

Why are Australians being sent to kill Iraqis?

Carmen Lawrence

“They have guns and bombs and the air will be cold and hot and we will
burn very much.”

Assem, 5 years, Iraq.

The justifications being offered by Bush, Blair and Howard for attacking Iraq are constantly changing. Most Australians have rightly concluded that they are pretexts, arguments of convenience served up to garner public opinion.

Trying to decipher the Bush administration’s real motives has consumed acres of newsprint and video footage. With varying emphasis and depending on the audience, three main reasons have been presented to the international community as providing an imperative for war:

1. to eliminate the so-called “weapons of mass destruction” which Saddam Hussein is said to possess;
2. to diminish the threat of international terrorism;
3. to remove a brutal tyrant and promote democracy in Iraq and region (regime change).

Nothing is more certain, however, than that these are not the reasons. A sudden commitment to democracy, the protection of human rights and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction is **not** at the heart of the Bush administration’s rush to create a new killing field.

The United States has “form” on all these front and many of its own citizens have had the temerity to remind the Bush administration of U.S. governments’ dismal record to date. As Lewis Lapham say bluntly in his essay, “Road to Babylon”, “We’re good at slogans, but we don’t have much talent for fostering the construction of exemplary democracies; we tend to betray our allies, dishonor our treaties, and avoid the waging of difficult or extensive wars.¹”

Successive U.S. administrations have supported, trained and funded brutal and despotic regimes in South America (and elsewhere), and Saddam Hussein’s grotesque dictatorship when it suited them. That little has changed is evident in their current largesse toward and support for several post soviet dictatorial regimes described by foreign policy analyst Klare² (foreign policy analyst) as “only slightly less odious” than Saddam Hussein. The U.S. has always been prepared to embrace anti-democratic regimes when it suited their interests.

They don’t have a particularly edifying record of respect for human rights either at home and abroad (they are not even signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and their previous support for terrorists of convenience (including the Contras and Osama Bin Laden himself in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan), suggests that their antipathy toward terrorism is selective.

And Lapham put it, “A Government that must hold Senate hearings to discover whether it has a reason to go to war is a government that doesn’t know the meaning of war.”

¹ Lapham, Lewis. “The Road to Babylon”, *Harper’s Magazine*, December, 2002.

² Klare, Michael, T. The Coming War With Iraq: Deciphering the Administration’s Motives. *Foreign Policy in Focus*, January 16, 2003.

The current administrations' rush to conflate the acts of murder carried out on September 11 with the Iraqi regime reveals these arguments as convenient fictions.

It is said that war is justified to keep such weapons out of the hands of terrorists. Such transfer is of genuine concern, but most agree that it is Pakistan where the risk of transference is greatest. Senior military officers are known to have strong links and sympathy with extreme Islamist movements like Al Qaeda and they have supported and trained Taliban and Al-Qaeda, as did Saudi Arabia, another U.S. ally and the home of the majority of those who attacked on September 11.

We've been told anyone who expresses such views is somehow suspect – “you're either with us or you're with the terrorists”. You either support the virtuous United States or you're with the “evildoers.” September 11 is being used to justify the “reconception of America's correct role in the world as one of initiating and waging virtually perpetual war.”³ It's also being used to forcefully silence critics in the U.S. and elsewhere.

As Laura Rediehs has argued, Bush and his apologists draw a sharp line between good and evil, assigning people and nations to one side or the other. Neutrality or complexity are not possible. In this world, “every attitude, action or person must be assigned to one side or the other. Therefore, to question the official interpretation of these events (Sept 11) or to question the appropriateness of a military response is to remove

³ Didion, Joan. “Fixed opinions, or the hinge of history.”, *The New York Review of Books*, January 16, 2003.

oneself from the side of goodness...the questioner must be regarded as evil,⁴” questioning goodness itself.

Apparently it's good enough for our Prime Minister, who simply parrots Bush's assertions about Iraq and the “war on terrorism”, imitating the pre-emptive strike rhetoric to the alarm of our neighbours.

The Prime Minister appears to unembarrassed by Bush's petulant impatience, by his whining complaint that he is fed up with watching what he describes as a B-Grade movie, by his childlike reasoning that things will be so because he says so - “I've made up my mind, that Saddam needs to go.”

There is no doubt that the U.S. is about to attack Iraq, with or without UN endorsement, but certainly with British and Australian troops in tow. Our troops are joined with the massive U.S. contingent and a significant British force. They are poised to attack Iraq.

They are being readied to rain down bombs on the Iraqi people in what one Pentagon source described as the “Shock and Awe” strategy. As reported in the New York Times of February 2,

“The Pentagon has disclosed its plan to maintain peace by carrying out an opening blitzkrieg on Iraq, more than 3000 bombs and missiles in the first day of a U.S. assault...so that you can have this simultaneous effect rather like the nuclear weapons at Hiroshima, not taking days or weeks but in minutes.”

⁴ Rediehs, Laura, J. “Evil”, In J. Collins and R. Glover, *Collateral Language: A User's Guide to America's New War*. New York: New York University Press, 2002

Even if this is nothing more than a crude device to scare Saddam Hussein into fleeing the country, that such a strategy could be articulated is grotesque.

Depleted uranium weapons, whose use during the last Gulf War is already linked to increases in childhood cancers, will, almost certainly, be used again. Indeed, the United States has not ruled out the use of nuclear weapons. Why is our Government supporting these actions?

Recent reports from the U.N., Medact, the U.K. equivalent of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War here in Australia, and a group of health workers based at Cambridge University all systematically document the past and projected health and environmental costs of war.

Medact estimates that if the threatened attack on Iraq eventuates, between 48,000 and 260,000 people on all sides could be killed. Civil war within Iraq could add another 20,000 deaths. They estimate that later deaths from adverse health effects could add a further 200,000 to this hideous total.

The leaked U.N. report predicts substantial and wide ranging impacts – as many as 500,000 requiring treatment as a result of injuries in the face of severe shortages of medical facilities and supplies. It also points to the likelihood that there will be food shortages and consequent starvation and malnutrition affecting some 3 million people.

The estimates of the toll of death and misery which might result from an attack on Iraq do not include the use of nuclear weapons which the U.S is said to be contemplating. (Los Angeles Times, January, 26, 2003). To quote from the piece by William Arkin.

“ the current planning focuses on two possible roles for nuclear weapons: attacking Iraqi facilities located so deep underground that they might be impervious to conventional explosives; thwarting Iraq’s use of weapons of mass destruction.”

The bizarre contradiction inherent in using nuclear weapons – the ultimate “weapons of mass destruction”- for the purpose of eliminating “weapons of mass destruction” appears to have escaped the warmongers in the Bush administration.

As commentators have pointed out planning for the possible pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons removes them from their long-established special category and treats them as no different from other military options.

We are all entitled to ask – WHY ARE AUSTRALIANS BEING SENT TO KILL IRAQI PEOPLE?

The burden of proof and argument must always be on those who argue for war. We should not have to argue against the use of violence. Peace and non-violent means of conflict resolution should be the starting point of any discussion.

That, after all, is why the United Nations was founded. It is why we have helped devise and have adopted so many conventions and treaties to prevent war, human rights abuses, including torture and persecution. The obligation should be on all the member nations to uphold the general principles of international law, that:

- there should be peaceful resolution of conflicts between states;
- the use of force is only permissible in the case of an armed attack or imminent attack or under UN authorisation when a threat to

peace has been declared by the Security Council and non-military means have been determined to be inadequate;

- enforcement of international law should be applied consistently to all States.

None of these principles are being respected by our government or by the Bush administration.

It is easy to be distracted by the minutiae of the arguments, but we sometimes forget to ask whether the arguments or the evidence in support of them can justify the killing of tens or even hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people. Or the flow on effects, including greater instability in the region, and the probable generation of a new wave of anti-western extremism.

Our Prime Minister's statement to the Parliament was simply a pale echo of the U.S. propaganda and is no more convincing.

Neither the Blix report, nor Blair's plagiarised dossier nor Powell's "evidence" before the Security Council justify war. Blix, himself septicly repudiated many of the claims made in Powell's presentation and told that his own report was being misrepresented by the U.S. to justify war.

The U.S. government also has a history of using disinformation to drum up support for war – Gulf of Tonkin incident to justify the campaign in Vietnam.

Yesterday's "Australian" carried a letter from Major-General Alan Stretton, a former deputy director of the Joint Intelligence Bureau saying he was unconvinced by the Powell evidence to the Security Council.

More damningly, he concludes, "Even if these US intelligence reports are true, there is still no valid reason why the Australian Government should be sending young Australians to be embroiled in a war in the Middle East where the consequences and duration are unknown."

It is often those who have seen war, who most revile the use of force. A war correspondent who has seen the end result of "orders from far away" describes his experience in Vietnam and anticipates the likely effects of the waves of B52 bombers which will be used in Iraq. He remembers the "children's skin folded back, like parchment, revealing veins and burnt flesh that seeped blood, while the eyes, intact, stared straight ahead."

This raises the question, what is the actual imminent threat posed by Iraq to the U.S. or any other nation which would justify war? Mere possession of weapons, even if established, is not evidence of an aggressive threat. The U.S. falls back on the "someday" argument to justify strike without threat, against international law.

The most obscene suggestion is that the U.S. now has to go to war because it threatened to and, otherwise will lose face. "Our credibility will be badly damaged," as one official said.

We desperately need a peaceful resolution to this and conflicts like it. We have to ask, if containment and surveillance have worked until now, why abandon them? Have we really explored all means less terrible than

war? Is it really beyond human imagination and intelligence to devise other diplomatic and security solutions such as those proposed in recent days by France and Germany? Is killing Iraqis really the only course of action open to us?

Killing people should not be considered until all alternative means have been tried and failed. We cannot in good conscience say that this is the case.

I've heard members on the other side justify an attack in terms not dissimilar to those of the Bush administration. That because they do not intend to kill children, that they are somehow exonerated. Even if Bush and Howard claim not to intend to kill innocent civilians, they are still using military techniques which will inevitably result in the loss of innocent lives. As Rediehs so eloquently puts it,

So, although both sides in this Great Cosmic Battle employ similar techniques- violence that includes the killing of innocent civilians – our doing this is justified because we are good; their doing it is unjustified because they are evil.

Like many in the community, I've tried to make sense of what's happening; to read and think and talk, to gain some sense of control over the dark chaos we're confronting. Like many, I cannot help but to return again and again to the images of children dying. The face on the poster advertising the rally this coming weekend is that of a child. And rightly so, because children will be – already are – the most likely victims of an attack on Iraq.

Of the approximately 25 million people living in Iraq, 12 million are children, with four million under the age of 5. Every time a bomb hits, on average, we can expect half of the victims to be children.

Writing in the “Guardian”, Jonathan Glover tells how in discussing medical ethics with his medical and nursing students, it is clear that everyone agonises over life and death decisions, for example, when discussing whether to continue life support for a severely disabled child, never rushing the discussion.

He is struck by “the contrast between these painful deliberations and the hasty way people think about a way in which thousands will be killed... Decisions for war seem less agonising than the decision to let a girl in hospital die. But only because anonymity and distance numb the moral imagination.”

We know that Iraqi children are already suffering as a result of the last Gulf war and the sanctions that have been imposed since 1991. Several meticulous reports, including from the U.N., attest to the already fragile state of Iraqi children.

The most recent, “Our Common Responsibility” from the International Study team, which documented the effects of the last war on the children of Iraq, has assessed the vulnerability of Iraqi children today, forecasting a “grave humanitarian disaster” should war occur. This independent group of academics, researchers and practitioners used data from a wide variety of sources, including the U.N., international and non-government organisations and more than 100 unaccompanied visits and interviews within Iraq, particularly in Baghdad, Karbala and Basra.

They concluded that “Iraqi children are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of war than they were before the Gulf War of 1991”, in part, because they are more dependent on food distribution programs which are likely to be disrupted by war. If war breaks out the number of children who are malnourished will almost certainly grow beyond the 500,000 already affected.

These children are particularly vulnerable to infectious diseases that are likely to increase with damage to water supply and sewerage treatment facilities, already operating below capacity because of sanctions. The death rate among children under five is already 2.5 times greater than in 1990, and has improved only slightly as result of the Oil For Food program initiated after adverse publicity on the devastating effects of sanctions.

Furthermore, the health care system, formerly one of the best in the region, is in a run-down state, with severe shortages of health professionals, many of whom have fled, and some of whom are rotting in our own Gulags.

The United Nations itself estimates that an attack on Iraq could force more than 1.4 million people to flee Iraq and another 2 million to within Iraq away from their homes. It is clear that no one is prepared for such an exodus, least of all the Australian government.

The newfound concern by the Government ministers and MPs for the plight of Saddam's victims has not been much in evidence over the last few years – ask the poor bastards who are still being brutalised on Nauru.

Ask the more than 1000 Iraqis who are still being held in detention. Ask their children, who are locked up in contravention of every relevant UN Convention to which Australia is signatory.

These are the same people for whom the Government felt such compassion that it systematically denigrated them as greedy, wealthy queue jumpers, as illegals who were prepared to manipulate the Australian people with their hunger strikes and desperate acts of self harm.

These are the people described as unworthy future citizens because they “threw their children overboard,” a claim we now know to be a calculated lie of political convenience. The Government so well understood the trauma they had already experienced at Saddam’s hands that it refused them aid altogether, marooning them on remote islands, trying to deny any responsibility for their wellbeing. They sent over 600 desperate Iraqi people to rot on Manus and Nauru, where many of them are still being held.

The government felt such pity for their plight that it turned its back on the foundering SIEVX and allowed 353 of people to drown, victims of either indifference or a deliberate strategy of sabotage, or in the chillingly clinical language of this government, a “disruption” program. The majority of these poor souls were Iraqi, 142 women and 146 children trying to join their husbands and fathers here on temporary protection visas which cruelly deny them family reunion.

There are an estimated 4000 Iraqis here on these temporary visas, many now up for review and renewal. Like the Afghani man who committed

suicide this week rather than face return, many will now be under enormous strain. They know that some of their compatriots have already been either forcibly returned to the region or coerced into agreeing to their own deportation, although even Syria is now refusing to take them.

Just two weeks ago I helped organise the removal of an Iraqi asylum seeker from a vessel where he'd stowed away. A political refugee, he's now in the Perth Detention Centre. He'd been held in a paint cupboard on board the ship for two months as the vessel pled the coastal trade because the Australian government has made it clear to all ship owners that they allow asylum seekers to land here at their peril. They risk prosecution and the cancellation of their permits. Such sympathy for those feeling the Monster of Baghdad!

To return to the children of Iraq. The most disturbing reports contained in "Our Common Responsibility" were those of the psychologists on the team. They followed up children who were interviewed after the last war and found, unsurprisingly that children "continued to experience sadness and remained afraid of losing their family." They described the increased stress on parents from the effects of the last war and the sanctions - poverty, the death of family members, disrupted sanitation, electricity and water supply and the subsequent difficulty parents have in providing a caring and supportive environment for the children.

We all understand that losing people we love, particularly children, causes long lasting grief and depression. These experiences can be devastating for children. During the early part of the sanctions regime, childhood mortality escalated at an alarming rate to reach 131 per thousand children below the age of five years, meaning, as the report puts

it, “that every second family runs the risk of losing a child.” Think about it – and that before the planned attack on Iraq. When these deaths are caused by shelling or bombing or shooting, the loss is even more traumatic and will lead to lifelong mental suffering.

Is it really a surprise that the researchers found that the imminent threat of war was adding to this stress and preoccupied many of the children they interviewed. Even the preschoolers were afraid and “possessed concepts of the real physical threats of bombs and guns; destruction of houses, burning homes, killing of people, and in the end referring to their own family: ‘we will all die.’” One five year old boy said of the threatened U.S. attack, “They have the guns and bombs and the air will be cold and hot and we will burn very much.”

Older children, also fearful, were found to be in a state of fatigue, resignation and sadness, many experiencing sleeping problems and nightmares, severe concentration problems at school and, in some cases, feelings of extreme detachment. Nine year old Hana said, “Often I feel nothing. Nothing at all.” This same feeling was starkly revealed in the finding that almost 40% of the teenagers interviewed thought that most of the time life is not worth living.

It seems that Bush and Blair and Howard are about to confirm their fears and grant them their implied wish.