

February 2013

The Iraq War Ten Years Later

For *Century Weekly*

By Richard N. Cooper

The United States and its coalition partners (especially Britain) invaded Iraq in March 2003, ten years ago. The anniversary provides an occasion to take stock. The ostensible reason for the invasion was that, in violation of United Nations resolutions, the Iraq of Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD – nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons). That was certainly a major reason. The US intelligence community, while lacking hard evidence, certainly thought he had hidden WMD programs, and Saddam's evasive behavior re-enforced that view. He had systematically thwarted the attempted investigations by international inspectors for nuclear programs, and finally expelled them altogether. He was known to have had both nuclear and biological weapons programs in the mid-1990s, revealed by his son-in-law who escaped to Jordan, and subsequently investigated. Those programs had allegedly ended, but Saddam's cat-and-mouse games with the international inspectors suggested otherwise. Moreover, Iraq had used chemical weapons against Iran in the 1980s and against some dissident Iraqi villages, although it did not use them against the coalition of forces that liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991. However, it was assumed Iraq still had such weapons.

Ever suspicious Russians thought the invasion of Iraq was mainly about oil, with the US aim of seizing and pumping more Iraqi oil in order to drive down the world price and hurt Russia, whose major export was oil. (I heard this view personally from retired Russian generals and officials in late 2002.) This view ignored the fact that President Bush was backed among others by American producers of oil, who wanted a higher price for oil, not a lower one, although the American public wanted a lower oil price – and neither of these conflicting desires had anything to do with Russia. This is only one of many examples where the people or even the leaders of a country interpret the actions of others in a self-centered way, paying no attention to the debate in the country undertaking the actions, and thus misinterpreting others and misleading themselves.

There were however other influences on the decision to invade Iraq. Iraq posed a threat to Israel with its missiles, possibly carrying chemical weapons, and Saddam was openly hostile to Israel, so some pro-Israel voices urged that he be toppled. And some senior members of the younger Bush administration felt that his father as President in 1991 ended the Gulf War too soon, before destroying Saddam's Republican Guard and weakening if not toppling him. Finally, Bush himself loathed authoritarian leaders that devastated their own people, and he made clear that he included Iraq as well as North Korea under this heading, as reported by Bob Woodward.

We now know that Iraq did not have concealed WMD, or even an active program to produce them, after intensive post-war inspections of the country. But that was not known before the war.

Saddam apparently considered his most formidable enemy to be Iran, and he wanted Iran to believe that he had such weapons, willing to deceive the international community to carry out that deception, and believing that at the end of the day the international community, or the United States and its close allies, would not in fact invade his country.

The military campaign was executed efficiently and was a short one; the Iraqi government fell within a month, and Saddam went into hiding. The US Defense Department plan for the postwar period involved creating soon an Iraqi Interim Authority made up of Iraqis that had not been associated with Saddam's Baathist regime, drawn from inside and the Iraqi exile community. It was to be given some authority at once, such as foreign affairs and agricultural affairs, which would gradually be increased over time. It presumably would also start the process of writing a new constitution and preside over the election of a full-fledged Iraqi government when the time was appropriate. That plan was never fully embraced by the Bush Administration and was late in starting. The situation on the ground was not conducive to early Iraqi decision-making, and Bush did not want to be seen as imposing leaders on Iraq, particularly drawn from the exile community. Military planning focused on winning the war quickly, not on constabulary duty afterwards, and there were too few coalition (US, British, Australian, Polish) troops to impose order on the Iraqi population. The result was extensive looting, especially of government buildings, and score-settling against Baathists. The disorder gradually evolved over time to sectarian violence, particularly between the majority shia muslims and the formerly dominant sunni muslims.

Anti-foreign insurgency started as early as July 2003, something the Americans had not anticipated since they saw themselves as liberators, not as conquerors. Some Iraqis also saw them as liberators, but not all. A determined and armed minority can create a lot of trouble. The United States looked as though it had not prepared for the postwar period. In fact, they were prepared for some contingencies (such as sabotage of the oil facilities), but not for others. US troops finally left nine years later, at the end of 2011, after taking 4800 coalition losses and observing an estimated 117,000 deaths of Iraqis, over 85 percent due to sectarian violence between sunnis and shia and other fighting among Iraqis.

What is the legacy? One is the death of Saddam, one of the worst villains of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, condemned by an Iraqi court for crimes against Iraqis. Another is a popularly elected parliament under a contentious constitution, with an increasingly authoritarian prime minister, and continued sectarian terrorist bombings, either out of vengeance for earlier bombings or to destabilize the government, or both. Strategically, Iraq, and hence the entire Arab community, has been weakened with respect to Iran, a traditional adversary, which perhaps harbors vague aspirations of re-establishing ancient Persian dominance throughout the region – a surely unintended and apparently unexpected consequence of the US invasion. Will Iraqi democracy take hold and endure? Perhaps, as Premier Chou Enlai said when asked about the impact of the French Revolution, it is too early to tell.