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Iraq, Then and Now

BOB HERBERT (op-ed)
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I remember going to Washington in mid-March 2003, nearly two years ago, to cover a demonstration by tens of thousands of protesters who were clinging to the last, tissue-thin strands of hope that they could bring the Bush administration to its senses and prevent the invasion of Iraq.

But it was already clear that nothing would deter President Bush from his war. I filed a column that said, "We're about to watch the tragedy unfold."

Even more clearly than the protests that weekend, I remember the ominous stories in the press about the likelihood that a war in Iraq would embolden Islamic terrorist organizations and strengthen their recruitment efforts. The Times ran a front-page article on Sunday March 16, in which a senior counterintelligence official said: "An American invasion of Iraq is already being used as a recruitment tool by Al Qaeda and other groups. And it is a very effective tool."

On the same day The Washington Post reported that "specialists inside and outside the government question whether a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq would deliver a significant blow against international terrorism. Experts warn that war and occupation could also have the opposite effect by emboldening radical Islamic groups and adding to their grievances."

All warnings were given the back of the administration's hand. Mr. Bush launched his invasion and many thousands died. Now fast-forward to last week's testimony of top administration officials before the Senate Intelligence Committee. If the war in Iraq was supposed to stem the terrorist tide, the comments of these officials made it clear that it hasn't worked.

Porter Goss, the C.I.A. director, told the committee, "Islamic extremists are exploiting the Iraqi conflict to recruit new anti-U.S. jihadists." He added, "These jihadists who survive will leave Iraq experienced and focus on acts of urban terrorism."

The war, said Mr. Goss, "has become a cause for extremists." In his view, "It may only be a matter of time before Al Qaeda or another group attempts to use chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons."

Vice Adm. Lowell Jacoby, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said: "Our policies in the Middle East fuel Islamic resentment. Overwhelming majorities in Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia believe the U.S. has a negative policy toward the Arab world."

An article in last Friday's Washington Post said the radical group Ansar al-Islam, which has carried out dozens of suicide bombings in Iraq, is recruiting young Muslims across Europe to join the insurgency.

So tell me again. What was this war about? In terms of the fight against terror, the war in Iraq has been a big loss. We've energized the enemy. We've wasted the talents of the many men and women who have fought bravely and tenaciously in Iraq. Thousands upon thousands of American men and women have lost arms or legs, or been paralyzed or blinded or horribly burned or killed in this ill-advised war. A wiser administration would have avoided that carnage and marshaled instead a more robust effort against Al Qaeda, which remains a deadly threat to America.

What is also dismaying is the way in which the administration has taken every opportunity since Sept. 11, 2001, to utilize the lofty language of freedom, democracy and the rule of law while secretly pursuing policies that are both unjust and profoundly inhumane. It is the policy of the U.S. to deny due process of law to detainees at the scandalous interrogation camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where prisoners, many of whom have turned out to be innocent, are routinely treated in a cruel and degrading manner.

The U.S. is also engaged in the reprehensible practice known as extraordinary rendition, in which terror suspects are abducted and sent off to be interrogated by foreign regimes that are known to practice torture. And the C.I.A. is operating ultrasecret prisons or detention centers overseas for so-called high-value detainees. What goes on in those places is anybody's guess.

It may be that most Americans would prefer not to know about these practices, which are nothing less than malignant cells that are already spreading in the nation's soul. Denial is often the first response to the most painful realities. But most Americans also know what happens when a cancer is ignored.