

## GOP Hypocrisy: Outraged Over Benghazi, Silent on Iraq



By Jay Parini

The creation of a House committee to study the attack on Benghazi raises the troubling question of why Congress has never bothered to scrutinize to the invasion of Iraq.

When I heard that the House of Representatives has established a select committee to investigate the attack on Benghazi that left several Americans dead in 2012, I couldn't help but wonder what these same legislators might have done had Barack Obama been president in 2003, and had the audacity of George W. Bush to attack a sovereign country that had no relevant connection to the 9/11 attacks with the result that nearly 5,000 Americans and well over 100,000 Iraqi civilians (many of them women and children) perished. Had Obama's war in Iraq also cost American taxpayers \$1.7 trillion, with another \$490 in veteran expenses (thus far)—with a total cost of \$6 trillion projected—I have no doubt that a select committee would long ago have sent him to the Hague for trial as a war criminal.

It's sad to think how in our fury over Benghazi we've almost forgotten a recent war that destroyed so many families, nearly bankrupted this country (and may yet), and led to a hugely destabilized Iraq that no longer serves as a buffer to Iran. Needless to say, this terrible war was pursued under false pretenses, with huge amounts of government corruption—Houston-based company KBR alone (a spinoff from Halliburton, where Dick Cheney was chairman and CEO before becoming vice president) racked up charges of nearly \$40 billion during the war, making it (by far) the winner in the Iraq sweepstakes. In most banana republics, this would be cause for serious investigation; but not so much here, where our politicians (or their friends) are allowed to profit from armed invasions. Can it possibly be so that the U.S. Congress has ignored such obvious corruption while investigating over and over whether Susan Rice was given some edited "talking points" on Benghazi? Really?

I've spent a good deal of time in the Middle East over the years, lecturing at universities in places like Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Morocco. Soon after the invasion of Iraq, I was staying at a hotel in Amman, when into the hot tub by the pool stepped a tall American with a closely shaved head. He seemed about my age, and we struck up a cheerful conversation. I explained I was in the country at the behest of the Department of State, as a kind of cultural ambassador. He liked this, and told me he was en route to Baghdad. He was a general in the army, a career officer with a specialty in intelligence. I asked him what he thought would come of the Iraq war.

He said, without pausing, that in ten years the U.S. would be out of Iraq, as the American people would never support an expensive war in an obscure country longer than a decade. He was right about that. He guessed that thousands would die. And he was more or less right about that, though his figures were a bit low. He predicted the region would be dangerously destabilized, and that sooner or later Iran would assert control over the Shia majority who would almost certainly take control, repressing the Sunni minority, which Saddam Hussein had led to power. Let's say he was absolutely on the mark here, as Nouri al-Maliki was hiding from Hussein in Iran before assuming high office in Iraq, where he now has become a kind of dictator, supported strongly by Grand Ayatolla Kazim al Haeri, one of the most influential Shia voices in Iran.

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I remember this general shaking his head bitterly, noting that we had turned Iraq into a magnet for all sorts of dangerous elements, drawing al Qaeda into a region where they had only a minimal presence before the war. He also pointed out that large numbers of Iraqi citizens had been displaced, and that the number would increase. Indeed, some four million Iraqis have been run out of their homes, and these wandering families—he said with a wry smirk—would never become our allies in the region (to put it mildly).

A few days after this conversation in Amman, I was giving a lecture on American poetry at a university on the Iraqi-Jordan border, talking to perhaps 800 students about Robert Frost. Afterwards, a young man came up to me with Frost's poems in hand. He could recite reams of Frost, Dickinson, Whitman, and Lowell, and he did so while I stood there, amazed. He had just completed a degree, he explained, in American poetry, and I asked him if he were going to become a teacher one day. He said, indeed, it was his fondest hope. "But first," he said, "I am crossing the border into Iraq, to fight against the American invader." My jaw dropped. "And why is this?" I wondered. He said, "You must understand that, for my

generation, this is like the Spanish Civil War. I must join in the fight for freedom. I must join the equivalent of our Lincoln Brigade.”

These encounters in Jordan stick with me, a decade later. Now Iraq lies in ruins, and the U.S. has tens of thousands of enemies with a right to their anger. Meanwhile, Americans mourn the loss of so many brothers, fathers, uncles, sisters, mothers. Many veterans lie in hospitals across the nation, dazed and confused. This war that somehow never found its way onto the books continues to drag on our economy. So why haven't we brought Bush and Cheney to Washington to answer some very hard questions under oath? Well, I suppose we've got Benghazi to worry about.

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