

Iraq and 15 Lessons We Never Learned

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Global Research, March 18, 2023

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [USA](#)
Theme: [History](#), [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War](#)
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The peace movement did a great many things right in the first decade of this millennium, some of which we've forgotten. It also fell short in many ways. I want to highlight the lessons I think we've most failed to learn and suggest how we might benefit from them today.

1. We formed uncomfortably large coalitions. We brought together war abolitionists with people who simply adored every war in human history but one. We probably didn't hold a single event at which there wasn't somebody pushing a theory about 9-11 that required some level of lunacy just to understand. We didn't put most of our effort into distinguishing ourselves from other peace advocates or seeking to get people canceled; we put most of our effort into trying to end a war.
2. It all began to fall apart in 2007, after Democrats had been elected to end the war and escalated it instead. People had a choice in that moment to stand on principle and demand peace, or to kneel before a political party and peace be damned. Millions made the wrong choice, and have never understood it. Political parties, especially when combined with legalized bribery and a subservient communications system, are deadly to movements. The war was ended by a movement compelling George W. Bush to sign an agreement to end it, not by electing Obama, who only ended it when that agreement made him do so. The point is not the idiotic strawman that one should ignore elections or pretend that political parties don't exist. The point is to put elections second. You don't even have to put them millionth, only second. But put policy first. Be for peace first, and make public servants serve you, not the other way around.

3. A “war based on lies” is simply a longwinded way of saying “a war.” There is no such thing as a war not based on lies. What distinguished Iraq 2003 was the ineptness of the lying. “We are going to find vast stockpiles of weapons” is a really, really stupid lie to tell about a place where you are very shortly going to fail to find any such thing. And, yes, they knew that was the case. In contrast, “Russia is going to invade Ukraine tomorrow” is a really smart lie to tell if Russia is about to invade Ukraine sometime in the next week, because nobody is going to care that you got the day wrong, and statistically practically nobody is going to have the resources to understand that what you’ve really said is “Now that we’ve broken promises, torn up treaties, militarized the region, threatened Russia, lied about Russia, facilitated a coup, opposed a peaceful resolution, supported attacks on Donbas, and escalated those attacks in recent days, while mocking utterly reasonable peace proposals from Russia, we can count on Russia invading, just as we’ve strategized to make happen including in published RAND reports, and when that happens, we are going to load the whole zone up with more weapons than we ever pretended Saddam Hussein had, and we’re going to block any peace negotiations in order to keep the war going as hundreds of thousands die, which we don’t think you’ll object to even if it risks nuclear apocalypse, because we’ve pre-conditioned you with five years of ludicrous lies about Putin owning Trump.”

4. We never said one word about the evil of the Iraqi side of the war on Iraq. Even though you may know, or suspect — pre-Erica Chenoweth — that nonviolence is more effective than violence, you aren’t permitted to utter one word against Iraqi violence or you’re accused of blaming the victims or asking them to lie down and be killed or some other stupidity. To simply state that Iraqis might be better off using exclusively organized nonviolent activism, even while you are working day and night to get the U.S. government to end the war, is to become an arrogant imperialist telling one’s victims what to do and somehow magically forbidding them to “fight back.” And so there is silence. One side of the war is evil and the other good. You can’t cheer for that other side without becoming an ostracized traitor. But you must believe, exactly as the Pentagon believes but with the sides switched, that one side is pure and holy and the other evil incarnate. This hardly constitutes ideal preparation of the mind for a war in Ukraine where, not only is the other side (the Russian side) clearly engaged in reprehensible horrors, but those horrors are the primary topic of corporate media. Opposing both sides of the war in Ukraine and demanding peace is denounced by each side as somehow constituting support for the other side, because the concept of more than one party being flawed has been erased from the collective brain through thousands of fairy tales and other content of cable news. The peace movement did nothing to counter this during the war on Iraq.

5. We never made people understand that the lies were not only typical of all wars, but also, as with all wars, irrelevant and off-topic. Every lie about Iraq could have been perfectly true and there would have been no case for attacking Iraq. The U.S. openly acknowledged having every weapon it pretended Iraq had, without

creating any case for attacking the United States. Having weapons is not an excuse for war. It makes no difference whether it's true or false. The same can be said of economic policies of China or anyone else. This week I watched a video of a former prime minister of Australia ridiculing a bunch of journalists for not being able to distinguish China's trade policies from an imaginary and ludicrous fantasy of a Chinese threat to invade Australia. But is there a member of the U.S. Congress who can make that distinction? Or a follower of either U.S. political party who will be able to much longer? The war in Ukraine has been named by the U.S. government/media the "Unprovoked War" — quite obviously precisely because it was so clearly provoked. But this is the wrong question. You don't get to wage a war if it was provoked. And you don't get to wage a war if the other side was unprovoked. I mean, not legally, not morally, not as part of a strategy for preserving life on Earth. The question is not whether Russia was provoked, and not merely because the obvious answer is yes, but also because the question is whether peace can be negotiated and established justly and sustainably, and whether the U.S. government has been impeding that development while pretending that only Ukrainians want the war to continue, not Lockheed-Martin stock holders.

6. We didn't follow through. There were no consequences. The architects of the murder of a million people went golfing and got rehabilitated by the very same media criminals who had pushed their lies. "Looking forward" replaced the rule of law or a "rules based order." Open profiteering, murder, and torture became policy choices, not crimes. Impeachment was stripped from the Constitution for any bipartisan offenses. There was no truth and reconciliation process. Now the U.S. works to prevent the reporting of even Russian crimes to the International Criminal Court, because preventing any sort of rules is the top priority of the Rules Based Order, and it hardly makes news. Presidents have been given all war powers, and darn near everybody has failed to grasp that the monstrous powers given to that office are drastically more important than which flavor of monster occupies the office. A bipartisan consensus opposes ever using the War Powers Resolution. While Johnson and Nixon had to clear out of town and opposition to war lasted long enough to label it a sickness, the Vietnam Syndrome, in this case the Iraq Syndrome lasted long enough to keep Kerry and Clinton out of the White House, but not Biden. And nobody has drawn the lesson that these syndromes are fits of wellness, not illness — certainly not the corporate media which has investigated itself and — after a quick apology or two — found everything in order.
7. We still talk about the media as having been an accomplice to the Bush-Cheney gang. We look back condescendingly at the age in which journalists claimed that one could not report that a president had lied. We now have media outlets in which you cannot report that anyone at all has lied if they are a member of one criminal cartel or the other, the elephants or the donkeys. It's time we recognize how much the media outlets wanted the war on Iraq for their own profit and ideological reasons, and that the media has played the leading role in building

up hostility with Russia and China, Iran and North Korea. If anyone is playing supporting actor in this drama, it is government officials. At some point we'll have to learn to appreciate whistleblowers and independent reporters and to recognize that corporate media as a mass is the problem, not just one part of the corporate media.

8. We never did even really try to teach the public that the wars are one-sided slaughters. U.S. polling for years found majorities believing the sick and ridiculous ideas that U.S. casualties were somewhere near equivalent to Iraqi casualties and that the U.S. had suffered more than Iraq, as well as that Iraqis were grateful, or that Iraqis were inexcusably ungrateful. The fact that well over 90% of the deaths were Iraqis never got through, nor the fact that they were disproportionately the very old and young, nor even the fact that wars are fought in people's towns and not on 19th century battlefields. Even if people come to believe that such things happen, if they are told tens of thousands of times that they only happen if Russia does them, nothing useful will have been learned. The U.S. peace movement made the conscious choice over and over and over again for years and years to focus on the damage the war was doing to U.S. troops, and the financial cost to taxpayers, and not to make ending a one-sided slaughter a moral question, as if people don't empty their pockets for faraway victims when they learn that they exist. This was the boomerang result of the spitting lies and other wild tales and exaggerations of mistakes of blaming the rank-and-file troops who destroyed Vietnam. A smart peace movement, its elders believed, would stress sympathizing with troops to the point of not telling anyone what the basic nature of the war was. Here's hoping that if a peace movement grows again it deems itself capable of walking while chewing gum.

9. The United Nations got it right. It said no to the war. It did so because people around the world got it right and applied pressure to governments. Whistleblowers exposed U.S. spying and threats and bribes. Representatives represented. They voted no. Global democracy, for all its flaws, succeeded. The rogue U.S. outlaw failed. Not only did U.S. media/society fail to begin listening to the millions of us who didn't lie or get everything wrong — allowing the warmongering clowns to go on failing upward, but it never became acceptable to learn the basic lesson. We need the world in charge. We do not need the world's leading holdout on basic treaties and structures of law in charge of law enforcement. Much of the world has learned this lesson. The U.S. public needs to. Foregoing one war for democracy and democratizing the United Nations instead would work wonders.

10. There are always options available. Bush could have given Saddam Hussein \$1 billion to clear out, a reprehensible idea but far superior to giving Halliburton hundreds of billions in a campaign to ruin the lives of tens of millions of people, permanently poison vast swaths of territory, predictably generate terrorism and

instability, and fuel war after war after war. Ukraine could have complied with Minsk 2, a better and more democratic and stable deal than it is likely to ever see again. The options always get worse, but always remain far better than continuing war. At this point, after openly admitting that Minsk was a pretense, the West would need actions rather than words merely to be believed, but good actions are readily available. Pull a missile base out of Poland or Romania, join a treaty or three, constrain or abolish NATO, or support international law for all. The options are not hard to think of; you're just not supposed to think them.

11. The underlying, WWII-based mythology that teaches people that a war can be good is rotten to the core. With Afghanistan and Iraq it took a year-and-a-half each to get good U.S. majorities in polls saying the wars never should have been started. The war in Ukraine appears to be on the same trajectory. Of course, those who believed the wars shouldn't have been started did not, for the most part, believe they should be ended. The wars had to be continued for the sake of the troops, even if the actual troops were telling pollsters they wanted the wars ended. This troopism was very effective propaganda, and the peace movement did not effectively counter it. To this very day, the blowback is minimized as so many believe it would be inappropriate to mention that U.S. mass shooters are disproportionately veterans. Slandering all veterans in the hollow minds of those who cannot grasp that 99.9% of people are not mass shooters at all is deemed a greater danger than creating more veterans. The hope is that U.S. opposition to the war in Ukraine may grow in the absence of the troopist propaganda, as U.S. troops are not involved in large numbers and not supposed to be involved at all. But the U.S. media is pushing heroic stories of Ukrainian troops, and if no U.S. troops are involved, and if the nuclear apocalypse will stay within a magic European bubble, then why end the war at all? Money? Will that be enough, when everyone knows that money is simply invented if a bank or a corporation needs it, whereas reducing money spent on weapons will not increase money spent on any enterprise that isn't set up to recycle chunks of it into election campaigns?

12. The wars ended, mostly. But the money didn't. The lesson was neither taught nor learned that the more you spend on preparing for wars, the more war you're likely to get. The war on Iraq, which generated hatred and violence around the globe, is now credited with keeping the United States safe. The same tired old bullshit about fighting them over there or over here is regularly heard on the floor of Congress in 2023. U.S. generals involved in the war on Iraq are presented in the U.S. media in 2023 as experts on victories, because they had something to do with a "surge," even though no surge ever produced any victory. Russia and China and Iran are held up as threatening evils. The need for empire is openly admitted in keeping troops in Syria. The centrality of oil is discussed without shame, even if pipelines are blown up with a wink. And so, the money keeps flowing, at a greater pace now than during the war on Iraq, at a greater pace now than at any time since WWII. And the Halliburtonization continues, the privatization, the profiteering, and the pseudo-rebuilding services. The absence

of consequences has consequences. Not a single serious pro-peace Congress Member remains. As long as we continue to oppose only particular wars for particular reasons, we'll lack the necessary movement to put a plug in the sewer drain that sucks down over half of our income taxes.

13. Thinking longer term while trying to prevent or end a particular war would impact our strategies in many ways, not by cartoonishly reversing them, but by significantly adjusting them, and not just in terms of how we talk about troops. A little long-term strategic thought is enough, for example, to create serious concerns about pushing patriotism and religion as part of advocating for peace. You don't see environmental advocates pushing love for ExxonMobil. But you do see them shying away from taking on the U.S. military and war celebrations. They learn that from the peace movement. If the peace movement won't demand the global cooperation in place of war that's needed to avoid nuclear disaster, how can the environmental movement be expected to demand the peaceful cooperation necessary to slow and mitigate the collapse of our climate and ecosystems?

14. We were too late and too small. The biggest global march in history was not big enough. It came with record speed but was not early enough. And not repeated enough. In particular it was not big enough where it mattered: in the United States. It's wonderful to have had such massive turnout in Rome and London, but the lesson mislearned in the United States was that public demonstrations do not work. This was the wrong lesson. We overwhelmed and won over the United Nations. We constrained the size of the war and prevented a number of additional wars. We generated movements that led into the Arab Spring and Occupy. We blocked the massive bombing of Syria and created a deal with Iran, as the "Iraq Syndrome" lingered. What if we had begun years earlier? It's not as if the war wasn't advertised ahead. George W. Bush campaigned on it. What if we had mobilized *en masse* for peace in Ukraine 8 years ago? What if we were to protest the predictable steps toward war with China now, while they are being taken, rather than after the war starts and it becomes our national duty to pretend they never occurred? There is such a thing as being too late. You can blame me for this message of gloom and doom or thank me for this motivation to get into the streets in solidarity with your brothers and sisters across the globe who want life to continue.

15. The biggest lie is the lie of powerlessness. The reason the government spies on and disrupts and constrains activism is not that its pretense of paying no attention to activism is real, just the opposite. Governments pay very close attention. They know damn well that they cannot continue if we withhold our consent. The constant media push to sit still or cry or shop or wait for an election is there for a reason. The reason is that people have far more power than the individually powerful would like them to know. Reject the biggest lie and the

others will fall like the imperialists' mythical dominoes.

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This article was originally published on WorldBeyondWar.Org.

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