

Women and minority US forces reflect on the invasion of Iraq, now 20 years ago

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Twenty years ago, the United States led the "[coalition of the willing](#)" in an invasion of Iraq, in the shadow of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US by militant Islamic network al-Qaeda.

Western forces justified the war by [claiming](#) Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (which would never be found) and intended to help al-Qaeda.

A long, drawn-out war created a power vacuum in Iraq, leading to civil war between Iraqi Shias and Sunnis, and repeated insurgencies against occupying forces. Both were exploited by the emerging militant terror group Daesh, better known as ISIS, [whose leaders](#) met and radicalized in US detention camps.

While most Western forces finally withdrew in 2017, [Iraq faces](#) continued insurgency and political crises.

"The people that we chose—and the people we empowered—were leaders of ethnic or religious extremists," reflected Lieutenant Heather Coyne, as early as 2004. "We made them, we put them in charge."

Coyne was one of the US military members and contractors whose experiences of the invasion were captured by the ["Iraq Experience" Oral History Project](#). It reveals a snapshot of Iraq at a key moment in time: just over a year after the war began.

Culturally diverse armed forces

The soldier-force Western militaries deployed to fight the War on Terror was the most diverse in history: providing language skills, cultural competencies and the ability to communicate with local women. It was also a [representational device](#), reflecting the invading forces' rhetoric of pluralism, tolerance and equality.

Yet these soldiers waged a deeply racialized and gendered war.

Military policies around "collateral damage" and "enemy combatants"

dehumanized enemies, allies, and civilians alike. Common threads of religious humiliation, [sexual violence](#) and racism run through reports of soldiers' conduct. Allegations of war crimes by Western forces bear the hallmarks of white male supremacy. Women and minority soldiers faced [epidemics of sexual violence](#) and [racism](#) within Western military institutions.

I'm researching the experiences of women and minority soldiers deployed with US, UK and Australian militaries in the war on terror. In the project's first stage, I read through existing archives of interviews with veterans.

The [Institute of Peace](#) think tank conducted [interviews](#) with military and contractors between June and November 2004 for a "[lessons learned](#)" [project](#).

Six of the 35 interviewees met my criteria: three women (all white) and three men: one Navajo, one African American, and one Iraqi expatriate. Half had military experience; the three civilians all had expertise in conflict management.

The interviewees were proud of their mission and buoyed by hopes for the [upcoming Iraqi parliamentary elections](#).

Yet underneath this confidence were deep anxieties.

Good guys or bad guys?

Navajo marine veteran Eric Bauer connected with Iraqis similarly to how he'd connect with other Native Americans: talking about relationships, family and community rather than resumes. By doing this, he explained, "they knew who I was as a person, and vice versa."

Bauer was tasked with the practical process of setting up councils in Baghdad. He had to figure out if those who wanted to serve as representatives were, in his words, "good guys or bad guys." In practice, this was "just getting people to talk about themselves," often for hours.

One major struggle for the occupying forces was the problem of governance: how to create a new Iraqi political system that was representative, cooperative, friendly to Western allies, and had popular support.

The first step in this process was "[de-Ba'athification](#)", a policy of removing any members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party from positions of power. The Iraqi Army was disbanded and public sector employees affiliated with the Ba'ath party were removed and banned from future employment. Once the old system was removed, the US attempted to build one anew.

Interviewing so many Iraqis helped Bauer understand the holes in the policy of de-Ba'athification: "if you wanted a job that was, let's say a teacher or a doctor within the government [...] you would take active part in furthering the goals of the Baath party, or at least swear allegiance to them now [...] technically then, we would have to dismiss all schoolteachers."

But this empathy for the struggle to survive clashed with his view that the Ba'ath party were fundamentally evil, and by extension those who cooperated were the same: "for a lot of them it was a way to get by. If you didn't have a moral conscience you would do it. Like I said, they weren't loyal to the principles of it."

Failures of reconstruction

Denise Dauphinais worked for USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives.

As a civilian with foreign policy expertise, she was critical of how the US military handled—or neglected—seemingly obvious tasks such as clearing rubble, preventing looting, and making the cities feel safe and liveable.

Electricity supply was another major problem. The US administration had believed an oil-rich country would quickly become self-sufficient, providing energy supply throughout Iraq—along with the revenue to fund the ongoing US occupation.

In reality, years of prewar US sanctions had [crippled Iraqi infrastructure](#), which was then bombarded in the invasion itself. Months into the occupation, the occupying forces were unable to provide electricity and other basic services.

Lieutenant Heather Coyne had worked on terrorism and conflict management for the White House and spoke Arabic proficiently. She worked in civil affairs in Iraq, for the Coalition Provisional Authority, where she used her language skills to connect with locals and hear their stories. By the summer of 2003, two months after the invasion, "...people were not only miserable because it was hot, but because food was spoiling. You could only buy a certain amount of food because they couldn't count on their refrigerators working. It created such destruction in their lives."

'We put them in charge'

The US was determined to prevent concentration of power by any one group, so they allocated different offices to the parties representing different ethnic and religious groups. But the result was a [system of quotas that fostered sectarian conflict between those groups](#), as potential leaders traded on identity to consolidate their power bases.

Bauer, who worked on setting up these councils, was very defensive of the quota system: "We carefully structured the councils to ensure that there was diversity in the representation because otherwise there would not have been [...] People say, "well, that's not a democracy." No, it's a republic trying to get fair representation, not just mob rule."

But Coyne, who was lower down the ladder, pointed out that the occupying forces had empowered extremists.

The civil war between Shia and Sunni militias that [emerged in Iraq from 2006](#) was one legacy of the new sectarian political system. So were the [waves of protests](#) calling for political reform in 2019–2021.

Coyne found the emphasis on equality and representation ironic, even hypocritical. She remembered sneaking into a meeting with military commanders who were insisting more women be represented in local council: "The commanding general was pounding the table, "we absolutely need more women in these councils." [...] Around the table, nods of agreement, shaking heads, absolutely this is incredibly important. I looked around the room, of 40 people in the room I was the only female and I wasn't really supposed to be there in the first place [...] they're going around telling the Iraqis you need to elect more women and the Iraqis look at [Americans] and see only men."

Loss of legitimacy and growing insurgency

This ongoing US interference in supposedly Iraqi democratic institutions meant a loss of legitimacy. As a result, [several moderate Sunni groups boycotted](#) the 2005 parliamentary elections.

Lack of trust in the new local authorities, combined with the effects of de-Ba'athification, propelled the growing insurgency.

Munthir Nalu was an Iraqi expatriate who fled Iraq in 1991 and was recruited into the Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council, an advisory body of Iraqi experts assisting the US Defense Department.

Nalu was highly critical of the decision to disband the Iraqi Army: "I have many, many friends in the former Iraqi army, and they were crying. They said, please, find us a solution, we have nothing. We are sitting home with no salaries, nothing ... those opposition, they are fighting against us and against United States Army and the coalition, most of them from the Iraqi army."

The thousands of newly unemployed men of fighting age were then attracted by sectarian militias, established by newly empowered leaders such [Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr](#).

Increasingly dangerous

Iraq felt increasingly dangerous, the interviewees reported. Many were concerned about the influx of foreign fighters across the borders, and increased attacks on anyone associated with the occupying forces.

Bauer felt lucky he was still able to move freely, because of his Navajo looks: "In Baghdad, the city is pretty diverse. I would go to the restaurants and shopping markets in the city and I never got a second look."

Still, he acknowledged, "Pretty much everybody that was involved, I mean in any way involved with the Coalition [...] you were a legitimate target."

The interviewees were aware the US had fostered the sense of insecurity within the country. But they still felt the Iraqis, not the US, were ultimately responsible for Iraqi security. They failed to see the links

between the US presence and the lack of security.

What was the real goal?

The weapons of mass destruction—the stated justification for the war—were almost absent from the Iraq Experience interviews, because in late 2004, it was [already apparent](#) they didn't exist.

Only Bauer mentioned them, and only briefly, stating: "He had them. I met the people that said he had them and I believe them."

Instead, the interviewees focused on two interlinked justifications for the war: removing a tyrant from power, and spreading democracy.

The Institute of Peace clearly selected interviewees that share the US government's ideological views. In the next phase of my project, I aim to interview women and minorities with a much broader range of experiences, including those who have become critical of the War on Terror as [a result of their service](#).

Nonetheless, these interviews from 2004 foreshadow the next 20 years of Iraq's history. The interviewees accurately predicted the US would remain involved in Iraq for the next few decades. Despite their belief in the mission, they were not convinced of their success.

"I still think it was the right thing to do," Coyne admitted, "but we did it so badly that it's now backfired."

What should they have done differently? The answer seems to be: everything. These interviews call into question the entire concept of a foreign military undertaking the mission of "nation-building."

Twenty years later, perhaps the most prescient warning comes from

Dauphinais: "the best that we can hope for [is that] the Iraqis will forgive us."

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