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Selective Memory and a Dishonest Doctrine

Noam Chomsky

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All people who have any concern for human rights, justice and integrity should be overjoyed by the capture of Saddam Hussein, and should be awaiting a fair trial for him by an international tribunal.

An indictment of Saddam's atrocities would include not only his slaughter and gassing of Kurds in 1988 but also, rather crucially, his massacre of the Shiite rebels who might have overthrown him in 1991.

At the time, Washington and its allies held the "strikingly unanimous view (that) whatever the sins of the Iraqi leader, he offered the West and the region a better hope for his country's stability than did those who have suffered his repression," reported Alan Cowell in the New York Times.

Last December, Jack Straw, Britain's foreign secretary, released a dossier of Saddam's crimes drawn almost entirely from the period of firm U.S.-British support of Saddam.

With the usual display of moral integrity, Straw's report and Washington's reaction overlooked that support.

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Such practices reflect a trap deeply rooted in the intellectual culture generally – a trap sometimes called the doctrine of change of course, invoked in the United States every two or three years. The content of the doctrine is: “Yes, in the past we did some wrong things because of innocence or inadvertence. But now that’s all over, so let’s not waste anymore time on this boring, stale stuff.”

The doctrine is dishonest and cowardly, but it does have advantages: It protects us from the danger of understanding what is happening before our eyes.

For example, the Bush administration’s original reason for going to war in Iraq was to save the world from a tyrant developing weapons of mass destruction and cultivating links to terror. Nobody believes that now, not even Bush’s speech writers.

The new reason is that we invaded Iraq to establish a democracy there and, in fact, to democratize the whole Middle East.

Sometimes, the repetition of this democracy-building posture reaches the level of rapturous acclaim.

Last month, for example, David Ignatius, the Washington Post commentator, described the invasion of Iraq as “the most idealistic war in modern times” – fought solely to bring democracy to Iraq and the region. Ignatius was particularly impressed with Paul Wolfowitz, “the Bush administration’s idealist in chief,” whom he described as a genuine intellectual who “bleeds for (the Arab world’s) oppression and dreams of liberating it.”

Maybe that helps explain Wolfowitz’s career – like his strong support for Suharto in Indonesia, one of the last century’s worst mass murderers and aggressors, when Wolfowitz was ambassador to that country under Ronald Reagan.

As the State Department official responsible for Asian affairs under Reagan, Wolfowitz oversaw support for the murderous dictators Chun of South Korea and Marcos of the Philippines.

All this is irrelevant because of the convenient doctrine of change of course.

So, yes, Wolfowitz's heart bleeds for the victims of oppression – and if the record shows the opposite, it's just that boring old stuff that we want to forget about.

One might recall another recent illustration of Wolfowitz's love of democracy. The Turkish parliament, heeding its population's near-unanimous opposition to war in Iraq, refused to let U.S. forces deploy fully from Turkey. This caused absolute fury in Washington.

Wolfowitz denounced the Turkish military for failing to intervene to overturn the decision. Turkey was listening to its people, not taking orders from Crawford, Texas, or Washington, D.C.

The most recent chapter is Wolfowitz's "Determination and Findings" on bidding for lavish reconstruction contracts in Iraq. Excluded are countries where the government dared to take the same position as the vast majority of the population.

Wolfowitz's alleged grounds are "security interests," which are non-existent, though the visceral hatred of democracy is hard to miss – along with the fact that Halliburton and Bechtel corporations will be free to "compete" with the vibrant democracy of Uzbekistan and the Solomon Islands, but not with leading industrial societies.

What's revealing and important to the future is that Washington's display of contempt for democracy went side by side with a chorus of adulation about its yearning for democracy. To be able to carry that off is an impressive achievement, hard to mimic even in a totalitarian state.

Iraqis have some insight into this process of conquerors and conquered.

The British created Iraq for their own interests. When they ran that part of the world, they discussed how to set up what they called Arab facades – weak, pliable governments, parliamentary if possible, so long as the British effectively ruled.

Who would expect that the United States would ever permit an independent Iraqi government to exist? Especially now that Washington has reserved the right to set up permanent military bases there, in the heart of the world's greatest oil-producing region, and has imposed an economic regime that no sovereign country would accept, putting the country's fate in the hands of Western corporations.

Throughout history, even the harshest and most shameful measures are regularly accompanied by professions of noble intent – and rhetoric about bestowing freedom and independence.

An honest look would only generalize Thomas Jefferson's observation on the world situation of his day: "We believe no more in Bonaparte's fighting merely for the liberties of the seas than in Great Britain's fighting for the liberties of mankind. The object is the same, to draw to themselves the power, the wealth and the resources of other nations."