

I hate to say I told you so, but ...

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By LEONARD PITTS Jr.
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It takes a certain amount of ego to do this job.

I don't mean an unhealthy obsession with the wonderfulness of oneself. Rather, I mean that inflicting one's opinions on others for a living requires immense confidence in one's own judgment. This is not a job for people who don't like saying, "I told you so."

Your humble correspondent was typical in this regard until a year ago today. That's when the war against Iraq began. As bombs began raining on Baghdad, I worried-and argued in this space-that we were making a dreadful mistake.

It was one of the very few times in my professional life that I wanted to be wrong. Indeed, I tried to convince myself that I was. After all, the decision to go to war was based on reports from intelligence experts, which I assuredly am not. So I sought comfort in the fact that "people who know about these things" felt it necessary to attack a nation that had not attacked us or our allies.

I was like a number of other people whose paths I crossed that winter-retirees, students, working people. All of us dubious about the war, but hoping we were wrong. The price of being right was too high: lives lost, bodies maimed and American credibility crippled, for nothing.

A year later, much that wasn't clear has since become crystal. Starting, obviously, with the weapons of mass destruction we were told Iraq possessed and would use against us unless we moved first. "We were all wrong," former U.S. weapons inspector David Kay told a congressional committee in January.

If the fact that the weapons apparently do not exist were the only thing that had become clear here, it might be possible to swallow hard and move on. Unfortunately, something worse has also become obvious. Namely, that the weapons don't matter and never really did.

You can infer this if you like from the stubbornness with which the architects of this war-national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell-have defended it. Unabashed and unapologetic, Team Bush has assured us in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary that the invasion was a good thing.

But it's more than inference. The president himself has as much as said the weapons never really mattered. He told an audience in

Charleston, S.C., last month that even knowing what he knows today, i.e., that weapons of mass destruction probably don't exist, he would "still" have invaded Iraq.

"America did the right thing in Iraq," he said.

It was arguably the starkest indication to date that the nation's show of diplomacy in the days prior to the invasion was always a sham, a fig leaf to cover the fact that George W. Bush was determined from the beginning to go to war. Diplomacy would not get in his way, nor would facts, nor would the hesitation of allies.

And what has it gotten us? Everything we feared. Lives lost. Bodies maimed. American prestige crippled. And daily attacks of ever-increasing intensity on soldiers who we were told would be greeted with open arms as liberators.

All for nothing.

Yes, it is said by Bush men and women that we fought to strike against terrorism- except that Iraq had no documented role in the Sept. 11 attacks. It is said that we fought from a moral objection to tyranny, except that we don't seem all that troubled by tyrants in nations that lack huge oil reserves. Everything is said except the truth: that

we rushed into an unnecessary war on a half-baked mission. And that the repercussions of our hubris will shadow us for years.

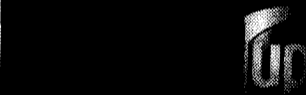
It takes me back to those earnest conversations of a year ago, all of us watching war coming like black clouds gathering on the horizon and feeling, the way you feel a storm in your bones, that this was a mistake. We all wanted so badly to be wrong.

We were not.

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