Heed the lessons of Iraq

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Canada was on the right side of history in refusing to go to war in Iraq a decade ago. Three lessons stand out for me from the Iraqi experience.

The first lesson is that, especially in cases of war and peace, we have to make our own judgments and let the chips fall where they may. We should not march off to war out of misplaced loyalty to allies and fellow democracies, as urged by the official opposition of the day. Nor should we "go along to get along" out of exaggerated hopes of benefits or fears of costs on the part of business organizations, pundits and members of the military. In dissenting, it turned out we had nothing to fear but fear itself.

Dissent was the right judgment. I was Canada's ambassador to the United Nations at the time, and it was evident to me that war in Iraq would be a bloody and strategic error, and so it turned out. According to Iraqi Body Count, an independent organization that painstakingly tries to count deaths, at least 111,000 Iraqi civilians have died violently since the war began on March 19, 2003. Nearly 5,000 American soldiers and their allies in the "coalition of the credulous and the calculating" died as well, paying the ultimate price for transitory good relations with a soon-to-be-discredited Bush administration.

All told, more than 170,000 people have perished as a consequence of the Iraq war, and millions have fled the country, perhaps never to return. Nor, as apologists for the war argue, has Iraq become a normal, democratic country. It remains rent by sectarian and ethnic divisions; more than 4,500 Iraqi civilians alone were killed in 2012, according to Iraqi Body Count.

Strategically, the war was a major error. The vast treasure devoted to this enterprise by the United States contributed directly to the size of the deficit that has bedevilled governance in Washington and undermined American foreign policy. The U.S. recourse to war in 2003 as a first – not last – resort over the objections of most of the rest of the world in flagrant disregard of international law so damaged America's reputation that it will take generations to recover.

The loss of reputation also implies the loss of the ability to persuade others to follow. The war was thus the opposite of the success grotesquely still claimed by Dick Cheney, Tony Blair and their neo-con co-conspirators, and the U.S. is still paying for their delusions. Jean Chrétien was right to keep us out of it. Declining to participate was sound, principled foreign policy that enhanced Canada's standing internationally, including among the many Americans who consider the war a mistake.

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The second lesson to draw is that one fiasco does not a norm make. Military intervention is sometimes indispensible, and in everyone's interests. Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Libya and Mali all qualify as successful international military interventions that saved countless lives. Syria is the most pressing current case for military intercession, despite the fear of making things worse – the diplomatic equivalent of the Hippocratic principle – and despite sheer intervention fatigue.

Four million Syrians have already fled their homes, half a million more have found refuge abroad, upward of 80,000 have been killed and 60,000 are thought to be held in Syrian prisons, subject to torture and disappearance. The infrastructure and cultural heritage of the country are being destroyed bomb by bomb, and neighbouring countries are progressively being destabilized by refugee flows.

Absent effective outside intervention, the crisis seems certain to widen and the destruction of the innocent to worsen. Such intervention need not mean Western boots on the ground; the creation of safe havens and "no fly" zones over those havens is a limited but viable alternative, as they were in Iraq in the years before the 2003 invasion. Intervention fatigue is nevertheless palpable in financially strapped and politically distracted Washington and Europe, and seems likely to stay that way. Others with the means, including Canada, need to accept a greater share of the lead.

The third lesson to draw from the Iraqi experience is that history can repeat itself if political leaders are brazen or incautious enough, senior officials feckless or ambitious enough, the media self-censoring or self-interested enough and populations inattentive or trusting enough.

The march to war in 2003 was replete with hyperbolic claims of the dangers posed by Iraq (the smoking gun that could be a mushroom cloud, according to Condoleezza Rice, George Bush's national security adviser), inflated and outright invented intelligence about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (Dick Cheney's assertion on *Meet the Press* that Saddam Hussein had reconstituted his nuclear weapons, as well as Britain's "dodgy dossier" on Iraqi capability), misplaced loyalty (Colin Powell, the U.S. secretary of state, allowing himself to be used in the UN Security Council), hubris about the outcome and disregard of the wider consequences of war ("a cakewalk"), arbitrary deadlines (the fight had to be launched before the hot Iraqi summer) and a massive disregard for international law.

All of these warning signs are present in current attitudes toward Iran. The difference, let's hope, is that, this time, all concerned will remember the lessons of Iraq.

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