

**Web of Deceit:
The History of Western Complicity
in Iraq, from Churchill to Kennedy to George W. Bush**

By Barry Lando

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What made Iraq the way it is today? The West? Iraqis? Something inevitable in that particular intersection of geography and human nature?

In *Web of Deceit*, television producer Barry Lando posits the condition of Iraq as a crime for which the culprit must be found. Claiming that the judgment of Saddam Hussein was rigged to protect "the West" from implication, Lando sets out to provide the trial we were cheated of.

The crimes Lando accuses the West of committing in Mesopotamia begin at the end of First World War and are still going on. First we stole the north from the Turks, then we created an artificial nation and put an artificial monarchy on top of it. Then, for 40 years, our neo-imperial interference, often bloody, prevented nationhood from taking root. Starting in 1963, we backed various coups, culminating in the one that put Saddam Hussein in the top job in 1979. In 1980, we fooled our friend into invading Iran, and during that long war we backed both sides. Then we persuaded the Kuwaitis to goad Saddam into invading them, which he did in 1991.

Meanwhile, we were telling our old friend that he could go ahead and help himself to the oil-rich emirate. But we were also ignoring his threats to invade it. Once he did so, we invented his threat to Saudi Arabia; after which we used excessive force in driving his forces from Kuwait. And we did not use enough force, leaving the villain in power and failing to kill enough of his men.

We abused the Kurds almost constantly throughout, and persuaded the Shiites to join them in a hopeless rebellion in 1991, which we then actively helped Saddam to crush. We armed him with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Then we were silent about his using WMD. We also exaggerated his WMD threat to the world. For 12 years, via the United Nations and its sanctions regime, we committed "mass murder" against Iraqis, especially their children.

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Then, at the behest of a Zionist cabal, we decided to invade Iraq and remove Saddam. When 9/11 happened, we invented excuses for this invasion, and then we botched its aftermath.

If this partial list of our Iraq malfeasances is breathtaking, that is because the last century has indeed been turbulent and bloody in Mesopotamia, and the West has indeed been involved throughout. The catalogue of grim associations can only be extensive.

But there is more to this docket than that. Lando has succumbed to the *idée fixe*. He is careful to supply a couple of brief bromides along the lines of, "the roots of discord in the Middle East go back to the beginning of history," or, "of course, nothing can excuse Saddam for his own terrible actions," but this book is an argument, not a list, and its conclusion is clear: Iraq's turbulent and bloody times are the fault of what Lando calls "Western complicity." One concept, one bad guy, one note, "from Churchill to Kennedy to George W. Bush": Thus breathlessly do we hear the long tale, galloping across the decades of corpses, finding on each the DNA of a single culprit. And at the end what we have is the mind-boggling rap sheet of a serial killer.

But Lando's topic is politics, which will never possess the satisfying certainties of true crime. And like all conspiracy theories, this one becomes more ponderous and less credible with length. The real story takes more work. Like all complex situations -- and Iraq, with its immense age, diverse population and axial location, is perhaps the most complex of all -- what Iraq really requires is nuance.

The idea that Iraq should never have existed in the first place is probably the most fundamental, frequently cited and blindly accepted of the many myths about this war. It is a good example of the importance of history to the situation in Iraq, and of how we need to take a little more time over that history.

"The artificial nation," as Lando calls it, dates from 1918, when the British were granted a League of Nations mandate over it; or from 1921, when its first king was crowned; or 1925, when the League of Nations appended southern Kurdistan to it; or 1932, when it achieved independence from the League. In any case, there was no Iraqi state before the Europeans came in the aftermath of the First World War.

Nor was there an Egyptian state. Or a Morocco. Or a Jordan or a

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Syria or a Saudi Arabia. For the three, four and five hundred years before Versailles, the Middle East, North Africa and much of southeast Europe were parts of a single state: the Ottoman empire. If Iraq should not exist, neither should Turkey or Tunisia. How odd that the critique of Western imperialism in Iraq can be satisfied only by a return to empire.

Ah, but those borders -- for if you need to make places into states, you might as well base those states on nations. But again, there is not a single country that has emerged from the Ottoman footprint that represents the final, fully parsed degree of national self-determination. Nor could there be: What about the Copts of Egypt, the Armenians of Turkey, the Christians, Jews, Allawites, Shias, Kurds and Bedouin of Syria? Yes, answer the critics of Iraq, but at least Turkey, or Egypt or Syria, is a coherent physical entity.

So is Iraq. If you spend time there, or consult an atlas, it quickly becomes clear that Iraq is a place as well as a state, that politically this geographical fact could be represented in only one way: by a country sitting within precisely the current borders. Iraq is Mesopotamia. It is, by and large, the low, flat, mostly rockless and treeless land between Arabia, the Persian plateau and the Zagros mountains, the floodplain where the Tigris and Euphrates have dumped the silt of the Armenian highlands on their way to the Persian Gulf.

Mesopotamia is not some frivolous creation of Gertrude Bell, T. E. Lawrence and A. T. Wilson playing at Dr. Frankenstein. They, unlike the hobbyists who provide today's fashionable truisms about this country, knew just about every wadi, dialect, bloodline, legend, mullah and chieftain in the land. Iraq is, in fact, the oldest cultural and political entity on earth. The Ottomans recognized this when, for the three centuries before Iraq's formalization in the new world of nation states, they made it a political entity of its own, precisely as it is today: a grouping of the three provinces of Mosul (i.e. Iraqi Kurdistan), Baghdad (including the Sunni triangle) and Basra, all under the varyingly firm -- and usually loose -- direction of Baghdad.

Even when old Mesopotamian empires, such as the Babylonians in the south and the Assyrians in the north, coexisted in the eternally bloody way of the place, they were locked into a common culture and common destiny that they never shared with the peoples to east and west. When Alexander conquered Babylonia, he did it at

Arbela -- Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. The border between the Mesopotamian province of the Sassanid Persian empire and the Byzantine empire followed the borders of contemporary Iraq with Turkey and Syria. In the 11th century, under the Arab empire, Iraq got its own name: Upper Iraq. (Lower Iraq was their term for what is basically Persia). And so on. Iraq is as logical and original as Syria or Egypt, which are as logical and original as it gets, and it has always been treated as such -- until recently.

A book review is no place to provide all of the rest of the missing history that Lando apparently has no room for in an entire history book. But this matter of Iraq's national legitimacy is as good an example as any of the need for subtler thinking and more homework in even the popular analyses of the current conflict. For "Iraq shouldn't exist at all" is a principal argument deployed in the world of public opinion and policy-making, as part of the bigger argument that "Iraq is not worth trying to save."

The war in Iraq has presented liberals with excruciating dilemmas, forcing many of us into positions of extreme illiberality: defence of the rule of Saddam, opposition to elections, racist dismissal of Arab potential, abandoning an elected government to the grotesque conservatism of Iran, the Wahhabis and the Baath. It is difficult to know whether bad history is a cause or an effect of this schizophrenia, but the familiarity of Lando's tone is a reminder that many of us start with opinions and then find ourselves a narrative.

The result in this case is conventional wisdom with footnotes, and it is no surprise when he ties himself into the old pretzels: We should never have made the Kurds part of Iraq, but they must never get their freedom. We should have deposed Saddam in the Kuwait war, but we were too concerned about holding the coalition together; we are also aggressive unilateralists who shouldn't have deposed Saddam. The sanctions regime was genocidal, but we should not have replaced it with free trade and an elected government. The country is fake and shouldn't exist, but the Shias fought desperately in the war with Iran. The Americans should have swamped the place with half a million GIs, but they should have fewer men there. After a while, the contortions make one's joints ache more than one's head.

Ever since the West cut its umbilical cord from Iraq, a few centuries before the apogee of the Greeks, our destiny and its own have been uniquely intertwined in blood and gold. The Garden of Eden is there,

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between the Tigris and Euphrates. Abraham, father of nations, came from Ur, near Nasiriyah. Alexander, the first neo-con, wanted to make Babylon the capital of an empire that would shine forever the light of Greek reason and individualism upon the East. Archeologists uncovering Biblical palaces in the soil of Iraq were the movie stars of 19th-century London, Paris and Berlin. Our men fought and died there in both world wars, and will do so in the next two. Mesopotamia, by whatever name, will never not be a nation. Its wars will never end. And we will always be there. That is what history teaches us about Iraq.