

RIGHT WAR OR WRONG WAR?

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAR 21 2010

It is seven years since a US led coalition invaded Iraq, deposing Saddam Hussein and becoming involved in a long, costly stabilization operation that is supposedly about to end soon with the withdrawal of US combat units. More than 4,700 coalition troops, 4,385 of them Americans, have died so far in this effort. The Iraqi toll is unknown, but surely is in the tens of thousands. Horrific violence has taken place, with millions of Iraqis displaced from their homes and forced into internal or external exile. Was the invasion the right thing to do?

Several justifications offered for the war have been proven wrong. The Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) justification failed in the post-invasion search for evidence. Although the claim that Saddam had at least chemical weapons was nearly universally believed among intelligence agencies, the truly dangerous weapons would have been nuclear weapons which hardly anyone thought Saddam was close to possessing in 2003 (thanks to the inspections that followed the Gulf War). Moreover, it was likely that the threat of retaliation could have contained even a nuclear armed Saddam as it had contained the nuclear armed Soviet Union. But the coalition's formation and a good part of US public support for the war depended upon the dangers that could be asserted about a Saddam running lose with WMD. It was political disaster of the first order for the coalition, and especially for President Bush, that not a single bunker full of viable chemical weapons was found.

The democratization of the Middle East argument, which claimed peace would flow as democracy spread from its establishment in Iraq, was mostly a quick, politically astute substitute for a fading WMD justification. Spreading democracy is a constant and popular ideological component of American foreign policy. But this justification had the burden of finding a viable, democratic government for Iraq, a task that seemingly crashed in the chaos of sectarian and tribal warfare that followed the removal of Saddam. Even today after years of foreign tutelage and a bloody civil war, it is unclear whether or not a stable, democratic government will rule in Iraq. Hardly anyone in the Middle East wants to repeat the Iraqi experience. If a democratic government takes hold in Iraq there will likely be regional effects, but it is not at all certain that they will be all beneficial or peaceful.

A claim that Saddam was in league with al Qaeda was asserted prior to the invasion although not widely believed. The evidence supporting a link with Saddam was never great and has not grown with time. Al Qaeda, it turned out, did find a welcoming home in Iraq after the invasion, but only after the insurgency had gained traction especially within the Sunni community. Today the al Qaeda presence in Iraq is minimal because al Qaeda's extreme taste for violence and its incredible arrogance eventually destroyed its relations with much of the Sunni population.

The only sustainable justification for the invasion, I believe, was one that was hardly offered in public prior to the invasion and one that is scarcely mentioned even now. America's war was with al Qaeda. After 9/11 it was clear that the effort to destroy al Qaeda would be relentless. Its leadership and power had to be eliminated. Al Qaeda is at its core a movement to control Islam. The heart of Islam is Saudi Arabia, the home of the two holy mosques. One of al Qaeda's most powerful and often voiced appeals was that Christian soldiers (America troops) were in the Holy Land near the most holy of sites.

Why were American troops in Saudi Arabia? They came to guard Saudi Arabia from Saddam in 1991 only after Saddam had invaded Kuwait. The Gulf War forced Saddam out of Kuwait, but did not remove the threat to the Saudi oil fields because Saddam survived in power and so the troops stayed. Over 10,000 American troops, primarily

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airman, were stationed in major military complexes in Saudi Arabia. While Saddam ruled Iraq the only plausible way out of Saudi Arabia for American forces was through Baghdad. If al Qaeda's claim for leadership in Islam was to be diminished, America had to leave Saudi Arabia which meant Saddam had to be removed. The invasion began in March 2003. All American military units were out of Saudi Arabia by early August 2003. Substantial American forces remain in the region, but are not based in Saudi Arabia.

Staying long in Iraq was not the intent. But Iraqi politics are complex. The plans for a post Saddam Iraq were not well thought through. Events, including resistance from Bathist elements, the collapse of Iraqi infrastructure, American domestic politics, and world opinion kept American forces in Iraq. Soon there came a serious insurrection that slid into a terrible civil war with American and coalition force caught in the middle. It was a nightmare. It was also though a war with a serious justification, one that you can still believe was right.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.