

Title:

The Inertia of Power

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Summary:

America holds its presidential administrations directly accountable every four years. The real question, though, is how accountable they hold themselves.

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Article Body:

I hate it when Saddam Hussein gets proved to be right ...

Buried in all his pre-invasion bluster was a promise that Iraqis would give the Americans 'another Viet Nam' if they tried to occupy the country. To many, this sounded like just another empty threat, but I took note when he said it.

The reason for my attention had nothing to do with Saddam or any tribal fealties in his favor. Instead, it gave me pause to recall a comment made to me by a veteran foot soldier who fought in World War II. We had a conversation in Geneva in the early 1980s, just before the Cold War began to thaw. I remarked about the superior weapons technology that I thought gave America a distinct advantage over the Soviets, and the vet responded by dismissing hi-tech armories.

"War is about killing your enemy one at a time and gaining territory a step at a time," he said. "And you can only do that with the grunts on the ground."

In what's become a prolonged battle between the forces of technology and terrorism in Iraq, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is the latest to challenge the old vet's advice. It's also looking like he'll be the latest to rue that decision.

However, such repentance will probably not occur in the short term. Just as the Gulf of Tonkin fabrication --- where the Johnson presidency alleged a since-debunked North Vietnamese torpedo boat attack on an American destroyer --- and the Watergate burglary were subordinated to the public as mere historical

footnotes by the administrations in power at those times, the present American presidency appears to believe its power of office can trample any truth that may give the lie to its Iraqi folly.

The trappings of the American presidency are such that the presidency's ability to do this is an established fact. Richard Nixon suppressed the truth long enough to win re-election. Lyndon Johnson ultimately saw a nation so divided by the Viet Nam issue that he chose not to seek a second term, but not before plunging the USA into a full-scale war. Now, it's George W Bush who has slithered into another four year term, based in part on his administration's spin machine successfully keeping the roots of his Iraqi misadventure obscure to the public.

The harsh reality is that the omnipotence of the world's most powerful government makes the task of calling it into immediate account virtually impossible. Before any resistance can be effectively raised, considerable damage --- in lives and resources --- has already been irretrievably done.

We already know that in Iraq, there were no weapons of mass destruction. This has been countered by the presidential argument that, well, Saddam was a bad man. We also know now that there was no relationship between al-Qaeda and Saddam. Yes, said the presidency, but there could have been in the near future; this soon became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, even though the presidency claimed that American forces would be welcomed as liberators in Iraq, the locals there have so far shown a strange way of expressing their gratitude.

How can these retorts go so consistently uncontested, with the possible exception of The Daily Show, which is merely a cable comedy channel's satire of the news?

Now comes further evidence which damns the dubious premises of presidential Iraqi policy, which has recently appeared in the journal, Foreign Affairs. The author, Paul Pillar, is the recently resigned CIA head of intelligence for the Near East and South Asia, who held that office from 2000-2005. His job included managing the Bush administration's secret assessments regarding Iraq. In the article, he contends that invading Iraq was a pre-ordained goal and that, if the presidency had to resort to misleading information in order to gain support for doing so, then they would provide it.

The article, 'Intelligence, Policy and the War in Iraq' doesn't have any new revelations. Its significance is the fact that Mr Pillar, a 28-year CIA operative, was directly involved in the picking and choosing of data ordered by the presidency to make its case, rather than being allowed to take the more

ethical and responsible path of reviewing all data and arriving at objective conclusions. (Lest someone attempts to accuse Mr Pillar of being a bureaucratic malcontent, he was installed on the faculty for Security Studies at the prestigious Georgetown University soon after his resignation from the CIA.)

The astounding carnage of Viet Nam --- 58,000 American dead, over 150,000 wounded; approximately 2-4million Vietnamese dead and wounded --- still dwarfs the totals for the Iraqi incursion, but tell that to each family who loses a loved one and see if it offers them any solace. These soldiers, fighters and innocents are not dying or being maimed for noble causes, but for cynical agenda: vague definitions of an enemy on one side and warped extreme fundamentalism on the other. The fact that the casualties in Iraq show no signs of subsiding make the assertions in Mr Pillar's article all the more exasperating.

A new documentary has also been recently released. 'Why We Fight' was produced and directed by Eugene Jarecki, who used a spectrum of interviews to delve into the effects of current American foreign policy. These range from former Bush administration officials to critics to American fighter pilots to a policeman who lost a son when the jets hit the towers in New York.

Jarecki's premise is based on a famous 'farewell' speech by Dwight David Eisenhower in 1961, who warned of a shadowy 'military-industrial complex' that had the potential to hijack American foreign policy without the public's ability to sufficiently contain it. Given Eisenhower's status as the Allied supreme commander in World War II as well as his presidency, his warning was not only jarring, but prophetic, especially coming as it did on the throes of the Viet Nam conflict. All appearances now are that it's even more pertinent today.

In retrospect, it is also ironic to think that it may have been the Americans who were being held in check by the balance of power posed by a totalitarian Soviet regime. There's no doubt the reverse was true, as well, but I had always thought the Americans realized their best global weapon was their culture; I continue to believe their culture, not their weaponry, caused the USSR to collapse. As such, I fail to understand why each successive American presidency hasn't realized that simple and obvious observation.

Putting that point to an unscientific test, I've asked various citizens of Iraq --- and Iran, for that matter --- what foreign country they most admire, and more often than not, they cite the USA. If I follow that with a question about which government they least admire, they cite the USA. Call me simplistic, but not only does it seem burgers and bluejeans do a better job of making friends, they cause significantly fewer deaths in the process.

However, as long as the American public allows its presidency the inherent power of overbearing rebuttal to any dissenting information without a constant call to justify itself, there will be no subsidence in damaged lives or diverted resources.

Until then, as Saddam, the old vet and history have combined to predict, Iraq is a grunt's war, fought one building at a time. And, like every other war, not every grunt will come home alive or well.