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OpinionNation: Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of the Iraq Invasion

Tom Hayden, Robert Dreyfuss, Jodie Evans and Nathan Schneider on March 19, 2013 - 10:23 AM ET

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As the tenth anniversary of the war in Iraq approached, we asked veteran antiwar activist Tom Hayden, CODE PINK's Jodie Evans, foreign policy blogger Robert Dreyfuss and activist-writer Nathan Schneider to reflect the legacy of the invasion and the destruction, and disillusionment, that followed. Their responses follow.

The Dove Is Never Free

Tom Hayden, a Nation editorial board member, is a long-time antiwar activist.

*Oh the wars they will be fought again
 The holy dove
 She will be caught again
 Bought and sold and bought again
 The dove is never free.*

— Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"

Remember how bad things were. Al Gore won the vote but the thieves won the 2000 election. After the terror of 9/11, the peace forces hadn't been so marginal since the 1950s.

Just in case, the Iraq War itself was designed to avoid provoking the public. No draft would mean no protest. Iraq would cost a bargain price \$200 million, with no tax hike. There would be few American casualties to disturb the television watchers, just like the earlier air war in the Balkans. A cakewalk, they called it.

Then in February 2003, millions around the world declared a new generation of winter soldiers on freezing streets. *The New York Times* pronounced public opinion a second superpower.

During the next five years there were eleven national protests surpassing 100,000 in number, some well over 500,000. Individuals found their boldness and made a difference, among them: Cindy Sheehan, Michael Moore, Robert Greenwald, Bradley Manning, Howard Dean and the individual security guard who released the Abu Graeb photos. One hundred and fifty city governments passed anti-war resolutions. For the first time, the AFL-CIO opposed a war. An American majority soon told Gallup that Iraq was a mistake. MoveOn.org raised tens of millions for anti-war candidates. Voters dumped the House Republican majority in 2006, with the issue of Iraq decisive.

In October 2007, old New Leftists like Marilyn Katz and Carl Davidson finally found a respectable speaker for their Chicago peace rally: state Senator Barack Obama. Months later, Obama won all-white Iowa on his pledge to oppose the Iraq War. He was the first president elected on platform of withdrawing our troops during a war.

In those brief five years, a peace movement arose mysteriously from the margins, spread to the mainstream and drove a stake through neo-conservative dreams of domination. A Shi'a regime came to power in a sovereign Iraq, and Iran was the geo-political victor. Of course, the Empire didn't fall, the "War on Terrorism" didn't abate, neo-liberalism proceeded, global warming worsened. In the title of David Kilcullen's book on counter-insurgency, Iraq was only a "small war" in the course of a longer one.

But it is important to note the impact of the peace movement as a formidable stumbling block and complicating factor for future imperial plans. It's a tragedy that the peace movement could not be consolidated after Iraq into a version of the NAACP, NOW or the AFL-CIO. The millions raised by Move.org were not reinvested in a lasting peace constituency. There was no Soros endowment. The political consultants turned a blind eye to the existence of the obvious peace bloc that was critical to winning. To this day, the peace movement is an unrecognized constituent force in the country. Its voice is utterly excluded from the inner circles of national

security discussions.

Until this imbalance is c

And, like the legend of S

Long wars require a long

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We Can't Afford the Same Mistake Again

Jodie Evans is co-founder of CODEPINK: Women for Peace.

Over ten years ago, we founded CODEPINK in response to the fear-mongering color-coded terrorist alerts that helped scare Congress into an invasion and occupation of an innocent country, Iraq. What I thought I was fighting to stop was so much less shocking than what actually happened. After Bush said it was time for Shock and Awe, the maid in our hotel in Baghdad buried her head in my chest, looked up to the sky and asked, "How do I protect my children?" Even then, with my heart breaking, I couldn't have imagined what lay ahead.

Could we have imagined over five million Iraqi displaced and possibly a million dead? Could we Americans have imagined the erasure of civil liberties, the deaths of so many young soldiers and over 100,000 horrific casualties? Or the excruciating effects of PTSD or the devastation of rapes in the military and the Military Sexual Trauma suffered by so many women? Could we have imagined that more American soldiers would commit suicide than die in the line of duty? I had argued to members of the Senate and Congress in 2002 that the numbers Rumsfeld was arguing, both in terms of how few months and how little money the war would require, were lies. But could I have imagined the occupation would reach the proportions it has both in time and money? No.

Could I have imagined that we would continue to find new ways to incite anger and violence against the United States with such insane creations as drones? And that no one who lied and manipulated us into war would be held responsible? Or those like Bradley Manning who exposed the torture and abuse would be in jail while those who violated laws and lives would remain free, and arrogantly so?

No, I couldn't have imagined all that or the trillions of dollars thrown into the incinerator of war instead of spent on schools, healthcare and the needs of our communities.

But what is beyond understanding is that after all that we have suffered the last ten years, we are on the brink of doing it all over again. Senators Jeff Sessions (R-AL) and Chuck Schumer (D-NY) are busy trying to scare the American people with stories of weapons of mass destruction in Iran, stories just like the ones that led us into Iraq, even though there is no proof that Iran is enriching uranium to weapons-grade, and top military officials believe war with Iran would make Iraq look like a cakewalk. Now the Senate is moving forward with a resolution that provides a backdoor to war with Iran, S.Res.65, which calls for the United States to offer military support for preemptive Israeli strikes on Iran. This resolution would allow us to slip into war without any public debate.

Have we not felt the price? Is no one paying attention? When do we say stop?

Call your senator and say, No more! We can't afford to make the same mistake again.

This Compulsion to Prevent Something

Nathan Schneider is the author of Thank You, Anarchy: Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse, forthcoming in 2013 from University of California Press. He is an editor of Waging Nonviolence and Killing the Buddha.

Liz was shivering from the cold. A few hundred of us had walked out of classes to gather around the student center on March 20, 2003, and she was one of the main speakers at the top of the steps, the one I knew best. We were both freshmen at Brown. We were friends. Footage taken for a never-completed documentary reminds me that, over long sleeves, she wore a black T-shirt with the words, in white, WE CAN STOP THE WAR and that famous picture of a lone man standing before a column of tanks at Tiananmen Square. "This," she cried out to the crowd, in reference to the rally itself, "is our only weapon against the weapons!"

It amazed me to see her up there—that she, after just a few months on campus, was one of the leaders of our

local opposition to what
before. When she talks
casts a shadow over her
Being new to campus w

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every political meeting she could in search of a group to join. Meanwhile, the Bush administration's choreography toward war was progressing, and by the time the need became obvious for a coalition on campus to oppose the prospect of an invasion, she knew people in a lot of the major groups but had particular allegiance to none. Along with another freshman named Emma and some seniors, she threw herself into Students Against War in Iraq, or SAWI (pronounced "say why"). Through the winter, campus groups from the Democrats to the Latin dance troupe came on board. Even the lonely conservative columnist for the newspaper wrote tightly reasoned rebuttals to the arguments for war.

Liz and some of the others leading SAWI, she remembers, were "flailing and searching for catharsis because we were dealing with our own wounds." She'd lived through the suicides of friends in each of the previous two years. "I had this compulsion to prevent something from happening again that I had experienced—these wasteful deaths."

By March 20, though, the bombs had started to fall, and there was no turning back. The first casualty of war on campus was the shared, palpable belief that protest—including the largest mobilization in world history on February 15—could make a dent in the neocons' juggernaut. The second casualty was the unity among students that Liz had helped to amass against the war; once American boots were on the ground and charging toward Baghdad, former doves were afraid to be caught on the wrong side of history.

"There were so many disappointing, confusing conversations that happened after that conservative muscle had been flexed," she says.

Through college, Liz stuck with the antiwar coalition, but she also turned her attention to other sites of imperial hubris. She studied abroad in South Africa. Upon returning she published, in 2005, an essay in a student

magazine arguing that US troops should leave Iraq immediately, that no one had a right to bring democracy to Iraq but Iraqis. This was a time when saying so was a lot less comfortable than it was before the war or is today, because it meant sympathizing with enemy insurgents. Her essay's boldest words shot across the right-wing radio circuit and blogosphere, exposing Liz to a nightmare of murder and rape threats and an unsuccessful campaign to have her expelled.

She is now pursuing doctoral research about political power in very different contexts. "I don't operate in the world of super-radical activism the way I did then," she explains, "though I do struggle with the same questions." The vitriol against her from 2005 still litters the Internet, and it continues to cause her problems, both personally and professionally. This fallout has been an ongoing reminder of a period ten years ago that now feels remote.

"The fleeting sense that urgent, collective action could make change was lost in the experience of the war," she says. It taught us, I hope wrongly, about what horrors we simply have to accept.

The Crime of the Century

Robert Dreyfuss is a foreign policy blogger at TheNation.com.

Ten years later, the invasion of Iraq is still the Crime of the Century.

Even as the last of the hanging chads was still fluttering to the floor and the Supreme Court ratified the outcome in *Bush v. Gore*, the smell of an attack on Iraq was in the air, many months before 9/11. George W. Bush, with what might charitably be called a limited understanding of Iraq—best expressed in his plaintive, though unsubstantiated lament that Saddam Hussein "tried to kill my daddy"—cobbled together a retreaded cabinet of hawks, led by Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who'd failed to topple Saddam in 1991. It was a job unfinished, and to the Cheney-Rumsfeld team Saddam's ability to survive a decade of brutal economic sanctions was a stunning rebuke, a huge middle finger erected at the center of the Middle East. Revenge was in the air. Back then, I remember telling friends that it was obvious that Bush would go to war

against Iraq. As we learned the very first subject was

As 2001 wore on, and e like an onrushing freight

government bureaucracy, at the State Department, at the Pentagon, at the CIA, pressed their collective palms tightly to their ears. They were deep, deep in denial—and, for some of them, even as the first bombs and cruise missiles pummeled Baghdad on March 19, 2003, they went into bureaucratic shock: *This is impossible! This can't be happening!*

But Bush hadn't been bluffing.

In early March, I interviewed Danielle Pletka, the neoconservative who served then, and now, as the vice president for defense and foreign policy at the American Enterprise Institute, whose regular Black Coffee briefings on Iraq—orchestrated by Richard Perle et al.—served as a showcase for Ahmed Chalabi and the likes of Douglas Feith. When I told Pletka that an incredulous bureaucracy, including State, DOD and CIA, were almost unanimously opposed to war with Iraq, she played her trump card. We, she said, have the president on our side. And so she did.

A curious, Catch-22 paradox was at the heart of why the United States so badly bungled the invasion and occupation: Anyone who knew anything about Iraq—Middle East experts, diplomats who'd served there, Arabist intelligence officers—were against the war. As a result, they were excluded from planning and managing it by a Bush team that insisted on groupthink. So, who was left to run the war? Why, precisely a bunch of know-nothings. As Chas Freeman once told me, "We didn't invade Iraq. We invaded the Iraq of our dreams."

But it wasn't a dream. It was a nightmare. An entire nation, of perhaps 25 million souls, blown to smithereens. Hundreds of thousands killed. More hundreds of thousands wounded, crippled, mangled, maimed. Millions of children orphaned or psychologically traumatized. A modern nation's economy nearly obliterated. Iraq's army, police and governing institutions not just decapitated, but destroyed. A society in which one-third of Iraqis

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intermarried among sect and ethnic group cleaved into bitter, hate-filled tribes. Ethnic (and sectarian) cleansing. Civil war. And for what? Against a country whose leader had no nuclear weapons, no chemical and biological agents and had never attacked the United States, had no connection at all with 9/11, did not sponsor international terrorism and considered Al Qaeda to be a mortal enemy.

America, of course, will debate Iraq well into the future: Good idea? Bad idea? War crime? And: Did the surge work? But countless Iraqis won't be debating it, because they're dead. Perhaps around the time academic historians, puffing on their pipes, come to a conclusion about Iraq—say, a generation from now—Iraq will have just begun to recover.

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