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## They caused the Iraq War and remain without shame

James Zogby

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During the past week, as the US president Barack Obama announced the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq, there was considerable media commentary focusing on the lies that had been utilised to build public support for the war.

The two that received the most attention were the argument that Saddam had an active programme to develop weapons of mass destruction and the assertion, made most vigorously by the then vice president Dick Cheney, that there were “proven links” connecting the Iraqi leadership to the terrorist attacks on September 11.

Both were, of course, deliberate fabrications but both did play important roles in shaping public opinion and justifying the invasion of Iraq. The propaganda effort to win support for the war involved much more.

As I note in my forthcoming book *What they are saying to us and why it matters: Arab Voices*, proponents for the war, preying on the public’s lack of basic information about Iraq and its people, made exaggerated claims expressing confidence that the effort would be relatively painless.

A former official at the Pentagon termed it a “cakewalk”. Mr Cheney said “it’ll go ... quickly. Weeks rather than months”. Paul Wolfowitz, another advisor in the Bush administration, estimated the cost of the entire enterprise not to exceed one or two billion dollars, with Iraq’s oil revenues quickly kicking in to “finance its own reconstruction”.

Throughout the media universe, commentators echoed these boasts, regularly churning out outrageous claims on a par with Saddam Hussein’s pre-Gulf War warning that the conflict would be the “mother of all battles”.

Before the invasion began, for example, Bill O’Reilly, a commentator of *Fox News*, wagered “the best dinner in the gaslight district of San Diego that military action will not last more than a week”.

A similarly euphoric (and ultimately equally misleading) statement by Bill Kristol, the editor of the *Weekly Standard*, soon followed: “There is a certain amount of pop psychology in America that the Shia can’t get along with the Sunni . . . There’s almost no evidence of that at all.” Finally, journalist Fred Barnes, another host of a programme on *Fox News*, chimed in: “The war was the hard part . . . It gets easier. I mean, setting up a democracy is hard, but not as hard as winning a war.”

This endless and deadly “spinning” didn’t end with the invasion. Six months into the war, Zogby International conducted the first-ever nationwide poll in Iraq showing that a disturbingly high percentage of Iraqis (including almost the entire Sunni population and a strong majority of Shia) wanted the US to leave their country, did not have a favourable view of the US military’s behaviour, and were not inclined to establish a democracy in Iraq.

A few days after these findings were released, Mr Cheney was on a television news programme citing our poll as evidence of “very positive news”, and using them to make his case that all was going well.

The same penchant for fabrication was in evidence in the hype surrounding the “surge” that the Bush administration implemented in early 2007. It is true that sectarian and intra-sect violence declined during this same period.

But the reasons for this decline had more to do with the fact that the “ethnic cleansing” operations launched by sectarian groups had already left Baghdad’s neighbourhoods purged and divided by barricades. Sunni tribal groups had organised and armed themselves to fight against al Qa’eda before the surge of US troops began.

Despite all this, the same cast of characters who promoted the fabrications that led the US into the war had the temerity to upbraid Mr Obama for failing to give George W Bush sufficient credit for successfully implementing measures that ended the war .

The US combat forces have now been withdrawn, but this war is not over, it has not been a success, and US responsibility has not ended. Iraq remains a fragile country, divided

internally and surrounded by neighbours, some wary of the country's instability and others eager to exploit its vulnerability.

In addition to the 4,400 Americans who died, tens of thousands have been severely wounded and their continued care must remain a national priority in the US. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis also perished and 20 per cent of that country's population at the start of the war are now refugees or internally displaced persons, unable to return home.

Meanwhile, instead of a "beacon of democracy" we see a dysfunctional political order that cannot so easily have closure or implement the results of an election that took place more than six months ago. The nation responsible for this calamity, America, will continue to have a role in Iraq's future.

The US vice president Joseph Biden was right when he noted that "American engagement with Iraq will continue" with a new mission to help the country through reconstruction and reconciliation. And the story doesn't end there.

At some point in history those who brought this disaster down on us all must be called to account for the fabrications, the embarrassment to America's honour, and the death and waste of so many lives. Until that occurs, the conclusion to this sad chapter will not have been written.