

The Iraq War ten years on: A turning point for US imperialism

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Today marks the tenth anniversary of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Ten years ago, the world watched the “shock and awe” bombing campaign light up the nighttime sky of Baghdad with billowing clouds of flame and smoke.

This campaign and the bloody ten years of occupation that followed had a devastating impact on what was once among the most advanced societies in the Middle East. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed and millions were made homeless.

The American military’s conduct of the war produced crimes of staggering dimensions. This included the turning of Fallujah, a city of 350,000 people, into a free-fire zone, the bombarding of its occupants with white phosphorus shells, banned by international law, and the summary execution of wounded prisoners. Ten years later, the rates of child cancer and birth defects in Fallujah are similar to those in Hiroshima following the US atomic bombing.

The leaking of stomach-turning photographs from Abu Ghraib lifted the veil on the barbaric character of the war, which included the systematic use of torture, death squads and sectarian massacres to terrorize the Iraqi population into submission.

People in Iraq continue to die from the sectarian violence unleashed by the war as well as from the destruction of infrastructure that has deprived them of clean water, health care and other essentials of life. One million children under the age of 18 have lost one or both parents, and hundreds of thousands suffer from grievous wounds.

In the US itself, in addition to the deaths of nearly 4,500 troops, 34,000 soldiers came home wounded and hundreds of thousands suffer from psychological trauma.

All of this killing and violence was carried out on the basis of lies, summed up in the claim that the Iraqi government was concealing “weapons of mass destruction.” These false pretexts for war were no less criminal than those used by Germany’s Third Reich to justify the invasion of Poland and other countries targeted at the outset of World War II.

If the Nuremberg precedents established in the trial of the surviving Nazi leaders at the end of that war had been followed, all of those responsible for the invasion of Iraq—in the first instance George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld,

Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice—would have been placed on trial and, at the very least, sent to prison for the rest of their lives.

In the United Kingdom, the same fate would have befallen former Prime Minister Tony Blair and others in his government.

While the Nazis were guilty of a war of aggression in Europe that produced genocide, Washington’s war of aggression against Iraq resulted in sociocide—the systematic decimation of an entire society. Following more than a decade of punishing economic sanctions, the full power of the American military was employed to tear what was left of the country’s economy, infrastructure and social fabric to shreds.

The entire establishment media was complicit in the launching of the war, repeating pretexts for aggression that it knew to be false. In particular, the *New York Times* played an indispensable role in legitimizing the actions of the Bush administration and manufacturing “evidence” of nonexistent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Noted opinion makers like Thomas Friedman of the *Times* and Richard Cohen and Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post* deeply involved themselves in promoting war.

Once the invasion had begun, “embedded” journalists served as propagandists for the US military, while carefully concealing the war’s atrocities and its devastating impact.

This war, staggering in the criminality of both its planning and execution, marked a critical turning point in the history of American imperialism. Though it ended in chaos, with the lies used to justify it thoroughly exposed and, in operational terms, the war widely considered a total disaster, it nonetheless laid the basis for the intensification of the war in Afghanistan and the ever-expanding eruption of American militarism across the planet.

Iraq was a predatory imperialist war. It was carried out as part of a long-developing US strategy for reorganizing the Middle East to secure American interests and control over the region’s vast energy resources.

Underlying this strategy was an effort to offset intensifying economic crisis through the use of military force. At the same time, the “war of choice” served as a means of directing the explosive social tensions generated by social inequality at home

outward in the form of militarist violence.

In pursuit of these aims, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 never represented anything more than a cynical pretext. The regime of Saddam Hussein, whatever its crimes against the Iraqi people, was secular, an enemy of Al Qaeda and in no way involved in September 11.

In this regard, the war established a pattern of Washington carrying out interventions for regime-change in the Middle East, targeting secular governments and tacitly or directly backing Islamist and Al Qaeda-linked forces to achieve its goals. Such was the case in Libya in 2011 and so it is today in Syria.

Meanwhile, the unending “global war on terrorism” of which Iraq was supposedly the centerpiece has been accompanied by an unprecedented buildup of the power of the state and its military-intelligence apparatus and an intensification of the attack on democratic rights both in the US and internationally. Under the Obama administration this has reached the point of the president claiming the power to order the execution of American citizens by drone strikes without presenting charges, much less proving them in a court of law.

The Iraq war represented a turning point not only for US imperialism, but also for the political evolution of Europe. With the exception of the British, the European bourgeoisie took a cautious attitude in the run-up to the US invasion, in many cases expressing reservations and disagreement. After a series of public disputes, however, the European powers shifted their position, coming to see the war as opening up an opportunity for unrestrained imperialism in which they too could share in the plunder.

The aftermath of the war also witnessed an extreme shift to the right by the ostensibly antiwar left parties, which abandoned the pretense of opposing imperialism. Having made no attempt to mobilize the broad spontaneous opposition that erupted in massive demonstrations around the world on the eve of the US invasion, these forces moved rapidly to align themselves in support of imperialist intervention. Political organizations ranging from the Greens in Germany to Rifondazione Comunista in Italy directly supported the war in Afghanistan.

In the US itself, the official antiwar movement worked relentlessly to channel mass popular opposition to the Iraq war behind the Democrats, who in Congress voted to authorize the invasion and continued to finance it until the end. With the election of Obama, the pseudo-left elements became full-fledged supporters of US military operations, promoting “humanitarian” interventions in Libya and Syria.

Iraq has put paid to all the claims that we are living in a post-imperialist era. The escalation of imperialist operations continues throughout the world. The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the ongoing drawdown from Afghanistan signal not, as Obama has repeatedly claimed, the “tide of war receding,” but rather the freeing up of military manpower and

resources for even greater interventions elsewhere.

Even as it continues its war in Afghanistan, Washington is moving aggressively into Africa, intervening in Syria, preparing war against Iran and “pivoting” to Asia, with increasingly bellicose threats against China.

New wars are inevitable, driven by the insoluble crisis of American and world capitalism. They are facilitated in no small measure by the fact that the crimes of the Iraq war have gone unpunished.

No one has been held accountable under international law for planning and waging a war of aggression that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of human beings—not the politicians who planned the war, nor the generals who led it, nor the journalists who spun the lies to promote it. Some have been awarded high posts in academia, like Condoleezza Rice at Stanford University. Others are in comfortable retirement or on various corporate and think tank boards, or pursuing other lucrative activities. The media pundits continue to pontificate as if nothing had happened.

This unpunished political crime has had far-reaching consequences all over the world, as the intensification of imperialist neocolonialism sets the stage for new conflagrations.

Very deep and sobering lessons must be drawn from this war, which, far from being an isolated episode relegated to the past, continues to shape the world political environment today. The experience of the Iraq war demonstrates that the struggle against war, which is at the heart of political life in every country, cannot be waged so long as the working class is tied to the political parties that wage these wars and subordinated to the economic system of capitalism that makes them inevitable.

Ten years after the invasion of Iraq, it must be said that the one consistent voice of opposition to this war was that of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International. The statements that we wrote both before and during the Iraq war are a testament to the principled character of this movement’s politics and the power of a Marxist perspective.

The fight against war today requires the building of the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

For a review of the invasion of Iraq, see the WSWS Chronology Year in Review: 2003



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