

Blaming the Iraqis: A new cover-up for American militarism

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A new ideological justification for more US violence in Iraq has been sounded in recent weeks from Bush administration officials, congressional Democrats and media pundits alike: all of them now maintain that the blame for the descent of Iraqi society into chaos and civil war should be placed, not on the American invaders, but on the Iraqi people themselves.

It was the Iraq Study Group report, released two months ago, that first gave voice to this theme, which has now been taken up more generally throughout official Washington, from Republicans like Senator John McCain, who has proposed rigid benchmarks for the Maliki government in Baghdad, to Democrats like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who have suggested that funds might be cut off for the Iraqi military—but not, of course, to the American war machine that still dominates the conquered country.

For fervid supporters of the war, criticism of Iraqi failures becomes a means of explaining away the catastrophic results of the US invasion and occupation, particularly for the neo-conservatives who played a critical role in presenting the war as an exercise in spreading democracy and freedom in the Middle East.

A particularly brazen expression of this type of argumentation comes from Charles Krauthammer, the conservative pundit who is among the most unrestrained in portraying the American conquest of Iraq as an exercise in “democratization.” In a column published February 2 in the *Washington Post*, Krauthammer bemoaned the “bewildering” array of religious, ethnic and subgroup conflicts now raging in Iraq, writing that it “can lead only to further discouragement of Americans, who are already deeply dismayed at the notion of being caught in the middle of endless civil strife.”

The column was headlined, “Who’s to Blame for the Killing.” Krauthammer answers the question by placing the responsibility squarely on the Iraqis themselves.

“America comes and liberates them from the tyrant who kept everyone living in fear, and the ancient animosities and more recent resentments begin to play themselves out to deadly effect,” he writes. “Iraqis were given their freedom, and yet many have chosen civil war.”

The columnist is at pains to denounce anyone who might suggest that the US invasion itself caused the disintegration of Iraqi society. He wrote: “Of all the accounts of the current situation, this is by far the most stupid. And the most pernicious. Did Britain ‘give’ India the Hindu-Muslim war of 1947-48 that killed a million souls and ethnically cleansed 12 million more? The Jewish-Arab wars in Palestine? The tribal wars of post-colonial Uganda?”

While Krauthammer apparently thinks this question self-evidently absurd, any serious student of history would respond: “Yes, yes and yes!” Britain’s policy of “divide-and-rule” deliberately exacerbated and inflamed ethnic and religious tensions in all these colonies, which exploded into violence as the old colonial regimes were dismantled.

And one can add many more examples: Belgian colonialism, followed by French and American neo-colonial manipulation and exploitation, fueled the Hutu-Tutsi conflicts that erupted into the Rwandan genocide of 1994. The American bombing of Cambodia for nearly a decade created the conditions for the coming to power of the genocidal Pol Pot regime. (“Bombing them back to the Stone Age” was not just a turn of phrase.) German and American rivalry for influence in post-Soviet Yugoslavia produced the secession, first of Slovenia and Croatia, then of Bosnia. These secessions triggered a struggle among peoples who had lived together peacefully for more than 40 years, but now found themselves persecuted minorities in their newly “independent” states (Serbs in Croatia; Moslems, Croats and Serbs in various parts of Bosnia; Croats, Moslems, Hungarians and

Albanians in Serbia), igniting an explosion of civil war and ethnic cleansing.

What underlies every one of these mass slaughters is the pernicious and destructive role of imperialism, and especially of American imperialism, the most dangerous and aggressive in today's world.

Krauthammer, ever the apostle for the "good intentions" of the American ruling class, claims that in Iraq, "at the political level, we've been doing everything we can to bring reconciliation. We got the Sunnis to participate in elections and then in parliament. Who is pushing the Shiite-Kurdish coalition for a law that would distribute oil revenue to the Sunnis? Who is pushing for a more broadly based government to exclude Moqtada al-Sadr and his sectarian Mahdi Army?"

The truth is that the United States has encouraged the centrifugal tendencies in Iraq for more than 30 years. The Nixon and Ford administrations gave significant backing to Kurdish separatism in the 1970s, directed against the secular Baathist regime in Baghdad that was loosely aligned with Moscow during the Cold War. The first Bush administration incited a Shiite uprising after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, then reversed course, fearing that a Shiite-ruled Iraq would line up with Iran.

In the initial stages of the current war, Sunnis were the principal target, culminating in the leveling of Fallujah, the center of Sunni resistance to the US occupation. The ongoing anti-Sunni war in Anbar province is now being combined with an offensive against the Shiite radicals of al-Sadr. At every stage, the US policy has been to pit one sectarian group against another.

As for the supposedly altruistic support for a Sunni share in oil revenue, the major concern of Washington is not fairness for the Sunnis, but the adoption of a legal framework, on whatever terms can be devised, that can provide the vehicle for privatizing the oil industry and opening up Iraq's vast oil wealth to American corporations—one of the principal aims of the war.

Krauthammer concludes: "We have made a lot of mistakes in Iraq. But when Arabs kill Arabs and Shiites kill Shiites and Sunnis kill all in a spasm of violence that is blind and furious and has roots in hatreds born long before America was even a republic, to place the blame on the one player, the one country, the one military that has done more than any other to try to separate the combatants and bring conciliation is simply perverse. It infantilizes Arabs. It demonizes Americans. It willfully overlooks the plainest of facts: Iraq is their country. We midwifed their freedom. They chose civil war."

It is true, of course, that the division within Islam between Sunni and Shiite goes back more than 1,000 years. But this division, however deep-rooted, never became the basis for mass sectarian violence under the Ottoman Empire, British colonial rule or Iraq's 70 years of semi-independence. Sunnis and Shiites lived together in the same neighborhoods in Baghdad and other parts of the country and frequently intermarried. It was only under the impact of ever-increasing US pressure—war, followed by 12 years of economic blockade, followed by invasion and occupation—that Iraqi society disintegrated along the fault lines of religion, ethnic group and tribe.

There is another side to the "blame the Iraqis" motif, one that has the most sinister implications. This was expressed most crudely by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, another vociferous and early supporter of the war, who on January 25 penned the following description of the Iraqi insurgents: "Violent, stupid men who would be the dregs of society under normal conditions rise amid the trauma, chaos and stress and become revered leaders." This is actually a passable description of the social type that dominates in the Bush administration, a government in which criminality vies with ignorance.

Brooks goes on with paragraph after paragraph of language abusing and reviling the Iraqi insurgents and declaring them the moral equivalents of the death squads in Rwanda, Bosnia, Sierra Leone and other killing fields. According to Brooks: "They command squads of young men who leave the moral universe and have no future in a peacetime world. They kill for fun, faith and profit—because they find it more rewarding to massacre and loot than to farm or labor."

The inescapable conclusion of such a torrent of abuse is to support the annihilation of these Iraqis, by whatever means are required. The logic of the "blame the Iraqis" argument is that the United States is entitled to kill as many Iraqis as possible to achieve its war aims.



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