

The War In Iraq: A Crisis Of Credibility

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A colleague tells the story of a university president who was approached by a woman during a fundraising dinner. The woman told her that she owed her success to a piece of advice he had given her at graduation years before. The president felt flattered to think she played such an important role in this person's life, but really didn't remember the advice." she asked candidly, "What had I said to you?" she said, "When I walked up to receive my diploma you shook my hand, pulled me close and whispered, "Keep moving!"

Temple Sinai has kept moving.

The renovation of our temple home is well underway. Everything is working out splendidly at our temporary sites for worship and for education.

And while it may seem a little strange, at first, not to pray in our sanctuary, this auditorium will soon feel like holy ground. Why? Because the torah scrolls are here, your clergy are here, Nick Tino and the choir are here. Most importantly, you are here!

And let us remember: what makes our sanctuary at 208 Summit Avenue so special to us is not really the physical plant. Holiness does not reside in buildings; it is embedded within the sacred community, within the people who come into the building to be together as one.

And so, together as one, and in the presence of our holy sifrei torah, we declare this space our sanctuary, our sacred place for prayer for this sacred community.

As the Rabbi was walking home from the temple, he was horrified to see one of his friends, a pious and learned man, walk into a Chinese restaurant.

Standing at the door, he observed his temple member talking to a waiter and gesturing at a menu. A short time later, the waiter reappeared, carrying a platter full of spare ribs,

shrimp in lobster sauce, crab rangoon, and other treif that the Rabbi could not bear to think about.

As the congregant picked up the chopsticks and began to eat his food, the Rabbi could take it no longer. He burst into the restaurant and reproached his friend. "Morris, what is this you are doing? I saw you come into this restaurant, order this treif, and now you are eating it in violation of the dietary laws, and mind you, with an apparent enjoyment that does not befit your pious reputation!"

Morris replied, "Rabbi, did you see me enter this restaurant?" The Rabbi nods his head.

"Did you see me order this meal?" Again he nods his head.

"Did you see the waiter bring me this food?" He nods his head.

"And did you see me eat it?" Again, the Rabbi nods his head.

"Then, my dear friend and Rabbi, I don't see the problem here. Everything I've done was under strict rabbinical supervision!"

May this New Year of 5764 that we usher in tonight be a year of blessings: blessings of goodness and joy, of peace and kindness, of friendship and love.

Blessings of creativity and serenity, of fulfilling work and satisfaction, of success and sustenance.

Blessings of nobility and dignity, of physical health and long life.

In this New Year, may justice and wisdom guide our acts, and compassion temper our lives that we may blossom as we age and become our sweetest, truest, and highest selves.

And so we welcome the New Year of 5764 with open arms but also with heavy hearts.

We are mindful of the mounting fatalities in Iraq. Our hearts go out to the families who have forever lost their husbands, fathers, or sons. We are worried about the soldiers who have come home from the war, scarred physically, mentally, or both. We are concerned about the economic and emotional toll that extended tours of duty are taking upon the families of Army Reservists and the National Guard. Nor can we forget that our troops in Afghanistan come under fire in almost daily skirmishes with a resurgent Taliban.

As you well know, 306 American soldiers have died in the Iraq war. More Americans have died in the postwar period than during the war itself (138), making the president's triumphant declaration last may of an end to combat operations painfully premature. This

conflict has already consumed more lives and cost more dollars, and will take far more time to exit, than we bargained for. Does America have another Vietnam-like quagmire on its hands? Let us hope not. But only time will tell.

The principal justifications for engaging in this pre-emptive war against Iraq were to rid the world of Saddam Hussein's stores of chemical and biological agents, to dismantle his efforts to produce a nuclear bomb – of which he was supposedly on the verge -- and to deprive him of the chance to give any of these weapons to terrorists. The bush administration also claimed that Saddam Hussein actively supported al Qaeda and implied by innuendo that Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks.

These justifications for the war have proven to be factually flawed. The urgency and gravity of the danger posed by Iraq to America's security were greatly exaggerated. No weapons of mass destruction have yet been found. Now we are told that there were few, if any, connections between al Qaeda and Hussein, nor between Hussein and 9/11. We know that our intelligence agencies felt under intense political pressure to find facts to fit the alarmist conclusions that the white house wanted to hear.

Now the president no longer mentions any of his prewar assertions. Under public scrutiny, it has become increasingly clear that the decisive motivations for this war were not the ones the administration told us.

Why have we really attacked and occupied Iraq?: to put Iran and Syria on notice that we are a formidable military power and prepared to use it against them; to remove a defiant dictator who made the United States appear weak; to thoroughly reshape the strategic equation in the Middle East by making Iraq into a pro-western country.

Now these might have been justifiable reasons to go to war. The problem is that neither the American people nor the congress were told these justifications and therefore had no opportunity to debate their merits.

And then, of course, there is the oil. World popular opinion claims that our country invaded Iraq for our own economic advantage. I hate to think that the United States of America would ever invade a country to control its natural resources. Unfortunately, the bush administration's awarding of billion dollar, no bid- reconstruction contracts exclusively to politically connected American companies -- Vice President Cheney's halliburton among them-- lends embarrassing weight to that opinion.

All this post-war questioning of our country's true intentions reflects just how inadequate was our national debate on what may have been our first pre-emptive war in American history.

Did the bush administration intentionally misrepresent the evidence to the American people? Was the president misled? Were the president's dire warnings that Iraq was an

imminent threat to America an act of deceit or self-delusion or a bad judgment call?

Each of us will have to come to his/her own conclusions.

But one issue is quite clear. We knew how to win the military fight, but our pentagon-led planning for the reconstruction and democratization of postwar Iraq has been incoherent, if not incompetent.

Do you remember how the administration once talked about bringing home almost all but 30,000 troops by this fall? Do you recall Vice President Cheney stating on "meet the press" that "the Iraqis will welcome the United States as liberators?" blinded by its own wishful thinking and unreliable intelligence of Iraqi exiles, our government did not foresee much that has occurred.

Our government greatly miscalculated the perils we would face in pacifying postwar Iraq, not least of which is the guerilla style resistance put up by Hussein loyalists, the bloody internecine struggle between various religious and ethnic groups with scores to settle, the sabotage and looting of the oil pipelines, the meltdown of the Iraqi army, the broken state of Iraq's physical infrastructure.

As a result, we have not succeeded in securing public order and safety, not for the Iraqi citizen and not for the desperately needed international relief organizations.

Thus far, terrorists have been too successful in spreading fear among the Iraqi people, of fanning hostility between Iraqis and American occupiers, in impeding and frightening away international relief organizations.

The war in Iraq has lived up to the law of unintended consequences. Where once it was debatable whether or not Iraq was truly a terrorist breeding ground under Saddam Hussein -- it is now for sure! Al Qaeda grows in influence. Ansar al-islam has reconstituted itself. Iraq has become a magnet for "jihadists" around the world, out to defeat the United States.

In response to a journalist's question about Iraqi insurgents targeting our troops, president bush replied, "Bring 'em on. We've got the force necessary to deal with the security situation."

Well, the Iraqi extremists are bringing it on. And our men and women in uniform are bearing the brunt of it. Radicals from Saudi Arabia, egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere have made Iraq the Mecca from which to conduct a holy war against America and the west.

In short, Iraq is a wretched mess and our troops have become sitting ducks in a scary

guerilla-style shooting war. Our soldiers are tired by such a long tour of duty, in need of relief, and frustrated by what has become a war of ambushes and sabotage, with no visible enemy to fight.

General Eric Shinseki, the former Army Chief of Staff, was rebuked by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld when he warned that the postwar occupation of Iraq would require several hundred thousand troops, far more than the war itself. General Shinseki was right and the administration knows it.

While refusing to acknowledge that it has made a policy shift, the bush administration has come to the conclusion that the United States cannot shoulder alone what it will take in lives and money to pacify and rebuild Iraq and transform it into a modern, democratic, and prosperous state.

It's long overdue for our government to abandon the "winner takes all" approach and actively pursue a compromise with the United Nations to bring in the multinational force, the humanitarian expertise, and the funds of the international community.

The bush administration's grudging concession that extensive international support is necessary shows just how alarmed it is –but won't admit -- by the mounting casualties and astronomical costs of this war.

Every American president and his administration engage in "spin." we know this. It is a fact of political life in our country. But the discrepancy between the bush administration's rhetoric and the truth with regard to Iraq, the discrepancy between its words and its actions, is as disillusioning as it is dangerous.

I do not see how the occupation of Iraq is central to the war on terror or strengthens our homeland security. On the contrary, I think it is actually diverting resources from where they need to go. The administration's implausibly optimistic and panglossian version of "progress" in Iraq just doesn't cut it anymore. Nor am I alone in feeling that this conflict was a war of choice that was sold to the American people as a war of necessity.

At a certain point, a glaring credibility gap arose between president Lyndon Baines Johnson and the American people over Vietnam. For me, president bush and Vice President Cheney have lost all credibility. What about you?

Some political scientists and historians believe that the United States' ambitious, unilateralist plan to remake the Middle East will ultimately bear fruit. "since world war ii," writes columnist Richard Bernstein, "the United States has been the primary force behind a number of astonishing transformations in the international order – everything from rebuilding Germany and Japan, to the defeat of the soviet union and the reintegration of Eastern Europe and even of Russia into the democratic fold. Could democratizing the Middle East fit into that tradition?"

However, others predict that our country is headed toward an immense failure. "Looking at the Middle East and the sources of liberalism and radical Islam," Writes Charles Kupchan, a senior fellow at the council on foreign relations, "it seems to me that creating an American colony in Iraq will do more to stoke radicalism than to contain it."

All agree that the United States has transformed the Middle East. All agree that the Iraqi people and the world are better off without the beastly regime of Saddam Hussein. All agree that America deserves a thank you for stopping Hussein's horrific human rights abuses.

But no one can yet say how or when this conflict is going to end, and whether or not it will be to America's liking.