there might have been a bipartisan political commitment to invest our country's resources and know-how in *everyone's* pursuit of happiness here— rather than sacrificing lives and resources in the death-dealing criminal pursuit of Iraq's huge oil reserves. There would be love and laughter filling far more American homes today, rather than death and grieving and injury and festering neglect. Without Bush ruling, the American people might have enjoyed real personal and national security—including *far more whole persons, rather than wounded warriors*.

Regarding Iraq's assumed weapons of mass destruction, "hindsight" has become the refuge of those who ignored *foresight*. "No one is more shocked and angry than I was when we didn't find the weapons," George W. Bush said. "The intelligence that everyone saw was . . . faulty," Jeb Bush said.

A chorus of Iraqi war apologists chimed in. Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio told Chris Wallace on Fox News Sunday, "The president was presented with intelligence that said Iraq had weapons of mass destruction." ("Was It a Mistake?": Wallace Presses Rubio on Iraq Invasion," *foxnews.com*, May 17, 2015) Republican presidential contender Ted Cruz told *The Hill*, "The intelligence reports indicated that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction that posed a significant national security threat to this country. . . . We now know in hindsight, those intelligence reports were false." ("Cruz: 'Of course' Iraq was a mistake," By Julian Hattem, May 12, 2015)

Republican presidential aspirant Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker joined the chorus. "I think any president, regardless of party, probably would have made a similar decision to what President Bush did at the time with the information he had available." ("GOP hopefuls debate: Was Iraq a mistake,?" By Katherine Skiba, *LA Times*, May 17, 2015) And as reported, "Most of the potential candidates have focused on what they characterize as an 'intelligence failure' in the prewar assessments of Iraq's weapons program." (*Ibid*)

Front-running Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who voted for the invasion of Iraq when a senator, was upfront about her vote. "I know there have been a lot of questions about Iraq posed to candidates over the last weeks. I've made it very clear that I made a mistake, plain and simple, and I have written about it in my book." ("Hillary Clinton Reiterates" 'I made a Mistake' With Iraq War Vote," By Caitlin MacNeal, *talkingpointsmemo*, May 19, 2015)

"No one was more shocked or angry than I was when we didn't find the weapons," George W. Bush wrote in his memoir. *Bush's fingerprints were all over the "faulty intelligence" on Iraq's assumed weapons of mass destruction*—that "everyone" in "the whole world" *was allowed to see*.

Paul O'Neill, then President Bush's Treasury Secretary, said that removing Saddam Hussein from power "was topic 'A' 10 days after the inauguration—eight months before September 11." ("Bush Sought 'Way' To Invade Iraq," www.cbsnews.com, Jan. 11, 2014) And Richard Clarke, Bush's chief advisor on terrorism, reported that Bush seemed determined to use the 9/11 attacks against America as a pretext to invade Iraq. According to Clarke, Bush told him "to find whether Iraq did this." And when Clarke replied, "We looked into it . . . [and] there's no connection," Bush insisted that he "come back with a report that said Iraq did this." ("Clarke's Take on Terror," www.cbsnews.com, Mar. 21, 2004)

Most telling are the comments of UN Chief weapons inspector Hans Blix. His team was effectively stopped from continuing its search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq when President Bush launched the pre-emptive invasion. Over two months before the invasion, Blix said, "We have now been there [in Iraq] for some two months and been covering the country in ever widening sweeps and we haven't found any smoking guns." ("Blix Says No Smoking Guns found in Iraq," By Edith M. Lederer, Associated Press, *Global Policy Forum*, Jan. 9, 2003) Later Blix was reported to have "lamented" the aborting of the UN inspections by Bush's invasion of Iraq. A *Boston Globe* story quoted Blix: "I don't think it is reasonable to close the door to inspections after 3 ½ months." He "would have welcomed some months more. . . . While inspectors followed up leads from US intelligence," the story continued, "Blix said, 'I must regret we have not found the results in so many cases. We certainly have not found any smoking guns.'" ("Blix Doubts Iraq Will Use Bioweapons," By Elizabeth Neuffer, Mar. 19, 2003)

A year after the invasion, Hans Blix stated in an interview at UC Berkeley, "There were about 700 inspections, and in no case did we find weapons of mass destruction." And "his work in Iraq was cut short when the United States and the United Kingdom took disarmament into their own hands in March of last year." Blix also said, "Had the inspections been allowed to continue . . . there would likely be a very different situation in Iraq today. As it was, America's pre-emptive, unilateral actions 'have bred more terrorism there and elsewhere.'" ("U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix faults the Bush administration for lack of 'critical thinking' in Iraq," By Bonnie Azab Powell, www.berkeley.edu, Mar. 18, 2004)

In a later 2004 interview with *the guardian* newspaper, Hans Blix said that he was "smeared by the Pentagon." Why? "'Towards the end the [Bush] administration leaned on us,' he conceded, hoping the inspectors would employ more damning language in their reports to swing votes on the UN security council." How was he "smeared?" "I have my detractors in Washington. There are bastards who spread things around, of course, who planted nasty things in the media." One of the "nasty things," the story reported, was that "the happily married father of two was being branded in Baghdad as a 'homosexual who went to Washington every two weeks to pick up [his] instructions.'" ("Blix: I was smeared by the Pentagon, By Helena Smith in New York, June 10, 2003)

"The false intelligence proved to be a massive blow to our credibility—my credibility." It is more damning than George W. Bush would have everyone believe.

In an April 23, 2006 CBS TV "60 Minutes" news program, Tyler Drumheller, a top CIA officer, revealed that paid informant, Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabir, a member of Saddam Hussein's

inner circle, “told us that they have no active weapons of mass destruction program.” Drumheller also disclosed that six months before America invaded Iraq, C.I.A. Director George Tenet delivered Sabir’s intelligence breakthrough news at a meeting attended by President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice, then national security advisor. They were only interested in intelligence that would justify their decision to invade Iraq. Drumheller said, “The group preparing for the Iraq war came back and said they’re no longer interested.” When “60 Minutes” host Ed Bradley asked, “What about the intel?,” he continued, “they said it isn’t about intel anymore. It’s about regime change.” Bradley responded, “It directly contradicts what the president and his staff were telling us.” Drumheller replied, “The policy was set. The war in Iraq was coming and they were looking for intelligence to fit . . . to justify the policy.”

Tyler Drumheller’s concluding comment: “Many people want to believe the president. Relatives who I tried to talk to about this said, ‘You can’t tell me the president had this information and just ignored it.’ But,” he concluded, “I think over time, people will look back on this and see it was, this is going to be one of the great, I think, policy mistakes of all time.” (*Ibid*)

Mohamed ElBaradei, former UN nuclear inspector “look[ed] back” and called it a crime, not a “policy mistake.” In his memoir, *The Age of Deception*, ElBaradei states “that Bush administration officials should face an international criminal investigation for the ‘shame of a needless war’ in Iraq.” The Nobel Peace Prize-winning Egyptian “accuses U.S. leaders of ‘grotesque distortion’ in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq invasion, when then President George W. Bush and his lieutenants claimed Iraq possessed doomsday weapons despite contrary evidence collected by ElBaradei and other arms inspector inside the country.” (ElBaradei suggests war crimes probes of Bush team,” *The Monitor*, Apr. 22, 2011)

Mohamed ElBaradei writes that he “‘was aghast’” at “the official U.S. attitude before the March 2003 invasion, which he calls ‘aggression where there is no imminent threat,’ *a war in which he accepts estimates that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed.*” (italics added) Thus he believes “the World Court should be asked to rule on whether the war was illegal. And, if so, ‘should not the International Criminal Court investigate whether this constitutes a war crime and determine who is accountable?’” (*Ibid*)

One would think that religious leaders especially would be “aghast” at the death sentence the Bush administration imposed on a whole nation of people, and join Mohamed ElBaradei in calling for a war crime investigation. In the Boston area, however, religious leaders are not communicating moral outrage over the indiscriminate, massive death sentence America carried out against the Iraqi people. Rather, their publicized moral struggle is with the death sentence Dzhokhar Tsarnaev recently received for his role in the Boston Marathon bombings— that resulted in the tragic deaths of four persons and injuring to 260 others. “Religious leaders conflicted on death penalty” was the headline of a front-page *Boston Globe* Metro story, in response to Tsarnaev’s death sentence. And not a word in the story from the religious leaders interviewed about Tsarnaev’s reported reason for causing such terrible deaths and injuries.

Though one of the Boston area religious leaders did flirt in passing with Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s reported motivation. Rev. Gustave Miracle, associate pastor of St. Angela Merici Church in Mattapan, was quoted as saying that “society would be better off to keep him alive . . . and

perhaps learn why Tsarnaev decided to detonate one of the two bombs that left three dead and hundreds wounded.” (“Religious leaders conflicted on death penalty,” By Jan Ransom and Jacqueline Tempera, *The Boston Globe*, May 18, 2015)

The evidence presented at Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s trial had already indicated why he did it. The motive he allegedly gave is spelled out in the note he apparently wrote in the boat in which he had hidden: “The U.S. Government is killing our innocent civilians but most of you already know that. As a M [bullet hole] I cannot stand to see such evil go unpunished. we Muslims are one body, you hurt one you hurt us all.” (“Here’s the Note Dzhokhar Tsarnaev Wrote Inside the Boat Where He Was Captured,” By Eric Levenson, www.boston.com, Mar. 10, 2015)

These words contain an indictment of America. Thus it is far safer for religious leaders and the status quo-guarding media to refer to Dzhokhar Tsarnsev’s motivation in passing, rather than seriously investigate his charge that the “U.S. Government is killing our innocent civilians.” Safer to pass by the horrible death penalty leveled against people in the whole of Iraq. Safer to be “conflicted” about Boston’s Marathon bombing victims and the death sentence given to a young man. But is it safer? Tsarnaev committed blowback violence, and that violence will continue against us Americans as long as we allow our government to plunder and kill other human beings *in our name*.

This is not to minimize the loss and grieving and struggles of the Marathon bombing victims and their families. Rather it is to point out that all of us need to challenge our political leaders, rather than allow them to continue calling their criminal foreign policy a “mistake.” And religious leaders should be in the forefront: speaking reality and moral truth to political and corporate power, rather than serving as chaplains of the status quo.