

Why the 2003 Invasion of Iraq Was Unjust:
An Application of Michael Walzer's 'Just War' Theory

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On March 20th, 2003, the surprise military invasion of Iraq, initiated by U.S forces, began. With no formal declaration of war, hundreds of thousands troops, primarily American and British, would invade Iraq under the pretense of finding weapons of mass destruction. In the process, they came to largely destroy the nation, and killed roughly 170,000¹ innocent civilians. No weapons of mass destruction were ever found. In this paper, I will argue that the United States-led invasion of Iraq was an unjust war according to Walzer's theories on wars of anticipation. The invasion of Iraq serves as a testament to the dangers of the American military-industrial complex, and the consequences of this deeply unjust and immoral war linger today in the form of ISIL, in lost lives of the hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians who were killed, and in the destroyed remnants of a nation that was once Iraq.

Michael Walzer's views on pre-emptive strikes generally support the idea that certain anticipatory strikes are in fact just if certain conditions are met beforehand. Walzer defines the main condition that justifies anticipatory action as the 'line of sufficient threat,' versus the more classically accepted condition which is the 'line of imminent attack.' However, 'sufficient threat' is at times a blurry and confusing line, and what

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constitutes as a sufficient threat can be interpreted in vastly different ways by those in power. Walzer clarifies that he defines ‘sufficient threat’ as three things: “a manifest intent to injure, a degree of active preparation that makes that intent a positive danger, and a general situation in which waiting, or doing anything other than fighting, greatly magnifies the risk.”² Despite Walzer’s clarification of the three main ways that ‘sufficient threat’ can be determined, there is still a great degree of uncertainty over what exactly is a genuine threat, and even Walzer notes that context is absolutely key in defining what a justifiable reason to engage in a pre-emptive strike would be. Nonetheless, the issue with Walzer’s ideas of just and unjust anticipatory action, and indeed in regards to just war theory in general, is that perceptions of events and of dangers often differ greatly, creating situations in which the often-hazy definitions set out by Walzer can be twisted and adapted for specific circumstances.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq is one such case where distortions of ‘sufficient threat’ influenced the perception of justice to such a degree that military action was taken, under the false pretense of highly dangerous weapons of mass destruction. To twist Walzer’s words, it is perhaps possible to turn the invasion into a just war, by arguing that the anti-American sentiment expressed by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein qualified as a “manifest intent to injure,” that the potential weapons of mass destruction qualified as “active preparation,” and that to act later rather than sooner could potentially put America, perhaps even the world, at risk. However, these assumptions, which were the core arguments of those in support of the war, are utterly false. While they can technically work in tandem

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with Walzer's theories, the accuracy of the perceptions used to justify the war means that such ideas, as untrue and unverified, mean that no matter how compelling an argument they may make, they are still in no way compatible with Walzer's arguments for what constitutes a just anticipatory strike.

The open of hostility of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein towards America, which was considered deeply threatening by U.S President George W. Bush and his advisors due to potential links with various terrorist organizations, did not constitute a "manifest intent to injure." While Hussein was undeniably a brutal dictator who treated both neighboring countries and his own citizens with hostility and oppression, the likelihood of him and his regime being intertwined with radical Islamic terrorist groups to destroy America was completely marginal.

The Ba'ath party, of which Hussein and his government represented, was a secular and socialist party, and was in fact often at odds with many of the more religious conservatives.³ Al-Qaeda, the terrorist group whose 9/11 attacks helped to support public perception that America was under attack by the Middle East, was largely composed of citizens of Saudi Arabia, America's ally.

Hussein, while certainly not a friend of American interests, had very little clear "manifest intent to injure," and it is only through dramatically warping perceptions that an alternate view could be accepted by those without any hidden interests. Walzer's first and foremost requirement for a 'sufficient threat' was not met by Saddam Hussein or the nation of Iraq in general, meaning that the invasion of Iraq

was illegitimate according to the very basics of just war theory.

Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, though now widely known to have never existed, were considered to be a deadly serious issue prior to the 2003 war. However, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, though obviously a reasonable cause for concern, is not in itself a justification for a large-scale invasion. As Norman K. Swazo writes:⁴

Yet, it remains amply unclear what the *moral or legal* warrant is for the Bush Administration's call for "regime change." A government set on primacy and seeing itself as a "regional" military power in the Middle East as part of its hegemony surely has strategic interest in regime change as well as assuring that there are no weapons of mass destruction that can be used against its forces when the hegemon chooses to intervene militarily. But strategic calculations are hardly moral or legal warrants for preemptive strike or preventive war.

Strategically, ensuring that no weapons of mass destruction were present in Iraq was a vital interest to the U.S., yet a vital interest is still not adequate justification of war, because the acquisition of such weapons did not constitute as 'active preparation' for an attack on the U.S. It's also worth noting that the reliability of intelligence regarding the weapons Iraq supposedly possessed has been called into question repeatedly in recent years, was called into question even prior to the invasion even beginning, and ultimately, did turn out to be faulty when no such weapons were found. The use of unreliable

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intelligence to justify an invasion is already in a moral grey zone, but the confirmation by then-Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz that “...for bureaucratic reasons we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was the one reason everyone could agree on,”⁵ clearly illustrates that the belief in weapons of mass destruction was used in part as a convenient means to justify the invasion; therefore the U.S invasion was not based on grounds of ‘active preparation’ for war taken by Iraq.

Had Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, and had he similarly possessed enough hostility towards the U.S that an attack was possible, the likelihood of it occurring was still relatively minimal. There was no immediate threat posed to the U.S, nor would waiting for an imminent threat versus pursuing an anticipatory strike have dramatically magnified the risk to the U.S should a later intervention have become necessary. While a terrorist threat was a possibility, the likelihood that it would be carried by Iraqi forces, versus say, Saudi radicals already known to be active terrorists who had previously carried out the 9/11 attacks, was not great enough by any means to warrant an invasion. Had the U.S waited until imminent danger to invade, Iraqi forces would have likely had similar strength to what they possessed during the pre-emptive strike, as large-scale UN sanctions and deep-seated national unrest did not bode well for sudden mobilization. As with Walzer’s two first conditions for a threat to be deemed sufficient enough to warrant anticipatory action, the third condition was not met prior to the 2003 invasion.

Preventive war is, in theory at least, meant to be true to its name, serving as a means by which to *prevent* greater

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destruction. Anticipatory wars exist in relation to Walzer's basic rules of just warfare; notably, the belief that a war should only be undertaken if the overall benefits outweigh the harm. This doctrine is fundamental to just war theory, as it provides some semblance of logic to military actions and serves as the dividing line between a morally correct war and a war of needless destruction and suffering. For a war to be just, it must in some way prove itself to have been worth the lives and resources that were lost while fighting it. In regards to this doctrine, the invasion of Iraq's greatest violation of just war theory is plainly evident. Over a decade after the the invasion was initially launched, hundreds of thousands of civilians are now dead, as well as 4,412 U.S servicemen.⁶ Alongside a shockingly high number of casualties, the political situation in Iraq also deteriorated as a direct consequence of the U.S invasion, with Iraq now existing as a borderline failed state that allowed for the rise of ISIL, a terrorist group that has, arguably, wreaked far more havoc in the Middle East than Saddam Hussein ever did. The preventative war that was the U.S led invasion of Iraq prevented nothing, except for any hopes that Iraq could have stabilized and peace could be achieved. Instead, the anticipatory strike that began in 2003 cost countless lives, destroyed Iraq (and arguably, Syria as well) and led to the rise of a far more dangerous terrorist group. Not only is the Iraq war of 2003 unjust according to Walzer, it is unjust to any individual who feels that political motivations are not a valid reason for thousands of civilians to die, and for a nation to be all-but annihilated.

Notes

1. According to rough estimates from various news sources.

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2. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*(New York: Basic Books, Member of the Perseus Group, 2015), 81.
3. Anouar Abdul-Malek, *Contemporary Arab Political Thought* (London: Zed Press, 1983).
4. Norman K. Swazo, "Just War Against Iraq in 2003." *The Ethical Spectacle* (February 2003),

<http://www.spectacle.org/0203/swazo.html>
5. David Osborne, "WMD Just a Convenient Excuse for War, Admits Wolfowitz," *The Independent*, May 29, 2003.
6. According to the U.S defense website's log of casualties

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