

Hawks must admit they got Iraq wrong

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In January 2005, a few days before his second inauguration, George W. Bush was asked when someone in his administration would be held accountable for the mistakes of the Iraq war. "We had an accountability moment," Bush replied, "and that's called the 2004 election."

As it turned out, the President was wrong: the accountability moment for Republican politicians was actually the 2006 mid-term election. But at least there was one. It is not yet clear, by contrast, when we'll have an accountability moment for pundits.

The balance sheet on Iraq is now pretty clear: it was a mistake. Yes, a murderous tyrant who brought suffering down on the heads of his people has been ousted.

But the country is a bloody mess and numberless Iraqis have lost their lives; the fabled weapons of mass destruction were not located; the jihadist fire has been fuelled, not smothered; the Middle East has been reordered only to the extent that Iran has been strengthened and emboldened. The blood and treasure spent by the Americans totals well over 3100 troop fatalities and \$US400 billion (\$513 billion).

Most analysts believe the eventual financial cost of the war will be between \$US1 trillion and \$US2trillion, but the cost to US prestige and influence is even greater. Five years ago all the talk in the corridors of foreign and defence ministries around the world (not to mention the streets of the Middle East) was about US strength; now, too often, it's about US weakness. Even if the recently announced troop surge were to have some success, it would be too late to redeem Bush's initial gamble.

Australia's participation in the war must be measured against the same rule. Some observers propose a different standard: they say that through our participation we demonstrated our reliability to Washington at minimal cost.

However, alliance considerations, while important, can hardly outweigh the broader consequences of actions in which we joined, including the self-harm done by our great ally.

Furthermore, the John Howard-Barack Obama dispute last month demonstrated the limits of cost-free reliability.

Iraq was a once-in-a-generation, system-shifting foreign policy decision, and we got it wrong. Now we need -- in fact, we are owed -- an exercise in due diligence on the part of the commentators who cheered Canberra on.

We could actually do with some rigorous self-examination from pundits on both sides of the debate, but given the scale of the policy failure in Iraq the responsibility rests more heavily on the war's supporters than its opponents.

Predictably, the Americans have been much more scrupulous at this than we have.

In the months after the invasion, as the initial cracks appeared, liberal hawks such as Ken Pollack, Gideon Rose and Fareed Zakaria entered serious discussions about what they had got right and what they had got wrong. Conservatives from William F. Buckley Jnr to Tucker Carlson re-examined the evidence.

When the liberal, pro-war magazine *The New Republic* editorialised in June 2004 that the strategic (though not the moral) rationale for the war had collapsed, its then editor Peter Beinart said he wanted the paper "to be honest not just about ... other people's mistakes but our mistakes. We felt we had a responsibility to look in the mirror." The magazine kept returning to the issue, and in November 2006 its editors wrote: "The *New Republic* deeply regrets its early support for this war."

Leading foreign policy intellectual Francis Fukuyama resigned from the ranks of neoconservatism. Washington blogger Andrew Sullivan, a powerful advocate of the invasion, published an article in *Time* in March 2006 entitled "What I got wrong about the war" in which he admitted that he and his fellow hawks had made serious errors:

"We have learned a tough lesson, and it has been a lot tougher for those tens of thousands of dead, innocent Iraqis and several thousand killed and injured American soldiers than for a few humiliated pundits. The correct response ... is not more spin but a real sense of shame and sorrow that so many have died because of errors made by their superiors, and by writers like me."

These commentators have not all necessarily recanted their support for the war. But they have had the courage to revisit their reasons.

It is a sign of the thinness of Australia's public debate that there has been no such reappraisal here. With a few honourable exceptions, Australian hawks have instead done the Baghdad Shuffle. The war was right in principle but wrong in execution. The whole mess is Bush's fault, or Donald Rumsfeld's fault, or the Iraqis' fault -- but it's not their fault. They move seamlessly on to the next foreign policy issue, as though the war had nothing to do with them.

American neoconservatives are also doing the Baghdad Shuffle. But the more impressive American hawks now admit there were clear warning signs before the invasion about the Bush administration's approach to intelligence, diplomacy, war-fighting and state-building. Fred Kaplan, an early supporter of the war who changed his mind before the invasion, wrote in March 2003: "If the administration lacks the acumen or persuasive power to deal with such familiar institutions as the UN Security Council or the established governments of France, Germany, Turkey, Russia, China -- even Canada -- then how is it going to handle Iraq's feuding opposition groups, Kurdish separatists, and myriad ethno-religious factions, to say nothing of the turbulence throughout the region?" Jacob Weisberg put it more bluntly in January 2004: "As a supporter of the war, I can't get myself off the hook by saying Bush has screwed things up, because he has screwed things up in ways that were evident in advance of the invasion. This was elective surgery, and we had a pretty good idea what the surgeon's limitations were."

Australian supporters of the war are doubtless discouraged from providing a rigorous accounting of their own work by the Schadenfreude of their critics. It's understandable that some doves want to play "gotcha", given that many hawks indulged in the same game in the first heady days of the war, but it's pointless. Accusations and apologies are unnecessary: we just need pundits to hold themselves to the same standards to which they hold policy makers.

Defiant hawks reply that this is yesterday's argument. We need to focus on the future, they say; namely, what to do with Iraq now that it's broken.

But if we don't undertake this audit now, then the next time we're faced with a defining international decision -- say, on Iran -- we won't know whether our analytical infrastructure is up to the task.

Another accountability moment is due.

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