

Hubris
An Incurious President
&
The Consequence of American Arrogance
A Documentary Proposal
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In Association with *Last Straw Productions*

Based on the book by Michael Isikoff & David Corn

Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War

Prologue

On March 20, 2003, U.S.-led coalition forces mounted nine hours of shock-and-awe bombing and missile strikes against Iraq. The ground forces entered the country, opening the next front in the noble and justified War on Terror. The American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan stood proudly as a public success, and the country, by and large, supported the Iraq War. President Bush's approval ratings shot up from 55% to 73%.

In the next weeks, U.S. troops marched toward Baghdad. Embedded reporters enthusiastically chronicled the actions of heroic American soldiers. Not even sandstorms could slow the invasion. Yes, the irregulars of the Fedayeen Saddam forces were more of a problem than military planners had expected, but the complaining didn't last long, and the coalition forces handily defeated Saddam's troops.

Many pre-war fears did not materialize. Iraq didn't attack Israel. No refugee crisis developed. Oil fields were protected. No WMDs were fired at coalition forces. Coalition casualties were moderate. And when the U.S.-led troops reached Baghdad, there was no final, bloody battle. The troops rolled in, and on April 9 a small, excited crowd toppled a giant statue of Saddam Hussein. They next day, Ken Adelman, a neoconservative

defense intellectual, wrote an op-ed article in *The Washington Post* stating that the invasion had been a “cakewalk.”

A few days later, Vice President Dick Cheney held a small celebratory dinner party at the vice president’s residence with Adelman, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and I. Lewis Libby, Cheney’s Chief of Staff. They congratulated themselves, cheered Bush, and derided Secretary of State Colin Powell for never having been a “true believer.” Asked for his thoughts, Libby said, “Wonderful.” But, Adelman asked, what about the weapons of mass destruction? Where are they? “We’ll find them,” Wolfowitz said. Cheney repeated the words.

The Bush White House and the Pentagon had every reason to act and feel proud. However, this confidence on the part of the war’s architects would soon be challenged by reality. And securing Iraq would turn out to be anything but a cakewalk.

At the time, this brand of confidence may have seemed to many harmless, if not justified. The greatest power on Earth had reason to be confident. We were righteously ridding the world of terror, while nobly spreading the seeds of democracy. But now, four years after the invasion, more than 3100 U.S. troops are dead. Twenty thousand more have been injured, maimed, or psychologically disabled. Estimates of Iraqi deaths, from combat operations to sectarian violence, which followed the toppling of Saddam, range from 100,000 to more than 600,000. The financial cost of the war is a hundred times higher than anticipated, with current estimates ranging from \$500 billion to \$1.8 trillion. Recruitment for al Qaeda and like terrorist organizations worldwide has gone up, not down. And secondary fronts in the “War on Terror” in Iran, North Korea, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia have suffered repeated setbacks. In light of all these failures, support for the War steadily dropped to a meager 38%, with the President’s approval rating recently sinking to 28%.

It is now clear that George Bush started the most overtly pre-emptive war in U.S. history, and proceeded to lose it because the reasons for starting it were unfounded, based on

faulty information or, in the extreme, unscrupulously manufactured. In other words, the fighting in Iraq may continue, but the war as it was sold to the American people is lost. Indeed, it was a war lost before it began because WMD did not exist, nor was there a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. What we fight today is something else and certainly not what we were asked to fight.

Public deception, skewing of intelligence, a muffled media, disregard of war planners, unilateralism in diplomacy, a poor invasion strategy, incompetent management of the occupation, inability to admit mistakes and alter course, and flat out corruption—all these contributed to the losing of the Iraq War. But all these failings have at their core the Bush team's most prominent characteristic. Seen first as a virtue, we now see this confidence for what it is: pride and arrogance on the order of *hubris*.

The Book

Aristotle defined hubris as “causing shame to a victim not in order that anything may happen to you, nor because anything has happened to you, but merely for your own gratification. As for the pleasure in hubris, its cause is this: men think that by ill-treating others they make their own superiority greater.”

Michael Isikoff is an award-winning investigative correspondent from *Newsweek*, a frequent guest on MSNBC and author of the bestselling book *Uncovering Clinton*. David Corn is the Washington editor of *The Nation* and a Fox News contributor. He is author of the bestselling book *The Lies of George W. Bush*. Hubris is what the authors call the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, its management of the war and its ultimate occupation of the country. In their assessment, the war was a misguided exercise in arrogance, incompetence and folly. They present their case with an abundance of detail and evidence that is both staggeringly vivid and persuasive.

This narrative provides an unprecedented understanding of how the United States came to go to war in Iraq, how a bungled occupation fed a ballooning insurgency, and how these events will affect the future of the American foreign policy. The book maps a

comprehensive timeline—beginning with administration’s inflammatory statements about Saddam Hussein in the wake of 9/11, through the invasion and occupation, to the escalating religious and ethnic strife that afflicts the country today. Across this “map,” spreading like a spider web, we see the insidious and deadly effects of a culture of arrogance.

In the book the president is revealed as an incurious true believer whose lack of knowledge and understanding is not just replaced, but *justified* by his sense of entitlement and crusade. Surrounding the president are Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Pentagon Policy Chief Douglas Fieth, and C.P.A. Viceroy L. Paul Bremmer—a brain trust of advisors, each individually arrogant and dismissive, but, in combination, a group whose collaboration magnified their individual hubris geometrically.

Even though the book makes clear that the consequences of Bush’s choice won’t be understood for decades, it is already apparent in 2007 that the U.S. government went to war in Iraq with scant solid international support and on the basis of incorrect information—about weapons of mass destruction and a supposed nexus between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda’s terrorism—and then occupied the country negligently. But it is also evident that the failures are failures of policy not intelligence. We now know that available intelligence was insufficient, misunderstood or simply torted-up. In other words, the intelligence, whatever it may have been, is not to blame; it’s the people who wielded it that are.

The book also reveals a *causal* link between the administration’s hubris and the insurgency’s furor. The plainest proof of this link is of course the U.S. system of detention in Iraq. We saw ourselves as liberators but behaved as jailers. Though the White House may not have overtly ordered abuse—although it did approve of the practice of “rendition”—the culture emanating from it promoted an attitude of arrogance that made abuse all too possible.

In most cultures, hubris is a central part of myth-making and religion. The Greek expression of hubris is best described in the story of Icarus, the man who sought to fly like the gods. Certain that his flight would be a “cakewalk,” he flew too close to the sun, the wax of his wings melted, and he plunged back to earth and to his death.

The Film

This is a film about hubris and its consequences. It is a film about how arrogance and incompetence pushed us into the Iraq War without a legitimate cause, a realistic plan for a protracted occupation, or a plan for how to get out. It is a film about how, in order to find peace, we must now learn from our mistakes. A number of books and some documentaries have chronicled different aspects of the war. By contrast, this film will document the human causes and consequences of an unbridled American foreign policy as whipped forward by the hubris of President George W. Bush’s administration.

This is a film in three parts. The first explores the selling of the war by the Bush Administration to the American public. The second examines our management of the occupation of Iraq and the creation of an insurgency. The third assesses where we stand today and, in part, compares Iraq to Vietnam.

1. Many people from different parts of the political spectrum now agree that the invasion of Iraq “was based on perhaps the worst war plan in American history,” an incomplete plan that “confused removing Iraq’s regime with the far more difficult task of changing the entire country.” The plan was based on faulty, if not exaggerated intelligence. Some have even gone so far to say it was based on a handful of lies. From the outset of the planning, the Bush administration routinely ignored the advice of experts. This stubborn confidence was complicated by constant infighting between the government’s key departments, which caused an internal gridlock that severely hampered the making and executing of American policy. As a result, the war’s architects created a war that they were ill-prepared to resolve, because they launched a war of political

agenda, rather than a war of military reality. Nonetheless, we cannot forget that what they created, we accepted. The American public is a critical part of the war equation. Indeed, we let the selling of the war escape proper investigation and debate.

2. Despite the occasional success during the first year of occupation, our failures of policy and maneuver quickly started to mount. Our soldiers were not trained or prepared to effectively occupy Iraq, or hold and rebuild the country's infrastructure. They were trained to defeat the enemy and win a war, and they were led to believe that doing so would be a *cakewalk*. Therefore, very quickly, as a result of random, mass arrests, we started alienating those who at first were willing to accept us as liberators. This alienation soon turned into open hostility. Secretary Rumsfeld's stubborn reluctance to acknowledge the American military's role in spurring a growing insurgency and his resistance to making adjustments contributed further to the problems of occupation. Nor did the abuses of Abu Graib change his position. Indeed, even though the administration may not have ordered the actual abuse, the culture emanating from the White House promoted an attitude of arrogance that made abuse all too possible.

3. There is no question that there are *more* terrorists in Iraq today than there were in early 2003. In fact, Iraq has become the kind of failed state that produces terrorists. In other words, in Iraq we have created the very thing we sought to destroy. For this reason, the war must be seen as an utterly unnecessary financial burden on the American taxpayer and an utterly unnecessary destruction of human life. When a nation goes to war for faulty reasons, it undercuts all the actions that follow, especially when it won't concede its errors. The administration's pride made it blind to the human costs, creating a profound ethical lapse in American foreign policy. "What happens in Iraq will influence the fate of the Middle East for generations to come, with profound impact on our national security.

In its modern usage hubris is associated with a "lack of knowledge, interest in and exploration of history and other cultures, combined with a lack of humility." In numerous ways, it is now abundantly clear that the war's architects had little interest in understanding the history and culture of Iraq and the Sunni/Shia division. If someone

recommends that the United States intervene in another society to change its government, then not to have studied that country beforehand is a gross dereliction of duty. If this intervention risks the loss of many lives, including those of American soldiers, then this failure on the part of policymakers is morally shameful. This moral lapse is all the more disturbing given the war's considerable parallels to Vietnam and the fact that the war's prime movers and loudest proponents never served in Vietnam or any other conflict.

Through these parts the film will map the promulgation and effects of the Administration's messianic pride and unmitigated hubris.

There are heroes as well as rogues in this story. This is a film about both. Needless to say, most of the heroes have names you have never heard. In many cases, you've never heard of them because they were sidelined or squashed for not being of the party line.

The film will bring to life the careful analysis and critique found in Hubris of the selling of the Iraq War, while retaining its nonpartisan perspective. Its ultimate goal will be to deepen public understanding of the War and start the national conversation about the need to reassert degrees of humility in American foreign policy. Such a goal is all the more important as we now hear aggressive rhetoric about Iran that is alarmingly reminiscent of the Administration's push to war with Iraq.