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# A STUPID WAR

Edward Said

**F**ull of contradictions, flat-out lies, groundless affirmations, the clotted media torrent of reporting and commentary on the war against Iraq (which is still being waged by something called “the coalition,” whereas it is still an American war with some British help) has obscured what has been so criminally stupid about its planning, propaganda, and justifying discourse by military and policy experts. For the past two weeks, I have been traveling in Egypt and Lebanon trying to keep up with the unending stream of information and misinformation coming out of Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and Jordan, a lot of it misleadingly upbeat, but some of it horrifyingly dramatic in its import as well of course as its immediacy. The Arab satellite channels, al-Jazeera being by now the most notorious and efficient, have given on the whole a totally opposed view of the war than the standard stuff served up by “embedded” reporters – including speculations about Iraqis being killed for not fighting, mass uprisings in Basra, four or five “falls” of Um Kasr and Fao – who have supplied grimy pictures of themselves as lost as the English-speaking soldiers they have been living with. Al-Jazeera has had reporters inside Mosul, Baghdad, Basra and Nasriya, one of them, the impressible Taysir Aloni, a fluent journalistic veteran of the Afghanistan war, and they have presented a much more detailed, on the spot account of the shattering realities of the heavy bombardment that has devastated Baghdad and Basra, as well as the extraordinary resistance and anger of the Iraqi population which was supposedly to have been only a sullen bunch of people waiting to be liberated and throw flowers at Clint Eastwood look-alikes.

Let’s get straight to what is so unwise and sub-standard about this war, leaving aside for the moment its illegality and vast unpopularity, to say nothing about the way American wars of the past half century have been lumbering, humanly unacceptable and so utterly destructive. In the first place, no one has satisfactorily proved that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction that furnish an imminent threat to the United States. No one. Iraq is a hugely weakened and sub-par Third World state ruled by a hated despotic regime: there is no disagreement about that anywhere, least of all in the Arab and Islamic world. But that it is any kind of threat to anyone in its current state of siege is a laughable notion, one which no journalist of the overpaid legions who swarm around the Pentagon, State Department and White House has ever bothered to pursue.

Yet in theory, Iraq might have been a challenge to Israel sometime in the future, since it is the only Arab country that has the human, natural and infrastructural resources to take on not so much America’s but rather Israel’s arrogant brutality. This is why Begin’s air force bombed Iraq preemptively in 1981. Note therefore the

creeping replication of Israeli assumptions and tactics (all of them, as I shall be showing, remarkably flawed) in what the US has been planning and implementing in its current post 9/11 campaign or preemptive war. How regrettable that the media has been so timorous in not investigating the Likud’s slow taking-over of US military and political thinking about the Arab world. So fearful has everyone been of the charge of anti-semitism bandied about recklessly, even by Harvard’s president, such that the neo-conservative cum Christian Right cum Pentagon civilian hawks stranglehold on American policy has become a sort of reality forcing on the entire country an attitude of total belligerency and free floating hostility. One would have thought that but for America’s global dominance we would have been headed for another Holocaust.

Nor, second, could it have been true by any normal human standard that Iraq’s population would have welcomed the American forces that entered the country after a terrifying aerial bombardment. But that that preposterous notion became one of the lynchpins of US policy is testament to the outright rubbish fed the Administration by the Iraqi opposition (many of whom were out of touch with their country as well as keen on promoting their post-war careers by persuading the Americans of how easy an invasion would be) and the two accredited Orientalist experts identified long ago as having the most influence over American Middle East policy, Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami.

Now in his late eighties, Lewis came to the US about thirty-five years or so ago to teach at Princeton where his fervent anti-communism and sarcastic disapproval of everything (except modern Turkey) about the modern Arabs and Islam pushed him to the forefront in the pro-Israel battles of the last years of the twentieth century. An old-fashioned Orientalism, he was quickly bypassed by advances in the social sciences and humanities that formed a new generation of scholars who treated the Arabs and Islam as living subjects rather than as backward natives. For Lewis, vast generalizations about the whole of Islam and the civilizational backwardness of “the Arabs” were viable routes to the truth which was available only to an expert like him. Common sense about human experience was out, whereas resounding pronouncements about the clash of civilizations were in (Huntington found his lucrative concept in one of Lewis’s more strident essays about the “return of Islam”). A generalist and ideologue who resorted to etymology to make his points about Islam and the Arabs, Lewis found a new audience within the American Zionist lobby to whom in journals such as *Commentary* and later *The New York Review of Books* he addressed his tendentious pontifications that basically reinforced the prevailing negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims.

What made Lewis's work so appalling in its effects was the fact that without any other views to counter his, American (policy-makers in particular) fell for them. That plus the icy distance and superciliousness of his manner made Lewis an "authority" even though he hadn't entered, much less lived in, the Arab world in decades. His last book *What Went Wrong?* became a post-9/11 bestseller and, I am told, required reading for the US military, despite its vacuousness and unsupported, usually factually incorrect, statement about the Arabs during the past 500 years. Reading the book, you get an idea that the Arabs are a useless bunch of backward primitives, easier to attack and destroy than ever before.

Lewis also formulated the equally fraudulent thesis that there were three concentric circles in the Middle East – countries with pro-American people and governments (Jordan, Egypt and Morocco), those with pro-American people and anti-American governments (Iraq and Iran), and those with anti-American governments and people (Syria and Libya). All of this, it would be seen, gradually crept its way into Pentagon planning, especially as Lewis kept spewing out his simplistic formulae on television and in articles for the right-wing press. Hence, Arabs wouldn't fight, they don't know how, they would welcome us, and above all, they were totally susceptible to whatever power America could bring to bear.

Ajami is a Lebanese Shi'a educated in the US who first made his name as a pro-Palestinian commentator. By the mid-1980s, he had become a professor at Johns Hopkins and a fervent anti-Arab nationalist ideologue, who was quickly adopted by the right-wing Zionist lobby (he now works for people like Martin Peretz and Mort Zuckerman) and groups like the Council of Foreign Relations. He is fond of describing himself as a non-fiction Naipaul and quotes Conrad while actually sounding as hokey as Khalil Gibran. In addition, Ajami has a penchant for catchy one-liners, ideally suited for television, if not for reflective thought. The author of two or three ill-informed and tendentious books, he has become influential because as a "native informant" he can harangue TV viewers with his venom while demoting the Arabs to the status of sub-human creatures whose world and actuality doesn't matter to anyone. Ten years ago, he started deploying "we" as a righteous imperial collectivity that along with Israel never does anything wrong. Arabs are to blame for everything and therefore deserve "our" contempt and hostility.

Iraq has drawn out his special venom. He was an early advocate of the 1991 war and has, I think, deliberately misled the basically ignorant American strategic mind into believing that "our" power can set things straight. Dick Cheney quoted him in a major speech last August as saying that Iraqis would welcome "us" as liberators in "the streets of Basra," which still fights on as I write. Like Lewis, Ajami hasn't been a resident of the Arab world for years, although he is rumored to be close to the Saudis, of whom he has reasonably spoken as models for the Arab world's future governance.

If Ajami and Lewis are the leading intellectual figures in US Middle East planning, one can only wince at how even more banal and weak-minded policy hacks in the Pentagon and White House have spun out such "ideas" into the scenario for a quick romp in a friendly Iraq. The State Department, after a long Zionist campaign against its so-called "Arabists" is purged of any countervailing views, and Colin Powell, it should be remembered, is little more than a dutiful servant of power. So because of its potential for anti-Israel troublemaking, Saddam's Iraq was targeted for military and political termination, quite irrespective of its history, its complicated society, its internal dynamics and contradictions. Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle said exactly that when they were consultants to Benjamin Netanyahu's 1996 election campaign. Saddam Hussein is of course an awful tyrant, but it isn't as if, for instance, most Iraqis haven't suffered terribly due to the US sanctions and were far from willing to accept more punishment on the off chance that they would be "liberated." After such liberation, what forgiveness? After all, look at the war against Afghanistan which also featured bombing and peanut butter sandwiches. Yes, Karzai is now in power of a very iffy kind, but the Taleban, the Pakistani secret services, and the poppy fields are all back, as are the warlords. Hardly a brilliant blueprint to follow in Iraq, which doesn't resemble Afghanistan very much anyway.

The expatriate Iraqi opposition has always been a motley bunch. Its leader Ahmad Chalabi is a brilliant man now wanted for embezzlement in Jordan and without a real constituency beyond Paul Wolfowitz's Pentagon office. He and his helpers (e.g. the thoroughly shabby Kanan Makiya who has said that the merciless high-altitude US bombing of his native land is "music to my ears") plus a few ex-Baathists, Shia clerics and others have also sold the US administration a bill of goods about quick wars, deserting soldiers, cheering crowds, equally unsupported by evidence or lived experience. One can't, of course, fault these people for wanting to rid the world of Saddam Hussein: we'd all be better off without him. The problem has been the falsifying of reality and the creation of either ideological or metaphysical scenarios for basically ignorant and unchecked American policy planners to foist undemocratically on a fundamentalist president and a largely misinformed public. In all, this Iraq might as well have been the moon and the Pentagon and White House Swift's Academy of Lagado.

Other racist premises underlying the campaign in Iraq are such thought-stopping propositions as having the power to redraw the Middle East map, setting in motion a "domino-effect" in bringing democracy there, and holding fast to the assumption that the Iraqi people constitute a kind of tabula rasa on which to inscribe the ideas of William Kristol, Robert Kagan and other far right deep thinkers. As I have said in an earlier article for the LRB, such ideas were first tried out by Ariel Sharon in Lebanon during the 1982 invasion, and then again in Palestine since he took office two years ago. There's been lots of destruction but little else in security and peace and subaltern compliance to show for it. Nevermind: well-trained US special forces have practiced and perfected the storming of civilian homes with Israeli soldiers in Jenin. It is hard

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to believe, as the ill-conceived Iraq war advances, that things will be much different than that bloody episode, but with other countries like Syria and Iran involved, shaky regimes shaken more, general Arab outrage inflamed to the boiling point, one cannot imagine that victory in Iraq will resemble any of the simple-minded myths posited by Bush and his little clique.

But what is truly puzzling is that the regnant American ideology is still undergirded by the view that US power is fundamentally benign and altruistic. This surely accounts for the outrage expressed by US pundits and officials that Iraqis had the gall to undertake resistance at all, or that when captured, US soldiers are exhibited on Iraqi TV. The practice is much worse a) than bombing markets and whole cities and b) than showing rows of Iraqi prisoners made to kneel or lie spread-eagled face down in the sand. All of a sudden, the Geneva Conventions are invoked not for Camp X-Ray but for Saddam, and when his forces hide inside cities, that is cheating, whereas carpet bombing from 30,000 feet is playing fair.

This is the stupidest and most recklessly undertaken war in modern times. It is all about imperial arrogance unschooled in worldliness, unfettered either by competence or experience, undeterred by history or human complexity, unrepentant in brutal violence and cruel electronic gadgetry. To call it "faith-based" is to give faith an even worse name that it already has. With its too-long and vulnerable supply lines, its lurching from illiterate glibness to blind military pounding, its poorly planned logistical inadequacy and its slick wordy self-explanations, the US war against Iraq is almost perfectly embodied by poor George Bush's groping to stay on cue and on top of the texts they've prepared for him and which he can scarcely read, and Rummy Rumsfeld's wordy petulance, sending out lots of young soldiers either to die or to kill as many people as possible. What winning, or for that matter losing, such a war will ultimately entail is almost literally unthinkable. But pity the Iraqi civilians who must still suffer a great deal more before they are finally "liberated." ■

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## GIVE US BACK OUR DEMOCRACY

Edward Said

In a speech in the Senate on 19 March, the first day of war against Iraq, Robert Byrd, the Democrat Senator from West Virginia, asked: 'What is happening to this country? When did we become a nation which ignores and berates our friends? When did we decide to risk undermining international order by adopting a radical and doctrinaire approach to using our awesome military might? How can we abandon diplomacy when the turmoil in the world cries out for diplomacy?'

No one bothered to answer, but as the American military machine currently in Iraq stirs restlessly in other directions, these questions give urgency to the failure, if not the corruption, of democracy.

Let us examine what the US's Middle East policy has wrought since George W. Bush came to power. Even before the atrocities of 11 September, Bush's team had given Ariel Sharon's government freedom to colonise the West Bank and Gaza, kill and detain people at will, demolish their homes, expropriate their land and imprison them by curfew and military blockades. After 9/11, Sharon simply hitched his wagon to 'the war on terrorism' and intensified his unilateral depredations against a defenceless civilian population under occupation, despite UN Security Council Resolutions enjoining Israel to withdraw and desist from its war crimes and human-rights abuses.

In October 2001, Bush launched the invasion of Afghanistan, which opened with concentrated, high-altitude bombing (an 'anti-terrorist' military tactic, which resembles ordinary terrorism in its effects and structure) and by December had installed a client regime with no effective power beyond Kabul. There has been no significant US effort at reconstruction, and it seems the country has returned to its former abjection.

Since the summer of 2002, the Bush administration has conducted a propaganda campaign against the despotic government of Iraq and with the UK, having unsuccessfully tried to push the Security Council into compliance, started the war. Since last November, dissent disappeared from the mainstream media swollen with a surfeit of ex-generals sprinkled with recent terrorism experts drawn from Washington right-wing think-tanks.

Anyone who was critical was labelled anti-American by failed academics, listed on websites as an 'enemy' scholar who didn't toe the line. Those few public figures who were critical had their emails swamped, their lives threatened, their ideas trashed by media commentators who had become sentinels of America's war.

A torrent of material appeared equating Saddam Hussein's tyranny not only with evil, but with every known crime. Some of this was factually correct but neglected the role of the US and Europe in