

Who Were the Major Victors and Losers in the Iraq War?

Written by Charlotte Clapham

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CHARLOTTE CLAPHAM, APR 24 2012

As the war in Iraq finally drew officially to a close in 2011, the debate amongst politicians, academics and commentators over the legacy of Iraq was reignited, with discussion surrounding ideas over who and what were the major victors and losers of the Iraq war. This essay aims to contribute to this polemical issue by exploring notions of victory and loss through a series of case studies and motifs within the build-up to the war, as well as the conflict itself, which will be used as a tool in which to decipher the major victors and losers in the War in Iraq. Space does not allow for an analysis of every aspect of the war, so in order to offer diverse analytical material the concepts of the diplomatic processes in the run up to the invasion, Private Military Forces (PMFs) and the implication of Iraqi civilians in the conflict, will be invoked. These aspects of the war allow for an analysis in both physical and theoretical terms, whilst addressing legal, military and moral concerns.

Clearly there are different understandings of victors and losers, in both physical and theoretical perspectives, but through exploration of the themes highlighted in this essay it is apparent that certain major victors and losers arose. It is important to make the distinction, moreover, that there are fundamental differences between success and victory, and failure and losing. The focus of this essay is not on whether or not one side successfully carried out a military campaign, but rather it is to understand in more comprehensive terms the fundamental victories and losses incurred as a result of the conflict in Iraq. Using these terms to understand the conflict, it is evident that decades of international multilateral cooperation were sacrificed, whilst Iraqi civilians were always condemned to being major losers in this conflict. PMFs, on the other hand, gained significantly from a new era of warfare which compromised legality in favour of profit-driven violence and the invading forces gained a new freedom from the conflict, borne out of their decision to shirk international convention and law.

Weapons of mass deception

The build-up to the Iraq war marked a fundamental shift and restructuring of the once strong institutions of international order. The somewhat audacious decision to embark on a highly contentious military campaign, which lacked U.N. ratification, against Saddam Hussein and his regime in March 2003, was both profound and pivotal. Not only did it signify a rejection of the post-war international order based on democracy, legality, diplomacy and multilateralism, but it also alluded to the dawn of a 'new world order' for America, characterised by unilateralism, 'threat inflation' and most importantly, aggression (Kaufman 2004; Talbott 2003: 1043; Hurrell 2002: 190). Whilst there is much debate on the matter, it is clear that this was not simply a case of 'stumbling into war' but rather a concerted course of action, steeped in deception, manipulation and falsehoods (Rubin 2003). A war which was less the result of a genuine knowledge of weapons of mass destruction and more concerned with initiating weapons of mass deception to mask a neo-conservative imperial agenda (Rampton and Stauber 2003; Ikenberry 2002: 45). On a theoretical basis, many fundamental principles and facets of international relations were lost, yet this was deliberate, and in a post-9/11 world, America's and its allies' victory in their new international agenda relied on these losses.

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The motivations and objectives behind the invasion of Iraq are difficult to decode. However, it is known that many official justifications for the war were based on unreliable or falsified intelligence and 'evidence'. Despite the resulting backlash, with over eight million people taking to the streets across five continents to brand the campaign 'illegal', global anti-war sentiment was largely ignored by the American and British governments (Ali 2003: 144; Simpson 2007: 7). For America in particular, democratic principles were disrespected and countered by pervasive propaganda campaigns and media bias. Fox News, for example, featured significantly disparate coverage of the debate over Iraq, with pro-war commentary 'overwhelmingly more frequent', and press coverage typically uncritical and 'often patriotic, even jingoistic' (Aday et al 2005: 315; Kull et al 2003: 593). The American government in particular, persistently presented statements which asserted myths and falsehoods, in an attempt to penetrate and shape public opinion (Kull et al 2003: 591; Crawford 2003: 31). As Paul Wolfowitz so candidly stated at a joint congressional committee, 'this is not a game we will ever win on the defense, we'll only win it on offense' (Leffler 2003: 1053). Whilst Wolfowitz is referring to the 'War on Terror' it epitomizes their propaganda campaign and efforts to justify the war to the public. The domestic propaganda campaign which accompanied the effort to justify the war on the international stage reaffirmed America's willingness to undermine the notions of democracy and truth as they committed to a program of deception.

The use of such tactics fundamentally contradicts the theory of the 'marketplace of ideas' which Chaim Kaufman claims defined international order prior to the invasion of Iraq (Kaufman 2004). This theory which asserts that mature democracies are inherently safe from threat inflation and 'myths of empire' ultimately failed with the advent of war (Kaufman 2004: 5). Moreover, the marketplace of ideas also stresses the power of the median voter, proposing that they have the incentives to scrutinize expansionist arguments (Kaufman 2004: 7). Yet with the implementation of 'weapons of mass deception' this proved to be yet another principle of this theory which failed in the preface to the war in Iraq (see; Rampton and Stauber 2003). Yet, as Kaufman has asserted, the failure of the marketplace of ideas was in fact decisively sacrificed by America and its allies in order to obtain political support for invading Iraq, and thus achieve victory in the objectives of their new foreign policy (Kaufman 2004: 31). Its failure was *necessary* for America and the invading forces' victory in Iraq. In light of this, the failure to qualify their arguments for invasion with evidence of the threat to national security highlights how the U.S. was intent on pursuing an autonomous victory to the detriment of international order.

The failure of the marketplace of ideas, which was compounded by a military campaign fought without U.N. backing, cost the world a consensual system of international order, peace, multilateralism and diplomacy. For many, this has been perceived as a failure for the US, shattering its reputation and ushering in a more hostile climate (see Talbott 2003: 1043; Crawford 2003: 36). However, it is apparent that there have been significant but necessary losses of democratic and legal principles in order for America's new foreign policy, based on unilateral aggression, to succeed. In sum, since 9/11 the US has asserted its power in such a way which has relinquished the need to rely on global institutions which inhibited their freedom of action (Talbott 2003: 1040). The victors of this crisis in international order would be the invading forces, led by the U.S.; their military and national agendas had superseded that of legality, democracy and peace. The result was polarized, in order for them to be victorious in their objectives the marketplace of ideas had to fail alongside the power of the U.N.

The Agents of War

At the point of invasion, as highlighted by Rubin, many in the Bush Administration viewed the diplomatic failure as a 'minor setback', and assumed that the military victory is all that would be remembered (Rubin 2003: 63). It follows that many commentators have determined the winners and losers on the basis of the military campaign itself. However, this is rife with contention and almost impossible to determine over the course of nine years of military presence in Iraq. Moreover, it is impossible to delve into the conflict without closely observing and assessing the agents of war, the major shifts in the military actors and the huge impact this has on its legacy. Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the war in Iraq is the sizeable presence of PMFs. Once again on a theoretical basis, this sacrificed some formerly staple principles of warfare whilst it too impacted on the nature, course and implications of the military campaign.

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The increasing reliance on PMFs in modern conflicts has dramatically changed the face of war, yet the debate regarding their positive and negative impact rages on. Their use has become prolific, with the ratio of PMFs to military personnel standing at 1:10 in Iraq, the largest employment of PMFs in modern conflicts, a fact which contributes to its already morally and ethically questionable nature (Isenberg 2007: 83; Avant 2006: 330). Many academics have dubbed the use of PMFs inherently 'morally reprehensible', for their profit-led motivation clashes with notions of conflict resolution (Baker 2008: 30; Singer 2001-2002: 186; Runzo 2008: 60). As D. P. Baker has claimed, the use of private contractors fundamentally disrupts the 'morally appropriate martial relationship', indicating a dangerous trend in modern warfare (Baker 2008: 38). Symbolic of the decision to pursue aggressive policy as opposed to containment and peace, the heavy reliance on PMFs reflects this propensity toward conflict as the industry itself relies on the continuation of global conflicts (Silverstein 2000: ix). Thus PMFs have a vested financial and career interest in violence, conflict and intervention, a reality which many academics have struggled to reconcile with Just War theory and notions of ethical conduct of war (Silverstein 2000: ix; Runzo 2008). The use of PMFs has had clear implications for establishing both victors and losers in the Iraq war. The heightened use of such forces has clearly benefited these private military actors, whilst also reaffirming notions of profit and conflict which already characterise the war itself.

Moreover, as transnational actors they fall outside the parameters of legal accountability. Unlike military personnel, PMFs do not operate under the purview of military law, rendering them legally ambiguous. These problems are compounded by the inexplicable reality that at the time of writing, Christopher Kinsey notes that not 'a single foreign contractor in Iraq has been held accountable for any criminal misconduct, while the same is not true for American and British soldiers' (Kinsey 2008: 70). Furthermore, there is no greater indicator of the danger of their legal ambiguity and the lack of transparency in the industry than the case of Abu Ghraib. The incomprehensible displays of torture and abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison at the hands of both US military personnel and private contractors not only established a firm link between official US propaganda for the war and military perceptions of their mission, but also confirmed the dangers of a group of military actors who are effectively immune from prosecution (Danner 2004). The lack of prosecution for these military actors is of course not legally sanctioned, yet the lack of incentive both from the armed forces and military companies themselves to prosecute, has served to further empower PMFs, whilst simultaneously creating victims of this unethical and unjust dynamic (Bina 2005: 1251; Singer 2001-2002: 215).

The moral, ethical and legal implications of the use of PMFs in Iraq are evident, yet the implications of their use extend further than their conceptual problems. It is also noteworthy to highlight the roles PMFs were instructed to assume, even in light of the issues raised above. The role of PMFs in the Abu Ghraib prison, assigned both to the role of interrogators whilst also working in intelligence seems somewhat curious (Bina 2005: 1244). Even the most conservative estimates have identified at least thirty seven interrogators from private contractors in Abu Ghraib, yet not one has been prosecuted (Isenberg 2007: 87). It is perhaps likely that these actors were chosen specifically as a way of diminishing transparency surrounding the activity in such prisons in Iraq. It is clear what actors benefitted, and what actors were defeated by this scandal and dynamic. In an illegitimate, at times 'profit-driven conflict', PMFs served only to gain from the deficiency in legal, democratic and peace-orientated principles (Singer 2001-2002: 197). Just as the road to war was paved with losses of core principles of international order, so too were the agents of warfare. Yet, these observations are also applicable to the military campaign itself with the agents of privatized violence emerging as victors, acting as the beneficiaries of a conflict characterised by illegitimacy, aggression and a lack of transparency.

Operation Iraqi Freedom?

Much discourse on the Iraq War has stressed the failings of the US and UK government, its fundamental illegitimacy, human rights abuses, the struggle of the insurgency and counter-insurgency, and the failure of the Iraqi population to herald the armed forces 'liberators' (Ramesh 2003: 107). It is difficult to dispute the apparent failings in these areas, however, evidence of the major losers of this conflict is offered in the memoirs of Tony Blair, as he reflects on the legacy and losses of the war. As he expresses his grief for the fallen, he mourns those who were sacrificed for the objectives of the conflict, first he addresses the British soldiers and 'most of all the American soldiers', then also

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those combatants of other nations including the Spanish, Japanese, Dutch and so on (Blair 2010: 372). Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, he addresses the loss of Iraqis themselves, interestingly dubbed the 'casualties of our forces' but also those at the hands of the regime that 'we failed to prevent' (Blair 2010: 372). These words speak volumes; they perfectly summarise the priorities of the UK and US government's and armed forces with civilian losses mentioned last in his list of regrets and sympathies, showing a clear reluctance to candidly address the reality and extent of their loss. Iraqi civilians stood as the major losers of this conflict, as a population under occupation, victims of an illegal invasion simply cannot emerge as victors. Understanding the losses incurred by the Iraqi civilian population is not to patronise their displays of defiance and strength against their occupiers, through the insurgency for example, but rather to highlight the disproportionate levels of violence and oppression imposed upon them by invading forces.

The costs of war for the Iraqi people were enormous. Not only were widely accepted definitions and rules of warfare regarding the special protections of civilians from violence frequently violated, but the manner in which the war was fought did little to ensure their immunity from the conflict (Gutman and Lutz 2010: 5). The theory of the 'double-effect' is apparent in the invasion of Iraq, with non-combatant casualties becoming justifiable, even if they are foreseen, 'so long as the non-combatants are not the objects of attack' (Bellamy 2005: 288). Moreover, 'trigger happy' impulses and evidence of a 'Better safe than sorry' approach to the shooting of 'suspicious' civilians is reflected both in the testimonies of a number of Iraqi veterans and the extreme death tolls (Ramesh 2003: 112; Gutman and Lutz 2010: 6).

Whilst rose-tinted accounts of the war such as that of John Keegan may praise British troops for their 'careful precision' in avoiding civilian deaths, this fails to account for the often recklessness of the troops (Keegan 2005: 205). A more accurate account for example is that of one Iraq veteran who attested to the prevalence of the attitude "at least no American died", a perception he struggled to reconcile with the innocent bodies of women and children which often lay strewn across Iraq's landscape (Gutman and Lutz 2010: 109-114; Roberts et al 2004: 1863; Salvage 2007: 8). The official statistics portray the cold reality of this; the final statistics range from 114,476 deaths as estimated by Iraq Body Count to other more inclusive estimates including deaths resulting from violence, malnutrition and disease which stand at around 650,000 deaths (Iraq Body Count 2012; Gutman and Lutz 2010: 6). Comparatively, U.S. and UK casualties have been estimated around 4,421 and 179 respectively, since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom (BBC News 2011). It is clear that the decision to wage urban warfare in Iraq alongside the use of aerial bombardments represents a military campaign which was built on the implication of civilians (Gutman and Lutz 2010: 5).

Gutman and Lutz's book, which documents the ugly realities of the conflict through the voices of Iraq veterans, serves to depict the ease with which soldiers could resort to hostile and abusive behaviour against Iraqi civilians (Gutman and Lutz 2010: 102). Yet as another veteran admitted, civilians had committed no crime; the crime was the occupation in itself (Gutman and Lutz 2010: 102). Thus, despite the arguments for the conflict liberating the Iraqi people, the invasion of Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein simply did not constitute a humanitarian intervention. In fact, as Ramesh so boldly claims, 'the bombing of innocents could not be part of a war of liberation' thus, instead of bringing salvation, the troops brought destruction (Ramesh 2003: 107-8). Despite 'the human rights case' for the war in Iraq made by Thomas Cushman, the illegitimacy of the invasion is *not* superseded by display of solidarity the west showed with the Iraqi people (Cushman 2005: 93). Perhaps some western academics fail to grasp the effects of a foreign occupation, yet the conflict has left an entire generation who have been forced to 'spend their formative years under a foreign occupation', and so it is not admiration this group feels for their occupiers (Ali 2003: 17). From the perspective of the American and British authorities, civilian casualties merely represent 'collateral damage', yet the after effects of a conflict not only inflicts grief on an entire population but establishes a cycle of violence which often extends to the next generation (Salvage 2007: 9). Thus, there can be no greater losers than the Iraqi civilian population. Their losses will not disappear with the footprints of the foreign troops.

Conclusion

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In many ways there are *no* winners and losers in the War on Iraq. With many victories tinged with sinister implications and consequences, those who emerged as major victors in this conflict proved to do so in the midst of excessive losses for others. Nevertheless, major victors and losers did emerge, perhaps the most significant outcome of the war, was the polarization of such victors and losers.

In many ways losers and victors were mutually exclusive, basic democratic, diplomatic and peace-driven principles could not have accompanied the victories of the American and British forces. The war itself would not have come into fruition if these facets of modern international order had endured. Thus a shift in global security and the balance of power was almost necessary for invading forces, particularly the U.S., to emerge as victors, able to dominate a region of interest without being restricted by concerns for legitimacy, human rights, legality and democracy.

It is this environment in which PMFs thrived, standing as a microcosm of the issues which have defined this conflict and perhaps future conflicts, and were thus able to emerge as victors in a new era of warfare. Moreover, the invading nations were able to shirk off the chains of the United Nations and multilateralism in general, embark upon a new era in Western dominance, establish Iraq as a strong ally in a shifting and tumultuous Middle East, steer the course of global democracy and of course gained access to Iraq's substantial oil resources (Duffield 2005: 110; Al Jazeera 2011). These victories contrast with the plight of the major losers, these ultimately being the Iraqi people, insurgents, combatants, and civilians alike. The ubiquity of human rights abuse, atrocities and 'collateral damage' has served to dwarf any sense of liberation they may have felt with the removal of an oppressive regime. Whilst, many have looked to these failings on the part of the US and the UK as evidence of their failure, these failings do not denote losing. The major losers in this environment can only ever be the victims and not the perpetrators.

There has never been a more pressing time to determine the major victors and losers in the Iraq War, with the conflict in Afghanistan still in motion, the Arab Spring restructuring the face of the Arab world as well as the imminent threat of conflict with Iran, Iraq stands as the proverbial canary in the mineshaft, a warning of what is to come (Danner 2004: 6). In the face of these global developments, it is salient to adopt a nuanced approach to the outcomes of the Iraq war. Without a proper appreciation of the loss of Iraqi civilians, the impact of PMFs and the new direction in international relations, these factors will be overlooked again in the conflicts which will inevitably arise in this region.

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