

The Empire Exits Iraq

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

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When President Barack Obama announced on October 21 that the nine year U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq was ending, it didn't even make first spot on many news reports. Another imperial slaughter had ground to an end, with many liberal publications, such as *The Nation*, declaring it an "ignominious end to a shameful debacle."

To be sure, there were no victory celebrations, no teary-eyed citizens at confetti-speckled parades waving little American flags as soldiers marched smartly past. No one has even thought of revering the last 33,000 battle troops coming out of Iraq as part of another Depression era WWII-type "Greatest Generation."

There's a temptation to invoke T.S. Eliot's over-used but apt phrase, "Not with a bang but a whimper," to describe the final hours of another conflict in the West's thousand-year war against the East. Although the end came without much ado in the U.S. media, the bang has been felt in Iraq for the preceding 20 years.

The total of what the U.S. architects of death have wrought in their wars is never accurately tabulated. Hundreds of thousands of civilians incinerated in Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki; perhaps 2.5 million during the Korean War; upwards of 3 million in Indochina.

These are all estimates. No one in the West counts the Asian dead, yet we are informed in exquisite detail how many perished among those who inflicted the mass death: 58,151 U.S. military deaths in Vietnam; 4,484 in Iraq. Each of the fallen is considered worthy of an engraving on a wall or a burial with honors. Those they killed wind up in mass graves, unnamed.

War is the health of the state

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are easily and accurately portrayed as wars for oil and for the larger purpose of fueling the military/industrial complex, the engine of the U.S. economy. At the economic level, it doesn't matter whether the U.S. continues to lose wars as it did in Vietnam, fight to somewhat of a draw in Iraq, or win minor ones such as the attacks on Grenada and Panama, if anyone remembers the latter two. (The citizens of Panama City, however, recall well the 1989 invasion to arrest the country's formerly U.S.-backed dictator, Manuel Noriega, which left 4,000 civilians dead in the slum surrounding the presidential palace).

Radical writer Randolph Bourne famously and accurately wrote in 1914 that, "War is the health of the state." Since the first quarter of 1942, war has also been the health of the economy; military Keynesianism now pumps a trillion taxpayer dollars a year through a massive wealth transfer from private hands through the government to what they called munitions makers in Bourne's time.

It is certainly a cause for outrage that almost every war in American history has been based on either contrived rationales (quickly: why did the U.S. enter World War I?), or outright lies (Spanish-American War, Vietnam, Iraq), World War II being the one time a war was fought by the U.S. against a country worse than itself or for reasons less malign.

But, there is another overarching socio/historical explanation besides economic ones that is rooted in the mass psychology of a pathogenic culture stemming from its European origins and gives the U.S. a primary definition as a permanent war state.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, Europe, primarily through Spain, Portugal, England, Holland, and France, extended an economic system based on exploitation and conquest and a culture of cruelty, religious fanaticism, and environmental destruction to what they designated as the New World. Actually, it was an Old World the mad European navigators stumbled upon that suffered their invasion, occupation, looting, and genocide.

It was an ancient world encompassing the Old Ways that had sustained people for millennia and was broken by the armored invaders, although mega-states in the Americas, the Aztecs and the Incas, for instance, exhibited the same characteristics as the nations across the waters.

Europe had destroyed its land, impoverishing not only the common people, but the rulers as well. It was a continent wracked with endless warfare (the latter often celebrated in Western literature). Their solution was fortuitously finding another continent to wreck by exporting a moribund system with every disastrous facet intact even though the original explorers and conquistadors met a face of humanity that could have solved their problems differently by adapting their ways.

Instead, "They will make excellent servants," wrote Columbus in his diary the first night after being discovered by Arawak people on Hispaniola. The rest is a well known terrible history. Europe survived through a scourge of mass death and looting. Its economy and culture became the world-dominant system.

By the late nineteenth century, the descendants of those first adventurers had done damage to the North American continent identical to that which Europe had suffered. Although conquest and purchase had already greatly expanded U.S. national territory, the country's internal contradictions were bringing it close to collapse with deeper economic depressions, mass labor unrest, great environmental despoliation, and wide-spread poverty and misery among the population:

Men such as Indiana U.S. Senator Albert J. Beveridge, who said, in the late 1890s, "We must have markets abroad or revolution at home," knew it was time for a nation on an isolated continent to move beyond its geography as had his forebears. This, by the way, was one of the reasons for the U.S. entry into World War I, although the Spanish-American war, and incursions into Latin America preceded the Great War. Presaging Cold War liberals, Sen. Beveridge was a supporter of all of the Progressive Era reforms.

When we hear U.S. Presidents or Secretaries of State talk of "American interests" in a region far from its own metropole, it comes from an understanding that U.S. wealth, shared to differing degrees by sectors of the domestic population, depends on access to world-wide markets and trade, particularly oil. The socially pathological culture of militarism and delusional sense of "American Exceptionalism" are necessary to create a mass acceptance of its horrific dead end.

Horrific since battle totals and the grotesque phrase, collateral damage, need a rationalization for such slaughter. All the wars mentioned above were based on lies, many now blithely recognized as such but ones which possessed overwhelming social and political power at the time of the conflict.

Almost without exception, people now know there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that Bush lied, as did Cheney (who delights that he's called Darth Vader by his detractors), as did Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, and the pathetic Colin Powell, butcher of the first Gulf War.

Everyone also knows that if there were a modicum of justice extracted from the powerful (there isn't and there won't be under present power relationships), all of those who lied us into the Iraq war would be in the docket of the International Criminal Court along with the likes of Slobodan Milosevic and the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. Instead, Bush and his gang of war criminals write self-serving memoirs where they brazenly admit to suborning torture, become even more enriched, and are touted as elder statesmen doing book tours and the lecture circuit for \$50,000 a pop.

Henry Kissinger, a man who has so many pending international warrants for his arrests because of crimes against Vietnam and Chile that he rarely travels outside of the U.S., and has his writing featured on the front page of *The New York Times* book review section.

The 20-year war against Saddam Hussein, first, by Bush Sr.'s invasion, the Clinton era sanctions, and finally, Junior's Shock and Awe, has been catastrophic. Massive amounts of Iraqi blood was spilled; much of it directly

by the huge U.S. war machine, with additional amounts due to the internecine clashes set off by the destruction and collapse of that society. The Iraqi civilian casualty toll is staggering; iraqbodycount.org, which lists only documented deaths, pegs the figures at 113,127. The British medical journal, *The Lancet*, gives a much larger figure of 654,965, counting only through 2006, calculating from household surveys and extrapolating “excess deaths.”

As always, battle deaths and injuries of the American troops who caused the Iraqi casualties are only a fraction of what they inflicted. Much is made of returning U.S. troops suffering PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). This is a serious and predictable consequence of war, and given what it has wreaked on American troops, one can only imagine what Iraqis must be suffering as the result of the war inflicted upon them. The Iraqi Red Crescent Organization has estimated that since Bush’s “surge” in 2007, the number of people who have fled their homes and become refugees topped 1.1 million.

The U.S. has spent \$800 billion dollars directly on the Iraq war, with long-range costs spiraling the figure upwards to \$23 trillion. Billions were siphoned off to war contractors like Cheney’s Halliburton firm, with billions more simply unaccounted for through blatant and widespread corruption. At times, skids filled with \$20 bills were unloaded from C-17 transport planes and passed out like leaflets by U.S. troops attempting to buy off local resistance.

Hundreds of U.S. bases in Iraq now lie deserted, but what isn’t going home is the U.S. embassy compound in Baghdad, the largest in the world, occupying one and a half square miles in area, and costing three quarters of a billion dollars to build. Although U.S. troops have left, American security personnel will swell to 16,000, not exactly a complete withdrawal.

Just as the Tehran embassy functioned prior to the overthrow of Iran’s Shah in 1979, the Iraq embassy will be a forward base for U.S. military and commercial ventures. Similarly, as the Islamic Revolutionaries in Iran designated the seized American embassy in their capital, it will act as a “nest of spies” looking eastward to Russia and China, something not lost on either nation.

Where next for the Death Star? Apparently off to Uganda, and to Australia, where President Obama announced in November that a couple of thousand U.S. Marines will be stationed there indefinitely as a hedge against Chinese influence in the region. The fact that Beijing sees this as a threatening provocation apparently matters little to those manning the Empire’s central command at the Pentagon.

It is imperial interest added to cultural psychosis that drives the U.S. relentlessly towards war, but this time it’s messing with the big boys. Steadily advancing into the sphere of influence of a nuclear armed super-power is reminiscent of the Cold War and fraught with the same chances of annihilation that existed a generation ago.

David Swanson’s excellent web site, warisacrime.org, reported on the anniversary of the Japanese attack in Hawaii 70 years ago on a similar military/political situation:

When President Franklin Roosevelt visited Pearl Harbor on July 28, 1934, seven years before the Japanese attack, the Japanese military expressed apprehension. General Kunishiga Tanaka wrote in the Japan Advertiser, objecting to the build-up of the American fleet and the creation of additional bases in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands: ‘Such insolent behavior makes us most suspicious. It makes us think a major disturbance is purposely being encouraged in the Pacific. This is greatly regretted.’

Such madness is afoot once again. Their preparation for total war necessitates our total opposition.



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