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The war everyone forgot

Noam Chomsky

February 29, 2008

Iraq remains a significant concern for the population, but that is a matter of little moment in a modern democracy. Not long ago, it was taken for granted that the Iraq war would be the central issue in the presidential campaign, as it was in the midterm election of 2006. But it has virtually disappeared, eliciting some puzzlement. There should be none.

The Wall Street Journal came close to the point in a front-page article on Super Tuesday, the day of many primaries: “Issues Recede in ’08 Contest As Voters Focus on Character.” To put it more accurately, issues recede as candidates, party managers and their public relations agencies focus on character. As usual. And for sound reasons. Apart from the irrelevance of the population, they can be dangerous.

Progressive democratic theory holds that the population — “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders” — should be “spectators,” not “participants” in action, as Walter Lippmann wrote.

The participants in action are surely aware that on a host of major issues, both political parties are well to the right of the general population, and that public opinion is quite consistent over time, a matter reviewed in the useful study, “The Foreign Policy Disconnect,” by Benjamin Page and Marshall Bouton. It

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is important, then, for the attention of the people to be diverted elsewhere.

The real work of the world is the domain of an enlightened leadership. The common understanding is revealed more in practice than in words, though some do articulate it: President Woodrow Wilson, for example, held that an elite of gentlemen with “elevated ideals” must be empowered to preserve “stability and righteousness,” essentially the perspective of the Founding Fathers. In more recent years the gentlemen are transmuted into the “technocratic elite” and “action intellectuals” of Camelot, “Straussian” neocons of Bush II or other configurations.

For the vanguard who uphold the elevated ideals and are charged with managing the society and the world, the reasons for Iraq’s drift off the radar screen should not be obscure. They were cogently explained by the distinguished historian Arthur M Schlesinger, articulating the position of the doves 40 years ago when the US invasion of South Vietnam was in its fourth year and Washington was preparing to add another 100,000 troops to the 175,000 already tearing South Vietnam to shreds.

By then the invasion launched by President Kennedy was facing difficulties and imposing difficult costs on the United States, so Schlesinger and other Kennedy liberals were reluctantly beginning to shift from hawks to doves.

– In 1966, Schlesinger wrote that of course “we all pray” that the hawks are right in thinking that the surge of the day will be able to “suppress the resistance,” and if it does, “we may all be saluting the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government” in winning victory while leaving “the tragic country gutted and devastated by bombs, burned by napalm, turned into a wasteland by chemical defoliation, a land of ruin and wreck,” with its “political and institutional fabric” pulverised. But escalation probably won’t succeed, and will prove to be too costly for ourselves, so perhaps strategy should be rethought.

As the costs to ourselves began to mount severely, it soon turned out that everyone had always been a strong opponent of the war (in deep silence).

Elite reasoning, and the accompanying attitudes, carry over with little change to commentary on the US invasion of Iraq today. And although criticism of the Iraq war is far greater and far-reaching than in the case of Vietnam at any comparable stage, nevertheless the principles that Schlesinger articulated remain in force in media and commentary.

It is of some interest that Schlesinger himself took a very different position on the Iraq invasion, virtually alone in his circles. When the bombs began to fall on Baghdad, he wrote that Bush's policies are "alarmingly similar to the policy that imperial Japan employed at Pearl Harbor, on a date which, as an earlier American president said it would, lives in infamy. Franklin D Roosevelt was right, but today it is we Americans who live in infamy."

That Iraq is "a land of ruin and wreck" is not in question. Recently the British polling agency Oxford Research Business updated its estimate of extra deaths resulting from the war to 1.03 million — excluding Karbala and Anbar provinces, two of the worst regions. Whether that estimate is correct, or much overstated as some claim, there is no doubt that the toll is horrendous. Several million people are internally displaced. Thanks to the generosity of Jordan and Syria, the millions of refugees fleeing the wreckage of Iraq, including most of the professional classes, have not been simply wiped out.

But that welcome is fading, for one reason because Jordan and Syria receive no meaningful support from the perpetrators of the crimes in Washington and London; the idea that they might admit these victims, beyond a trickle, is too outlandish to consider.

– Sectarian warfare has devastated Iraq. Baghdad and other areas have been subjected to brutal ethnic cleansing and left in the hands of warlords and militias, the primary thrust of

the current counterinsurgency strategy developed by General Petraeus, who won his fame by pacifying Mosul, now the scene of some of the most extreme violence.

One of the most dedicated and informed journalists who have been immersed in the shocking tragedy, Nir Rosen, recently published an epitaph, "The Death of Iraq," in *Current History*.

"Iraq has been killed, never to rise again," Rosen writes. "The American occupation has been more disastrous than that of the Mongols, who sacked Baghdad in the 13th century" — a common perception of Iraqis as well. "Only fools talk of 'solutions' now. There is no solution. The only hope is that perhaps the damage can be contained."

Catastrophe notwithstanding, Iraq remains a marginal issue in the presidential campaign. That is natural, given the spectrum of hawk-dove elite opinion. The liberal doves adhere to their traditional reasoning and attitudes, praying that the hawks will be right and that the United States will win a victory in the land of ruin and wreck, establishing "stability," a code word for subordination to Washington's will. By and large hawks are encouraged, and doves silenced, by the upbeat post-surge reports of reduced casualties.

In December, the Pentagon released "good news" from Iraq, a study of focus groups from all over the country that found that Iraqis have "shared beliefs," so that reconciliation should be possible, contrary to claims of critics of the invasion. The shared beliefs were two. First, the US invasion is the cause of the sectarian violence that has torn Iraq to shreds. Second, the invaders should withdraw and leave Iraq to its people.

A few weeks after the Pentagon report, New York Times military-Iraq expert Michael R Gordon wrote a reasoned and comprehensive review of the options on Iraq policy facing the candidates for the presidential election. One voice is missing in the debate: Iraqis. Their preference is not rejected. Rather, it is not worthy of mention. And it seems that there is no notice

of the fact. That makes sense on the usual tacit assumption of almost all discourse on international affairs: We own the world, so what does it matter what others think? They are "unpeople," to borrow the term used by British diplomatic historian Mark Curtis in his work on Britain's crimes of empire.

Routinely, Americans join Iraqis in un-peoplehood. Their preferences too provide no options.