

By Andy Worthington

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Friday marked the seventh anniversary of the illegal invasion of Iraq, but by now, it seems, the American people have become used to living in a state of perpetual war, even though that war was based on torture and lies. Protestors rallied across the country on Saturday, but the anti-war impetus of the Bush years has not been regained, as I discovered to my sorrow during [a brief US tour](#) in November, when I showed the new documentary film, “[Outside the Law: Stories from Guantánamo](#)” (directed by Polly Nash and myself) in New York, Washington D.C., and the Bay Area.

Some activists were still burnt out from campaigning for Barack Obama, others thought the new President had waved a magic wand and miraculously cured all America's ills, while others, to the right of common sense and decency, were beginning to mobilize in opposition to a President who, to be frank, should have been more of a disappointment to those who thought that “hope” and “change” might mean something than to those who supported the Bush administration's view of the world. Obama escalated the war in Afghanistan, [endorsed indefinite detention](#) without charge or trial for prisoners at Guantánamo, and [shielded Bush administration officials and lawyers](#) from calls for their prosecution for turning America into a nation with secret prisons, an extraordinary rendition program, and a detention policy for terror suspects based on [the use of torture](#).

Nevertheless, the Republicans' assault on decency, common sense and the law, in relation to terrorism, [escalated](#) in the wake of the failed Christmas Day plane bombing, with a high-level revolt against trying those accused of involvement in the 9/11 attacks in federal courts, and a renewed onslaught on President Obama's already tattered plans to close Guantánamo. On the anniversary of the war, headlines were dominated not by anti-war protests, but by the disgusting behavior of the Tea Party activists, whose bitter, negative campaigning against Obama, which has always demonstrated a thinly-veiled racism, plumbed new depths when protestors hurled racist and homophobic abuse at members of Congress.

African-American Congressman Emanuel Cleaver (D-MO) was spat on by a Tea Party protester, Congressman John Lewis (D-GA), a protégé of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was called a “nigger,” and gay Congressman Barney Frank (D-MA) was called a “faggot.” Congressman James E. Clyburn (D-SC), who helped lead sit-ins in South Carolina in the 1960s during the civil rights movement, told [NBC News](#) :

It was absolutely shocking to me. Last Monday, I stayed home to meet on the campus of Pomfrod University, where 50 years ago, as of last Monday, March 15th, I led the first demonstrations in South Carolina, the sit-ins. Quite frankly I heard some things today that I haven't heard since that day. I heard people saying things today I've not heard since March 15th, 1960 when I was marching to try and get off the back of the bus. This is incredible, shocking to me.

It is enough of a sign of madness that the Tea Party brigade, who oppose healthcare reform, have been sold a lie by the very corporations who mercilessly exploit them, essentially by stirring up fears of “communism” and “socialism” that Europeans and sensible Americans find bewildering and illogical, but it is no less dispiriting that their pointless hatred overshadowed countrywide calls for the immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The war in Afghanistan may originally have had some sort of acceptable rationale, but it was a lost cause almost as soon as it began, when America failed to win the crucial struggle for hearts and minds, killing thousands of Afghan civilians in bombing raids, imprisoning others in vile conditions in prisons at Kandahar and Bagram (where [some died](#) ), and sending others to Guantánamo.

Another major reason for the failure in Afghanistan was the administration's intention — instigated as early as November 2001 — to move on to Iraq, and while the Chilcot Inquiry in Britain revisited the roots of the Iraq war in recent months, [demonstrating](#) , without a shadow of a doubt, that it was an illegal war decided as early as April 2002, when Prime Minister Tony Blair committed the UK to full participation, an often overlooked side-effect of this decision involved, in the most cynical manner, the exploitation of prisoners seized in the “War on Terror” to provide cover for the planned invasion.

As I explained in an article last April, entitled, “ [Even In Cheney's Bleak World, The Al-Qaeda-Iraq Torture Story Is A New Low](#) ”:

In case anyone has forgotten, when [Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi](#), the head of the Khaldan military training camp in Afghanistan, was captured at the end of 2001 and sent to Egypt to be tortured, he made a false confession that Saddam Hussein had offered to train two al-Qaeda operatives in the use of chemical and biological weapons. Al-Libi later recanted his confession, but not until Secretary of State Colin Powell — to his eternal shame — had used the story in February 2003 in an attempt to persuade the UN to support the invasion of Iraq.

That attempt, of course, was successful, but it is no less shocking now than it was then that those who manipulated Powell — Vice President Dick Cheney and his close circle of advisors — used the CIA's post-9/11 torture program not to protect American from terrorists, but to launch an illegal war. As I also explained last April, with reference to an interview conducted by Jane Mayer of the [New Yorker](#) with Dan Coleman of the FBI, an old-school interrogator opposed to the use of torture, who was pulled off al-Libi's case when senior officials decided to send him to Egypt:

As Mayer explained, Coleman was “disgusted” when he heard about the false confession, telling her, “It was ridiculous for interrogators to think Libi would have known anything about Iraq. I could have told them that. He ran a training camp. He wouldn't have had anything to do with Iraq. Administration officials were always pushing us to come up with links, but there weren't any. The reason they got bad information is that they beat it out of him. You never get good information from someone that way.”

As I also explained:

This, I believe, provides an absolutely critical explanation of why the Bush administration's torture regime was not only morally repugnant, but also counter-productive, and it's particularly worth noting Coleman's comment that “Administration officials were always pushing us to come up with links, but there weren't any.” However, I realize that the failure of torture to produce genuine evidence — as opposed to intelligence that, though false, was at least “actionable” — was exactly what was required by those, like Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, “Scooter” Libby and other Iraq obsessives, who wished to betray America doubly, firstly by endorsing the use of torture in defiance of almost universal disapproval from government agencies and military lawyers, and secondly by using it not to prevent terrorist attacks, but to

justify an illegal war.

This was a point that Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, Colin Powell's Chief of Staff, confirmed to me in [an interview last year](#)

. Speaking about the Bush administration's focus on interrogating prisoners seized in the "War on Terror," Col. Wilkerson told me:

[T]hey wanted to put together a pattern, a map, a body of evidence, if you will, from all these people, that they thought was going to tell them more and more about al-Qaeda, and increasingly more and more about the connection between al-Qaeda and Baghdad.

I even think that probably, in the summer of 2002, well before Powell gave his presentation at the UN in February 2003, their priority had shifted, as their expectation of another attack went down, and that happened, I think, rather rapidly. I've just stumbled on this. I thought before that it had persisted all the way through 2002, but I'm convinced now, from talking to hundreds of people, literally, that that's not the case, that their fear of another attack subsided rather rapidly after their attention turned to Iraq, and after Tommy Franks, in late November [2001] as I recall, was directed to begin planning for Iraq and to take his focus off Afghanistan.

I commend the actions of the anti-war protestors in Washington D.C. on Saturday who, as the [Associated Press](#) explained, "stopped at the offices of military contractor Halliburton — where they tore apart an effigy of former Vice President and Halliburton Chief Executive Dick Cheney," but as this anniversary passes and Dick Cheney remains free to continue espousing his vile, self-serving rhetoric, the sad truth is that, seven years on, Cheney's crimes cannot be viewed in isolation, but must stand as an indictment of everyone, from the President down, via lawmakers, the media and the American people, who are prepared to accept this darkest of truths: that in 2002, the Vice President of the United States used an illegal torture program not to protect Americans from future terrorist attacks, but to launch an illegal war that, to date, has led to the loss of [4,386 American lives](#) and the lives of [at least 100,000 Iraqis](#), and possibly [as many as a million](#)

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