

A mea culpa on Iraq by pro-war journalist Johann Hari

Paul Bond
22 April 2006

One of the most forthright defenders of the war, Johann Hari, has recently published an article in the *Independent* (UK) described as “A melancholic mea culpa.” The article ran under the headline “After three years, after 150,000 dead, why I was wrong about Iraq.” In it, Hari grimly acknowledged that the situation in Iraq had worsened since the invasion, contrary to his original prognosis. (The article can be found on the author’s web site at <http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=831>.)

Hari was among the most gung-ho supporters of the invasion. Unlike many of the “pro-war lefties” with whom he aligned himself, he rejected what he describes as “the obviously fictitious” arguments about weapons of mass destruction as a reason for the war. Rather, he argued, a war for regime change was necessary because the Baathist government of Saddam Hussein was so barbarous that its overthrow was necessary by any means necessary. Imperialist intervention would pave the way for the building of democracy in Iraq, he claimed.

Hari now says that the violence following the occupation—violence by both the occupying forces and the contending militias—is worse than the death toll under the Baathists, and is escalating.

He notes the comments of other pro-invasion journalists that far from democratic rights being restored to the Iraqi people, the occupying forces have “effectively ceded” power to armed criminal gangs. Some 10,000 have vanished into secret prisons without trial, and kangaroo sharia courts are given free rein in many parts of the country. The invading forces have used banned chemical weapons (white phosphorus), cluster bombs and depleted uranium weaponry. The US has imposed an “IMF-ed up economic model” and cancelled reconstruction funds, causing unemployment to spiral to 60 percent.

To the extent that these comments acknowledge the scale of his error, they are welcome. But they do not exonerate Hari for the role he played in the build-up to the war. Nor, it must be said, do they indicate any fundamental reconsideration of the views that led him to support the war in the first place.

Hari’s arguments have had their consequences in that he helped Bush and Blair mount an illegal war that has cost thousands of lives. He wrote in 2003, “Sometimes the only way to spread peace is at the barrel of a gun.” Now he admits: “I am not hiding in my home, rocking and clutching a Kalashnikov. Millions of Iraqis are, and many thousands more did not live to see even that future because of the arguments of people like me.”

He bears a direct political responsibility for championing the government’s lies. Only a year ago, just prior to the Iraq elections, he was still defending the invasion beside government spokesman Eric Joyce at a debate organised by the *Independent* newspaper, and insisting that calls for a withdrawal of US and British troops were

premature.

Hari was vigorous in his tirades against opponents of the war. Early in 2003, he reacted furiously to antiwar demonstrations under the headline “Stop the war? Tell that to the tyrannized people of Iraq.” When Hari spoke alongside Joyce last year he attacked “the left” for its failure to show solidarity with oppressed peoples.

Anyone who had the temerity to oppose the positions being advanced by imperialism has been denounced by Hari. When playwright Harold Pinter received the Nobel Prize for Literature—a decision based in part on his stand against escalating military interventions in the Gulf and the Balkans—Hari suggested that not only was Pinter an undeserving recipient, but the “ravings” of his acceptance speech should not be broadcast.

In his mea culpa, Hari states that although it was evident that the Bush administration was pursuing a “disgusting” rationale for the war, he had convinced himself that it was “possible to ride this beast [the US drive for strategic access to a major source of oil] to a better Iraq.” He now looks at the lost lives and the devastated country, and hopes that we understand what led him to this position in the first place.

This is an extraordinary admission. Barely five months ago, in his dispute with the *World Socialist Web Site* over his attack on Pinter, he complained, “Whatever I say,” Paul Bond of the WSWS “seems to just hear ‘rah rah imperialism imperialism imperialism hurrah!’ ” Now he is forced to concede that, at least with regard to Iraq, support for US imperialism’s supposedly liberating role was the very reason for his disastrously wrong position.

Hari’s support for the war was explicitly based on the premise that imperialist intervention could play a progressive role in spreading liberal democracy. He wrote in 2003 that war is the “only means” to achieve “democracy for the Iraqi people.” In another article that year, entitled “The lesson of this conflict: America can be a force for good in the world,” he argued, “Anti-war movements must never again simplistically assume that they speak for the people who are about to be bombed. Sometimes they will be right; but sometimes a civilian population will prefer American bombs to the totalitarian status quo.”

Although US imperialism was doing “obscene” things in some parts of the world, there were still “other American instincts and foreign policy traditions.” The role of the liberal left was to steer US imperialism “towards spreading the values of its own American revolution: the overthrow of tyranny and the birth of democracy.”

So enamoured was Hari of US military might and the readiness of the Bush administration to use it that he called on the European powers to do the same. He wrote on February 12, 2003, of how the US neo-conservative Robert Kagan had contrasted how Europe’s peoples believed that the “sole legitimate foreign policy tool is dialogue;

violence is taboo,” whereas the American people believe “that confronting ‘evil’ (a word used without embarrassment), even at the risk of war, pays off in the end. It is only through the threat of violence that peace and freedom can ultimately prevail.”

Hari commented, “By using his model, we can see more clearly some of the flaws in the current European position towards Iraq... Nation-building and the spread of democracy require both an acceptance of violence as a means to an end (overthrow Saddam, build democracy) and a degree of optimism and self-confidence that Europeans seem to have lost.”

It would be wrong, he concluded, “to oppose democracy for the Iraqi people (and the war that is the only means to achieve it, unless Saddam goes into exile) because of the flaws of the military power [the US] bringing it into place. If Europeans want more say in projects like this,” then they too must “develop a far more substantial military,” reject pacifism and support the Americans “when they constructively rebuild the world around us.” His orientation towards what he describes as the “pro-war left” was based on a rejection of the anti-imperialist stand he explicitly associated with Marxism. He saw a layer of media professionals who had been members of the Stalinist Communist Party as his main co-thinkers. He quoted approvingly the *New Statesman*’s John Lloyd that “We centre-left ex-communists believe passionately in democracy because we’ve reasoned ourselves towards it, so we are perhaps more prepared to support wars that establish or defend it.” Hari oriented towards these people—and still does—because they are most prepared to accept the concept of “necessary violence” by the imperialist powers.

Even now, Hari has made no reckoning with his record of supporting military intervention prior to Iraq. Having convinced himself that the US could do good in Iraq, he now acts as though what happened was unforeseen and without precedent. It was not. Although he points to the record of the US in Central America and parts of eastern Europe as reasons why he really should have known better, he still maintains that imperialist intervention in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan were beneficial. Indeed, in our polemic with him over Pinter he was scornful of any mention by us of Iraq. He said we had artificially introduced it into the argument, when his diatribe against Pinter was based on events in the Balkans. But as we pointed out, Hari supported the invasion of Iraq on the same basis as he had supported the war in Yugoslavia. His refusal to connect them stems from his constant willingness to seek out the “exceptional circumstances” that justify renewed colonialist actions.

As we have sought to explain, there is a consistency to US foreign policy, and therefore a causal connection between interventions in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and the new threats against Iran:

“In the final analysis,” we wrote, “the threat of a war of aggression against Iran and the use of nuclear weapons express the historic crisis of American and world capitalism, and the accelerating disequilibrium within the entire capitalist nation-state system. This disequilibrium—and its malevolent product, the danger of a new world war—has been exacerbated both by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the relative decline of US capitalism’s position within the world economy.

“Within America’s ruling oligarchy, these parallel developments have fostered a consensus strategy of exploiting US imperialism’s military superiority for the purpose of reorganizing the world economy in the interests of US-based banks and transnational corporations. This means the seizure of strategic positions and resources—as in the Persian Gulf—and the use of militarism and war to

preclude the emergence of any rival, even of a regional character, that would challenge America’s bid for global hegemony.”

Hari finds himself facing the failure of his own predictions. His original defence, that “sometimes a short war is preferable to an endless tyranny,” looks threadbare in light of the ongoing problems of the occupation. But his change of heart is based solely on the debacle that has followed the invasion.

Socialists do not reserve their opposition to imperialism for when its plans go wrong. It is an issue of political principle derived from the necessity to elaborate a strategy that meets the historic interests of the international working class. The task facing socialists is to oppose the barbarous colonial redivision of the world and mobilise the working class against it, not merely to disown individual acts of imperialist aggression that are descending into ignominy.

Hari’s shift in Iraq to no small degree expresses nervousness within the ranks of imperialism’s professional media apologists at how exposed they have become. Hari has received a great deal of flak for supporting the Bush and Blair administrations in Iraq, and his hand-wringing represents an attempt to claw back some of his radical and left credentials.

To this end, he maintains that his position is in fact consistent because his support for invasion was “out of solidarity with Iraqis” who he claims overwhelmingly supported intervention to topple Hussein and who have now expressed “their clear desire for the US-UK troops to leave now.”

Even if it were true that the majority of Iraqis had illusions in the consequences of US intervention, this would only emphasise the necessity to provide political leadership based on a historically grounded understanding of the real nature of imperialism.

Today, Hari is somewhat cautiously opposed to military action against Iran, though late last year he was on British television complaining that the exposure of the lies about Iraq’s WMDs meant that people would unfortunately be less likely to believe Britain and the US when they warned of the real danger posed by Iran. But his retreat on Iraq still leaves open the possibility of him supporting imperialist intervention, whether against Iran or elsewhere in the world, while offering high-sounding moral justifications for removing a dictatorial regime that oppresses its own peoples.

In any event, Hari’s belated admission of how singly he failed to understand the political consequences of his support for US and British military aggression against Iraq underscores the necessity of a scientific historical outlook that clearly distinguishes socialist policies from the pseudo-liberal apologetics peddled by himself and others. Only by developing a Marxist understanding amongst broad layers of workers, intellectuals and youth will it be possible for the international working class to politically combat further acts of barbarism by Washington, London and other major powers.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact