George W. Bush’s Horrific Legacy

As part of the drive to drive President Trump from the White House, some “never-Trumipers” are rehabilitating George W. Bush as a relative “moderate” and thus whitewashing his war crimes, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

There is an ongoing reality that is destroying hundreds of thousands of lives in the Middle East. And though most Americans are ignorant of the fact, and many of those who should be in the know would deny it, the suffering flows directly from decisions taken by Washington over the last 27 years.

Some of the facts of the matter have just been presented by the first Global Conflict Medicine Congress held at the American University of Beirut (AUB) earlier this month (May 11-14, 2017). It has drawn attention to two dire consequences of the war policies Americans have carried on in the region: cancer-causing munition material and drug-resistant bacteria.

—Cancer-causing munition material: Materials such as tungsten and mercury are found in the casing of penetrating bombs used in the first and second Gulf wars. These have had long-term effects on survivors, especially those who have been wounded by these munitions. Iraqi-trained and Harvard-educated Dr. Omar Dewachi, a medical anthropologist at AUB fears that “the base line of cancers [appearing in those exposed to these materials] has become very aggressive. … When a young woman of 30, with no family history of cancer, has two different primary cancers – in the breast and in the oesophagus – you have to ask what is happening.” To this can be added that doctors are now “overwhelmed by the sheer number of [war] wounded patients in the Middle East.”

—Drug-resistant bacteria: According to Glasgow-trained Professor Ghassan Abu-Sittah, head of plastic and reconstructive surgery at AUB Medical Center, drug resistance was not a problem during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. However, after the fiasco of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, things began to change. In the period after 1990, Iraq suffered under a vicious sanctions regime imposed by the United Nations at U.S. insistence. During the next 12 years “Iraqis were allowed to use only three antibiotics” and bacterial resistance quickly evolved. Those resistant bacteria spread throughout the region, particularly after the American invasion of the country in 2003.

Today, according to a Medecins Sans Frontieres analysis, “multidrug resistant [MDR] bacteria now accounts for most war wound infections across the Middle East, yet most medical facilities in the region do not even have the laboratory
capacity to diagnose MDR, leading to significant delays and clinical mismanagement of festering wounds.”

Insofar as these developments go, it is not that there aren’t contributing factors stemming from local causes such as factional fighting. However, the major triggers for these horrors were set in motion in Washington. As far as I know, no American holding a senior official post has ever accepted any responsibility for this ongoing suffering.

Hiding Reality

As the cancers and untreatable infections grow in number in the Middle East, there is here in the United States a distressing effort to rehabilitate George W. Bush, the American president whose decisions and policies contributed mightily to this ongoing disaster. It is this Bush who launched the unjustified 2003 invasion of Iraq and thereby — to use the words of the Arab League — “opened the gates of hell.”

His rehabilitation effort began in earnest in April 2013, and coincided with the opening of his presidential library. In an interview given at that time, Bush set the stage for his second coming with an act of self-exoneration. He said he remained “comfortable with the decision making process” that led to the invasion of Iraq — the one that saw him fudging the intelligence when it did not tell him what he wanted to hear — and so also “comfortable” with the ultimate determination to launch the invasion.

“There’s no need to defend myself. I did what I did and ultimately history will judge,” he said.

The frivolous assertion that “history will judge” is often used by people of suspect character. “History” stands for a vague future time. Its alleged inevitable coming allows the protagonist to fantasize about achieving personal glory unchallenged by present, usually significant, ethical concerns.

Those seeking George W. Bush’s rehabilitation now like to contrast him to Donald Trump. One imagines they thereby hope to present him as a “moderate” Republican. They claim that Bush was and is really a very smart and analytical fellow rather than the simpleton most of us suspect him to be.

In other words, despite launching an unnecessary and subsequently catastrophic war, he was never as ignorant and dangerous as Trump. He and his supporters also depict him as a great defender of a free press, again in contrast to Donald Trump. However, when he was president, Bush described the media as an aider and abettor of the nation’s enemies. This certainly can be read as a position that parallels Trump’s description of the media as the “enemy of the American
people.”

But all of this is part of a public relations campaign and speaks to the power of reputation remodeling – the creation of a facade that hides reality. In order to do this you have to “control the evidence” – in this case by ignoring it. In this endeavor George W. Bush and his boosters have the cooperation of much of the mainstream media. No sweat here: the press has done this before.

Except for the odd editorial the mainstream media also contributed to Richard Nixon’s rehabilitation back in the mid 1980s. These sorts of sleights-of-hand are only possible against the background of pervasive public ignorance.

Closed Information Environments

Local happenings are open to relatively close investigation. We usually have a more or less accurate understanding of the local context in which events play out, and this allows for the possibility of making a critical judgment. As we move further away, both in space and time, information becomes less reliable, if for no other reason than it comes to us through the auspices of others who may or may not know what they are talking about.

As a society, we have little or no knowledge of the context for foreign events, and thus it is easy for those reporting on them to apply filters according to any number of criteria. What we are left with is news that is customized – stories designed to fit preexisting political or ideological biases. In this way millions upon millions of minds are restricted to closed information environments on subjects which often touch on, among other important topics, war and its consequences.

So what is likely to be more influential with the locally oriented American public: George W. Bush’s rehabilitated image reported on repeatedly in the nation’s mainstream media, or the foreign-based, horror-strewn consequences of his deeds reported upon infrequently?

This dilemma is not uniquely American, nor is it original to our time. But its dangerous consequences are a very good argument against the ubiquitous ignorance that allows political criminals to be rehabilitated even as their crimes condemn others to continuing suffering.

If reputation remodelers can do this for George W. Bush, then there is little doubt that someday it will be done for Donald Trump. Life, so full of suffering, is also full of such absurdities.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s*
National Interest; America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood; and Islamic Fundamentalism. He blogs at www.tothepointanalyses.com.