Australian general blames 2003 invasion for Iraq civil war

James Cogan
17 June 2014

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Monday, retired Major General John Cantwell denounced the attempts by figures such as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair to deny that the 2003 invasion of Iraq is directly responsible for the sectarian civil war now devastating the country and destabilising the entire Middle East.

The Australian government was one of a handful of countries that joined the US "Coalition of the Willing," defied international law and sent troops to illegally invade Iraq in March 2003. Australian forces subsequently participated in the occupation of the country until 2009. Cantwell served in Iraq in 2006, working alongside top American commanders as the Director of Strategic Operations.

The former general was asked by the ABC: "Is it reasonable for people to now ask whether toppling Saddam Hussein was, in the long run, one of the most misguided military expeditions in history?"

Cantwell replied: "It's certainly a legitimate question and it was interesting to hear Tony Blair quickly brushing over that issue… which I would if I was him. He was one of the leaders that led us down that very, very bad pathway where we knocked over a government and a country on the basis of very poor intelligence and political blinkers, and led to a terrible and extended and very deadly war. You have to ask 'why did we do that', given the current circumstances."

Extending his condemnation of the war, Cantwell stated: "You have to ask the question, if we had just left Iraq alone would Saddam Hussein still be there, would he have lasted, what would have changed that was in anyway comparable to the violence and death that has followed the invasion?"

Cantwell did not directly state that the pretexts for the war—notably the claims that Iraq had "weapons of mass destruction"—were outright lies. Nor did he indict the invasion of Iraq as a criminal enterprise aimed at seizing the country's oil resources and asserting American dominance over the Middle East. He did, however, voice some basic truths about the situation in Iraq that are generally suppressed by the mass media and rarely uttered by current or former military commanders.

The former general condemned the sectarian policies of the Shiite fundamentalist-dominated government that holds power, with US backing, for the ability of the Sunni extremist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) to capture the city of Mosul and large areas of northern Iraq. He declared: "[T]he Sunni population—the minority population of Iraq—feel quite legitimately that they've been persecuted and held back and denied opportunities. There's no wonder that organisations like ISIS are able to inflame the Sunni component of the country in the north, and the other parts of the country and take advantage of that."

Cantwell also indicted the US-backed civil war in Syria, and the financing and arming of Al Qaeda-linked Sunni extremists by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, for the ability of ISIS to make military gains inside Iraq. "Much of the money… that directly supports the ISIS fighters," he said, "is coming straight from Syria where they've gained so much of their experience. Their heavy weaponry and the like have all come from Syria."

Asked about any Australian participation in renewed US military operations in Iraq, Cantwell emphatically told the ABC: "I think it would be absolute folly for Australia to go back into Iraq. I'd be very surprised if the US seriously gets involved. The worry, if they do employ air strikes, which they may be tempted to do if

© World Socialist Web Site

the situation worsens, is that it would probably be perceived by the Sunnis as further evidence of them being suppressed by a government that's backed by the West—a Shia government backed by the West. It would produce other long term and unforeseen consequences."

The statements of the ex-general are in sharp contrast to the unconditional support that has been offered by the Australian government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott to any military actions taken by the Obama administration in response to the debacle that US imperialism faces in Iraq. While joining Washington in excluding, for now, the redeployment of ground troops, Abbott declared on the weekend: "As you'd expect, the Americans are weighing their options. They'll speak to us and we'll talk to them and we'll see what emerges."

Cantwell's positions stem from conclusions drawn after more than two decades of involvement in the neo-colonial violence perpetrated by the US and Australian governments in the region.

In 1990, Cantwell was attached as an exchange officer with a British armoured regiment in Germany and went with it to the first Gulf War. He was one of the few Australians who served in ground combat units. He fought in the armoured advance into southern Iraq that resulted in the mass slaughter of Iraqi troops, who attempted to fight the US and allied forces with vastly inferior equipment and no air support.

In 2006, Cantwell arrived in Iraq just before the sectarian massacres that followed the destruction of a key Shiite mosque, and witnessed the impact of devastating suicide bombings in Baghdad. In 2010, he served as commander of Australian forces in the US and NATO occupation of Afghanistan. That was the year of the most intense military operations against the Taliban resistance and the highest number of occupation force casualties, including 10 Australian troops.

Cantwell retired from the military in February 2012. He related in his autobiography how he almost immediately sought treatment for what was diagnosed as long-standing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

In April 2012, when asked about Australian casualties in the wars, Cantwell told ABC-TV's "Four Corners" program: "At the level of the soldier and their families, you have to say, is it worth it? I as a commander asked myself that question many times, and I really, really struggle with it. The only way I can see through this, so that I can sleep at night, is to differentiate, to say it's not worth it for the lives that you lose."

Cantwell described Australia's involvement in Afghanistan as political payment for the US military alliance, the outcome of "the dirty, ugly world of international relationships, where it's 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.'"

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site