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THE WAR IN IRAQ

Question: Who said the following and when?

I think that the proposition of going to Baghdad is also fallacious. I think if we were going to remove Saddam Hussein we would have had to go all the way to Baghdad, we would have to commit a lot of force because I do not believe he would wait in the Presidential Palace for us to arrive. I think we'd have had to hunt him down. And once we'd done that and we'd gotten rid of Saddam Hussein and his government, then we'd have had to put another government in its place. What kind of government? Should it be a Sunni government or Shi'i government or a Kurdish government or Ba'athist regime? Or maybe we want to bring in some of the Islamic fundamentalists? How long would we have had to stay in Baghdad to keep that government in place? What would happen to the government once U.S. forces withdrew? How many casualties should the United States accept in that effort to try to create clarity and stability in a situation that is inherently unstable? I think it is vitally important for a President to know when to use military force. I think it is also very important for him to know when not to commit U.S. military force. And it's my view that the President got it right both times, that it would have been a mistake for us to get bogged down in the quagmire inside Iraq.

Answer: Dick Cheney, Washington Institute, 1991

A WHAT IS GOING WRONG AND WHY?

To understand what is going wrong today and why, it's important to recap the genesis of the Iraq war.

In the wake of Sept 11, there was a huge outpouring of international support for the US. Indeed, one French newspaper famously declared that "We are all Americans now."

International consensus built rapidly in support of the strike on Afghanistan to end the Taliban regime which had harboured Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

That attack initially proved highly successful (albeit bin Laden escaped) and there was every sense that a new, democratic nation could be created in the country.

However, pretty soon after the seeming "victory" in Afghanistan, talk within the Bush administration turned to its next target, Iraq.

Opinions differ on the real basis for this shift:

- WMD – none
- Iraq a rogue state in league with Al Qaeda – no evidence – originally rejected by Howard as sufficient justification for war
- Iraq breaching UN resolutions and sanctions – contrast AWB which was actually breaching sanctions to the tune of \$300m bribes to Hussein under Howard government watch
- Regime change/democratisation/national building – rejected as justifications for invasion by John Howard
- Others more conspiratorially suggest oil – certainly oil and other geo-political and strategic interests would have been part of the Bush calculus and factored into the ultimate decision
- Occam's Razor (simplest explanation) – Bush arguably sought a mandate as a "War" President to define his presidency and to assist in creating Republican political dominance for decades to come, and certainly there is plenty of evidence via Bob Woodward (*State of Denial*, 2006), and other commentators such as Frank Rich (*Greatest Story ever Sold*, 2007) and Thomas Ricks (*Fiasco*, 2006) to support this contention and on the basis that Bush is a politician, this may be the simplest and most obvious explanation
- Similarly, he also likely learnt the lesson from George H W Bush and Gulf War 1 – ie, don't actually have the war end

In the end, as the Downing Street memo of July 2002 highlighted: in the end WMD was merely the most convenient and most sellable of the rationalisations for the invasion and that ultimately the "intelligence and the facts were being fixed around the policy" to invade.

Since the original invasion we can see the rhetorical shifts by our government, continuously seeking to argue support for the war: including re-workings of key phrases out of the US playbook: “stay the course”, we must not “cut and run”.

Unfortunately, fact on the ground have tended to undercut all these kinds of lines.

Further, along the way the public has witnessed not just the deterioration of the invasion into civil war but also other shocks, scandals and revelations:

- the looting of Baghdad immediately following the invasion
- Abu Ghraib
- AWB
- Civilian death toll ranging between 60,000 to as high as 600,000 (disgraceful that there is no accurate data and government strongly denies the legitimacy of the higher figure, despite the fact the UK’s own Department of Defence says the Lancet survey was credibly based)
- No evidence of post-war planning
- Iraq is now a terrorist haven, so the invasion has become a self-fulfilling prophecy
- Afghanistan continues to remain highly problematic, and requiring of greater troop commitment and materiel

“If you break it, you own it”, Colin Powell told the US President prior to the invasion, and certainly with over 3000 servicemen dead and countless tens of thousands seriously wounded and with a financial cost of several hundreds of billions, the US has significant interests in the outcome of the war, as the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice acknowledges

Kofi Annan: paradox of “can’t stay, can’t leave”

Equally when asking ourselves what is going wrong we can reflect on the fact that mala fides, bad motives, have led to the inevitable bad outcomes.

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that increasingly many Australians don’t believe the current government on many issues of public policy, and certainly from kids overboard through to Iraq’s missing WMDs there is plenty of evidence to see the government being loose with the truth.

A decade of such behaviour may finally be starting to take its toll,

And perhaps current polls are reflecting the fact the public is unconvinced about the various justifications the Howard Government continues to use to support its policies – and most tellingly the outcomes of those policies are becoming increasingly harder to spin, with the Iraq disaster being the most notable example.

In the past the PM was prone to suggest that the Iraq war was at a “tipping point” or more recently that we are witnessing a “hinge moment”.

The US witnessed such a tipping point last November. We are obviously going to have to wait and see whether Australians require some penalty from a government which has supported such a rolled gold strategic disaster such as the Iraq invasion.

Prime Minister Howard says that the real question is what we do now – if the Americans pull out there will be a massive loss of American prestige.

Responses

- 1 If this had happened under a Labor government the world would have stopped until we departed the political stage in disgrace; the Liberals would be demanding our heads for such a monumental debacle.
- 2 They should have thought about the prestige issue before they went in in the first place – the invasion was not bi-partisan in Australia, and indeed did not have a UN mandate or authority, but the Bush and Howard Administrations were the know-alls who knew better.
- 3 How many more military and civilians are going to die in order that the Americans suffer no loss of face? You would think that we would have learnt something from Vietnam, but this war is no better – it will go on until we get out of there.
- 4 Yes, we ought to be good friends of the Americans and support them. But sometimes being a good mate involves not going along with every silly idea your mate comes up with and telling your mate they've got it wrong.

2 **WHAT IS THE BEST WAY FORWARD? HOW SHOULD AUSTRALIA DISENGAGE FROM IRAQ? HOW SHOULD THE ALP APPROACH IRAQ?**

Important to recognise the nature of the current conflict in Iraq and also to distinguish it from the situation in Afghanistan.

Along with the broad world community and in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 Australia supported and supports action in Afghanistan to combat and defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda, who have provided the foundations for extreme Islamist terrorists for close to two decades, and which provided the kernel of support for jihadists in our region, including those involved in the Bali bombing.

So we recognise our obligations under the ANZUS treaty, and also that bin Laden and the Taliban need to be destroyed. But we also have to bear in mind that for several years the Government withdrew from this theatre, before the job was done, to get involved in the Iraq adventure, so in committing more troops now we are trying to make up for lost time.

In contrast, Iraq has now become effectively a civil and sectarian war, involving inter-ethnic and inter-religious forces.

Tragically, rather than mitigating and decreasing the risks of global terrorism, the Iraq invasion has merely spawned new terror in the region and created a training zone for jihadists.

The fact that the current US and Australian administrations conflate the two conflicts demonstrates a failure to comprehend reality.

As distinct to Afghanistan, in Iraq the international community sees the need to find **political** solutions.

This is recognised even within the US foreign policy establishment. Look at the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group report of late 2006 and recent moves taken by the Democrat controlled Congress and Senate in the wake of mid-term elections last year and the “thumpin’” of the Bush Republicans.

Iraq is a civil war and demands political reconciliation between the disputing Islamic groups – the Iraqis are the only people who can ultimately resolve their security crisis.

The only people who are in denial and don't seem to see this reality are the Bush-Cheney presidency and the Howard government. The PM seems to have personalised the ANZUS treaty and because of his relationship with the current US President, Australia is committing itself to self-defeating support for Bush's high-risk/low percentage 'surge' strategy.

So out of the work of the Iraq Study Group and others the broad framework for how the international community manages the Iraq situation going forward would include:

- the need to set performance benchmarks for the phased withdrawal of allied troops, in line with the Baker-Hamilton report
- setting limits to our involvement so that we send a message to the al-Maliki government that it must do more to curb sectarian violence
- define the mission and the exit strategy

The Opposition has sought to define both our mission and an appropriate exit process, such that on election a Labor government would take measured steps to withdraw Australian combat troops from Iraq, but we would do that in a sensible and responsible way in consultation with both the US and the UK.

In changing our troop commitment in Iraq Australia would be doing no more or less than countless other nations who have either removed or withdrawn troops, including the UK, Spain, Italy, Japan, Ukraine, the Philippines, Thailand, Norway, The Netherlands and South Korea, to name a few.

Australia has about 1400 military personnel in its various Iraq commitments. Of these approximately 900 won't be affected including those involved with HMAS Toowoomba on Gulf duties; overflight missions by P-3C Orion aircraft and its personnel and the Hercules C130 detachment providing supply and medical assistance. There are also over 100 personnel protecting the Australian embassy and officials in Baghdad.

However some 500 combat troops in Dhi Qar province will be withdrawn in a sensible and responsible way. It is worth noting that even the Defence Minister recently acknowledged that they have not been involved in any direct military actions as such.

By conflating the Afghanistan and Iraq missions, the Government demonstrates its denial of reality and exposes that its foreign policy is being dictated by considerations other than Australia's genuine national security interests.

3 REPAIRING AUSTRALIA'S REPUTATION AS A GOOD INTERNATIONAL CITIZEN

In 1996 on coming to office the Howard Government removed reference to Australia being a "good international citizen" as an objective of Australian foreign policy.

Certainly the last decade has seen the effect of this strategy across a number of key areas including:

- lack of respect for international law, as highlighted in our decision to participate in the invasion of Iraq.
- our diminished human rights reputation and increasing disengagement from promoting human rights via increased criticism of human right bodies.
- undermining international labour standards.
- isolation from what Shadow Foreign Affairs spokesman Robert McClelland terms "inconvenient truths", eg AWB committing the largest breaches of UN sanctions even while one of the reasons we invaded Iraq was in the name of its breaching such sanctions; equally our failure to act even when allegations concerning the abuses at Abu Ghraib were made known to the Australian government directly.
- failure to defend the rights of our citizens to due process – David Hicks, supporting Guantanamo Bay process.

Consequently our capacity to advocate Australian national interests from a position of strength as a good international citizen is severely compromised, and this affects our international bargaining power over issues as diverse and as important as trade policy, climate change, disarmament and international security.