

Our Invasions

If we're never going to hold U.S. war criminals accountable, what moral credibility do we have when we condemn Russia and others? We don't even begin to practice what we preach.

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“.... the decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq—I mean of Ukraine.” — George W. Bush

“Kick ass. ... If someone tries to stop the march to democracy, we will seek them out and kill them. ... Kill them! Be confident! Prevail! We are going to wipe them out! We are not blinking!” — George W. Bush to his generals

“This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog,” — Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi, while throwing his shoes at George W. Bush

It is beginning to seem as if there will never be any meaningful accountability for the invasions and occupations of [Afghanistan](#) and Iraq. George W. Bush, now [a personal friend of the Obamas](#), is being rehabilitated among the political elite, his crimes forgotten (except by his victims' families). These disastrous wars have destabilized the Middle East and caused [hundreds of thousands of deaths](#); the cases for both wars were built on mountains of lies; and they both involved unspeakable criminal violence (from the use of [horrific white phosphorous in Fallujah](#) to the [bombing of a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Afghanistan](#) that burned patients alive in their beds). Yet these wars are receding in Americans' memories. The sheer amount of death and deprivation unleashed is difficult to even begin to come to grips with. The bipartisan consensus position in the U.S. appears to be that we are just not going to talk about it anymore, that while scores of Iraqis and Afghans will grow up orphaned, maimed, or both, there will be no investigations and no trials for some of the worst crimes committed in the 21st century.

There are still those who think the invasion of Afghanistan was a morally justifiable “good war,” since it was conducted with the explicit purpose of rooting out Al-Qaeda after the 9/11

attacks. It is hard to maintain this conclusion after reading the U.S. government's own internal accounts of the war, as revealed in *Washington Post* reporter [Craig Whitlock's 2021 book *The Afghanistan Papers*](#). We have evidence that the Taliban might have been willing to strike a deal to end the war quickly; the *Guardian* [reported](#) in October 2001 that "President George Bush rejected as 'non-negotiable' an offer by the Taliban to discuss turning over Osama bin Laden if the United States ended the bombing in Afghanistan." In fact, as Whitlock shows, the Bush administration *conflated* the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, thus turning what should have been a narrow operation to round up a small criminal gang into an all-out war that toppled the country's government and replaced it with an unstable, corrupt, and unpopular alternative. For 20 years, successive administrations were unwilling to admit that the war was squandering vast amounts of lives and money and achieving almost nothing. As in Vietnam, Whitlock says, U.S. officials were consistently "making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable." Whitlock documents almost unbelievable examples of ignorant policymaking, from trying to win "hearts and minds" by giving children soccer balls with Koran verses on them (utterly offensive) to destroying poppy fields in the name of the War on Drugs, thus encouraging enraged, impoverished farmers to join the Taliban. The [Costs of War](#) project at Brown University has summarized the harm done to the country:

The war in Afghanistan continues destroying lives, due to the direct consequences of violence and the war-induced breakdown of public health, security, and infrastructure. Civilians have been killed by crossfire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassinations, bombings, and night raids into houses of suspected insurgents. The United States military in 2017 relaxed its rules of engagement for airstrikes in Afghanistan, which resulted in a massive increase in civilian casualties. From the last year of the Obama administration to the last full year of recorded data during the Trump administration, the number of civilians killed by U.S.-led airstrikes in Afghanistan increased by [330 percent](#). The [CIA has armed Afghan militia groups](#) to fight Islamist militants and these militias are responsible for serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings of civilians. Even in the absence of fighting, [unexploded ordnance](#) from this war and landmines from previous wars continue to kill, injure, and maim civilians. Fields, roads, and school buildings are contaminated by ordnance, which often harms children as they go about chores like gathering wood. The war has also inflicted invisible wounds. In 2009, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health reported that fully two-thirds of Afghans suffer from mental health problems. Prior wars and civil conflict in the country have made Afghan society extremely vulnerable to the reverberating effects of the current war. Those war effects include elevated rates of disease due to lack of clean drinking water, malnutrition, and reduced access to health care. Nearly every factor associated with premature death—poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of access to health care, environmental degradation—is exacerbated by the current war. About [241,000](#) people have been killed in the Afghanistan and Pakistan war zone since 2001. More than 71,000 of those killed have been civilians.

George W. Bush said in 2002 that "the history of military conflict in Afghanistan [has] been one of initial success, followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure. We're not going to repeat that mistake." Whitlock shows that that is precisely what happened, and that it was the Afghan people who suffered the most. The Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations all lied to the U.S. public about how the war was going. After the U.S. finally withdrew (with one final horrifying drone strike on civilians for good measure, [plus a coverup](#)), the Taliban predictably returned to power. The U.S., not content to wreck the

country with 20 years of war, [froze Afghanistan's assets](#) and halted aid out of a purported concern with "human rights." As a result, millions of Afghans are now on the [brink of starvation](#). As the *Washington Post* notes in a [report](#) on the crisis, this is squarely the fault of the Biden administration, since "it was [Biden's] decision to halt aid in response to the Taliban takeover that put the country on the brink of catastrophe."

"We were outside of [an Iraqi city] watching as bombs were dropping on the town. ... We were talking. And Pat said, 'You know, this war is so fucking illegal.'" —Army Spec. Russell Baer, speaking of Pat Tillman, NFL football player and Army Ranger killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan

The Iraq war was completely indefensible from the start. The Bush administration knew that the intelligence it was relying on was shaky, but deliberately eliminated any possibility of doubt. It tried to terrify the American public into supporting the war by warning that proof of Saddam Hussein's secret arsenal of world-ending weapons would come in the form of a "mushroom cloud."

Saddam Hussein, interviewed in February of 2003 by Dan Rather, made protestations that turned out to be quite true, and accused the Bush administration of delusion:

Hussein:

The inspection teams have been here. They have inspected every place. ... I think the U.S. and the world know that Iraq no longer has the weapons. There are no missiles that are contrary to the prescription of the United Nations in Iraq

Dan Rather:

Mr. President, Americans are very much concerned about anyone's connections to Osama bin Laden. Do you have, have you had, any connections to Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden?

Hussein:

Is this the basis of the anxiety in the minds of U.S. officials? Or is it the basis of anxiety in the minds of the people of the United States? ... This topic did not appear amongst the concerns of U.S. officials—that is, about any relationship between Iraq and Osama bin Laden—until recently. That is when they realized that what they had been saying about Iraq—that Iraq was probably in possession of proscribed weapons of mass destruction—or that Iraq might have manufactured some of those weapons ... if that was the case, then that would be an embarrassment to the United Nations.

The elimination of Hussein, a homicidal psychopath, as Iraq's leader, could have been a worthy goal in and of itself. Indeed, "bringing democracy to Iraq" swiftly became one of the major public justifications for the war (after it became apparent that the other reasons were nonsense). Yet at every stage the war and occupation were conducted without regard to the well-being or desires of the people of Iraq. After Hussein's ouster, Bush installed a nincompoop named L. Paul Bremer (a Harvard MBA who spoke no Arabic and had never set foot in Iraq), who ruled over the country like an imperial viceroy. Bremer made disastrous, ignorant decisions that plunged the country into hideous violence, most infamously by disbanding the Iraqi Army, thus instantly creating anarchy. "We created half a million angry,

armed, unemployed Iraqis in 48 hours,” commented Bremer’s predecessor. Bremer may have been a bit of a scapegoat for the administration’s failures—some Republicans blame Bremer in order to exonerate Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld—but he did fine out of it. After destroying Iraq, Bremer went on to serve as chairman of the advisory board for Global Secure Corporation, a company that focuses “on securing the homeland with integrated products and services for the critical incident response community worldwide,” as well as on the board of [BlastGard International](#), a “Florida-based company that manufactures materials to mitigate the impact of explosions.” When he’s not doing that, he lives a pleasant life as a [ski instructor in Vermont](#).

Let us review the damage: [500,000](#) Iraqis died as a result of the U.S. war. Nearly 200,000 of those were violent deaths—people who were blown to pieces by coalition airstrikes or suicide bombers from the insurgency the U.S. occupation unleashed. Others died as a result of the collapse of the medical system—doctors fled the country in droves, since their colleagues were being killed or abducted. Childhood mortality and infant mortality in the country rose, and so did malnutrition and starvation. Millions of people were displaced, and toxins (such as [depleted uranium](#), which is [toxic](#) when ingested or inhaled and, like other radioactive substances, confers a risk of cancer) introduced by American bombardment [have been suspected](#) of causing a range of public health effects including “increase[s] in Fallujah of congenital malformations, sterility, and infertility.” A “[generation of orphans](#)” was created; hundreds of thousands of children lost parents with many left to wander the streets homeless. The country’s infrastructure collapsed, its libraries and museums were looted, and its university system was decimated, its professors assassinated. For years, residents of Baghdad had to deal with suicide bombings as a daily feature of life, and of course, for every violent death, scores more people were left injured or traumatized for life. In 2007 the Red Cross [said that](#) there were “mothers appealing for someone to pick up the bodies on the street so their children will be spared the horror of looking at them on their way to school.” The amount of death, misery, suffering, and trauma is almost inconceivable. In many places, we created a kind of hell on earth.

U.S. forces were not trained to deal with Iraqis as human beings. They solved problems with violence, and had little understanding of the culture. Houses were ransacked or destroyed in searches; people were shot for making sudden movements. The U.S. had absolutely no idea how to make Iraq into a functional country after destroying its government, and didn’t care to put in much effort. Testimonies from Iraq Veterans Against The War’s “[Winter Soldier](#)” [interviews](#) offering a disturbing look at how casual the dehumanization and violence toward Iraqis was:

- “I remember one woman walking by. ... She was carrying a huge bag, and she looked like she was heading toward us, so we lit her up with the Mark 19, which is an automatic grenade launcher, and when the dust settled, we realized that the bag was full of groceries. She had been trying to bring us food, and we blew her to pieces.” — Jason Washburn, a corporal in the U.S. Marines who served three tours in Iraq.
- “By the time we got to Baghdad ... I was explicitly told by my chain of command that I could shoot anyone who came closer to me than I felt comfortable with, if that person did not immediately move when I ordered them to do so, keeping in mind I don’t speak Arabic. My chain of command’s general attitude was ‘better them than us,’ and we were given guidance that reinforced that attitude across the ranks. I watched that attitude intensify throughout my three tours. ... [At one point our commander] ordered that everyone on the streets was an enemy

combatant. I can remember one instance that afternoon when we came around a corner and an unarmed Iraqi man stepped out of a doorway. I remember the marine directly in front of me raising his rifle and aiming at the unarmed man. Then I think, due to some psychological reason, my brain blocked out the actual shots, because the next thing I remember is stepping over the dead man's body to clear the room that he came out of. It was a storage room and it was full of some Arabic version of Cheetos. There weren't any weapons in the area except ours. The commander told us a couple of weeks later that over a hundred enemies "had been killed," and to the best of my knowledge that number includes the people who were shot for simply walking down the street in their own city. — Jason Wayne Lemieux, sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps

- "One time they said to fire on all taxicabs because the enemy was using them for transportation. In Iraq, any car can be a taxi cab; you just paint it white and orange. One of the snipers replied back, "Excuse me? Did I hear that right? Fire on all taxi cabs?" The lieutenant colonel responded, "You heard me, trooper, fire on all taxi cabs." After that, the town lit up, with all the units firing on cars. This was my first experience with war, and that kind of set the tone for the rest of the deployment." — Hart Vigas, U.S. Army Infantry specialist, 82nd airborne

Very little of this was reported in the U.S. press. As Ashleigh Banfield of MSNBC, who was punished by the network for being publicly critical of the war, [said](#): "There are horrors that were completely left out of this war" by the media. Not that exposure made much difference. The practice of torturing detainees at Abu Ghraib prison and CIA black sites was eventually exposed to the public, but when Barack Obama came into office, he made it clear that there would be complete impunity for misconduct. As Karen Greenberg of the NYU Center on Law and Security noted, Obama "refused to clamp down on [torture] in a way that would make it hard for people in the future to do it." Obama said that he wanted to "[look forward, not backward](#)," a bizarre phrase that would sound laughable applied to any other serious crime.

Iraqis of all sects and backgrounds made it clear from early on that they did not want to be occupied—public opinion polling [consistently showed](#) that the majority wanted the U.S. to leave, despite American rhetoric about bringing "democracy" to Iraq. (In a sign of how much the U.S. respected Iraqi democracy, when the Iraqi parliament voted to expel U.S. troops in 2020, Donald Trump responded by [threatening the country with sanctions](#).) One Iraqi quoted by a Winter Soldier testimonial likely spoke for many when he summarized: "Before America invaded, we didn't have to worry about car bombs in our neighborhoods. We didn't have to worry about the safety of our own children before they walked to school, and we didn't have to worry about U.S. soldiers shooting at us as we drive up and down our own streets."

When Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, American politicians were almost unanimous in correctly declaring the war a hideous crime against humanity. But hardly any wished to discuss the difficult question: With what moral credibility can this country condemn aggressive warfare? We have long claimed the right to invade wherever and whenever we please in order to protect what we see as our national interests. We have wrecked countries and done nothing to make amends for our crimes. On what grounds do we claim Vladimir Putin is not allowed to do the same thing? Having undermined international law repeatedly, we are hardly in a position now to invoke it.

Joe Biden has publicly announced that he believes Vladimir Putin should be tried in the International Criminal Court for the invasion of Ukraine. He should. But shouldn't George W. Bush? The United States declines to be bound by the jurisdiction of the ICC, and even claims the right to militarily rescue U.S. citizens who find themselves on trial there. (We have a law that has been dubbed the "[Hague Invasion Act](#).") If we believe that Vladimir Putin should be prosecuted, do we also believe in holding our own war criminals to account? Or do they get a free pass? If they *do* get a free pass, then the United States makes clear that it believes Putin should be bound by rules that we should be exempt from. And why should Putin be expected to accept such a setup? Asked in a 2003 press conference whether his Iraq policy was a violation of international law, George W. Bush joked: "[International law? I better call my lawyer; he didn't bring that up to me.](#)" If Putin replied like this, we would consider it evidence of his depravity.

The invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have caused decades-long human misery. Our lack of concern for the Iraqi people caused hundreds of thousands of them to die gruesomely, and gave the world the barbaric Islamic State. Afghanistan is now back under Taliban rule, but its people are starving to death. Few in the United States seem inclined to discuss what our country's government did in our names. Supposedly there is no statute of limitations on murder. But if you are a U.S. official, the statute of limitations is "whenever public attention moves on to the next thing." Usually that's about five minutes. Then you are scot-free. Are we truly willing to accept this?

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