

Here We Go Again! Publicity for Ukraine War vs Campaign to Justify 2003 US War on Iraq

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The publicity for the Ukraine war has been handled far more successfully by the US, NATO and allies than the campaign to justify the 2003 US war on Iraq. The Ukraine news is pervasive. It comes from the front, from anchors in Kyiv, from interviews with victims, medical staff and politicians. Moscow-based Western correspondents who dominate the airwaves, television and print media provide unenlightening input from Russia. The war is being won for hearts and minds while bloody battles rage in eastern Ukraine. Blanket efforts to influence global public opinion in favour of the war will go on long after the war ends.

This is true of this week's 20th anniversary coverage of George W. Bush's deadly and destructive war on Iraq which afflicted chaos, anarchy and sectarianism on the core country of the Eastern Arab World (Mashreq) and shook the region. By repeating the three false pretexts for launching the war, the media gives them currency and some credibility. Few commentators state the fact that the US "lied" by saying Iraqi president Saddam Hussein retained banned weapons of mass destruction (WMD), had ties to Al Qaeda which attacked the US in 2001, and, the most farfetched of all, posed a threat to the US. "Lied" is a leaded word which conveys the accusation that the US intended to mislead the global public even this was true.

On the issue of WMD, on the website of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, ex-UN nuclear inspector Robert Kelley wrote, "The UN Special Commission on Iraq [UNSCOM] and the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] Action Team carried out hundreds of person-days of inspections in Iraq [in 1992-1993]. We discovered nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programmes and methodically destroyed them, even to the extent of blowing up entire factories and laboratories and bringing special nuclear materials out of the country." A US expert, Kelley also wrote the report to the IAEA on inspections carried out ahead of the war found no evidence of nuclear material or

equipment. His report was ignored in Washington and London.

The Saddam Hussein-Al Qaeda connection was invented by US officials with the aim of providing Bush with justification for his war but was dismissed by the Senate Intelligence Committee in 2006. Al Qaeda made its appearance in Iraq after the US occupation when Abu Musab Al Zarqawi was tasked by Usama Bin Laden to establish cells in Iraq. Saddam Hussein had neither the aspiration nor possibility to mount strikes on the US which is more than 11,000 kilometres distant from Baghdad.

On April 9, 2007, former director of Central Intelligence George Tenet said on a 60 Minutes television interview, "We could never verify that there was any Iraqi authority, direction and control, complicity with Al Qaeda for 9/11 or any operational act against America, period."

Twenty years on lies and misrepresentations continue to be adopted by today's politicians and commentators. The most common is that Saddam Hussein established "a minority Sunni regime". This, somehow, justified its removal.

Although Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, appointed relatives to senior posts, the government was secular and included Christian, Kurdish and Shiite ministers in key roles. Deputy prime minister and foreign minister Tareq Aziz was a Christian. Defence industry and industry minister Amr Al Sadi — who built weapons used by Iraq during the Iran war and liaised with UN weapons inspectors — is a Shiite. He was not a member of the ruling Baath Party. His brother was a high ranking official in the oil ministry. An early Baathist who reached the top ranks of the party, Saadoun Hammadi, another Shiita, was oil minister, prime minister, and foreign minister. Mohammed Saeed Al Sahhaf, a Shiita born in Karbala like Hammadi, served as information and foreign minister. Iraq's health minister in the 1990s was a Kurd whom I met in Baghdad in 1992 or 1993 during a conference convened by a Jordanian doctors' association. The majority of members in the Baath and Communist parties were Shiitas who made up about 55 per cent of the population.

Two examples of Monday's 20th anniversary coverage are revealing.

Commenting in The Washington Post about US Secretary of State Colin Powell's pre-war statement on WMD to the UN Security Council, Ishaan Tharoor said that he "would lament the defects in the US intelligence process" which gave Bush the pretext to wage war. There were no "defects" just lies which were recognised as lies at the time by opponents and critics of the war.

Beating around the bush, Tharoor admitted that "Saddam's regime" was "nominally secular" although it was, in fact, "secular" and inclusive. Tharoor also wrote that the "regime ..presided over a united sense of Iraqi identity that was, to a certain extent, broken up by the US invasion and its aftermath". There was an Iraqi identity before the war and, there was no "certain extent" about the US effort, launched in May 2003, to destroy the Iraqi identity. The US imposed a divide-and-rule system of governance based on ethnic — Arab-Kurd — and sectarian — Shiite and Sunni — identity. Instead of democracy, this system has produced sectarian and ethnic cleansing and rule by expatriate pro-Iranain Shiita militia leaders turned politicians.

In her 50-minute BBC documentary, "A Choice of Horrors", Caroline Wyatt interviewed a number of academics, journalists and ex-officials on the whys and wherefores of the war. The programme was divided between interviews with proponents and opponents of the war.

Pro-ponents relied on non-existent WMD and Saddam Husein’s repression. Wyatt argued correctly that the end of the Cold War left the US as the global hyperpower which, after 2000, had the muscle to conduct “humanitarian interventions” although the Iraq war was a straightforward war of conquest and not a “humanitarian intervention”. While opponents spoke of US hubris and argued Iraq emerged from the US war broken, violent and impoverished, they were overshadowed by proponents who spoke first. This weakened the conclusion that the US intervention was worse than non-intervention. The war of words over the US war on Iraq continues unabated.

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