

A War To Be Proud Of

By Christopher Hitchens

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Let me begin with a simple sentence that, even as I write it, appears less than Swiftian in the modesty of its proposal: "Prison conditions at Abu Ghraib have improved markedly and dramatically since the arrival of Coalition troops in Baghdad."

I could undertake to defend that statement against any member of Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International, and I know in advance that none of them could challenge it, let alone negate it. Before March 2003, Abu Ghraib was an abattoir, a torture chamber, and a concentration camp. Now, and not without reason, it is an international byword for Yankee imperialism and sadism. Yet the improvement is still, unarguably, the difference between night and day. How is it possible that the advocates of a post-Saddam Iraq have been placed on the defensive in this manner? And where should one begin?

I once tried to calculate how long the post-Cold War liberal Utopia had actually lasted. Whether you chose to date its inception from the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, or the death of Nicolae Ceausescu in late December of the same year, or the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, or the referendum defeat suffered by Augusto Pinochet (or indeed from the publication of Francis Fukuyama's book about the "end of history" and the unarguable triumph of market liberal pluralism), it was an epoch that in retrospect was over before it began. By the middle of 1990, Saddam Hussein had abolished Kuwait and Slobodan Milosevic was attempting to erase the identity and the existence of Bosnia. It turned out that we had not by any means escaped the reach of atavistic, aggressive, expansionist, and totalitarian ideology. Proving the same point in another way, and within approximately the same period, the theocratic dictator of Iran had publicly claimed the right to offer money in his own name for the suborning of the murder of a novelist living in London, and the génocidaire faction in Rwanda had decided that it could probably get away with putting its long-fantasized plan of mass murder into operation.

One is not mentioning these apparently discrepant crimes and nightmares as a random or unsorted list. Khomeini, for example, was attempting to compensate for the humiliation of the peace agreement he had been compelled to sign with Saddam Hussein. And Saddam Hussein

needed to make up the loss, of prestige and income, that he had himself suffered in the very same war. Milosevic (anticipating Putin, as it now seems to me, and perhaps Beijing also) was riding a mutation of socialist nationalism into national socialism. It was to be noticed in all cases that the aggressors, whether they were killing Muslims, or exalting Islam, or just killing their neighbors, shared a deep and abiding hatred of the United States.

The balance sheet of the Iraq war, if it is to be seriously drawn up, must also involve a confrontation with at least this much of recent history. Was the Bush administration right to leave - actually to confirm - Saddam Hussein in power after his eviction from Kuwait in 1991? Was James Baker correct to say, in his delightfully folksy manner, that the United States did not "have a dog in the fight" that involved ethnic cleansing for the mad dream of a Greater Serbia? Was the Clinton administration prudent in its retreat from Somalia, or wise in its opposition to the U.N. resolution that called for a preemptive strengthening of the U.N. forces in Rwanda?

I know hardly anybody who comes out of this examination with complete credit. There were neoconservatives who jeered at Rushdie in 1989 and who couldn't see the point when Sarajevo faced obliteration in 1992. There were leftist humanitarians and radicals who rallied to Rushdie and called for solidarity with Bosnia, but who - perhaps because of a bad conscience about Palestine - couldn't face a confrontation with Saddam Hussein even when he annexed a neighbor state that was a full member of the Arab League and of the U.N. (I suppose I have to admit that I was for a time a member of that second group.) But there were consistencies, too. French statecraft, for example, was uniformly hostile to any resistance to any aggression, and Paris even sent troops to rescue its filthy clientele in Rwanda. And some on the hard left and the brute right were also opposed to any exercise, for any reason, of American military force.

The only speech by any statesman that can bear reprinting from that low, dishonest decade came from Tony Blair when he spoke in Chicago in 1999. Welcoming the defeat and overthrow of Milosevic after the Kosovo intervention, he warned against any self-satisfaction and drew attention to an inescapable confrontation that was

coming with Saddam Hussein. So far from being an American "poodle," as his taunting and ignorant foes like to sneer, Blair had in fact leaned on Clinton over Kosovo and was insisting on the importance of Iraq while George Bush was still an isolationist governor of Texas.

Notwithstanding this prescience and principle on his part, one still cannot read the journals of the 2000/2001 millennium without the feeling that one is revisiting a hopelessly somnambulist relative in a neglected home. I am one of those who believe, uncynically, that Osama bin Laden did us all a service (and holy war a great disservice) by his mad decision to assault the American homeland four years ago. Had he not made this world-historical mistake, we would have been able to add a Talibanized and nuclear-armed Pakistan to our list of the threats we failed to recognize in time. (This threat still exists, but it is no longer so casually overlooked.)

The subsequent liberation of Pakistan's theocratic colony in Afghanistan, and the so-far decisive eviction and defeat of its bin Ladenist guests, was only a reprisal. It took care of the last attack. But what about the next one? For anyone with eyes to see, there was only one other state that combined the latent and the blatant definitions of both "rogue" and "failed." This state--Saddam's ruined and tortured and collapsing Iraq--had also met all the conditions under which a country may be deemed to have sacrificed its own legal sovereignty. To recapitulate: It had invaded its neighbors, committed genocide on its own soil, harbored and nurtured international thugs and killers, and flouted every provision of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The United Nations, in this crisis, faced with regular insult to its own resolutions and its own character, had managed to set up a system of sanctions-based mutual corruption. In May 2003, had things gone on as they had been going, Saddam Hussein would have been due to fill Iraq's slot as chair of the U.N. Conference on Disarmament. Meanwhile, every species of gangster from the hero of the Achille Lauro hijacking to Abu Musab al Zarqawi was finding hospitality under Saddam's crumbling roof.

One might have thought, therefore, that Bush and Blair's decision to put an end at last to this intolerable state of affairs would be hailed, not just as a belated vindication of long-ignored U.N.

resolutions but as some corrective to the decade of shame and inaction that had just passed in Bosnia and Rwanda. But such is not the case. An apparent consensus exists, among millions of people in Europe and America, that the whole operation for the demilitarization of Iraq, and the salvage of its traumatized society, was at best a false pretense and at worst an unprovoked aggression. How can this possibly be?

There is, first, the problem of humorless and pseudo-legalistic literalism. In Saki's short story *The Lumber Room*, the naughty but clever child Nicholas, who has actually placed a frog in his morning bread-and-milk, rejoices in his triumph over the adults who don't credit this excuse for not eating his healthful dish:

"You said there couldn't possibly be a frog in my bread-and-milk; there was a frog in my bread-and-milk," he repeated, with the insistence of a skilled tactician who does not intend to shift from favorable ground.

Childishness is one thing--those of us who grew up on this wonderful Edwardian author were always happy to see the grown-ups and governesses discomfited. But puerility in adults is quite another thing, and considerably less charming. "You said there were WMDs in Iraq and that Saddam had friends in al Qaeda. . . . Blah, blah, pants on fire." I have had many opportunities to tire of this mantra. It takes ten seconds to intone the said mantra. It would take me, on my most eloquent C-SPAN day, at the very least five minutes to say that Abdul Rahman Yasin, who mixed the chemicals for the World Trade Center attack in 1993, subsequently sought and found refuge in Baghdad; that Dr. Mahdi Obeidi, Saddam's senior physicist, was able to lead American soldiers to nuclear centrifuge parts and a blueprint for a complete centrifuge (the crown jewel of nuclear physics) buried on the orders of Qusay Hussein; that Saddam's agents were in Damascus as late as February 2003, negotiating to purchase missiles off the shelf from North Korea; or that Rolf Ekeus, the great Swedish socialist who founded the inspection process in Iraq after 1991, has told me for the record that he was offered a \$2 million bribe in a face-to-face meeting with Tariq Aziz. And these eye-catching examples would by no means exhaust my repertoire, or empty my quiver. Yes, it must be admitted that Bush and Blair made a hash of a good case, largely because they preferred to scare people rather than enlighten them or reason with them. Still, the only real strategy of deception has come from those who believe, or pretend, that Saddam Hussein was no problem.

I have a ready answer to those who accuse me of being an agent and tool of the Bush-Cheney administration (which is the nicest thing that my enemies can find to say). Attempting a little levity, I respond that I could stay at home if the authorities could bother to make their own case, but that I meanwhile am a prisoner of what I actually do know about the permanent hell, and the permanent threat, of the Saddam regime. However, having debated almost all of the spokespeople for the antiwar faction, both the sane and the deranged, I was recently asked a question that I was temporarily unable to answer. "If what you claim is true," the honest citizen at this meeting politely asked me, "how come the White House hasn't told us?"

I do in fact know the answer to this question. So deep and bitter is the split within official Washington, most especially between the Defense Department and the CIA, that any claim made by the former has been undermined by leaks from the latter. (The latter being those who maintained, with a combination of dogmatism and cowardice not seen since Lincoln had to fire General McClellan, that Saddam Hussein was both a "secular" actor and - this is the really rich bit - a rational and calculating one.)

There's no cure for that illusion, but the resulting bureaucratic chaos and unease has cornered the president into his current fallback upon platitude and hollowness. It has also induced him to give hostages to fortune. The claim that if we fight fundamentalism "over there" we won't have to confront it "over here" is not just a standing invitation for disproof by the next suicide-maniac in London or Chicago, but a coded appeal to provincial and isolationist opinion in the United States. Surely the elementary lesson of the grim anniversary that will shortly be upon us is that American civilians are as near to the front line as American soldiers.

It is exactly this point that makes nonsense of the sob-sister tripe pumped out by the Cindy Sheehan circus and its surrogates. But in reply, why bother to call a struggle "global" if you then try to localize it? Just say plainly that we shall fight them everywhere they show themselves, and fight them on principle as well as in practice, and get ready to warn people that Nigeria is very probably the next target of the jihadists. The peaceniks love to ask: When and where will it all end? The answer is easy: It will end with the surrender or defeat of one of the contending parties. Should I add that I am certain which party that ought to be? Defeat is just about imaginable, though the mathematics and the algebra tell heavily against the holy warriors. Surrender to

such a foe, after only four years of combat, is not even worthy of consideration.

Antaeus was able to draw strength from the earth every time an antagonist wrestled him to the ground. A reverse mythology has been permitted to take hold in the present case, where bad news is deemed to be bad news only for regime-change. Anyone with the smallest knowledge of Iraq knows that its society and infrastructure and institutions have been appallingly maimed and beggared by three decades of war and fascism (and the "divide-and-rule" tactics by which Saddam maintained his own tribal minority of the Sunni minority in power). In logic and morality, one must therefore compare the current state of the country with the likely or probable state of it had Saddam and his sons been allowed to go on ruling.

At once, one sees that all the alternatives would have been infinitely worse, and would most likely have led to an implosion - as well as opportunistic invasions from Iran and Turkey and Saudi Arabia, on behalf of their respective interests or confessional clienteles. This would in turn have necessitated a more costly and bloody intervention by some kind of coalition, much too late and on even worse terms and conditions. This is the lesson of Bosnia and Rwanda yesterday, and of Darfur today. When I have made this point in public, I have never had anyone offer an answer to it. A broken Iraq was in our future no matter what, and was a responsibility (somewhat conditioned by our past blunders) that no decent person could shirk. The only unthinkable policy was one of abstention.

Two pieces of good fortune still attend those of us who go out on the road for this urgent and worthy cause. The first is contingent: There are an astounding number of plain frauds and charlatans (to phrase it at its highest) in charge of the propaganda of the other side. Just to tell off the names is to frighten children more than Saki ever could: Michael Moore, George Galloway, Jacques Chirac, Tim Robbins, Richard Clarke, Joseph Wilson . . . a roster of gargoyles that would send Ripley himself into early retirement. Some of these characters are flippant, and make heavy jokes about Halliburton, and some disdain to conceal their sympathy for the opposite side. So that's easy enough.

The second bit of luck is a certain fiber displayed by a huge number of anonymous Americans. Faced with a constant drizzle of bad news and purposely demoralizing commentary, millions of people stick out their jaws and hang tight. I am no fan of populism, but I surmise that

these citizens are clear on the main point: It is out of the question--plainly and absolutely out of the question--that we should surrender the keystone state of the Middle East to a rotten, murderous alliance between Baathists and bin Ladenists. When they hear the fatuous insinuation that this alliance has only been created by the resistance to it, voters know in their intestines that those who say so are soft on crime and soft on fascism. The more temperate anti-warriors, such as Mark Danner and Harold Meyerson, like to employ the term "a war of choice." One should have no problem in accepting this concept. As they cannot and do not deny, there was going to be another round with Saddam Hussein no matter what. To whom, then, should the "choice" of time and place have fallen? The clear implication of the anti-choice faction--if I may so dub them - is that this decision should have been left up to Saddam Hussein. As so often before . . .

Does the president deserve the benefit of the reserve of fortitude that I just mentioned? Only just, if at all. We need not argue about the failures and the mistakes and even the crimes, because these in some ways argue themselves. But a positive accounting could be offered without braggartry, and would include:

(1) The overthrow of Talibanism and Baathism, and the exposure of many highly suggestive links between the two elements of this Hitler-Stalin pact. Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who moved from Afghanistan to Iraq before the coalition

intervention, has even gone to the trouble of naming his organization al Qaeda in Mesopotamia.

(2) The subsequent capitulation of Qaddafi's Libya in point of weapons of mass destruction - a capitulation that was offered not to Kofi Annan or the E.U. but to Blair and Bush.

(3) The consequent unmasking of the A.Q. Khan network for the illicit transfer of nuclear technology to Libya, Iran, and North Korea.

(4) The agreement by the United Nations that its own reform is necessary and overdue, and the unmasking of a quasi-criminal network within its elite.

(5) The craven admission by President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder, when confronted with irrefutable evidence of cheating and concealment, respecting solemn treaties, on the part of Iran, that not even this will alter their commitment to neutralism. (One had already suspected as much in the Iraqi case.)

(6) The ability to certify Iraq as actually disarmed, rather than accept the word of a psychopathic autocrat.

(7) The immense gains made by the largest stateless minority in the region - the Kurds - and the spread of this example to other states.

(8) The related encouragement of democratic and civil society movements in Egypt, Syria, and most notably Lebanon, which has regained a version of its autonomy.

(9) The violent and ignominious death of thousands of bin Ladenist infiltrators into Iraq and Afghanistan, and the real prospect of greatly enlarging this number.

(10) The training and hardening of many thousands of American servicemen and women in a battle against the forces of nihilism and absolutism, which training and hardening will surely be of great use in future combat.

It would be admirable if the president could manage to make such a presentation. It would also be welcome if he and his deputies adopted a clear attitude toward the war within the war: in other words, stated plainly, that the secular and pluralist forces within Afghan and Iraqi society, while they are not our clients, can in no circumstance be allowed to wonder which outcome we favor.

The great point about Blair's 1999 speech was that it asserted the obvious. Coexistence with aggressive regimes or expansionist, theocratic, and totalitarian ideologies is not in fact possible. One should welcome this conclusion for the additional reason that such coexistence is not desirable, either. If the great effort to remake Iraq as a demilitarized federal and secular democracy should fail or be defeated, I shall lose sleep for the rest of my life in reproaching myself for doing too little. But at least I shall have the comfort of not having offered, so far as I can recall, any word or deed that contributed to a defeat. ▲

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