

Was Trump Right that the Iraq War Was “A Big Fat Mistake”?

TRUMP: Obviously, the war in Iraq was a big, fat mistake. All right? Now, you can take it any way you want, and it took – it took Jeb Bush, if you remember at the beginning of his announcement, when he announced for president, it took him five days....

–at the Republican debate in Greenville, S.C. on February 13, 2016

Jeb Bush did not reply in Greenville to Trump’s pithy dismissal of the Iraq War. But he is on record as defending that war: “I’ll tell you, taking out Saddam Hussein turned out to be a pretty good deal,” he said last August.

Nor did Trump add any details in Greenville to justify his charge of a “big fat mistake.” So perhaps a review of what the war in Iraq was intended to accomplish, and what it did in fact accomplish, will help us decide whether it was “a pretty good deal” or “a big fat mistake.”

Many people at the time the war began were convinced that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and that was enough to justify going to war. But no evidence has yet been found to support that claim. Whatever threat Saddam Hussein posed in 2003 was not to the United States, not even to Kuwait (his clobbering in the Gulf War ended that dream), but only to his immediate neighbor, the hated enemy, with which Iraq had already fought an eight-year-long war, the Shi’a Republic of Iran. And Iran also happens to be America’s most dangerous enemy in the Middle East.

Many people in the Bush Administration felt at the time that Saddam Hussein surely must have had something to do with the 9/11 attacks, that is, with Al Qaeda. They appeared not to

realize that Saddam Hussein was a secularizing Baathist, as antipathetic to Al Qaeda as Al Qaeda was to him. And no evidence appeared then, or has appeared since, to link Saddam Hussein to the 9/11 attacks.

Many who supported the war felt that once Saddam was out of the way, Iraq could with Yankee Knowhow be turned into some kind of Peaceable Kingdom, unified and prosperous and democratic, and then become a A Light Unto the Muslim Nations, with others following its example, so as to transform the Middle East and North Africa. These were people who thought that democracy could be transplanted, through purple-thumbed elections, without much fuss and practically overnight, to Iraq. They did not understand that democracy is a sensitive plant that requires a certain kind of ideological soil in which to flourish, from Locke and Montesquieu and many other political theorists. It requires in addition an Enlightenment that never appeared in the Muslim world, and an understanding that what constitutes a government's legitimacy is whether or not that government reflects, through elections (and often imperfectly) the Will Expressed By the People. But there is no Muslim Locke, no Muslim Montesquieu, no Muslim Enlightenment. There is only the Qur'an, the Hadith, the Sira. And for Muslims, a ruler's legitimacy is determined by the extent to which his rule reflects not the Will Expressed by the People, but the Will Expressed By Allah in the Qur'an. None of this was given a moment's thought by those who were gung-ho for "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

Nor did the Americans understand either the depth or the duration of the hostility between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and why it could not be made to disappear (or why that would not be in America's interest). The American effort to remove Saddam Hussein and his whole top tier of killers (the American military distributed decks of cards depicting the fifty-two most important members of the regime, for a wittily macabre game of Fifty-Two Pickup) was successful, and led to an

inevitable transfer of power from the Sunni to the Shi'a Arabs, through those very elections the Americans hailed as an example of democracy at work. Since the Shi'a Arabs outnumbered the Sunni Arabs 3 to 1, voting *en bloc* ensured a Shi'a ascendancy. Now the Shi'a are solidly installed as the "democratically elected" rulers in Baghdad, and they will never voluntarily cede the power, political and economic (for whoever controls the Iraqi government also controls the oil revenues), that they obtained when Saddam's regime was overthrown. Similarly, the Sunni Arabs will never reconcile themselves to the loss of their former power, but keep fighting to regain it.

Meanwhile the Kurds, who had suffered from attacks, including mass murder, during Saddam's rule, had some relief when, from 2001 on, the Americans established a No-Fly-Zone for them in Northern Iraq, thus limiting Saddam's power to hurt them. The Kurds having tasted, they then acquired a taste for, autonomy. And in Iraq today, the Kurds – who have been the most effective local fighters against the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq – have no intention of surrendering what autonomy they have gained. They may try to transform their quasi-autonomous region into an independent Kurdistan, possibly with military help from Syrian Kurds who have been battle-hardened by their own combat against the Islamic State. That, too, was never part of the American plan for Iraq.

Finally, there is the story of what happened to the Christians in Iraq as a result of the American invasion. In Iraq, the despotic Saddam Hussein had protected the local Christians from Muslim depredations. For the Christians were never a threat to Saddam Hussein, but were a small minority, threatened by the same "real Muslims" who threatened Saddam Hussein as a secularizing Arab. He knew that he need not worry about the Christians in Iraq, for they had no political power or ambitions; they simply wanted to lie low, to practice their faith, and not to be persecuted. Saddam Hussein did make use

of them for his own domestic purposes: Christians, both Assyrians and Armenians, served as his household staff – drivers, cooks, laundresses, tasters. (When the Americans took over the Green Zone, they inherited this same Christian staff, but did not ask themselves why Saddam had relied on Christians). He used them, too, for propaganda purposes: the appointment of Tariq Aziz, a Christian, to such a prominent post as Foreign Minister was a way to signal to the world that Christians could rise high in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. He could trust the Christians, for they knew he was their protector; Iraqi Christians have openly lamented the fall of Saddam Hussein (as, in Syria, the Christians are terrified of the possible toppling of Bashar al-Assad), to the puzzlement of their American "saviors" who assumed Iraqis all shared the American distaste for "despots."

When Saddam fell, the position of the Christians worsened. Canon Andrew White of the Anglican Church in Baghdad was interviewed by Scott Pelley in 2007:

"You were here during Saddam's reign. And now after. Which was better? Which was worse?" Pelley asked.

"The situation now is clearly worse" than under Saddam, White replied.

"There's no comparison between Iraq now and then," he told Pelley. "Things are the most difficult they have ever been for Christians. Probably ever in history. They've never known it like now."

"Wait a minute, Christians have been here for 2,000 years," Pelley remarked.

"Yes," White said.

And this catastrophe for Iraq's Christians was entirely predictable for those who understood why the Ba'athist Saddam Hussein, whatever he did to the Shi'ite Arabs or the Kurds,

had no quarrel with the Christians, but was regarded by them as their Great Protector. With Saddam gone, the “real” Muslims – and not just those of the Islamic State – started to attack Christians with impunity. The Christian population in Iraq went from 1,500,000 in 2003, when the American invasion began, to less than one-third of that, 500,000, today. And it is still falling.

But perhaps, some diehards of democracy might argue, it is always good to get rid of a “despot” and to impose “democracy” (always thought to be a Good Thing, no matter what the mental and moral and historical conditions of the people to whom this “democracy” is to be brought). But in Iraq, what happened when the despot was no longer there? Instead of a Peaceable Kingdom, there has been one long descent into not one civil war, but into many little civil wars, with Sunnis against Shia, Shia against Sunnis, Shia and some Sunnis against other Sunnis of the Islamic State, Muslims against Christians, Sunnis against Yazidis, and tens of thousands of Muslim fanatics flooding into Iraq from outside to join that Islamic State. The city of Ramadi lies in ruins, and so does much of Anbar Province. The Islamic State holds a large part of northeastern Iraq, including Iraq’s second city of Mosul. The Christian population has diminished by 70% since 2003. The unity, prosperity, and Western-style democracy that were all confidently foretold for a Saddam-less Iraq are nowhere to be found. Instead, that Muslim state that poses the greatest danger to the Western world, the Islamic Republic of Iran, has only been strengthened by American intervention. Saddam Hussein, Iran’s greatest enemy, who fought an eight-year war with Iran, is gone, thanks to American intervention. And in Baghdad it is Shia who now rule, supported by Iranian-backed militias.

And what did that exercise in confused geopolitics and misplaced hopes cost us? 4,486 Americans died, and 32,223 were wounded, to bring about that Light Unto the Muslim Nations.

The Iraq war cost American taxpayers more than 3 trillion dollars in direct costs, and with other costs, including long-term care for tens of thousands of severely wounded soldiers, and interest payments on amounts borrowed to conduct the war adding at least another 3 trillion – a total of 6 trillion dollars.

And for all this, what have we achieved? Iran has been strengthened. Iraq is no longer safe for Christians; two-thirds of them have left. Ancient monasteries and churches that were in Iraq for millennia, witnesses to one of the earliest Christian presences in the world, have been destroyed up and down the land. The Islamic State got its fanatical start in Baghdad, became ensconced in Iraq's Anbar Province, from there extended its ferocious power into Syria, and now has branch offices in Libya, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Indonesia, where any day can be bombs away. That was not the "Light Unto the Muslim Nations" that the Bush Administration had in mind when back in 2003 it kicked off its excellent adventure in Iraq with the ballyhoo of Shock and Awe.

So you may have reason to prefer another candidate to Donald Trump. He may exaggerate, he may be wrong, about many things. But when he called the war in Iraq a "big fat mistake," he was not exaggerating, and he was not wrong.

First published in