



Americans protesting against the war in Iraq at the height of hostilities with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and the United States campaign against perceived weapons of mass destruction. There was intense pressure on US intelligence agencies to justify the war against Iraq, especially after the 9/11 attacks.

Getting Iraq War narrative right

LOOKING PAST LIES:

Setting the record straight for waging a false case for war against Saddam is crucial to finally nailing the truth



PAUL KRUGMAN

SURPRISE! It turns out that there's something to be said for having the brother of a failed president make his own run for the White House.

Thanks to Jeb Bush, we may finally have the frank discussion of the Iraq invasion we should have had a decade ago.

But many influential people — not just Bush — would prefer that we not have that discussion. There's a palpable sense right now of the political and media elite trying to draw a line under the subject. Yes, the narrative goes, we now know that invading Iraq was a terrible mistake, and it's about time that everyone admits it. Now let's move on.

Well, let's not — because that's a false narrative, and everyone who was involved in the debate over the war knows that it's false. The Iraq War wasn't an innocent mistake, a venture undertaken on the basis of intelligence that turned out to be wrong. America invaded Iraq because the Bush administration wanted a war. The public justifications for the invasion were nothing but pretexts, and falsified pretexts at that. We were, in a fundamental sense, lied into war.

The fraudulence of the case for war was actually obvious even at the time: The ever-shifting arguments for an unchanging goal were a dead giveaway. So were the word games — the talk about Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) that conflated chemical weapons (which many people did think Saddam Hussein had) with nukes, the constant insinuations that Iraq was somehow behind 9/11.

And, at this point, we have plenty

of evidence to confirm everything the war's opponents were saying. We now know, for example, that on 9/11 itself — literally before the dust had settled — Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defence, was already plotting war against a regime that had nothing to do with the terrorist attack.

"Judge whether good enough (to) hit S.H. (Saddam Hussein) ...sweep it all up things related and not"; so read notes taken by Rumsfeld's aide.

This was, in short, a war the White House wanted, and all of the supposed mistakes that, as Jeb puts it, "were made" by someone unnamed actually flowed from this underlying desire. Did the intelligence agencies wrongly conclude that Iraq had chemical weapons and a nuclear programme?

That's because they were under intense pressure to justify the war. Did prewar assessments vastly underestimate the difficulty and cost of occupation? That's because the war party didn't want to hear anything that might raise doubts about the rush to invade.

Indeed, the Army's chief of staff was effectively fired for questioning claims that the occupation phase would be cheap and easy.

Why did they want a war? That's

a harder question to answer. Some of the warmongers believed that deploying shock and awe in Iraq would enhance American power and influence around the world.

Some saw Iraq as a sort of pilot project, preparation for a series of regime changes. And it's hard to avoid the suspicion that there was a strong element of wagging the dog, of using military triumph to strengthen the Republican brand at home. Whatever the precise motives, the result was a very dark chapter in American history. Once again: We were lied into war.

Now, you can understand why many political and media figures would prefer not to talk about any of this. Some of them, I suppose, may have been duped: may have fallen for the obvious lies, which doesn't say much about their judgment. More, I suspect, were complicit: They realised that the official case for war was a pretext, but had their own reasons for wanting a war, or, alternatively, allowed themselves to be intimidated into going along.

For there was a definite climate of fear among politicians and pundits in 2002 and 2003, one in which criticising the push for war looked very much like a career killer.

On top of these personal motives,

our news media in general have a hard time coping with policy dishonesty. Reporters are reluctant to call politicians on their lies, even when these involve mundane issues like budget numbers, for fear of seeming partisan. In fact, the bigger the lie, the clearer it is that major political figures are engaged in outright fraud, the more hesitant the reporting. And it doesn't get much bigger — indeed, more or less criminal — than lying America into war.

But truth matters, and not just because those who refuse to learn from history are doomed in some general sense to repeat it. The campaign of lies that took us into Iraq was recent enough that it's still important to hold the guilty individuals accountable. Never mind Jeb Bush's verbal stumbles. Think, instead, about his foreign-policy team, led by people who were directly involved in concocting a false case for war.

So let's get the Iraq story right. Yes, from a national point of view the invasion was a mistake. But (with apologies to Talleyrand) it was worse than a mistake, it was a crime.

The writer is an 'NYT' columnist

