

# Twenty years since the US invasion of Iraq

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Twenty years ago, on March 20, 2003, the government of the United States embarked on one of the greatest crimes of the 21st century, launching an unprovoked and illegal war against Iraq. It began with saturation bombing of the defenseless country (“shock and awe”), which annihilated the bulk of its armed forces and much of its social infrastructure, including electrical power and water supplies, food processing, and the production of medical supplies.

This was followed by the invasion of the devastated country by more than 130,000 American troops, armed with the most technologically sophisticated weapons, who cut through what little remained of organized Iraqi resistance and reached Baghdad in only two weeks. After another week of slaughter, US forces captured the capital, suffering only 34 casualties in this final one-sided battle, compared to countless thousands of Iraqi dead.

The methods employed by the Bush administration in Iraq were entirely criminal, in keeping with the nature of the whole enterprise. The war began with a sneak attack: cruise missile strikes against government buildings where Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein was believed to be, in an effort to assassinate him. It continued with the use of weapons banned by international law, like white phosphorus bombs, which set cities on fire and cause horrific burns to human flesh. In addition, US and British forces fired an estimated 440,000 depleted uranium shells, which cause long-term cancer rates to skyrocket and produce hideous birth defects.

In the course of the war, the most horrific forms of torture were employed by US forces, revealed in shocking images from the Abu Ghraib prison. The authorization of torture was drawn up by Bush administration lawyers, who asserted that the president had virtually unlimited powers as Commander-in-Chief.

The result of the invasion, followed by an eight-year occupation, was what the WSWs branded as “sociocide,” the deliberate destruction of an entire society. The imperialist conquest reduced one of the most advanced countries in the Middle East to conditions of medieval barbarism, not only economically, but also politically. The US rulers systematically promoted religious divisions and ignited sectarian warfare between Sunni and Shi’ite

Muslims and between Muslims and smaller religious minorities, in an effort to prevent any united resistance to the US occupation.

In deliberately embarking on an aggressive war, the US government and its leading officials—including George W. Bush, Richard Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, and Colin Powell—were guilty of war crimes. Along with allies like UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, they violated the core principle laid down by the Nuremberg Tribunal after World War II, which found that the central crime of the Nazis, from which all their other crimes flowed, was the launching of unprovoked and aggressive wars. (See below, remarks delivered by David North in 2004 at a debate in Dublin, Ireland.)

The American media paid only perfunctory attention to the Iraq War anniversary. What has been said is aimed at covering up for the colossal scale of the crime, and of the media’s own role in it.

The cynicism, as always, found its most perfidious expression in the pages of the *New York Times*. A news analysis by Max Fisher under the headline, “20 Years On, a Question Lingers About Iraq: Why Did the U.S. Invade?” treats the motives of the Bush administration in launching the war as uncertain and even “fundamentally unknowable,” in the words of one “scholar” interviewed by Fisher.

The *Times* article flatly rejects the “once-prevalent theory: that Washington invaded to control Iraq’s vast oil resources,” without referring to the prominence of former oilmen like Vice President Cheney and Bush himself in driving the decisions for war. And it attributes the systematic lying about Saddam Hussein’s possession of “weapons of mass destruction” to a form of groupthink, in which “[a] critical mass of senior officials all came to the table wanting to topple Mr. Hussein for their own reasons, and then talked one another into believing the most readily available justification.”

The *Times*’ “analysis” carefully avoids any discussion of the role of the *Times* itself as one of the main promoters of the “weapons of mass destruction” campaign. Reports written by Judith Miller and Michael Gordon, most notoriously a September 2002 front-page exclusive under the

headline, “U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts,” parroted the claims of top Bush administration officials, and were taken up by the corporate media as a whole. White House officials then cited these reports as “evidence” against Iraq, which they themselves had planted.

The motivations for the war are not “unknowable.” Indeed, they were known at the time, with tens of millions throughout the world participating in demonstrations in advance of the invasion, rejecting the lies of the administration and demanding “no blood for oil.” The size and breadth of the demonstrations were so large that it prompted the *New York Times* to comment that there were “two superpowers”: The United States and “world public opinion.”

On March 21, 2003, the day after the invasion began, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board Chairman David North published a statement laying out the nature of the war:

The unprovoked and illegal invasion of Iraq by the United States is an event that will live in infamy. The political criminals in Washington who have launched this war, and the wretched scoundrels in the mass media who are reveling in the bloodbath, have covered this country in shame. Hundreds of millions of people in every part of the world are repulsed by the spectacle of a brutal and unrestrained military power pulverizing a small and defenseless country. The invasion of Iraq is an imperialist war in the classic sense of the term: a vile act of aggression that has been undertaken on behalf of the interests of the most reactionary and predatory sections of the financial and corporate oligarchy in the United States. Its overt and immediate purpose is the establishment of control over Iraq’s vast oil resources and reduction of that long-oppressed country to an American colonial protectorate.

The war was part of an unending series of invasions and occupations initiated by the United States in the midst of and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, under both Democrats and Republicans. This includes the First Gulf War (1990-91); the bombing of Serbia (1999); the invasion of Afghanistan (2001); the bombing of Libya (2011) and the US-backed civil war in Syria (2011). Far from expressing the strength of American capitalism, the effort of the American ruling class to use military force to conquer the world arises out of extreme crisis. As the WSWS statement explained:

Whatever the outcome of the initial stages of the conflict that has begun, American imperialism has a rendezvous with disaster. It cannot conquer the world. It cannot reimpose colonial shackles upon the masses of the Middle East. It will not find through the medium of war a viable solution to its internal maladies. Rather, the unforeseen difficulties and mounting resistance engendered by war will intensify all of the internal contradictions of American society.

The 20th anniversary of the Iraq war is being marked now amidst an escalating US-NATO war against Russia, which threatens to become a much wider war, involving the whole of Europe and risking the potential use of nuclear weapons for the first time since the Truman administration carried out the nuclear incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While the former middle class critics of the Bush administration’s war against Iraq have become the most fervent advocates of the war against Russia, the basic interests driving US policy remain the same. American imperialism, now led by the Biden administration, instigated the war and is determined to pursue it to the military defeat of Russia, whatever the consequences. Facing intersecting crises, enormously exacerbated by the pandemic, the ruling class toboggans toward catastrophe.

The media which yesterday promoted the lies of “weapons of mass destruction” peddles the “Wuhan lab leak” hoax to blame China for the coronavirus pandemic, and the claims of “unprovoked Russian aggression” and ludicrous allegations of Nazi-style atrocities in Ukraine.

The lies of 2023 are even greater and more brazen than the lies of 2003. Putin’s reactionary invasion is a desperate effort by the Russian oligarchy to defend its class interests against a real threat: the far more powerful forces of American and European imperialism.

Twenty years after the invasion of Iraq, all those responsible for it remain free. But the colossal growth of the class struggle throughout the world provides the powerful objective foundation for a mass movement that will hold them to account and put an end to imperialist war, as part of the socialist reorganization of world society.



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