

Lack of Empathy and the Bloodshed in Iraq

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This Insight considers empathy in the context of the Iraq war, and in particular, the pre-war planning and the handling of the intervention in its early stages.

Few would deny that after the fall of Saddam Hussein the occupation was far more chaotic than George W. Bush or Tony Blair expected. Blair himself has conceded that. It's also generally acknowledged (though not by Blair or Bush) that some big mistakes were made, not least the disbanding of the Iraqi army and the dismissal of every administrator in the civil service who had been a senior figure of the Baath party, whether they were ideologues or, more likely, professional technocrats who had joined the party of necessity for career reasons.

But what of the other serious problems which arose during the occupation? These are often put down to the so-called Law of Unintended Consequences. It's a convenient alibi. Many things which are conveniently described as unintended consequences should more accurately be described as unacknowledged consequences.

In Iraq many of the challenges which undermined the occupation were flagged up in advance by experts but the British and US governments did not acknowledge the validity of the warnings they were given. They were set on their chosen strategy of regime change and brushed criticism aside.

Consider the three factors which created turmoil in post-Saddam Iraq. These were, first, the rise to political dominance of Iraq's Shia parties and religious leaders; second, their generally suspicious and non-co-operative attitude to the foreign occupiers; and, third, the eruption of armed resistance not just from Sunnis, upset at losing power, but from Shias as well. All of these trends were predicted before the war by academic experts, journalistic commentators, and retired diplomats but they were not taken seriously enough in Whitehall or Washington. The reason was that officials lacked empathy. Had they had some empathy they might have treated the warnings properly.

Empathy is an important tool in mediation – in getting inside the various parties' skins, and understanding not just their culture and history but their psychological baggage, their sense of grievance, their fears of impending betrayal.

Empathy is equally important as an ingredient in good planning, especially if a government is taking the extreme measure of intervening militarily in another country. There is a need for what I would call "empathy for the sake of harm-avoidance". Before taking military action in a foreign conflict any government or political leader, and this includes those on the UN Security Council, should first consider whether they will be causing greater harm. Will a foreign intervention, whether it is in Iraq, Libya, Syria or Afghanistan, run the risk of making an ongoing conflict, whether it is an armed uprising or a full-scale civil war worse, not better?

Can governments be sure they are avoiding creating further harm? Before launching an intervention it is vital for any government as well as the UN Security Council to have completed a properly researched Political Impact Assessment and an equally well-researched Humanitarian Impact Assessment. Empathy is crucial to ensure that such assessments are accurate and useful.

In the case of Iraq one of the biggest mistakes was to think that Iraq's Shias would unreservedly welcome a Western occupation. They might welcome Saddam's removal but not wish for a prolonged occupation, which would inevitably raise suspicions about the foreigners' motives and intentions. Bush, Blair and their advisers did not understand the psychological wounds which remained from earlier British and Western interference in southern Iraq. They thought the Shias' hatred of Saddam would lead to Britain and the US being treated unequivocally as liberators. They did not know that Shias had vigorously resisted Britain's take-over of the country from the retreating Ottoman Empire in

1917. They did not bother to find out that the ancestors of some of the religious party leaders of 2003 had led an armed uprising against the British in 1920. Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for War, ordered the Royal Air Force to bomb the insurgents into submission. Britain then further inflamed Shia anger by imposing a foreign non-Iraqi Sunni as Iraq's King in 1921.

In 2002 and 2003 as they planned their invasion Bush and Blair failed to take on board a more recent historical episode which had angered Iraq's Shia communities. In 1991 the Americans used force to drive Saddam's army out of Kuwait. With the Iraqi army destroyed or in retreat from Kuwait, President George Bush Senior urged the Shias to rise up in Basra and other southern Iraqi cities against Saddam's troops. But when Saddam unexpectedly found reserves and sent helicopter gunships to mow the Shia resistance down, Bush did nothing to help. No wonder that most Shias felt betrayed by the Americans. Memories are long and in 2003 when Bush Junior invaded Iraq the wounds left by Bush's father's betrayal were still fresh in many people's minds.

If only Washington and Whitehall had shown some empathy they would have realised that the dominant emotion among Iraqi Shias towards Britain and the United States in 2003 would not be gratitude for liberation but suspicion, scepticism, and the expectation of a new betrayal. The Brits and the Americans should not have been surprised that Shia militias took up arms against them in Basra and Baghdad.

Consider a second episode from the Iraq war: the political rise of the young Shia cleric, Moqtada al Sadr. The first part of this Insight discussed the need for empathy for the sake of harm-avoidance during political planning; we now come to the issue of empathy in administration.

One of the most impressive sights that I and other reporters saw when we reached Baghdad in April 2003 was young Shia clerics trying to stem the looting of public buildings, shops, and private homes. They were far from successful, of course, but we saw roadblocks close to mosques in various parts of Baghdad where cars were checked to see if they were carrying looted goods. TV sets, computers, and other items were confiscated and taken into the mosques if the driver could not prove they were his. The mosques were also taking donations of food to distribute to the poor.

Over subsequent weeks it became clear that many of these clerics were congregating around a young man, Moqtada al Sadr, who was the 29-year-old son of a distinguished ayatollah who had been assassinated by Saddam's thugs. Reporters like myself found it easy to go into Sadr city and interview these clerics. The American occupiers were busy trying to establish a central government over Iraq. Running Baghdad was a secondary concern. In the absence of local government, Moqtada's people were acting as a substitute administration in several Baghdad suburbs. This was particularly the case in the poor run-down and overcrowded eastern district of Baghdad, which used to be called Saddam City and had been renamed Sadr City.

There was a strong element of class tension in the turmoil which followed Saddam's removal. Sadr city was largely peopled by poor rural migrants from the south, and their descendants, who had moved to Baghdad in the hope of jobs in the industrial modernisation which Saddam had promoted with the help of oil revenues since the mid-1970s. With Saddam gone, the people of Sadr City wanted an improvement in their life-chances. Many of them were suspicious of the elitist leaders of the established Shia political parties. Moqtada seemed to them a more sympathetic figure and he soon acquired a devoted and loyal following.

If the Americans had had any empathy in their administration they would have tried to learn what made Moqtada tick and why he was so popular. But Moqtada was no friend of US power. He denounced the occupation and demanded that it end. This hardly made him a figure whom the Americans would willingly approach, however necessary it was. Secondly, as I just pointed out, he represented a lower-class and largely young clientele, not the sort of group which middle-aged and middle- and upper-middle-class US or British diplomats and administrators regularly encounter. They preferred the middle-aged and middle-class Shia leaders from the Dawa party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (known as SCIRI). When these Iraqi leaders criticised Moqtada al-Sadr as a wild upstart, it was easy for the Americans to agree.

Instead of practising empathy and trying to understand Moqtada's background and appeal, the Americans demonised him. They refused to talk to him and did their best to undermine him. The only issue for debate in US circles was whether Moqtada was a Fascist or a Bolshevik. In his memoirs Jerry Bremer, the US overlord and head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, referred to Moqtada as "a Bolshevik Islamist who understood only one thing, raw power, and who would stop at nothing to get it". Larry Diamond, who was one of the more liberal US officials, described Sadr's followers as a "malignant cancer". He wrote in his memoirs: "There was a fascist tone to all the street action and thuggery which was meant to terrorise enlightened people and persecute ethnic minorities".

I won't go into detail on what followed, except to say that when in July 2003 Moqtada set up a militia, known as the Mahdi army, the Americans continued to ostracise him. A few months later, they turned to repression. Moqtada's newspaper was closed down. He was arrested. Not surprisingly this provoked armed resistance by Moqtada's militia and for a month in April 2004 the city of Najaf was the site of full-scale battles between the militia and the Americans. The lesson is clear. If only there had been empathy, much bloodshed could have been avoided.