

What has the Iraq war taught us?

The tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq fell on 19 March, but one wonders if we have learned the lessons from that war. To mark the anniversary in Iraq, a bomb killed 50 people and wounded many more. For a country of 24.6 million in 2003 (31 million in 2012), the constant random killing and violence seem endless.

We know now, of course, that the two major pretexts for the invasion were at least erroneous, if not outright lies: that Iraq was intent on building weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear ones, and that it was implicated in the terrorist attacks on the United States.

Many people were misled by the Administration of President George W Bush and its neo-conservative advisers, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. Many presumed that the US government, with all the intelligence available to it, must have had reliable information to back up its claims; otherwise, why would it have been so adamant and belligerent?



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Sadly, we were lied to. Yet

none of the people most responsible for the war in Iraq have been made accountable. Not only were they driven by ideology and hubris, but they also proved unbelievably incompetent, refusing to listen to the US State Department with its plans for post-war reconstruction. If any other country had done this, its leaders would have been tried for war crimes.

Today's apologists for the war attempt to justify it on the grounds that the dictator Saddam has been removed. But it has been nothing like the 'cakewalk' Rumsfeld expected. What an astonishing cost there has been in lives and treasure! Estimates of the numbers killed vary from 100,000 to much higher. Some 3-4 million people have been displaced, millions fleeing overseas, some even here to Australia. Much of the infrastructure of the country was destroyed. And there have since been an estimated 1700 suicide bomb attacks.

Almost 4,500 US soldiers have been killed, along with 300 from other countries, with 34,000

injured, large numbers with crippling disabilities, and far more with post-traumatic stress disorder. In 2012, 349 US soldiers committed suicide on active duty. The economic cost of the war has reached \$1.7 trillion, and, according to Joseph Stiglitz, with ongoing medical costs, will possibly reach \$3 trillion for lifetime support of disabled veterans.

Some argue that the removal of Saddam was worth the price, and was in the US's national self-interest. Such an argument entirely ignores the moral issues involved.

Saddam may have continued to do bad things to his people, but hardly on the scale Iraq has since endured.

But more to the point, the damage inflicted on Iraq has been our doing, not Saddam's. We must take moral responsibility.

As I argued in a 17,000-word booklet, *War on Iraq: is it just?*, published by the Catholic Social Justice Council before the war, the arguments for war had been convincingly rebutted by leading experts, and the war failed the moral criteria stemming from the just war tradition.

And how do we account for Australia being only one of three countries to join the invasion, together with Britain and the USA? Would it have made a difference if then-Prime Minister John Howard had not had 'Winston' as a middle name? Mr Howard's 2010 autobiography, *Lazarus Rising*, totally fails to explain how Australia's intelligence on the issues was so mistaken, and he offers no apology for his personal decision to take Australia to war. And what of the other polities, the commentators and media that campaigned for the war, and even pilloried critics?

It seems we have forgotten the lessons of Vietnam, to recognise that truth is proverbially the first casualty, and not to become involved in other people's wars.

In addition, many people seem unaware of the just war tradition establishing clear markers for the moral conditions for going to war. I would argue the Iraq war failed on the grounds of just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, proportionality between good and bad outcomes, last resort, and non-combatant immunity.

Thank God, Pope John Paul II strongly opposed the war, and religious groups worldwide joined the widespread chorus of opposition to it. Despite the Pope's leadership however, Australian Catholic bishops dilly-dallied in their response, and only a few bishops strongly entered the debate. What it indicated to me was that some seemed unaware of the strong Christian tradition to constrain wars, and that it was urgent to broaden the constituency of informed opinion on these issues.

Churches and universities need to give much higher priority to study of war and peace, so that we can engage much more positively in foreign affairs, promoting better networks of collective security and disarmament, and resist the lies and propaganda of those who would rush us to war again.

Once the war was begun, of course, we had to see it through and try to establish a reasonable peace. Here we must acknowledge the efforts of members of the armed forces, aid workers, diplomats, and many others genuinely working to build a sustainable peace. They deserve our heartfelt thanks and support.