

I AM A REVISIONIST HISTORIAN

Staughton Lynd and Carl Mirra

One hundred years ago, three officers of the Western Federation of Miners were indicted for murder. President Theodore Roosevelt declared that they were “undesirable citizens.” Working people and radicals all over the country responded with insignia stating, “I am an undesirable citizen.”

According to popular legend, during World War II the Nazis occupied Denmark and ordered all Jews to wear the Star of David. King Christian thereupon appeared in public wearing the six-pointed symbol.

Something similar is now required of historians in the United States. In June 2003, President Bush told a group of business leaders that “This nation acted to a threat from the dictator of Iraq,” but “now there are some who would like to rewrite history—revisionist historians is what I like to call them.”¹ Following Bush’s Veteran’s Day speech in November 2005, the *BBC* news featured a story, “Bush slams Iraq War revisionism.” Bush’s sanctimonious posturing compels the responsible historian to declare: I AM A REVISIONIST HISTORIAN.

The president’s critique of revisionism needs to be rejected both as a specific comment on the origins of the Iraq War, and as a general proposition.

I

In the Veterans Day speech, Bush declared that, “Some Democrats and anti-war critics are now claiming we manipulated the intelligence and misled the American people about why we went to war. These critics are fully aware that a bipartisan Senate investigation found no evidence of political pressure to change the intelligence community’s judgments related to Iraq’s weapons programs.”² The whitewash panel that Bush is likely referring to is the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States

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Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction. On the one hand, it noted that analysts working on the WMD issue did not experience pressure. On the other, the report noted, “It is hard to deny that the intelligence analysts worked in an environment that did not encourage skepticism about the conventional wisdom.”³ It is difficult to explain this discrepancy; perhaps the commission was, well, under pressure. Elsewhere, former Chief United Nations weapons inspector, Hans Blix, bemoaned that “the [Bush] administration leaned on us.”⁴

Bush believes that “it is deeply irresponsible to rewrite the history of how [the Iraq] war began.”⁵ Of course, it is the Bush administration that is trying to rewrite the history of how the war began. Responsible observers are now forced to revise Bush’s rewritten version so that it is closer to the facts. Four well-known examples should suffice to show that the Bush administration deceived the U.S. public, and that “Revisionists” are those who simply want to keep the record accurate for future historians of the Iraq War:

1. Bush (in a March 2003 speech on the eve of invasion): There is “no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.”⁶

Revisionist correction: The International Atomic Energy (IAEA) Update for the Security Council Pursuant to Iraq Resolution 1441 stated that: “In the first eight weeks of the IAEA inspections, the IAEA has visited all sites identified by it or States as significant. No evidence of ongoing prohibited nuclear or nuclear-related activities at those locations has been detected.”⁷

In early March 2003, Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the IAEA, reported that “there was no evidence Iraq had a nuclear development program,” according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.⁸

In February 2001, Colin Powell acknowledged that Iraq “has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction.”⁹

Demonstrators and “revisionists” across the globe also challenged this now fully discredited claim. Recall that the administration’s own inspection team confirmed that Iraq did not possess WMD.

2. Bush (State of the Union 2003): “Iraq recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.”¹⁰

Revisionist correction: UN inspectors almost immediately disputed the allegation. One letter used to prove the purchase was signed by someone who last served in the Nigerian government in 1989.¹¹ One would hope that the Bush administration was capable of detecting such obvious errors. Bush shifted blame to George Tenet, then head of the CIA,

who allegedly allowed the statement to enter the State of the Union Address. However, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, the CIA sent a memo to Condoleezza Rice that “challenged the African uranium sale” before the speech. Rice accepted responsibility for the “error,” the article notes.¹² Rice was not reprimanded; instead she was promoted to Secretary of State in 2005. Of course, Joseph Wilson also disputed the uranium claim and now Cheney’s Chief of Staff is under indictment surrounding the outing of Wilson’s wife who worked in the CIA.

3. Bush in October 2002: “I have not ordered the use of force. I hope the use of force will not become necessary.”¹³

Revisionist correction: In July 2002, Sir Richard Dearlove, head of Britain’s M16, reported that, “Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.”¹⁴

4. Dick Cheney: Iraq constitutes “the geographic base of the terrorists who have had us under assault for many years, but most especially on 9/11.”¹⁵

Revisionist Correction: Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, which even Bush and Rumsfeld admitted. Al Qaeda operatives in custody spoke of the conflict between Hussein and the organization.¹⁶

This last piece of propaganda is especially disconcerting. A Zogby Poll has found that 85% of U.S. soldiers serving in Iraq stated that the U.S. mission is “to retaliate for Saddam’s role in the 9-11 attacks.” Cheney’s propaganda has infiltrated the minds of our long-suffering troops. Despite the administration’s attempts to mislead its own troops, they are not simply vassals of administration propaganda. The same Zogby Poll has found that 72% of U.S. troops in Iraq believe that the U.S. should withdraw from the country within a year. In fact, 29% of these soldiers felt that the U.S. should leave immediately, adopting a position once reserved for the so-called “radical left.”¹⁷ Are U.S. troops becoming “revisionists”?

The Iraqi people also feel that the U.S. forces should leave. A poll by the British Ministry of Defence revealed that 82% of Iraqis are “strongly opposed” to the U.S. led occupation and 45 % of Iraqis felt that the attacks on U.S./U.K troops were justified.¹⁸ In 2003, a Gallup Poll, once cited by the Bush administration to illustrate that Iraqis welcomed the U.S. forces, showed instead that 94% of Iraqis felt Baghdad was more dangerous since the U.S. “liberation.”¹⁹ Even if we allow for a wide margin of error, these polls reveal that U.S. soldiers and the Iraqi people oppose the occupation.

In the buildup to the Iraq War, most of the world’s citizens and governments disputed the administration’s WMD claims. Bush, a so-called champion of democracy, dismissed

world opinion. It was the revisionists who said Iraq did not have the WMD in March 2003. Revisionists of the world unite and declare: I am a revisionist historian!

II

There is a second, more general reason to resist the president's attack on "revisionism."

History *is* revisionist. It is precisely the task of the historian to correct, that is, to revise, the popular misconceptions of the moment. Every responsible historian is perpetually in the position of the little child who sees that the emperor has no clothes, or, to take an example from the life of the mind, of Galileo when he is said to have muttered, "Eppur si muove" (yet it does move).

The responsibility to revise falls especially on the historian of foreign policy. United States history is replete with controversy over reasons initially offered for going to war. Congressman Abraham Lincoln challenged President Polk as to the "spot" where the armies of Mexico and the United States first fired on each other in the 1840s. The circumstances causing the battleship *Maine* and the steamship *Lusitania* to be sunk are still debated. Within living memory, it now seems, the Johnson Administration deliberately falsified the alleged events that occasioned the so-called Tonkin Bay Resolution in August 1964.

And it is not only official explanations of the reasons for going to war that require revision. The underlying assumptions of policy makers are often enough, from an historian's vantage point, simply false. One of the authors, after a trip to Hanoi in the mid-1960s, had the opportunity to meet Robert Kennedy. If memory serves, Kennedy said that "everybody knows" that Communists can't win democratic elections. But in fact, former President Eisenhower's memoirs prove that ten years earlier the United States had sabotaged the Geneva agreements which ended the French war in Indo-China because American policymakers knew that if nationwide democratic elections were held in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh would win. The same fallacy -- that the "bad guys" are bound to lose in a fair election -- now plagues United States foreign policy in Iran, Palestine, Venezuela, Haiti, and elsewhere.

A debate that has no obvious "politically correct" answer but that desperately requires to be joined concerns the question, How new is the Bush administration policy of "preventive" or "preemptive" war? Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, Professor Arthur Schlesinger opines that preemption represents a "fatal change in the foreign policy of the United States." During the long years of the Cold War, Schlesinger assures the reader, "preventative war was unmentionable. Its advocates were regarded as loonies."²⁰ Yet some of Schlesinger's colleagues in the administration of John F. Kennedy explicitly advocated attacking Communism in Vietnam while it was still relatively weak: McGeorge Bundy "concluded that a preemptive strike was desirable."²¹

On the one hand, commentators point to the brazen way in which policymakers in the Bush administration destroy multinational agreements that have been painful decades in the making, and blithely leap from rationale to rationale in seeking to justify United States aggression. This, it is suggested, is something new under the sun. On the other hand, any one viewing the history of treaties with Native Americans might conclude that both in style and substance, neo-conservatism began with the extermination of the Pequot Indians.

Most fundamentally and grievously of all: Radical historians, anxious to prove the meticulous character of their scholarship, have too often confined the scope of their research to small, “manageable” topics. Creation of the master narrative is defaulted to professors who view the world broadly, but from the parochial perspective of Ivy League departments whose tenured members – think of the Bundys, the Rostows, Professor Wolfowitz – in even years make the policy that in odd years their scholarship grandly justifies.

For example, Tony Judt finds such parochialism and “triumphalism” in the sweeping Cold War history of Yale Professor John Lewis Gaddis.²² Among the topics he finds lacking substantial treatment in Gaddis’ work are: the sources and psychology of Soviet strategy; the degree to which United States diplomats like Harriman, Acheson, Kennan and Bohlen brought to the table a “worldly, cosmopolitan” outlook just as cold and hard as that of their Marxist counterparts; the Third World, including the overthrow of elected governments in Iran, Guatemala and Chile; Polish Solidarity and Hungary in 1956; Soviet intelligence; the fact that McCarthyism did not occur in Western Europe despite spying in those countries at least as serious as that charged to the Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss; DeGaulle; Eurocommunism; the international New Left; the prehistory of the Cold War from 1917 to 1945; and its posthistory, including the invasion of Iraq. One might pardonably conclude that this master narrative is not just *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark, but *Hamlet* without the entire court at Elsinore.

To revise is more than to criticize. Revisionist historians must take risks that will expose them, in turn, to criticism. Revisionist historians have a responsibility to reconstruct the master narrative as well as to polish particular tiles in the mosaic. Since William Appleman Williams, few if any historians on the Left have had the chutzpah to try to tell the whole story of United States foreign policy, or even the whole story of United States foreign policy since World War II. That should be next on our agenda.

Notes

¹ Bush quoted in “Bush raps ‘revisionist historians’ on Iraq,” *CNN.com*, posted 16 June 2003.

² “President Commemorates Veterans Day, Discusses War on Terror.” Tobyhanna Army Depot, Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, 11 November 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/11/print/20051111-1.html>

³ Scott Shane and Daniel Sanger, “Bush Panel Finds Big Flaws Remain in U.S. Spy Efforts,” *New York Times*, 1 April 2005, p. A10.

⁴ “Blix: U.S. Leaned on Us,” *Newsday*, 12 June 2003, p. A48

⁵ “President Commemorates Veterans Day, Discusses War on Terror.” Tobyhanna Army Depot, Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, 11 November 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/11/print/20051111-1.html>

⁶ “President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq Within 48 Hours: Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation” (Washington, DC: Office of the Press Secretary), 17 March 2003.

⁷ IAEA Update Report for the Security Council Pursuant to Resolution 1441 (2002).

⁸ “No Evidence of Nuclear Weapons Program: ElBaradei,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 March 2003.

⁹ Secretary Colin L. Powell, “Press Remarks with Foreign Minister of Egypt Amre Moussa,” *U.S. Department of State*, 24 February 2001, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/933.htm>

¹⁰ “President Delivers State of the Union,” 28 January 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html>

¹¹ Dana Priest and Karen DeYoung, “CIA Questioned Documents Linking Iraq, Uranium Ore,” *Washington Post*, 22 March 2003. See also “Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community’s Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq,” Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, 7 July 2004. The report finds numerous agencies challenging the documents regarding the Nigerian uranium sale to Iraq. Among the responses were that it was “highly suspect”; “lacks crucial details”; and was “completely implausible.”

¹² Jeanne Cummings, “Security Advisers Now Share Blame In Intelligence Row,” *Wall Street Journal*, 23 July 2003, p. A4. Note that the CIA’s initial challenge led to the removal of the uranium claim from an October speech. See Ken Fireman, “Warning Unheeded,” *Newsday*, 23 July 2003.

¹³ Mark Danner, “The Secret Way to War,” *The New York Review of Books*, 9 June 2005.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* This quotation is from the infamous Downing Street memo. For more details and responses to Bush supporters, visit <http://www.downingstreet.org>, which explains that, “The Downing Street Memo is actually meeting minutes transcribed during the British Prime Minister’s meeting on July 23, 2002. Published by *The Sunday Times* on May 1, 2005 it was the first hard evidence from within the UK or US governments that exposed the truth behind how the Iraq war began.”

¹⁵ See Stephen Shalom, “Iraq White Paper,” for reference and more details in *Enduring Freedom or Enduring War? Prospects and Costs of the New American 21st Century* (Maisonneuve Press, 2005), Carl Mirra, ed., pp. 173-6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁷ “U.S. Troops in Iraq: 72% Say End the War in 2006,” *Zogby International*, 28 February 2006, <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=1075>. To be sure, withdrawal does not mean abandonment. UN consultant, Johan Galtung, suggests a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East, chaired by Jordan or a party in the region: Ongoing concerns such as the Israel-Palestine crisis, Kurdish independence, and a Middle East common market should be part of this dialogue. A U.S. aid package to rebuild the infrastructure along with a

pledge that Iraqi resources belong to the Iraqis are also in order. The presence of U.S. soldiers is not necessary to begin repairing Iraq; a multinational force coupled with significant aid is more desirable than a U.S. occupation that is opposed by the Iraqis themselves. See Johan Galtung, "Human Needs, Humanitarian Intervention, Human Security and the War in Iraq," (February 2004), posted at <http://www.transcend.org>

¹⁸ Sean Rayment, "Secret MoD poll: Iraqis support attacks on British Troops," *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 October 2005.

¹⁹ "Iraqis Not So Happy," *Newsday*, 29 September 2003, p. A12. Furthermore, the Brookings Institute identifies a February 2005 poll in which 71% of Iraqis "oppose the presence of Coalition forces in Iraq." For this poll and several others with similar data, see Abigail Fuller and Neil Wollman, "Should the U.S. Withdraw? Let the Iraqi People Decide," *Professors for Peace*, 13 October 2005.

²⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Eyeless in Iraq," *The New York Review of Books*, 23 October 2003.

²¹ Ralph Stavins, Richard Barnet and Marcus Raskin, *Washington Plans an Aggressive War* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 34, 39, 194, 252.

²² Tony Judt, "A Story Still to be Told," *The New York Review of Books*, 23 March 2006.