

The Last Word: It's Been Twenty Years— Time for Historians to Turn to Iraq

Marjorie Galelli

A lot of us still tend to think of the 1980s when we're thinking of something from twenty years ago, and many radio stations boast about playing the greatest hits of "the 80s, 90s and today" as if time somehow stopped at the turn of the millennium. But it is time to adjust and realize that the era of Michael Jackson, John Hughes movies, and shoulder pads was in fact forty years ago and that history did not end in the 1990s, despite claims to that effect at the time.

Twenty years ago, in March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq claiming that the attack was part of the global war on terror. Its goals were removing Saddam Hussein from power, securing the country's weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and "liberating" the Iraqi people. As we now know, WMDs were nowhere to be found, and rather than a quick strike immediately followed by a transfer of authority back to an Iraqi government as anticipated by the White House, the conflict became a civil war that embroiled the U.S. military in a complex insurgency and lasted nearly a decade.

While many of us lived through these years and consider them current events, the Iraq War might as well be ancient history to the average college freshman today. Not only was this generation born after the September 11 terrorist attacks, but most of them were not alive when Colin Powell addressed the United Nations and claimed that Iraq was harboring WMDs, or even when the first American tanks crossed the border from Kuwait into Iraq. The same students were still in elementary school when U.S. troops left in 2011. These events are now very much a part of history and, as such, deserve our attention.

Looking at the historiography, it is hard to find works in the field published by historians beyond a handful of edited volumes, a few analyses (often written by people who participated in the events), and official histories published by the military. Why are historians so reluctant to tackle the subject? In the past, historians have often published analyses of wars, their origins, and their conduct soon after they ended. Marc Bloch wrote *Strange Defeat* while the Second World War was still ongoing. Hugh Trevor-Roper's *Last Days of Hitler* came out in 1947, and George Herring published *America's Longest War* in 1979, a mere six years after U.S. troops left Vietnam. Of course, these were not definitive analyses, but they proved foundational and helped start conversations that ultimately led to the robust historiographies that exist today.

It is true that any historian seeking to analyze the events of the turn of the century will face significant difficulties when it comes to sources, in large part because so many official documents will remain classified for decades to come. In addition, this was one of the first wars of the digital age. Units recorded after-action reports directly onto computers. PowerPoint slides were updated for daily briefs, and prior versions were rarely—if ever—archived. Entire

hard drives were erased when units rotated through areas of operation before archival procedures for digital material were developed. And instead of writing letters and diaries, soldiers, airmen, sailors, and Marines wrote blog posts and emails, most of which disappeared from the internet long ago. As a consequence, even though Operation Iraqi Freedom generated large amounts of material—probably as much if not more than any prior conflict—historians might end up with fewer sources to analyze, even once the records are processed and opened to the public.

Still, these difficulties are not grounds to leave the study of that time period to political scientists and journalists indefinitely. On the contrary, it is imperative that historians start looking at the war in Iraq (and the global war on terror more broadly) through our own methodological lenses and begin writing its history, even if it means devising more creative ways to access sources, since traditional archival collections do not yet exist. Oral histories, for instance, are particularly critical to achieving a more holistic understanding of the Iraq War, especially if one wishes to understand the views of enlisted service members. However, the longer we wait, the fewer people we will be able to interview. What is more, history is always in high demand from the public, and if we don't offer our own analyses, someone else will inevitably shape the narrative.

It can be daunting to step into a field in which the historiography is so scarce, but it is important to remember that neither the first nor the second or even the tenth study of any given event is its definitive history. Nor do we expect it to be. After all, refining, challenging, and expanding previous analyses is the whole point of history as a discipline. But for that to be possible, someone has to start the conversation, and it is past time for historians to start talking about Iraq.

The implications for this work go well beyond academia. The Iraq War has shaped the careers and lives of an entire generation of service members and led to sweeping changes in military doctrine—the guiding principles used by the military to conduct operations and achieve its objectives—that will affect the institution for years to come. When U.S. troops failed to discover Saddam's supposed stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, thereby putting in question the entire rationale for the invasion, the bond of trust between the American people and its government was fundamentally, and possibly irremediably, damaged. The United States' near-unilateral decision to go to war despite a lack of support from the United Nations also drove a wedge between the nation and many of its allies, thereby altering international relations on a global scale.

These are but a few of the critical issues raised by the war in Iraq, issues whose ramifications we need to analyze if we hope to understand the present. Journalists often label their work "the first draft of history." It is time for historians to revise and resubmit a second draft.