The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 11, Issue 11, No. 3. March 18, 2013.

The 10th Anniversary of the Iraq War イラク戦争10年

Richard Falk

After a decade of combat, casualties, massive displacement, persisting violence, enhanced sectarian tension and violence between Shi'ias and Sunnis, periodic suicide bombings, and autocratic governance, a negative assessment of the Iraq War as a strategic move by the United States, United Kingdom, and a few of their secondary allies, including Japan, seems unavoidable. Not only the regionally destabilizing outcome, including the blowback effect of perversely adding weight to Iran's overall diplomatic influence, but the reputational costs in the Middle East associated with an imprudent, destructive, and failed military intervention make the Iraq War the worst American foreign policy disaster since its defeat in Vietnam in the 1970s. Such geopolitical accounting does not even consider the damage to the United Nations and international law arising from an aggressive use of force in flagrant violation of the UN Charter, embarked upon without any legitimating authorization as to the use of force by the Security Council. The UN hurt its image when it failed to reinforce its refusal to grant authorization to the United States and its coalition. This was compounded by the fact that the UN lent support to the unlawful American-led occupation that followed. In other words, not only was the Iraq War a disaster from the perspective of American and British foreign policy and the peace and stability of the Middle East region, but it was also a serious setback for international law, the UN, and world order.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the United States was supposedly burdened by what policymakers came to call 'the Vietnam Syndrome.' This was a Washington shorthand for the psychological inhibitions to engage in military interventions in the non-Western world due to the negative attitudes towards such imperial undertakings that were supposed to exist among the American public and in the government, especially among the military who were widely blamed for the outcome in Vietnam. Many American militarists at the time complained that the Vietnam Syndrome was a combined result of an anti-war plot engineered by the liberal media and a response to an unpopular conscription that required many middle class Americans to fight in a war that lacked popular support or a convincing strategic or legal rationale. The flag-draped coffins of dead young Americans were shown on TV, leading defense hawks to contend somewhat ridiculously that 'the war was lost in American living rooms.'

Coffins returning to Arlington Cemetery

The government made adjustments: the draft was abolished, reliance was henceforth placed on an all-volunteer professional military, and renewed efforts were made to assure media support for subsequent military operations.

President, George H.W. Bush told the world in 1991 immediately after the Gulf War was fought to reverse the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait that "we have finally kicked the Vietnam Syndrome." In effect, the senior President Bush was saying to the grand strategists in the White House and Pentagon that the role of American military power was again available for use around the world. What the Gulf War showed was that on a conventional battlefield, in this setting of a desert war, American military superiority would be decisive, and could produce a quick victory with minimal costs in American lives. This new militarist enthusiasm created the political base for recourse to the NATO War in 1999 to wrest Kosovo from Serb control. To ensure the avoidance of casualties, reliance was placed on air power, which took more time than expected, but further vindicated the war planners' claim that the United States could now fight and win 'zero casualty wars.' In fact there were no NATO combat deaths in the Kosovo War.

More sophisticated American war planners understood that not all challenges to United States interests around the world could be met with air power in the absence of ground combat. Increasingly, political violence involving geopolitical priorities took the form of transnational violence (as in the 9/11 attacks) or was situated within the boundaries of territorial states, and involved Western military intervention designed to crush societal forces of national resistance. The Bush presidency badly confused its new self-assurance about the conduct of battlefield *international* warfare and its old nemesis from Vietnam War days of counter-insurgency warfare, also known as low-intensity or asymmetric warfare.

David Petraeus rose through the ranks of the American military by repackaging counterinsurgency warfare in a post-Vietnam format relying upon an approach developed by noted guerrilla war expert David Galula, who contended that in the Vietnam War the fatal mistake was made of supposing that such a war would be determined 80% by combat battles in the jungles and paddy fields with the remaining 20% devoted to the capture of the 'hearts and minds' of the indigenous population. Galula argued that counterinsurgency wars could only be won if this formula was inverted. This meant that 80% of future U.S. military interventions should be devoted to non-military aspects of societal wellbeing: restoring electricity, providing police protection for normal activity, building and staffing schools, improving sanitation and garbage removal, and providing health car and jobs.

Afghanistan, and then Iraq, became the testing grounds for applying these nation-building lessons of Vietnam, only to reveal in the course of their long, destructive and expensive failures that the wrong lessons had been learned. These conflicts were wars of national resistance, a continuation of the anti-colonial struggles against West-centric colonial domination, and regardless of whether the killing was complemented by sophisticated social and economic programs, it still involved a pronounced and deadly challenge by foreign interests to the rights of self-determination that entailed killing Iraqi women and children, and violating their most basic rights through the harsh mechanics of foreign occupation. It also proved impossible to disentangle the planned 80% from the 20% as the hostility of the Iraqi people to their supposed American liberators demonstrated over and over again, especially as many Iraqis on the side of the occupiers proved to be corrupt and brutal, sparking popular suspicion and internal polarization. The truly 'fatal mistake' made by Petraeus, Galula, and all the counterinsurgency advocates that have followed this path, is the failure to recognize that when the American military and its allies attack and occupy a non-Western country, especially in the Islamic world, when they start dividing, killing and policing its inhabitants, popular resistance will be mobilized. This is precisely

what happened in Iraq, and the suicide bombings to this day suggest that the ugly patterns of violence have not stopped even with the ending of America's direct combat role.

The United States was guilty of a fundamental misunderstanding of the Iraq War displayed to the world when George W. Bush theatrically declared on May 1, 2003 a wildly premature victory from the deck of an American aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, with the notorious banner proclaiming 'mission accomplished' plainly visible behind the podium as the sun sank over the Pacific Ocean.

Bush reveled in this misunderstanding by assuming that the attack phase of the war was the whole war, forgetting about the more difficult and protracted occupation phase. The real Iraq War, rather than ending, was about to begin, that is, the violent internal struggle for the political future of the country, one made more difficult and protracted by the military presence of the US and its allies. This counterinsurgency sequel to occupation would not be decided on the kind of battlefield where arrayed military capabilities confront one another, but rather through a war of attrition waged by hit and run domestic Iraqi forces, abetted by foreign volunteers, opposed to the tactics of Washington. Such a war has a shadowy beginning and an uncertain ending, and is often, as in Iraq, as it proved to be earlier in Vietnam, a quagmire for intervening powers.

The Iraq War was a war of aggression from its inception, being an unprovoked use of armed force against a sovereign state in a situation other than self-defense. The Nuremberg and Tokyo War Crimes Tribunals convened after World War II had declared such aggressive warfare to be a 'crime against peace' and prosecuted and punished political and military leaders of Germany and Japan as war criminals. We can ask why have George W. Bush and Tony Blair not been investigated, indicted, and prosecuted for their roles in planning and prosecuting the Iraq War. As folk singer Bob Dylan instructed us long ago, the answer is 'blowin' in the wind,' or in more straightforward language, the reasons for such impunity conferred upon the American and British leaders is a crude display of geopolitics—their countries were not defeated and occupied, their governments never surrendered, and such strategic failures (or successes) are exempted from legal scrutiny. These are the double standards that make international criminal justice more a matter of power politics than global justice.

Global civil society with its own limited resources had challenged both the onset of the Iraq War, and later its actual unfolding. On and around February 15, 2003, what the Guinness Book of Records called "the largest anti-war rally in history" took the form of about 3,000 demonstrations in 800 cities located in more than 60 countries and according to the BBC involved an estimated 6-10 million persons. Although such a global show of opposition to recourse to war was unprecedented, it failed to halt the war. It did, however, have the lasting effect of undermining the American claims of justification for the attack and occupation of Iraq. It also led to an unprecedented effort by groups around the world to pass judgment on the war by holding sessions in which peace activists and international law experts alleged the criminality of the Iraq War, and called for war crimes prosecutions of Bush and Blair. As many as twenty such events were held in various parts of the world, with a culminating Iraq War Tribunal convened in June of 2005, which included testimony from more than 50 experts, including several from Iraq and a jury of conscience headed by Arundhati Roy.

There is also the question of complicity of countries that supported the war with troop deployments, such as Japan, which dispatched 1000 members of its self-defense units to Iraq in July 2003 to help with non-combat dimensions of the occupation. Such a role is a clear breach of international law and morality. It is also inconsistent with Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. It was coupled with Tokyo's diplomatic support for the U.S./UK-led Iraq War from start to finish. Should such a record of involvement have any adverse consequences? It would seem that Japan might at least review the appropriateness of its complicit participation in a war of aggression, and how that diminishes the credibility of any Japanese claim to uphold the responsibilities of membership in the United Nations. At least, it provides the people of Japan with a moment for national soul-searching to think about what kind of world order will in the future best achieve peace, stability, and human dignity.

Are there lessons to be drawn from the Iraq War? I believe there are. The overwhelming lesson is that in this historical period interventions by the West in the non-West, especially when not authorized by the UN Security Council, can rarely succeed in attaining their stated goals. More broadly, counterinsurgency warfare involving a core encounter between Western invading and occupying forces and a national resistance movement will not be decided on the basis of hard power military superiority, but rather by the dynamics of self-determination associated with the party that has the more credible nationalist credentials, which include the will to persist in the struggle for as long as it takes, and the capacity to capture the high moral ground in the ongoing struggle for domestic and international public support. It is only when we witness the dismantling of many of America's 700+ acknowledged foreign military bases spread around the world, and see the end of repeated US military intervention globally, that we can have some hope that the correct lessons of the Iraq War are finally being learned. Until then there will be further attempts by the U.S. Government to correct the tactical mistakes that it claims explain past failures in Iraq (and Afghanistan), and new interventions will undoubtedly be proposed in coming years, most probably leading to costly new failures, and further controversies as to 'why?' we fought and why we lost. American leaders will remain unlikely to acknowledge that the most basic mistake is itself militarism, at least until challenged by robust anti-militarist political forces not currently on the political scene.

This is the English version of an article that appeared in the March 15, 2013 edition of Shukan Kin'yobi.

Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law, Princeton University, and United Nations Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories. His recent books include Richard Falk, Mark Juergensmeyer and Vesselin Popovski, eds., Legality and Legitimacy in Global Affairs *and Richard Falk and David Krieger,* The Path to Zero: Dialogues on Nuclear Danger.

Recommended citation: Richard Falk, "The 10th Anniversary of the Iraq War," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 11, Issue 11, No. 3. March 18, 2013.

Articles on related subjects

•Jonathan Schell, The Iraq Invasion, Ten Years Later

•National Security Archive, The Iraq War Ten Years After. Declassified Documents

•Patrick Coburn, The American Legacy in Iraq

•Jeremy Kuzmarov, American Police Training and Political Violence: From the Philippines Conquest to the Killing Fields of Afghanistan and Iraq

• Saito Mitsumasa, Mission Impossible? Misawa as the Forward Staging Area for the Secret US-Japan Nuclear Deal and the Bombing of Iraq

•Yuki Tanaka and Richard Falk, The Atomic Bombing, the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and the Shimoda Case: Lessons for Anti-Nuclear Legal Movements

• John W. Dower with an introduction by Laura Hein, The Failure of Imagination: From Pearl Harbor to 9-11, Afghanistan and Iraq http://japanfocus.org/-Laura-Hein/3405

• Daniel Ellsberg, Building a Better Bomb: Reflections on the Atomic Bomb, the Hydrogen Bomb, and the Neutron Bomb

• Peter Dale Scott, Martial Law, the Financial Bailout, and the Afghan and Iraq Wars

• Noam Chomsky interviewed by Kevin Hewison From Indochina to Iraq: At War With Asia: here