

## **On Justifying This War: Torture, Lies and Basic Principles**

### **Iraq War Teach-In (3/26/03)**

Let's begin with torture.

President Bush, during his State of the Union address catalogued Saddam Hussein's atrocities: "Electric shock, burning with hot irons, dripping acid on the skin, mutilation with electric drills." He concluded, "If this is not evil, then evil has no meaning."

I agree with him on this point, absolutely.

Two weeks earlier (12/26/02) The Washington Post reported on our torturers:

Thousands of Al Qaeda suspects are held at overseas CIA interrogations centers, which are completely off limits to reporters, lawyers and outside agencies are routinely "softened up," i.e., beaten.--as well as thrown against the walls, hooded, deprived of sleep, bound in painful positions with duct tape. "If you don't violate someone's human rights some of the time, you probably aren't doing your job," one of official commented.

The hard cases are then turned over to our "allies"--who are less scrupulous than we. The Egyptians have suspects "stripped and blindfolded, suspended from a ceiling or doorframe with feet just touching the floor, beaten with fists, whips, metal rods; subject to electric shock."

The Syrians are even tougher, "pulling out fingernails, forcing objects into the rectum, using a chair that bends backwards to asphyxiate the victim or fracture his spine."

Let me repeat President Bush's words: "If this is not evil, then evil has no meaning."

To my mind, one conclusion follows, regarding the current war: one evil regime is trying to overthrow another evil regime--and is using our young men and women to do so.

There is torture. There are also the lies. Here's partial listing, drawn from John MacArthur's recent article in the LA Weekly Mar 21-27, 2003. (MacArthur is the publisher of Harper's Magazine.)

- # On Sept 7, 2002, George Bush and Tony Blair began circulating the story that the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had issued a new report describing a revived nuclear weapons project in Iraq that was only six months away from completion. As we now know, there was no such IAEA report. This was a complete fabrication.
- # Then there was the administration's "leak" about Iraq's attempt to buy "special aluminum tubes" for their nuclear program. This story was kept alive for months, repeated by President Bush in his State of the Union Address, until finally the head of the IAEA

Mohammed El Baradei laid it to rest.

- # Then there was the report that Iraq had attempted to buy uranium from Niger. But, oops- it appears the documents had been fabricated. (By whom, one wonders? Apparently, no one has seen fit to pursue that question.)

The list could be extended, but I'll stop here. Let us just ask, why do they do it? Lie, knowing that they will be exposed? Well, here's what Peter Teeley had to say (Bush the First's press secretary when he was Vice President):

You can say anything you want during a debate, and 80 million people hear it. If it happens to be untrue, so what. Maybe 200 people read [the correction] or 2000 or 20,000.

Clearly G. W. is following in this father's footsteps.

That's my preamble. I am a philosopher, so I'm allowed to talk about morality. It's the question everyone should be asking: What is the moral basis of this war?

There is only one principle that has any credibility: we may kill innocent people so as to prevent even more innocent people from being killed.

This principle is monstrous, but it's also sound. At least arguably sound. A pacifist will not agree, nor will one who thinks the killing of innocents is never morally justifiable. But for most of us, well, there might be circumstances when such a horrible choice might be made in good conscience. There might be circumstances when one should kill innocents to save innocents.

I won't defend this principle here, but rather underscore something far less controversial: In order for an application of this principle to be other than merely monstrous, there must be overwhelming evidence that far more innocent people will be saved than will die.

Do we have such evidence as backing for the current war? Well, consider:

- # There was no evidence at the onset of war, nor is there any as of today, that Iraq even has weapons of mass destruction, let alone has any intention of using them for reasons apart from self-defense. (Perhaps the Iraqis do have such weapons, but if they don't what are we going to say? "Whoops, our mistake. We thought you were lying. I guess you weren't. Sorry about all that death and destruction. Sorry so many of your children are now dead or crippled or traumatized. But, hey, everyone makes mistakes.")
- # No evidence has been uncovered that Iraq had anything whatsoever to do with the terrorist attack of 9/11, despite what the majority of our citizens seem to think. (I wonder where they got that idea. Could it have anything to do with the Bush Administration mentioning Sept 11 and Saddam in the same breath every chance they get?)

# No evidence exists, nor is anyone claiming any, that the Iraqi regime, brutal and oppressive as it is, is currently engaged in mass slaughter of its own people or any form of ethnic cleansing on a scale that would warrant immediate outside intervention.

I contend that since there is no morally legitimate justification for this war, we must see it for what it is: an American invasion of a foreign country that has done us no harm whatsoever. The likely outcome: the establishment of an American protectorate of indefinite duration. The certain outcome: American control of Iraqi oil, either directly or via a "friendly" regime.

It should come as no surprise that most of the world regards this war as an act of imperial aggression. It should come as no surprise--although it clearly did to the Bush Administration--that a great many Iraqis regard it as such and are prepared to die defending their homeland. However much they may dislike, even despise, Saddam Hussein, they are Iraqis and we are not. It is our bombs and bullets that are killing their children, not his.

What is to be done? Let me quote Stan Goff, a retired US Special Forces Master Sergeant, who served in the US Army from 1970 to 1996, and who, among other things, participated in the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. He wrote a very powerful article recently about that experience and its relevance to this war. Here is his conclusion. The language is rough, but I think he's right:

The best thing we can do for our sons and daughters and sisters and brothers and spouses and sweethearts . . . is to tell the damn truth. What is endangering them is a right-wing, racist, military/security state--including Uncle Tom and Aunt Thomasina--that is attempting protect the power of the powerful by plundering other people, and using soldiers to do it. . . .

I will not be a chauvinist who advocates victory in an illegal war where our people and the people of Iraq are the cannon fodder and victims. I do not want our children to die. And I do not want them to kill other people's children. This is not a fucking football game.

If we want to support our troops, we'll do it by encouraging them to think, and when necessary, to disobey. . . . Many are beginning to suspect that they've been had, and that behind all this high-flown mendacity coming out of the White House briefing room is a gangster's errand of plunder with our children as its unwitting tools. If we want to support the real troops, the real people, instead of the abstraction, we'll keep connecting the dots for them . . . This is what the anti-war movement needs to do.

Let me end on a less dramatic note. I can't resist commenting on the drumbeat claim that it is the French and Russians and Germans and Chinese who really caused this war. This is a truly breathtaking Orwellian assertion: black is white, war is peace.

It has been claimed that because the French and the Russians had oil contracts with Iraq, they wanted Saddam to stay in power. The truth of the matter is it was precisely the existence of such contracts that gave the US the confidence to ask for that second resolution. For our diplomats made it clear to the French and the Russians that we were going to war, with or without the U.N.,

and if they didn't cooperate, those contracts would not be honored in post-Saddam Iraq. It was the purest form of economic blackmail. Play along with us, or we cut you out of the oil deal. Yet it failed.

The fact of the matter is the French, Russians, Chinese, Germans, Chileans, Mexicans, Angolans, Guineans and Pakistanis tried desperately, at significant sacrifice of their own interests, to prevent the United States from making a colossal, horrific blunder.

Alas, they, and the rest of the anti-war movement, did not succeed. I'm not sure what to do next - apart from connecting the dots, and praying for peace.

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