

Mistakes, Excuses and Painful Lessons From the Iraq War

By Ezra Klein

I supported the Iraq War, and I'm sorry.

I have my excuses, of course. I was a college student, young and dumb. I thought that if U.S. President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell and former President Bill Clinton and U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair all thought it was necessary, then that was because they had intelligence proving as much. I thought there was no way the Bush administration would neglect to plan for the obvious challenges of the aftermath. I turned on the war quickly when I saw how poorly and arrogantly it was being managed.

But at the core of my support for the war was an analytical failure I think about often: Rather than looking at the war that was actually being sold, I'd invented my own Iraq war to support -- an Iraq war with different aims, promoted by different people, conceptualized in a different way and bearing little resemblance to the project proposed by the Bush administration. In particular, I supported Kenneth Pollack's Iraq war.

In 2002, Pollack, a Persian Gulf expert who'd worked at the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council, published "The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq." Pollack's argument, in short, was that Saddam Hussein was an unusually reckless, cruel and self-deluded dictator who either had weapons of mass destruction or was very close to attaining them. His past, which included catastrophic wars with Iran and Kuwait, murderous rampages against his own people, erratic personal behavior and a clear aspiration toward regional hegemony, suggested that he wasn't the sort of tyrant who could be contained or reasoned with, and so Pollack's reluctant, unhappy conclusion was that he was the sort of tyrant who must be stopped before the right weaponry made him unstoppable.

Third Priority

But Pollack was clear-eyed about the task ahead. Iraq, he said, shouldn't be America's top priority. We should first focus on destroying al-Qaeda. We should then work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only then should we turn to Hussein.

Moreover, when and if we did invade Iraq, we should do so only as part of a coordinated, multilateral operation that takes as its fundamental premise that rebuilding Iraq "is likely to be

the most important and difficult part.” On National Public Radio’s Fresh Air, Pollack said that “if we do it wrong we could create as many problems as we solve.”

Pollack’s book was a key document in the run-up to the war. In the *New Yorker*, David Remnick called it “the most comprehensive and convincing case for the use of force in Iraq.” On the *New York Times* op-ed page, Bill Keller said it was “surely the most influential book of this season.” At *Slate*, Chris Suellentrop joked that “the Bush administration should consider a last-ditch effort to obtain Security Council approval: a Paris airlift that drops thousands of French translations of Kenneth Pollack’s ‘The Threatening Storm’ over the city.” Pollack even appeared on “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” Yes, Oprah.

As the months wore on, it became clearer and clearer that Bush wasn’t fighting Pollack’s war. He didn’t focus on al-Qaeda first, or the Israelis and Palestinians second. He was undermining the role of multilateral institutions rather than relying on their legitimizing role. There was little evident planning for the aftermath, and the administration’s statements about the length of the war, the number of troops required, and the likely reactions of the Iraqi people were insanely optimistic. But Pollack was still arguing that the war was worth doing, and so was I. After all, what other chance would we get to topple Hussein?

We got our war. More to the point, we got Bush’s war, which was, in the end, the only war on offer. There were no weapons of mass destruction. There was little real planning for the occupation, which led to a huge and senseless loss of Iraqi life in a quasi-civil war that we did too little, at first, to stop, and arguably helped start through the misguided process of “debaathification.” The focus on al-Qaeda, not to mention on Israel and Palestine, was lost.

Looking Back

This week, I sought out Pollack, now a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, to ask what he thought of the war, and his role in it, 10 years later. Was it worth it?

“Whether the war was ‘worth it’ is a judgment that is going to vary from person to person,” he said. “And that view will change over the course of time. What strikes me as far more important right now is the lessons we take from it.” Those lessons, he continued, include, “always be skeptical of even the strongest intelligence,” “keep in mind the potential for unintended consequences,” “don’t ever go to war on the cheap,” and “start with the end state you want to achieve and build back from there.”

In conversation, Pollack comes off much as he did in his original book: curious and questioning. He worries openly about what he got wrong and what he could have done better. He’s careful to avoid articulating overwhelming doctrines or overly moralistic arguments. He talks about how he’s gone back and marked up a copy of “The Threatening Storm,” underlining the parts he got right and striking through the parts he got wrong, trying to figure out whether his case still

coheres and whether there was more he could have, or should have, said. He talks about his justifiable pride in the final chapter of the book, a thoroughgoing indictment of the fly-by-night approach the Bush administration took to the reconstruction of Iraq.

But his re-evaluation of the Iraq War has been limited. “For me,” he said, “the two big revelations, one of which was becoming clear when we went to war and the other which wasn’t clear until afterward was the way the Bush administration handled it, and then the absence of the WMDs.”

Shocking Failure

The lack of WMDs, Pollack continued, was a “complete surprise.” The intelligence community - with the exception of United Nations weapons inspector Scott Ritter -- was simply wrong. But to Pollack, the Bush administration’s failures were also a shock. “Early on especially, I looked at this administration and I really thought it was my daddy’s Bush administration. I saw Colin Powell and Dick Cheney and Rich Armitage and even Paul Wolfowitz. These guys had handled the first Gulf War exactly right. These guys were telling Schwarzkopf, ‘We don’t care if you don’t need a second corps, you’re getting a second corps.’ I thought there was no way they’d do this half-assed. But it got clearer and clearer as we got closer that they were going to do just that.”

In 2005, Sam Rosenfeld and Matthew Yglesias criticized, in the *American Prospect*, the kind of mea culpa Pollack makes here. “The incompetence critique is, in short, a dodge -- a way for liberal hawks to acknowledge the obviously grim reality of the war without rethinking any of the premises that led them to support it in the first place.” This sounded, I told Pollack, a bit like what he was saying. Wasn’t one lesson of the Iraq War that we had simply been far too confident in the American military’s capacity to invade, occupy and rebuild a complex, volatile society that we could never hope to truly understand?

“We’ll never know,” Pollack replied. “History doesn’t reveal its alternatives. But I think the evidence out there is that we could have handled this much better than we did, and that it didn’t have to be this bad. The best evidence for that is the surge. In 18 months, we shut down the civil war and reversed the direction of Iraqi politics.”

The absence of WMDs didn’t blunt Pollack’s primary argument for the war. “Saddam didn’t have the capability we were ascribing to him -- we were absolutely wrong about that -- but he did have the motivation. He thought about nuclear weapons in a way most of the world does not. What we’re getting from the tapes of conversations among his inner circle is that he says they need to acquire nuclear weapons to wage war against Israel. There’s no sign this is bluster at all.”

I told Pollack that the situation seemed precisely the reverse. The fact that Hussein had shut down his WMD program and was engaged in an elaborate con to convince the Iranians and his own people that he still had WMDs suggests that this was, indeed, bluster.

Unique Character

Pollack didn't buy it. "Saddam was close to being unique. What we know about how he thought about nuclear weapons is not something you encounter with other leaders. I worry about the North Koreans because I don't know what they believe. But I'm quite comfortable that the Iranians don't think about nuclear weapons the way Saddam did. Containing a nuclear Iran is not a walk in the park. But it should be doable, and it's preferable to war. What was important about Saddam was the uniqueness of his character."

I supported Ken Pollack's war, which led me to support George W. Bush's war. Both were wrong. The assumptions required to make them right -- Hussein had WMDs, Hussein was truly crazy, Hussein couldn't be contained, American military planners and soldiers could competently destroy and then rebuild a complex, fractured society they didn't understand -- were implausible.

But saying, in retrospect, that I shouldn't have supported the Iraq War is easy. The harder question is how to avoid a similarly catastrophic misjudgment in the future.

So here are some of my lessons. First, listen to the arguments of the people who will actually carry out a project, not the arguments of the people who just want to see the project carried out. Who manages a project can be as important as what the project is.

Second, don't trust what "everybody knows." There is, perhaps, nothing more dangerous than a fact that everyone thinks they know, because it shuts down critical thinking. In a retrospective for Foreign Policy, Stephen Hadley, Bush's national security adviser, said, "It never occurred to me or anyone else I was working with, and no one from the intelligence community or anyplace else ever came in and said, 'What if Saddam is doing all this deception because he actually got rid of the WMD and he doesn't want the Iranians to know?' Now, somebody should have asked that question. I should have asked that question. Nobody did. It turns out that was the most important question in terms of the intelligence failure that never got asked."

Of course, it wasn't asked. "Everybody knew" that Hussein had WMDs.

Third, the people who are most persuasive aren't necessarily the people who are actually right. Argument is a skill. Authority is a position. Trusting too much in either can lead you astray.

Fourth, the U.S. military is a blunt and limited instrument. Tasks that require it to stray far outside its core competence, such as rebuilding societies rather than destroying them, are projects that aren't likely to go well. In retrospect, the constant "to be sure" caveats about how this wasn't worth doing if it wasn't done right should have been a warning. It wasn't worth doing precisely because the odds were high that we couldn't do it "right."

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