Policy Studies Organization

From the Selected Works of Paul J. Rich

2007

Iraq and Hubris

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/paulrich/61/
Iraq and Hubris: Avoiding History
a Review Essay
Paul Rich, Ph.D.
Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War
Michael Isikol and David Corn
Blind into Baghdad: America’s War in Iraq
James Fallows
Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq
Stephen Zinzer
The Politics of Truth: Inside the Lies that Led to War and Betrayed My Wife’s CIA Identity
Joseph Wilson
The Italian Letter: How the Bush Administration Used a Fake Letter to Build the Case for War in Iraq
Peter Eisner and Knut Royce
Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam: or, How Not to Learn From the Past
Lloyd C. Gardner, Marilyn B. Young, Eds.
George Mason University and Hoover Institution, Stanford University

Perhaps the only person who really believed that Iraq existed was Saddam Hussein, paraphrasing remarks by Marshall Tito and Yugoslavia. If anyone in the White House or the Pentagon had bothered to investigate, they would have found that it certainly has never been a truly unitary state in anything but name, and that from the very start of the American invasion, such circumstances called, at least, for a federal approach. The people of Iraq have become the victims of long-standing American hubris which has exacted its toll since the conquest of Mexico in 1848, overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893, subjugation of the Philippines for decades, and engineered coups, revolutions, and invasions in the name of democracy. Chroni- cling much of this in his useful study Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq, Stephen Kinzer notes: American leaders would have done well to reflect on the fate that befell the British when they tried to subdue Iraq after World War I.
Iraqis launched a revolt against the colonial regime in 1920. The British sent troops to suppress it but soon found themselves caught in a spiral of horrific violence. Their occupation, which they expected would last for only a few months, dragged on for thirty-five years. When they finally withdrew from Iraq in 1955, they left behind a weak, unrepresentative political system that ultimately produced Saddam Hussein. Credibility has been one of Iraq’s many casualties. Given the grotesque ruminations by President George W. Bush in the dog days of summer 2007, appealing to the history of the American intrusion and withdrawal in Vietnam as proof that staying in Iraq would save lives, one might ask if history gives any lead as to how the President can find guidance for escaping his purgatory. Possibly the history of Iraq and the Middle East is more pertinent to the situation in Iraq than is the history of Vietnam. If there is a similarity between the Iraq and Vietnam wars, it is not in the dubious virtue the Bush administration found in feeding an endless conflict on the grounds that withdrawal would lead to more deaths, but rather in the dangers of shunning advice rooted in objective research and scholarship. The verdict is already rendered by these volumes here in review on how the Bush team was determinedly deaf, dumb, and blind to counsel. Gabriel Kolko, in an essay in *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam*, sees the problem as how, “preconceived ideas or interests determined how the world was portrayed, and the outcome was disastrous, if only because action frequently bore scant relation to reality...The Vietnam War evolved in this context, and erroneous and often duplicitous estimates provided the setting of every crisis since then – Iraq included. It is crucial that we regard the intelligence and information process as inherently polluted, subject to political whims. The problem has never been knowledge but policy.”

The catastrophic success of the Iraq invasion owes a great deal to the total lack of understanding of the diversity of the population and of their experience at the hands of the Ottoman and British occupation: “No capable security force took the [Iraqi] army’s place, and civilians at the Pentagon, determined to prove Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld’s theory that wars could be won with relatively small numbers of troop, refused to send enough soldiers to patrol the countryside, guard weapons depots, or seal Iraq’s borders to keep out foreign insurgents. Within a few months, enemies of the occupation built the most potent insurgent force the United States had faced since its misadventure in Vietnam.”

This descent into ethnic and religious chaos was a replay of what had befallen the British decades earlier. Iraq defied the best mind of the British Empire and turned the optimism of great Arabists like Gertrude Bell to abject despair. Janet Wallach, in her admirable and almost definitive biography of Gertrude Bell, *Desert Queen*, relates that, “When the war with the Turks was over, the Arabs welcomed their British liberators. But the masses of flowers thrown in the streets soon turned to shouts of anger and tears of despair over the occupation. The British were no longer perceived as friends but as another foreign occupier, neither Arab nor Muslim, who invaded their land, evicted their government, and authorized themselves as rulers.”
When Michael Isiko and David Corn outlined how America got into the Iraq war, they hit upon a title which tells it all: ...Hubris. There is, in fact, a similarity between the war in Iraq and another war, World War I in Iraq. The fate of the Bush administration in Iraq after the World Trade Center tragedy has parallels with the earlier British incursion. Reviewing my second edition of Gertrude Bell’s The Arab of Mesopotamia, Salah D. Hassan noted in Middle East Report, that my criticism of Bell “…directly addresses the political relevance of Bell’s writings for the present. At the end of his introduction, Rich suggests that ‘notwithstanding its apology for British intervention, Bell’s handbook might well be distributed to policymakers of the present era and read profitably by them.’ It is unclear how Bell’s description of Iraq in 1916 could be of use to US officials in the 1990s. Surely Rich does not mean to suggest that the conditions in Iraq have changed little throughout the twentieth century.” As a matter of fact, I did, and do strongly feel that the history of the British intervention in Iraq is relevant to the American debacle there. I emphasized that in the introductions to the 1991 and the 2001 editions of Bell’s The Arab of Mesopotamia. The British found themselves in as much of a quagmire as the Americans did decades later; Professor Hassan remarks, “Rich has no romantic illusions…” This is exactly the point; interfering in a situation without the slightest idea of the complexity of the situation has produced an inevitable result. Not listening has been a root cause of the multiple failures in Iraq. A good example of this arrogance is in the treatment of David Kay, the head of the Iraq Survey Group. It will be recalled that the luckless Dr. Kay and a staff of 1300 scoured Iraq in 2003 for the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that the White House pined for. Isiko and Corn make clear that there were ample warnings that WMD was proving a red herring, but “the president seemed disengaged” over Kay’s protestations: "I’m not sure I’ve spoken to anyone at that level who seemed less inquisitive.” As for Cheney, he publicly proclaimed that bio-weapons labs had been found despite Kay’s telling him that was not true. The most polite and calm of men, an unlikely candidate for making waves or giving anyone a hard time, but with a predilection for truth, Kay complained that for his truthfulness he “became the turd on the table”. He is one of the few to emerge from the Iraq debacle with reputation intact. Another who deserves mention whenever those who stood up and gave a good account of themselves are mentioned was, of course, Ambassador Joseph Wilson. When Bush claimed in his 2003 “State of the Union” address that “Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa”, Wilson knew that this was a lie. He had the gumption to say so in the New York Times, and for his pains, both he and his wife went through perdition. Bush refused to back down, and as Wilson reports in The Politics of Truth, “Condoleezza Rice categorically denied that she or anyone else at senior levels in the White House knew that the received intelligence did not support the charge. Later, when finally forced to admit that the CIA had transmitted two memos and placed one telephone call to the National Security Council on the subject, she
argued that the uranium charge was really just a small part of the nuclear weapons program indictment. Another lie.” 12 Wilson’s assertions are completely supported by the work of Eisner and Royce, which scrupulously documents the duplicity of Cheney, Libby, Tenet, and Bush himself. The worst consequence of the hysteria that has fueled American foreign policy in the Bush Administration has been the demonizing of Islam. Imagine if the Third Reich were described as Lutheran terrorism. The intellectual antecedents of people are no more chargeable for their excesses than are their ancestors, unless we revert to a medieval predestination as an explanation for actions. Leadership has the obligation to inform and temper public opinion, not inflame it: “What had gone wrong? Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Rice and other administration officials had set themselves up by using the most drastic and forceful rhetoric in persuading the nation that the war was necessary. They had approached the invasion of Iraq as though it were a political campaign. They pushed aside doubt, they exaggerated, [and] they shared information with the public selectively.”13 I have always maintained that there is a déjà vu to the Iraq situation — the same dangerous sense of excitement and jauntiness, followed by melancholy when the war is not all medals and success. A chatty letter in 1918 from Bell to her parents, congratulating them on their honors from Buckingham Palace, turned to a more sober note: [5 September 1918] Baghdad Sep 5 Darling Mother. My letters have come back from Persia and lo and behol[e] there were 5 from you, May 14, 17, 22, 30 and June 13, and 2 from Father, May 27 and June 12. So that was a fine haul. Now first my very best congratulations to both of you on your honours. I am delighted. But I would to Heaven I knew how to address you on your envelope? Is it Dame Florence Bell DCIE or KCIE or what? Please let me know this at a very early date as I wish to put all your titles correctly on your letters. As for Father, the C.B. is a nice thing always and I'm very glad about it. That, however, I consider that you both deserve to be made Dukes goes without saying. Why yes of course I wrote all the Arab of Mesopotamia. I've loved the reviews which speak of the practical men who were the anonymous authors etc. It's fun being practical men isn't it...You will be told, at any rate, of the fall of Baku and perhaps you may wonder how it is that we should have attempted to carry on a campaign 500 miles from railhead. I should like to say that no one in this country, military or civil, has contemplated the attempt with other feelings than those of anxiety and dismay, feelings which have been clearly expressed to the authorities at home. If disaster on a small scale is before us, I hope the blame will rest on those who gave the orders.”14 Indeed.

The scholarship that has been prompted by the war, and each of the books under review here has a niche, redresses any mistaken belief that somehow there was a purpose and plan in the invasion of Iraq. The authors, despite different purviews, demonstrate that there was plenty of straightforward advice to be had, but no takers. 120

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A heavy price has been exacted. As retreat is sounded, soldiers are probably encountering snipers using hidden sites that their grand-fathers used against the occupiers in the aftermath of World War I. The caravan moves on. Shortly after Donald Rumsfeld resigned as Secretary of Defense, I was at a Washington reception and noticed his forlorn figure in a corner of the room, completely alone with the shrimp. No doubt just a few weeks before he would have been surrounded by admirers. Now he was a pariah in an unforgiving town. He had learned the hard way what Calvin Coolidge wrote in 1925, that “No nation ever had an army large enough to guarantee it against attack in time of peace or insure it victory in time of war.” The truth of that has recently been armed by the bizarre events recounted in these admirable books recalling a saga which began in some ways with a search for revenge for the World Trade Center tragedy and has unfolded in Iraq. Seldom has statecraft been less informed by history.

NOTES

1 Kinzer, Overthrow, p. 314.
2 Gabriel Kolko, “Familiar Foreign Policy and Familiar Wars: Vietnam, Iraq... Before and After,” Gardener and Young, Eds., p. 163.
3 Kinzer, op. cit., p. 311.
5 Published as Arab War Lords and Iraqi Star Gazers, Paul Rich, Ed. NY and Shanghai: Authors Choice Press, 2001
7 Ibid.
8 Isikoï and Corn, p. 310.
9 Isikoï and Corn, p. 314.
10 Isikoï and Corn, p. 312.
11 After Kay's resignation, I had the privilege, at a ceremony in Washington, of making him a life member of the scholastic honor society, Phi Beta Delta — small recompense for a courageous stand. ••
12 Wilson, Politics of Truth, pp. 330-331.
13 Isikoï and Corn, p. 410.
“The Shiahs and their Position in Iraq,” etc. The only piece that can, with certainty, be attributed to Bell is “Asiatic Turkey” that begins on p. 101, and is stated to be by Bertrude Lowthian Bell. The other papers were, no doubt, written by her male colleagues in either The Arab Bureau, Cairo, or in the Office of the British Military Administrator in Baghdad. Abe Books: http://www.abebooks.co.uk/search/sortby/3/an/Bell+/tn+Arab+Of+Mesopotamia. • Dupont Summit, December 4-6, 2006, Washington, D.C. Conference section website via http://www.ipsonet.org.