

Review – Shock and War

Written by Elizabeth Brown

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Shock and War: Iraq 20 Years On By BBC Radio 4, hosted by Gordon Corera Podcast, 2023

In his new podcast series 'Shock and War: Iraq 20 Years On', the BBC's Security Correspondent Gordon Corera tries to answer a question that politicians, journalists, and concerned citizens have been contemplating for the last two decades: how exactly did Britain find itself embroiled in such a widely disliked and largely unsuccessful conflict in Iraq? While Corera does not find a simple answer, as the platitude goes it is the journey which is more interesting. And in this regard, Corera does not disappoint. Over the course of ten 20-minute-long episodes, he covers an impressive amount of ground, navigating the listener deftly between Anglo-American relations, the intelligence (or lack thereof) regarding Saddam Hussein's possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), the aftermath of the invasion on the ground in Iraq, and the domestic political ramifications of becoming involved in a deeply unpopular and illegal war. Produced by the BBC, it can be listened to both online and over the radio waves on Radio 4 (upcoming timings can be found [here](#)).

Those tuning in can expect to be treated to a varied and distinguished line-up of guests. The podcast itself is structured around a mass of interviews conducted by Corera, which have been woven together to form a historical narrative taking the listener through the key events surrounding Britain's involvement in the war, as told by those who were there. The illustrious guestlist includes former head of MI6 Sir Richard Dearlove, former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, the CIA's Chief of Iraq Operations Luis Rueda, the former head of the UN's nuclear weapons inspectorate UNMOVIC Hans Blix, and historian and Chilcot Inquiry member Sir Lawrence Freedman. Some of the most powerful moments, however, come not from the big names, but appropriately from the Iraqis themselves. Salman Khairalla, Faiza Al-Araji and Marwah Abdulqader provide heart-wrenching accounts of a country enduring despotism, invasion, and painful attempts at rebuilding, acting as an important reminder that the real impact of the war was felt not in Birmingham or Bristol, but rather in Baghdad and Basrah.

Nevertheless, the British experience remains steadfastly at the forefront. Threading throughout the entire series is a fascinating, long-form interview with the man at the centre of Britain's involvement in Iraq – then-Prime Minister Tony Blair. As each expert provides their perspective on what was really going on, Blair is repeatedly brought back to provide reasoning, justification, and in some cases remorse for the courses of action taken, and their impact in both Britain and Iraq. It is not often that a politician submits to interrogation on the most heavily criticised and unpopular decisions of their political career, and Corera makes the most of the opportunity. In one notably tense moment in the third episode, entitled 'The Spies', Corera and Blair tussle over the extent to which the intelligence services failed to provide an accurate analysis of Iraq's alleged WMD programme – an analysis which was ultimately used, in Corera's view, as the primary public justification for the war. Within the wider format, Blair's interviews are particularly salient. The cacophony of voices, each giving its own staunch perspective on what was right and wrong, perhaps mirrors the atmosphere in the corridors of Downing Street in the weeks and months leading up to the invasion. Politics, as it often does, gets in the way of best practice.

It is this focus on politics which is simultaneously one of the podcast's greatest strengths, and its most critical weakness. Throughout the series, the legality of the war is often referenced but never quite taken head-on. Corera

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draws on the issue of the legal basis for the war through discussion of the UN Security Council and the search for evidence of WMD in Iraq. However, this is the extent of the coverage. As a result, most listeners – lacking specialist knowledge – are left knowing that the legality of the war was important, but not why that is the case, nor in fact why the invasion of Iraq is widely held to have been illegal. This deficiency also means that Corera misses the opportunity to delve into the malleability of Britain's argument for war, which was variously founded in humanitarianism, pre-emptive self-defence based on Iraq's alleged possession of WMD, and UN Security Council Resolutions dating back to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (For further discussion of the legal justifications of the war, see Bellamy 2003 or Simpson 2005). The Iraq War is a perfect example of the Janus-faced application of law when it comes to armed conflict. Just as in today's Russo-Ukrainian War, international law is fervently invoked to justify the invasion, but in a way which co-opts the principles of the law to excuse behaviour which is plainly illegal. This dissonance between rhetoric and conduct is a trend which Corera picks up on throughout the podcast, but unfortunately misses the most conspicuous example by choosing to only bring in the legal argument when it is relevant to political manoeuvrings.

This being said, 'Shock and War' is not a podcast about international law. The lack of attention given to the legal side of the conflict does not undermine the quality of the analysis which Corera provides throughout, but rather represents a missed opportunity to further expand it. Overall, the podcast offers an engaging and important reflection on Britain's role in the Iraq War, two decades on. In the concluding moments of the final episode, Corera again chooses to place the focus on those whose lives were forever changed by the decision to go to war in Iraq. Their words provide a crucial grounding to the series as a whole, reminding the listener that, while Britons continue to go about their day to day lives in relative safety, twenty years later Iraqis are still feeling the aftershocks of war. As put by Faiza Al-Araji, "after twenty years, nothing is shining, you see? It's still dark."

References

Bellamy, Alex J. (2003) 'International Law and the War with Iraq', *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, 4:2.

Simpson, Gerry (2005) 'The War in Iraq and International Law', *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, 6:1.

About the author:

Elizabeth Brown is a doctoral researcher in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, where her research focuses on issues of justice, ethics, and human rights during and after conflict. Her PhD research concerns accountability mechanisms following allegations of war crimes by British forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. She can be found on Twitter [here](#).