

## A Refined Barbarism

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*The thinking that led to the invasion of Iraq is crude and mechanical. With its inhumanity and promise of eternal conflict, it threatens progress towards a peaceful, civilized world.*  
By *Allan Abraham*

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The diehards who still argue that the invasion of Iraq was the right thing to do now stretch logic and credibility to grasp at any faintly plausible rationale. One-and-a-half years after the invasion, Iraq's WMD threat has been shown, incontrovertibly, not to have existed and to have been a deliberate fabrication by the American and British governments. These governments now fall back upon moral and ideological rhetoric to justify the invasion.

This kind of moral and ideological certitude is misplaced, insensitive, and intellectually crass in a multicultural and plural world. Hannah Arendt has pointed out that to conceive of political action as making a society is to ignore human plurality in theory and to coerce individuals in practice. Ideological certitude is where totalitarianism comes from and could lead there. So, if we accept plurality—hard not to do in a postmodern world—morality or ideology has no place as an argument for an action as radical and destructive as war; it is an argument that cannot be accepted and should not be made. It's only value is as rhetoric to sway the unthinking masses. It has no value in serious debate. The fact that it is being made in all seriousness points to the desperate need to find some serviceable rationale for the invasion and continuing occupation of Iraq. People are free to let the authorities do their thinking for them. But they might serve themselves better by looking behind the rhetoric.

This invasion was based on simplistic theory, wildly optimistic appraisals of reality, and a puerile arrogance. It was conceived in the minds of people with a narrow view of the world. The worthless thinking behind the invasion—praised at the time by US media as brilliant—is now hidden behind a front of crusading zeal. What we are left to contemplate

is a colossal error of policy, a crime of outstanding brazenness, and the futility of exclusive worldviews.

It is important to articulate the significance of Iraq in terms of the larger intellectual picture. Only after people understand this significance can they think forward to an ideal of a peaceful and civilized world. Otherwise, the pointless and destructive clashing of moralities and ideologies, which we now see taking root in many parts of the world, will become entrenched to the point that thought is shaped by exclusive worldviews and where plurality is neither a guide nor an objective.

This article discusses some implications of the invasion of Iraq for the framework of thought.

### The Magnitude of the Policy Error

The central objective of US foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been world hegemony. The objective of that hegemony is to open up opportunities for US corporations and financial institutions so that these play a dominant and controlling role in the world economy and so that stock prices rise on optimistic outlooks for business. The Clinton administration sought to establish hegemony by mainly economic, institutional, and legal means, through global treaties and agreements that were designed to force economies into a global economic, financial, and trading system in which corporations and financial institutions were the chief beneficiaries. Steady financial markets also served to assure Western shareholders and pensioners that shares and private pension funds were good buys and promised a secure future—thus keeping these societies calm under corporatism.

When the Bush administration took power, the neo-conservatives in the administration, being impatient to lay the foundations of the New American Century, implemented a radical new approach. For them, hegemony is not to be achieved through multilateral organizations, in which US interests are tempered by the interests of other powerful states, but unilaterally. The majority of states would be dealt with through bilateral agreements in which the US would have a superior

negotiating position that was unconstrained by global treaties or obligations. Non-cooperative governments of states that were important for US interests would be coerced into compliance. There was to be no more negotiation; only a dictation of terms—as befitted the sole hegemon.

Western Asia, because of its potential for oil-financed independence (demonstrated by the Saddam Hussein government in Baghdad and the religious government in Teheran) must be brought under control. This region's oil makes control of it vital for US interests and for any aspirant to world domination. In early 2001, the future political direction of Western Asia was too unpredictable for the liking of US policymakers. Better, the thinking went, to subdue it forcefully once and for all and establish a powerful military presence in the region. The terrorist actions of 11 September 2001 provided the impetus for putting that policy into action. The doctrine of pre-emption was invented to provide a cover for the regime change activities US policy-makers had in mind.

The fatal flaw in the neo-conservative thinking is the miscalculation about the effects of unilateralism. The expectation was that states, on seeing the resoluteness and might of the US, would flock to the US side in the hope of obtaining favours—rather than incur its wrath. This has worked in the case of some leaders, like Tony Blair of the UK and John Howard of Australia, who could conceive of no destiny for their countries without the US, and who believed that by being the first and most steadfast of supporters they would get a privileged place at the hegemon's side. People throughout the world, however, have been angered and deeply upset by US unilateralism and arrogance, and its easy resort to violence. States that feel threatened by US posturing or see no future at the hegemon's side are developing alternative strategies for advancing in a world setting dominated by power politics. The previous decades' steady progress in international cooperation required to deal with global issues has been halted, and, in some cases (like the slowdown in nuclear weapons development), even reversed. The dream of a better world, free of poverty and misery, is gone. *Western* hegemony based on an

international system of trade and finance controlled by Western institutions is in abeyance as the formerly cohesive West grapples with the ambitions of one of its members. Worst of all, for US policymakers, the long and well cultivated image of the US as a state in the forefront of the fight for freedom, equality, and prosperity for all has been shattered—and that has considerable implications.

From the US and Western points of view, the neo-conservatives have not only botched any hope of a New American Century; their policy has also seriously damaged the earlier policy of US-led Western hegemony by internationalism. For the US, maintaining the current policy will drain already stretched resources and will not result in the anticipated benefits. For other Western states, the hegemony established through international institutions and agreements is seriously threatened. Policy must be adjusted to deal with an international situation in which objectives are unclear and which is subject to the erratic behaviour of one major player.

From the point of view of the less-powerful, less-developed states, the neo-conservative policy has lessened the opportunities for multilateral solutions to their problems. They are left to fend for themselves in a competitive global market that reduces their economies to supplemental roles. The development process boils down to embracing the market and non-interventionist government policy. Developing states now cannot join forces in multilateral forums to press for their needs but must deal with powerful states in bilateral relationships.

This, in broad outline, is the magnitude of the neocon policy error. From a progressive intellectual perspective, it represents a giant step backwards—in historical terms, 100 years backwards. The previous, late 20th century system of Western hegemony at least had the advantage of being multilateralist; there were forums where the needs of the less privileged could be registered and where they could form alliances in order to negotiate. Now, US unilateralism brings power politics back to world affairs. Relative power and the market become the only reality and, hence, the

framework of thought. The most exciting debates will be about the best methods to maximize competitiveness—rather than about why this a good idea at all. Other objectives, such as policy-led social justice and alternative lifestyles, must fit within the larger objectives dictated by the market and cannot become greater objectives. Constructive thought, thus, becomes constrained by the ideology of the market.

### The Magnitude of the Crime

The invasion and occupation of Iraq has cost at least 13,000 Iraqi civilians their lives till date (actual bodies counted by [Iraq Body Count](#) ). In an article published 29 October 2004, the reputed medical journal, [The Lancet](#) , estimates that around 100,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed since the invasion, mostly women and children, and mostly by the invasion and occupation forces (*see sidebar, 'Invasion Brings Death'*). In invading Iraq, the US and UK have resorted to a crime. Starting an aggressive war is the most serious of war crimes. (For those who still labour under the illusion, it is worth emphasizing that there was zero threat from Iraq.) Numerous experts on international law have explained clearly why the invasion is a crime. The UN Secretary-General has himself stated that it was illegal. In the course of the occupation, Iraqi civilians have been killed by US and UK forces. They have been detained without charge and tortured by US soldiers. Iraqi villages and cities have been bombed, and civic utilities and infrastructure destroyed. All these are crimes under the Geneva Conventions. From a broader perspective, a government of a sovereign state has been overthrown by force. This is a straightforward violation of the most fundamental principle of the UN charter. Furthermore, the imprisoned Iraqi government officials are held without charge and with no prospect of facing trial in a court of law: They might have interesting things to say about charges brought against them.

The scale of the crimes is, to use an American phrase, awesome. That awesomeness is magnified and spotlighted by the impunity and arrogance with which they have been carried out. By the same criteria that put Slobodan Milosevic in the dock before a UN war crimes

tribunal, George Bush and his advisers and Tony Blair and his retinue should also be defending themselves before a war crimes tribunal. By the same logic that put Saddam Hussein in chains, Mr Bush and Mr Blair should be doubly bound. Instead they preach morality and strength of character to thunderous applause by the deluded and the deceived. The rest of the world, however, sees astounding double standards, flaunted shamelessly. The message is clear: the law applies to the weak. The consequences of that conclusion do not need to be spelled out.

What does need to be emphasized is that such subjective use of the law legitimizes extremist views. A terrorist group can now justify its deliberate beheading of a Western prisoner by pointing to the beheading of an Iraqi child by shrapnel. The suicide bombing of a restaurant in Israel can be justified by the bombing of civilians in Gaza or Falluja. How do you distinguish legal from illegal, and right from wrong, when some entities refuse to respect or be bound by the law? When that happens, other entities are justified in responding that they, too, will not respect the law. And since the law holds us to minimal standards of acceptable behaviour, the depravity that then follows can be boundless. That is the most crucial consequence of the crime of the invasion. Its enormity should be seen in the starkness of the universal application of the law. Without **universal** application of the law, we open the road to extremism and anarchy.

### The Crassness of the Thinking

The invasion and occupation of Iraq was predicated on the crucial assumption that the population could be co-opted or coerced into a political system designed in Washington. In order to assess how this system could best be achieved, Iraqi society was modelled in terms of the units that make up the ideal managed democracy. This model overlooked the complexity of Iraqi society, which, having roots in antiquity, resists easy compartmentalization. The planned system isn't turning out as planned because the various sectors of Iraqi society resist the pigeonholes designed for them and aren't following the plan. In trying to create their own reality in Iraq, the neo-conservatives underestimated the

strength of the reality they were trying to overcome. This is not just an error of assessment; it highlights a crassly reductive way of thinking about the world.

This worldview assumes that it is America's mission to bring freedom and civilization to poorer and weaker nations, and that it is the prerogative of the current US administration to determine what kind of democracy is best for the people that benefit from its gift. For the civilizing force, people delivered into their care are units gathered into two broad groups: elites and the masses. These groups may be further differentiated into other categories based on religion, community, literacy, social traits, etc. The civilizing force designs electoral systems that keep power within elites who are supportive of US interests. The elites are co-opted into the system, the masses coerced into it. When this works without an uproar, the wonder is attributed to democracy. This is the framework of thought within which the US establishment thinks. Its sole objective is to gain access to the natural and human resources of a country by co-opting elites. All discussion is framed in these terms. For example, there is debate about the best way to make a country's investment climate competitive, but no debate about the sectors in which private investment is most required by the recipient country. This kind of debate takes little account of particular social problems or cultural differences. It reduces people to labour units, and nations to markets that must be modelled in the image of the greatest civilization to have graced history.

### Conclusion

There is one dangerous consequence of action following from this line of thinking, and it is already in train. Muslims and Arabs are being identified with terrorism and evil, leading to a reaction from them. Ideologies on both sides harden as a result, and the confrontation intensifies. People everywhere start to think in terms of these simplicities and start to take sides. The world is dividing into groups based on simple, primitive traits, and these groups are becoming increasingly hostile towards perceived adversaries. The thinking outlined above, instead of leading towards a peaceful world based on mutual understanding and cooperation, is leading inexorably to

confrontation and conflict.

This kind of thinking is barbarism, in the sense of the absence of culture and civilized standards, in the sense of ignorance and crudeness, in the sense of a lack of appreciation of, and respect for, other civilizations. The trend towards rationalization in human society some 100 years ago ultimately led to Fascism and other totalitarian regimes that represented a complete negation of human freedom. The new barbarism coming out of the US today is headed in the same direction. The arguments are rational and slickly presented, but they are crude because of their dismissal of the diversity of the world and their contempt for history. They are narrow-minded, selfish little ideas that offer little hope for human emancipation. Theodor Adorno suggested that such an emancipation might come from aesthetic development. If so, that development would start with respect for other civilizations and love for the world and its wonders. We must learn again to think positively, without fear or cynicism, and with the goal of uniting people, not dividing them.

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3 November 2004

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## SIDEBARS

### Simply Unjust

[The invasion of Iraq is a] completely unjust adventure based on misleading statements.

– Jimmy Carter, former US President and Nobel Peace Prize winner, in an interview with the Guardian, published 25 October 2004.

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**Running on Lies**

I think [Mr Blair] has lied about the situation in the Middle East.

– *Lord Heseltine, former UK cabinet minister, in an interview with ITV's Jonathan Dimbleby Programme, broadcast 24 October 2004.*

**Back to Square One**

All of those long, tedious negotiations that were done by Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Nixon and me and Reagan, to control the spread of nuclear weapons have been abandoned by Bush.

– *Jimmy Carter, former US President and Nobel Peace Prize winner, in an interview with the Guardian, published 25 October 2004.*

**The Finger Writes On**

The president has adopted a policy of 'anticipatory self-defence' that is alarmingly similar to the policy that imperial Japan employed at Pearl Harbour on a date which, as an earlier American president said it would, lives in infamy. Franklin D Roosevelt was right, but today it is we Americans who live in infamy.

– *Arthur Schlesinger, in the Los Angeles Times, 23 March 2003.*

**Jungle Talk**

The grand attempt to subject the rule of force to the rule of law [should be ended].

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– *Michael Glennon, in Foreign Affairs, May–June 2003.*

**Easily Riled**

'There was a feeling that the White House was being mocked,' says one person who worked closely with the National Security Council during those days after the [Iraqi] declaration [on armaments to the UN] was delivered on December 8. 'A tinpot dictator was mocking the president. It provoked a sense of anger inside the White House. After that point there was no prospect of a diplomatic solution.'

*Financial Times, 27 May 2003.*

**Promoting Sycophancy**

[Peoples and regimes will have to change the way they see the world] from a view based on the United Nations and international law to one based on an identification [with Washington's agenda].

– *Roger Owen, Al-Ahram Weekly, 3 April 2003.*

**No Power Politics**

In the future world the misuse of power as implied in the term 'power politics' must not be the controlling factor in US politics.

– *Franklin Delano Roosevelt, US President, 1933–1945*

**A New Era**

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In a world where freedom, not tyranny, is on the march, the cynical calculus of pure power politics simply does not compute. It is ill-suited to a new era.

– *Bill Clinton, US President, 1993–2000*

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### Wars for All

Preventive war falls within the category of war crimes. If indeed it is an idea ‘whose time has come’, then the world is in deep trouble.

– *Noam Chomsky, in Hegemony or Survival, 2004.*

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### Chaos and Mayhem

At the moment there are about 2 million Iraqi in Jordan and the same in Syria and Lebanon. Some 200,000 Christian Iraqis have fled the country in the last couple of months. This is the freedom and democracy promised to the Iraqis.

– *Iraqi civilian, in the Guardian, 25 October 2004.*

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### Invasion Brings Death

The risk of death was estimated to be **2.5-fold higher** after the invasion when compared with the pre-invasion period. The major causes of death before the invasion were myocardial infarction, cerebro-vascular accidents, and other chronic disorders whereas after the invasion violence was the primary cause of death. Violent deaths were... mainly *attributed to coalition forces*. Most individuals reportedly killed by coalition forces were *women*

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*and children*. The risk of death from violence in the period after the invasion was **58 times higher** than in the period before the war.

*The Lancet*, pub. online 4 November 2004.

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### Ship of Fools

The new imperial grand strategy presents the United States [as] a revisionist state seeking to parlay its momentary advantages into a world order in which it runs the show... [Others must find ways to] work around, undermine, contain and retaliate against US power... [The strategy will] leave the world more dangerous and divided—and the United States less secure.

– *John Ikenberry, in Foreign Affairs, September–October 2002.*

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### Our Ideas

There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves.

– *Richard Rorty, in Consequences of Pragmatism, refuting the idea that there is some innate metaphysical ‘truth’ about human beings.*

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### Thinking Like Machines

Technology is making gestures precise and brutal, and with them men. It expels from movements all hesitation, deliberation, civility.

– *Theodor W Adorno,, Minimia Moralia, 1944, transl. GFN Jephcott,*

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1978.

**Related Articles**

Sucking up to the US qualifies as self-interest among some leaders. See [On Self-Interest](#) .

Insisting on the occupation as the only way to bring stability to Iraq is wrong. There are clear alternatives. See [Constructive about Iraq](#) .

All governments now answer to a second constituency of international investors and lenders. In the model for democracy being exported to conquered countries, that constituency might well be the only constituency to which governments answer. See [The Second Constituency](#) .