

By Derek Seidman

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Corporations and universities helped launder the reputation of war criminals who are still profiting from the invasion.



U.S. soldiers from the Army's 82nd Airborne Division patrol Baghdad's Haifa Street district on January 30, 2005. Charles ONIANS/AFP/Getty Images

It had been 15 years since the U.S. invaded Iraq when, on March 19, 2018, the celebrated Iraqi novelist and poet Sinan Antoon published a blistering [op-ed](#) in *The New York Times*. He took readers through his observations of the steady deterioration of Iraqi society since the war began, but the most scathing words came toward the end.

“No one knows for certain how many Iraqis have died as a result of the invasion 15 years ago,” Antoon wrote. “Some credible estimates put the number at more than one million. You can read

that sentence again. The invasion of Iraq is often spoken of in the United States as a ‘blunder,’ or even a ‘colossal mistake.’ It was a crime. Those who perpetrated it are still at large.”

That the invasion was not just a moral catastrophe but an egregious [war crime](#) has been echoed by everyone from

[United Nations heads](#)

to

[human rights leaders](#)

. According to Brown University’s Costs of War project,

[over 300,000](#)

people died in the war, the overwhelming bulk of them Iraqi civilians. These are only the counted: civilian deaths are certainly much

[higher](#)

. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis continue to suffer from a decades-long

[public](#)

and

[mental health](#)

calamity. Around

[9.2 million](#)

Iraqis have been displaced.

The war fractured any cohesion across Iraq and set the stage for massive levels of sectarian violence [fueled](#) by the U.S. Accounts of massacres like those in [Mukaradeeb](#) and [Haditha](#) and torture chambers like

[Abu Ghraib](#)

only touch the surface of the

[crimes](#)

committed against Iraqis.

With the 20th anniversary of the invasion now approaching, the sanitizing of the war’s major culprits — or, at the very least, the soft forgetting of their crimes — continues.

George W. Bush, the war’s ultimate “[Decider](#),” now smacks of the pre-Trump “good old days” for

[some liberals](#) . (“A year ago, I watched Mr.

Bush on ‘The Ellen DeGeneres Show,’ dancing and talking about his paintings,” Antoon wrote).

Dick Cheney has aged quietly at his

[Wyoming ranch](#)

, enjoying the

[tens of millions of dollars](#)

he raked in as Halliburton CEO before he was elected vice president in 2000 and went on — by all accounts — to coax an invasion and occupation where the military and oilfield services giant took in in

[nearly](#)

\$40 billion in federal contracts.

As the very top decision-makers faded into retirement, the next layer of war pushers, enablers and overseers — the top defense and national security officials and the celebrity generals — went on to profit immensely following their leadership of an illegal war, darting through the revolving door to snag coveted corporate board seats and prestigious university appointments.

[Revolving Door Profiteering after the Iraq War - for chart see original article.](#)

Many of them remain in these positions with defense industry giants, tech firms and Wall Street investors today, enjoying the good life, raking in consulting and speaker fees, their images washed as they profit handsomely from the insider access they provide.

Turn War Crimes Into Corporate Board Seats

Take Paul Wolfowitz, widely seen as one of the war's key architects, who in 2013 was [appointed](#) to

the board of tech company LaserLock — now

[VerifyMe](#)

— and raked in

[2 million shares](#)

of company stock in 2013. A year before, he was

[appointed](#)

to the Strategic Advisory Council of NGP Energy Capital Management, an energy-focused private equity firm that oversees billions in oil and gas investments and is

[partnered](#)

with private equity behemoth and

[war profiteer](#)

, the Carlyle Group.

Then there's George Tenet, who directed the CIA during the invasion of Iraq, [skewing](#) intelligence to push for war. After

[leaving](#)

the CIA in 2004, Tenet wasted little time jumping onto defense tech corporate boards like

[L-1 Identity Solutions](#)

, [Guidance Software](#)

and

[QinetiQ Group](#)

that cash in from government contracts. Tenet currently serves on the board of defense tech company

[In-Q-Tel](#)

— initially

[chartered](#)

as a venture capital arm of the CIA — and is

[chairman](#)

of the

[secretive](#)

private investment firm Allen & Company.

[William Hartung](#), a senior research [fellow](#) with the Quincy Institute and author of [Prophets of War: Lockheed Martin and the Making of the Military-Industrial Complex](#)

, told

Truthout

that the revolving door between the Pentagon and corporate America creates major conflicts of interest.

“When government officials are looking ahead towards getting into the industry and cashing in, I think they go lighter on corporations,” he said. “They’re looking ahead towards their future employer, instead of what should be their current responsibilities.” Once they land those corporate positions, “they’ve got a special line to their former colleagues” and “get easier audiences.”

“They know how the process works and how to manipulate it,” said Hartung.

Secretary of State Colin Powell played a pivotal role in the destruction of Iraq. Perhaps personally skeptical of the case for the invasion, Powell nevertheless lent his considerable prestige and credibility to paving the way for war, most notoriously in his February 2003 [briefi](#)

[ng](#)
the United Nations.

to

But Powell, who died in 2021, suffered little financial fallout from his crucial role in enabling an illegal war. Instead, he went on to rake in millions as a director of Bloom Energy and [Salesforce](#). For example, Bloom Energy's 2018 [proxy statement](#) shows that Powell took in \$1.9 million in compensation while also enjoying a \$125,000 consulting gig with the company, all in addition to the [\\$5 million](#) in company stock he purchased. Powell took in \$571,915 in [2020](#) alone as a Salesforce director. On top of all this, he [served](#) as partner and adviser to a range of private equity and venture capital firms.

Then there's Stephen Hadley, who helped [propel](#) the invasion forward as deputy national security adviser. After he left office, Hadley raked in millions over a decade as a director of arms giant Raytheon, publishing hawkish, pro-war [op-eds](#) without disclosing his financial ties to the defense industry.

Corporate Consulting, Speaker Fees and Celebrity Photo-Ops

After the war, Hadley also went into business with the first in command at the National Security Council, Condoleezza Rice. Together they formed the private consulting service, [Rice, Hadley, Gates & Manuel](#). The firm [leverages](#) its partners' government connections and global networks to benefit corporate and government clients, largely unseen by the public eye.

This is a common move among top defense and security officials who leave office: form opaque, for-profit firms that rake in undisclosed millions. It's not just Hadley and Rice: everyone from Henry Kissinger to Madeleine Albright has done it (Hadley and Rice's co-partner is [Rober](#)

[t Gates](#)

, who served as defense secretary under both Bush and Obama).

Hartung says these consulting firms may offer a cover for lobbying. “They have a certain advantage because of the lack of transparency,” he said. “If they’re labeled as lobbyists, they would at least have to make some disclosures. But if they define themselves as giving ‘strategic advice,’ then they can skirt that whole system.”

Before becoming Bush’s national security adviser and then secretary of state during the lead-up to the invasion and the first half-decade of war and occupation, Rice held a slew of corporate board seats, including at Chevron, which [even named](#) an oil tanker after her. Since she left office in 2009, Rice has maintained her ability to profit big from the private sector. In addition to her consulting gig, she’s nabbed board seats at

[Dropbox](#)

,
[Makena Capital](#)

,
[KiOR](#)

and

[C3 AI](#)

(the latter of which netted her

[\\$340,000](#)

in 2022 alone), not to mention a seat on

[JPMorgan’s International Council](#)

If the millions Rice has made from consulting and corporate board seats hasn’t been enough, she’s also raked in a small fortune on the speaker circuit, reportedly earning [\\$150,000](#) for a speech at the University of Minnesota, one of many lectures she’s given from

[Pepperdine](#)

to

[Purdue](#)

to

[corporate gatherings](#)

Twenty years after [loyally serving](#) Bush and Cheney’s march to war, Rice’s image has been fully rehabilitated: [modeling](#) for the NFL, speaking at liberal

campuses, enjoying accolades as a new

[part-owner](#)

of the Denver Broncos, serving as American Academy of Arts & Sciences

[Fellow](#)

, and now running the prestigious conservative

[Hoover Institute](#)

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The Generals' Profit

If the top Bush administration civilian officials steered the U.S. into the war, the top generals who willingly executed the invasion and subsequent occupation have also gone on to personally benefit, as have the corporations that pay big to access the generals' influence and connections.

Take Tommy Franks, the commanding general of the 2003 invasion, who beginning in 2005 [snagged](#)

lucrative board seats with Bank of America (owner of the Outback Steakhouse and other chains) and CEC Entertainment (more commonly known as Chuck E. Cheese).

But most top generals didn't move on to oversee kids' restaurants: they joined [top weapons companies](#) that paid them hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in cash and stock to tap into their unrivaled access to the Pentagon and military.

Gen. Raymond Odierno [led](#) the 4th Infantry Division into Iraq after the invasion, where it was known for its "[rough methods](#)" that included "breaking down the doors of private homes and grabbing young Iraqi men off the street and delivering them to the notorious Abu Ghraib prison," according to the

Washington Post

. He later became the chief commander in Iraq and the Army's top general. Odierno

[joined](#)

the board of weapons manufacturer Honeywell shortly before he died in 2021.

James “Mad Dog” Mattis, who commanded the 1st Marine Division during the invasion and [oversaw](#) massacres in Fallujah and the wedding bombing in Mukaradeeb, joined the board of General Dynamics not once but [twice](#), with a stint as Donald Trump’s defense secretary in between.

After serving as commanding general of U.S. forces in Iraq and then commander of all U.S. military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, Lloyd Austin [retired](#) in 2016 and soon joined the board of defense company powerhouse United Technologies, and then the board of Raytheon after it acquired United Technologies (he also joined the boards of steel powerhouse Nucor and health care giant Tenet). Austin was also part of the Pine Island Capital Partners [team](#), a [defense industry](#) investment firm.

Austin then quickly scurried back the other way through the revolving door to become President Biden’s defense secretary in 2021. Austin [estimated](#) he’d cash out his Raytheon stock for anywhere between \$750,000 and \$1.7 million when he joined the administration.

“They’re there to use their influence on behalf of the company — to knock on the doors of members of Congress, to use phones, email, or other communications to put the arm on people that can help the firm,” said Hartung.

“I think for the company, it’s about buying that reputational value as well as their contacts.” For the generals, he added, it’s a “dubious ethical situation.”

“They’re going to the companies that profited from these wars, and then themselves profiting from working for this company,” said Hartung. “I’m sure they have all kinds of rationales about national security and protecting the country, but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re profiting from the system.”

David Petraeus commanded the 101st Airborne Division during the invasion and later became

the top commander in Iraq and Afghanistan. He rose up even further to lead the CIA, only to resign amid scandal after he [leaked](#) classified information to his biographer with whom he was having an affair.

But none of this stopped Petraeus from joining the [board](#) of KKR, one of the world's top private equity companies, and serving as chairman of the [KKR Global Institute](#), using his global network and know-how to advance the interests of Wall Street billionaires like [Henry Kravis](#).

Petraeus has also enjoyed a slew of postwar cozy university appointments at [CUNY](#), [Harvard](#), [USC](#) and [Yale](#), though not always without protest (CUNY students, for instance, suffered arrests to oppose their school's sanitizing of a "[war criminal](#)").

But when it comes to universities, Petraeus is not alone. Architects and overseers of the Iraq War — from neocon Douglas Feith at [Georgetown](#) to Condoleezza Rice at [Stanford](#) to Stanley McChrystal at [Yale](#) — have all benefited from reputational burnishing by the Ivory Tower, whose provosts and deans are always eager for greater access to the corridors of influence.

Beyond universities, nonprofits ranging from the [Aspen Institute](#) to the [Boys & Girls Club](#) of America, as much spaces for elite networking and corporate image-washing as they are mission-driven, have welcomed the war's architects with open arms.

To be sure, it's a slippery slope in trying to name responsibility for the war. We haven't even broached the Democratic establishment here, nor the many influential liberal pundits who [grea](#)
[sed](#) public opinion with their fantasies of "liberating" Iraq.

Again, the words of Sinan Antoon: “It was a crime. Those who perpetrated it are still at large.”

At large, and we should add, living lavishly, thanks to the corporations who splurge to benefit from their blood-soaked connections and the universities that shuffle them into their storied lecture halls and swanky cocktail parties.

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