

Why The Anti-war Movement Was Right (and Will Keep Fighting)

by Adele Oliveri
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TV screens worldwide are inundated with the images of a US marine climbing over the statue of Saddam Hussein in the centre of Baghdad, covering his face with a US flag. A few minutes later, a US tank pulls the statue to the ground, among a small crowd of Iraqis dancing and cheering and smiling to the cameras. Next thing we hear is that the war in Iraq is over, the regime has fallen, the Iraqi people have been liberated, and that we are witnessing a unique moment in history. Amidst all this cheap triumphalism, many commentators are quick to point out that the quick fall of Saddam's regime and the joy of liberated Iraqis stand to prove that the anti-war movement had got it all wrong.

Had we really? The quick answer to such an assertion is that there were never any doubts that the US and their allies would crash the Iraqi crumbling armed forces in no time, given the overwhelming disparity in military might between Washington and Baghdad. As the British comedian Mark Steel brilliantly put it, "The argument was never that the Americans couldn't manage it. If someone suggests strangling a kitten and ignores your pleas for them not to, it's not much of a defence if they say later 'What you were worried about, it hardly put up a fight at all.'" (The Independent, 17 April 2003)

But this is not the real issue here. Most importantly, every single reason for opposing war in Iraq has turned out to be painfully correct, in spite of carefully crafted propaganda trying to portray the image of a "clean" war conducted solely for the purposes of bringing democracy to Iraq and rid the world of a dangerous and evil dictator. Let's consider the most important in turn.

(1) War was never about the "present danger" posed by Saddam Hussein and his regime. The official pretext for a unilateral attack against Iraq (and for bypassing the UN Security Council) was that Saddam Hussein represented an immediate threat to the security of the United States and the "civilised" world. It was such an urgent matter that the US refused to give inspectors another thirty days before launching their ultimatum.

As it turns out, the allied forces are yet to find any credible evidence of the dangerous WMDs that Saddam was allegedly amassing in the dungeons of in countless presidential palaces. True, there were several times we were made believe that the US armed forces had found the "smoking gun" they were looking for, such as when a group of marines discovered a dozen barrel of suspicious material, which later turned out to be ordinary pesticides, such as those employed in agriculture everywhere in the world. But even if WMDs were to be found, that would strengthen the antiwar argument.

As Rahul Mahajan recently explained in an interview to Znet, the US online radical magazine, "Even against an illegal war of aggression whose end was the annihilation of the regime, the Iraqis didn't use WMD; how then could anyone argue that there was a threat that it would use WMD if it wasn't invaded?" The truth is the US adminis-

tration had known all along Saddam Hussein was never the dangerous threat he was portrayed to be. In a recent article on The Australian, Michael Ledeen, resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute bears it all; talking about "rogue states" and the dangers they pose in the war on terrorism, he says: "Saddam Hussein's Iraq was never the most threatening of those countries. That dubious honour belongs to Iran, the creator of modern Islamic terrorism in the form of Hezbollah, arguably the world's most lethal terrorist organisation". There we go.

(2) The war would cause immense suffering on a people already brought to their knees by 12 years of economic sanctions. In spite of all the propaganda that "collateral damages" would be kept to a minimum, air raids over Baghdad and the indiscriminate targeting of civilians caused a massive death toll in Iraq, that no reliable source has yet been able to estimate.

While "embedded" journalists happily reported the "shock and awe" of a Baghdad being floodlight by "surgical" strikes, distinguished independent journalists like Robert Fisk provided us with the crude images of emergency surgery being carried out in hospitals overflowing with the dead bodies of those who the "clever" bombs were not clever enough to spare.

The Socialist Worker reports: "The Pentagon estimates US troops killed more Iraqis in a single day - 5 April - than were killed in the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001. According to the World Health Organisation, 100 civilian casualties per hour were being brought into Baghdad hospitals following the 5 April assault."

Robert Collier from the San Francisco Chronicle wrote a few days later, "The body bags have run out at Baghdad's Al-Kindi Hospital, and morgue workers have to cut up big rolls



of black plastic to wrap the war's latest victims... Doctors have been carrying out some emergency surgery with only 800 milligrams of ibuprofen. In the United States, that's standard prescription-strength dosage for muscle pain." Roland Huguenin, one of six International Red Cross workers in the Iraqi capital, said doctors were horrified by the casualties they had found in a hospital in Hilla, about 160 kilometres south of Baghdad. "There has been an incredible number of casualties," reported Huguenin. "We saw that a truck was delivering dozens of totally dismembered dead bodies of women and children. It was an awful sight. We had small toddlers of two or three years of age who had lost their legs, their arms."

Besides the immediate casualties of war, many more are expected in its aftermath, as the lack of food, clean water and other basic resources appear set to provoke a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions.

As Denis Halliday, a former Under-Secretary General at the U.N. who administered Iraq's oil for food program before he resigned in protest against economic sanctions in 1998, recently told Scott Harris of Between the Lines: "As UNICEF was telling us just recently, in the south of Iraq 25 percent or more of children under 5 years of age are already

malnourished. When you're malnourished at that age and you get unclean water, just simple diarrhea is enough to take your life... So that I think is the absolute immediate crisis that several millions obviously are facing in Umm Qasr, Nasiriyah, Basra, Najaf or Karbala to the south of Baghdad."

Not to mention, of course, the dangers to the civilian population arising from cluster bombs, depleted uranium and the social unrest and the looting which are already taking place. This alone, among all reasons, is enough to prove that opposing the war was not only right, but indeed the only morally sound thing to do.

(3) The claim that the Iraqi people would be "liberated" has proved a blatant lie. While the demise of Saddam Hussein would indeed be reason for celebration (like the fall of any dictatorship), it has become increasingly evident that self-determination for the Iraqi people will be off the agenda for some time to come. Ahmed Chalabi, the leader of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), in an interview to the American network ABC advocated the presence of US forces in Iraq: "The military presence of the United States in Iraq is a necessity until at least the first democratic election is held, and I think this process should take two years".

In the meanwhile, the US army is turning to the forces operating under Saddam Hussein's rule to "restore order" in the country, where looting and rioting appear to be out of control. According to the Iraqi poet Sinan Antoon, "After surrounding the statue and announcing the end of Saddam's era to the world, the liberators stood still and watched the country descend into lawlessness. The power vacuum unleashed the violence and repression of three decades of tyranny and exposed the total erosion of Iraqi social fabric... Even if there were some Iraqis who had given the US the benefit of the doubt, they have changed their mind by now and one can see their anger everywhere."

How could it be otherwise? The US had already planned the future of post-war Iraq well before the war began; candidates to the top ruling posts include General Jay Garner, now head of the Iraq Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, President of the company that sells Patriot missiles and fervent supporter of Ariel Sharon's right wing Likud party in Israel; James Woolsey, former CIA director, on the board of the pro-Israel Jewish institute for National Security Affairs; Ahmed Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress and a convicted fraudster; and Nizar al-Khazraji, former Saddam general, who fled Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait and lived under CIA protection, and is being investigated for gassing Kurds.

The Iraqi's fury at the invaders was all too evident on April 18, when thousands of people gathered outside the mosque in Baghdad after their Friday prayers, calling for the US to leave Iraq at once. The group, calling itself the United National Movement of Iraq, claimed to be representing both Shiites and Sunnites, the two major Islamic groups of the country. Compare this with the few dozens Iraqi caught smiling on camera in Al-Firdaws Square the day Saddam's statue was pulled down, and you are bound to agree with Robert Fisk's assessment: "America's war of 'liberation' is over. Iraq's war of liberation from the Americans is about to begin."

(4) War was in fact about securing US economic interests in the country and controlling Iraqi's precious oil reserves. Besides the issue of Iraqis self-determination in its own right, the worrying feature of the US presence in

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PO Box 21604, Seattle, WA 98111-3604

Phone/Fax—206.374.2215, Email—thevets@vavai.org, Web—www.vavai.org

Iraq is that by the time Iraqis will be free to elect a government of their choice, all major economic decisions concerning their country will have already been taken. "The country is being treated as a blank slate on which the most ideological Washington neoliberals can design their dream economy: fully privatized, foreign-owned and open for business." (Naomi Klein, ZNet, 13 April 2003).

Oil is of course top of the list: the US defense department is setting up an advisory board to run Iraq's oil industry, to be likely headed by Philip Carroll, Shell's former CEO.

But it's not just oil we are talking about: USAID is handing out contracts worth up to \$100 billion. Among the beneficiaries, the Halliburton company, that got a \$7 billion contract to fight fires at oil wells and that still pays Dick Cheney, the US vice-President and its former CEO \$1 million a year as a "retainer". Halliburton was the only bidder for the contract, as doing otherwise "would have been a wasteful duplication", the Pentagon said. (So much for market competition, we would add).

Other contracts have been granted to DynCorp, the US military contractor, hired to recruit a private police force for Iraq; to the US company Research Triangle, for "strengthening the local administration"; to Creative Associates International, to provide educational service; and to Stevedoring Service of America, to run the Umm Qasr port. And if this wasn't enough, "California Republican Congressman Darrel Issa has introduced a bill that would require the Defense Department to build a CDMA cell-phone system in postwar Iraq in order to benefit 'US patent holders'".

As Farhad Manjoo noted in Salon, CDMA is the system used in the United States, not Europe, and was developed by Qualcomm, one of Issa's most generous donors. (Naomi Klein, *ibidem*). One wonders why nobody has bothered to ask the Iraqis whether they agreed with selling out their country to the worst bidder, as one would expect in a 'democratic' country; wasn't this war about democracy, after all?

Those facts represent ex-post the reasons why the anti-war movement has been opposing war in Iraq; most importantly, they are the reason why the movement has kept up the struggle even after the end of the bombing. On April 12, 2003, several hundred thousand people took the streets in Spain, Italy, Britain, Canada, the USA and several other countries, to call for an end of the occupation of Iraq and to finally allow Iraqis to have the full control of their lives. But there are more challenges lying ahead, as warmongers in Washington reassess their strategy, taking their aim at the next likely target of their seemingly unstoppable ambitions.

If there is anything that war on Iraq has taught us, is that it will take more than a few well-organized marches to contain the expansionistic drive of political and economic imperialism; a "total war" requires a "total opposition", calling on all our energies to devise new and more powerful forms of struggle, depriving the beast of the vital resources it is now feeding on.

Adele Oliveri is an Italian economist and political activist, now living in Barcelona, Spain. This article is set to appear in "La Resistencia A La Guerra Global", Luke Stobart (ed.), a book on the antiwar movement forthcoming in Spain. Adele can be reached at melippa@gmx.net.

