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# **The Unseen Victims of War: the ongoing toxic legacy of the war in Iraq**

Address by Donna Mulhearn

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My talk this morning is about the legacy of the war in Iraq and it's exactly people like you who will remember very well 2003. I was in Parliament House last week with a group of eminent Australians and I was thrilled to meet my favourite former Prime Minister. This is a very big thing for a Labor person to say – but my favourite former Prime Minister is Malcolm Fraser. How could you not? I was thrilled to meet him and to talk to him, because he was launching an enquiry into Australia's involvement in the war in Iraq.

Why did we go to war in Iraq? A group of eminent people – there's a list of about 20 academics and prominent people in Australia who have signed on to an appeal to investigate this. Their main issue is - one man decided this. One man decided to go to war in Iraq without even acknowledging the parliamentary process. So their issue is this should not happen again because there's a lot of anxiety about what is ahead in the future and how Australia might jump into it. These eminent Australians were saying, we don't want this to happen again. At least have some kind of a process that may be democratic and transparent.

We were anxious and nervous and embarrassed by that and on to the streets everybody went. There is currently a documentary being made called 'We Are Many', based in the UK but there's filming being done in Australia. It's a documentary on that day, I think it was 16<sup>th</sup> February 2003, the big march in Sydney, and that day all over the world: Barcelona, Paris, England, all over America, all over the world; millions of people coming out in total, so this documentary is being made about that. Not only how amazing that was that so many millions of people came together but also asking the question: why were they still able to go to war despite that? What is needed now to do in the future that that can't happen again? That's a very big question.

What I want to do just now is paint a brief picture of how Iraq was in order to compare it with how Iraq is now. Before I went to Iraq I realised I didn't know a lot about the country and maybe it was the same for you. Here I was, having been involved in journalism, current affairs and politics, and hearing the call to the human shield movement, which was literally a call. When I say 'call', I don't mean an angelic voice in my ear one night on top of a mountain. It was a guy on a radio who actually said, 'I've got an idea; what would happen if we Westerners went to Iraq as well, because it seems okay,' he said, 'for our governments and our media to support an invasion of Iraq because they talk about the people who live there as if they are somehow different from us; that they are *the other*; that they are *Muslim*, as if that was a bad thing; that they are *Arabs*, as if that was a bad thing, and their names are *Yusef, Rehab, Ahmed*.'

Ken O'Keefe was his name, a former US Marine who said, 'What if we went there, too, us white people, Westerners, Western-educated, wealthy?' He knew that if any of us were killed it would make the news, but if Iraqi people were killed you'd barely hear a mention. This is the concept of white privilege.

So here I was in Australia thinking, What am I supposed to do to this pending war and opposing it with all my heart and soul because of my belief in non-violence, because of my radical Christian views, because I pray, *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me bring love; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light.*

I speak a lot to school groups and when I talk to the school groups I say, *Pray the prayer to St Francis if you dare. I dare you to.* Because if you pray the prayer to St Francis and you pray it sincerely, then it will be honoured, I tell them, and then you don't know where you're going to end up, because you're saying, *Pick me, let me go.*

So when I heard this call on the radio, I knew as soon as I heard it that I had to go. A lot of people say to me, Donna, it must have taken you a long time to decide to be a human shield in Iraq, tossing and turning at night, arguing

with your mother, all the rest. I say, no, one second, because this is what I prayed, I could sense St Francis smiling. It was perfect.

So two weeks later I was in Baghdad. I turned up to this country, along with about 600 to 800 other people from around the world, from 25 different countries. We had to get our meetings translated into five languages.

Before I went to Iraq I realised how little we knew about the country. I thought that I was well-informed but I realised before I left that all I really knew was what everybody knew, the one story we all knew: Saddam Hussein. He was evil and he was oppressive and he was a maniac dictator and people would flee Iraq and people living there had a horrible life. Basically that was the narrative on Iraq that we knew.

That's the story that we knew. I didn't know any other story. I thought it was an Islamic fundamentalist country. I don't know why; I just thought that because of the connotations that are given about the Middle East, so I imagined men frowning and angry and strict, and women shrouded in black and nobody's having any fun, definitely. I thought it was a Third World country, that it was a developing country.

The only other things I knew about it was wars: the first Gulf War back in 1991 – remember that one, over the Kuwait border, Iraq decimated from the air, its infrastructure destroyed from missiles, the invasion in the south and fighting in the south. Then I knew about the war with Iran and Iraq which I'd heard about. So I thought Iraq is all about wars, dictators, oppression, fundamentalism, so it's a very dark and gloomy place.

But now I'll just share what I did find there and talk about what I found there in my most recent visit. When I go to speak at schools, I say, 'Challenge your stereotypes', because what I just described, were my stereotypes about Iraq and that from a relatively educated person. I say, 'Question your stereotypes', because not only did I realise that my stereotypes were not true but when I realised that the opposite was the case it really shook me up, and did I feel like a real goose? You bet I did. I felt embarrassed and I had to make my apologies.

When I went to Iraq what did I find? A place full of life, full of smiles, full of music, culture, laughter, celebrations. Yes, Saddam was there, but they refused to allow him to determine their life. They stayed human. They made poetry. They made good music, they made good food, they celebrated, they danced, despite him, in spite of him. It wasn't an Islamic fundamentalist country – of course it wasn't! It was totally secular. You probably knew that; I didn't. So the most you saw was a cute little head scarf. That would be the most you would see. Most Iraqi women would be wearing similar things to what we do. Actually, no – they're a bit more glamorous.

Iraqi women are beautiful and they know it. Iraqi men are very handsome and they know it. Lots of beauty parlours on every second corner. A great sense of pride in their appearance, so Iraqi women would be very, extremely glamorous, walking to the shops in their stilettos and their big long hair and they're very heavily made up and very Westernised, very tight-fitting clothing, very beautiful and glamorous.

So Iraq – a secular country, bottle shops on every second corner selling beer, wine, spirits. Walking down the street you'd hear Middle Eastern music blaring out of one outdoor café, you'd hear Metallica coming out of another one, that's a heavy metal music rock band, and then Britney Spears coming out of another one, not that that's a good thing but I'm just saying it was just how it was. Very Westernised, very relaxed.

Baghdad was a city very similar to Sydney, 5 million people, high rise buildings, marketplaces, hotels, universities, soccer fields, art galleries – actually probably more art galleries than you'd see in most cities because the Iraqis are very artistic and have a great love and are very talented in modern abstract painting. There were poetry readings by the River Tigris. The national theatre was in the centre of town, where they'd have Shakespeare in the square and a highly educated community. As I said, it wasn't a poor country. In the photos I'm showing this is the main square; you can see the latest model Mercedes Benz driving around, a BMW. It was rich, most people were, in terms of the strata and the classes in society the same as most countries, so an elite wealthy, a middle class, a working class

and the rural poor. But the fattest, the biggest section was the middle class. It was huge, so most people lived a comfortable life. If you worked for the civil service, especially, you had a very good salary, you had free healthcare, free education right up until university.

At one stage Iraq had the highest rates of Masters degrees and PhD degrees in the world. That was in the 1970s. I have my theory on that, though, and that was because education was free everyone was encouraged. Iraq was a little bit obsessed with education and technology, so people would come from all over the Middle East to study in Baghdad. A very high quality education, and if you were a young man it was compulsory to join the army at 21 except if you were enrolled at university. So people my age I met were on their second Masters or their PhD at easily a very young age.

So there was a great emphasis on education, a wealthy country, that middle class, highly educated, big mansions with marble, chandeliers, an orchestra on Friday night, the theatre on Saturday night, and this highly cultured life. I can't emphasise that enough. It was a very cosmopolitan place, it was very sophisticated.

I didn't know any of this. Why didn't I know any of this?

The children - doted upon, cheeky little things. They'd come and tug on your sleeve: 'Hello, miss, what's your name, welcome in Baghdad' – practising their English. Most Iraqis could speak to us in English because it was the second or third language they'd learn at school, so communication was quite easy. Sometimes it was broken English and very rarely did you find anyone who didn't speak any English.

Family and children is by far the most important aspect of life for Iraqis. I think this would be the case for Middle East across the board, That's why the children are doted upon, because they're considered the centre of the universe, and they know it. The greatest role a man can play in his life is to be a father, so when you become a father in the Middle East even your name changes. You're no longer Mohammed, you're Abu Saif, the father of –

and that becomes your name. You're then the father. That's the most important thing for you.

Of course, for women, that's the meaning for their life as well, to have family, Under Saddam's Iraq, which was very secular, at one point Saddam did not allow women to wear hijab, and he was pushing it the other way. So women were in positions of power and they were the highest enrolments at universities, in this era, so they were moving away from having to feel as if they needed to have a family.

The ethic of hospitality, as many of you would know if you've been to the Middle East, was overwhelming - this tradition of welcoming the stranger, welcoming the foreigner.

I was a little bit unsure about this when I got to Baghdad because, remember, I was coming from Australia and Australia had put up their hands to be in this thing called 'The Coalition of the Willing' and Iraqis knew it. Unlike us they knew about us, whereas we didn't know much about them. So Iraqis knew that we were involved and they were quoting – they used to call him President Howard, and he's saying this and he's saying that. So I was really unsure before I went to Iraq what they would think of me. Would they challenge me; would they have an issue with me; would I be confronted, and I was quite nervous about it.

But it was very early on in my trip when I was discovered to be an Australian, not only was that accepted as fine, it was like, *Wow, you're Australian, we love Australians!* I was the popular one. Why? Well, the two reasons they gave me on this particular day, it was my first day in Baghdad, *You are really nice people, you are really funny, you have a great sense of humour, we know because we see your movies, the TV, like Crocodile Dundee*, and they said, *we're like that, too*. Funny, sense of humour. And they're right. I don't know if you know many Iraqis but they are a very cheeky and funny people and if anyone can make jokes about dire situations and try to lighten it up they've had a lot of experience now doing that; the

second reason was that we're good at sport. That was the other thing that made me very popular back then!

So we were welcomed and with me one day was an American woman, and I was nervous about the reaction to her, but when they met her they said, *You are a most honoured guest*. She knocked me off my popularity perch, because they could see beyond the politics, beyond our leaders' rhetoric, and we connected as human beings.

I found when I got to Iraq, within the first two days, this amazing mix and cocktail of humanity, life, music, culture, friendship, welcoming, tradition, hospitality, love, and all I could think was, *Oh my God, I can't believe we're coming to bomb these people. If only Alexander Downer and John Howard could come here for a cup of tea, I'd give them 24 hours before they realised.*

I say to students, *Know your enemy*. I say, Know your enemy before you bomb them because you might realise they are more like you than you ever imagined.

*Q: You mentioned about the kids loving the Australian people but the population not being in favour of Howard or Downer?*

The Iraqi population? They didn't have an opinion about that, they just knew what he said. They knew that we were joining the war with America and they were confused by that. They were asking, *Why does Australia want to hurt us? Why is Australia sending soldiers? We don't understand. What did we ever do?* They wanted to relate it to a reason. *What is the reason? We didn't attack you.* They were just perplexed as to why a country with which they've never had a conflict – we buy all their wheat, for heaven's sake, the Australian Wheat Board had become quite cosy by that stage, so they were confused. *Why, why would you come as part of an army?* Totally confused, as you can understand.

So the message from them, of course, was very clear, and that was – they said, *You may not have had much experience but we know war - the war*

with Iran for eight years, which achieved absolutely nothing, hundreds of thousands killed, maimed, the economy destroyed on both sides, nothing achieved. The first Gulf War decimated their infrastructure and then the sanctions came, which they called 'the silent war' which we know resulted in them not being able to import basic goods into the country, which resulted in the deaths of quarter of a million Iraqi children from dysentery, because the water couldn't be cleaned.

So they have all that experience of war. They say we know what war brings, it's just suffering, grief, death to us and our children, but we see no result, nothing. You want to bring us another war? Please, can't you think of something else!

But they knew this, in fact, was about the North. They knew that this didn't have anything to do with the Iraqi people or the conditions in Iraq. Remember, at first the rhetoric was all about weapons of mass destruction. We feared that they were coming to get us. Saddam's going to come to get us. Then when that fizzled out, they had to change the rhetoric: oh, it's about them, it's about the Iraqi people, we're worried about them. That's when the Iraqi people said, You're 20 years too late. What about the 80s when you were providing Saddam with financial aid and military aid against Iran, and Donald Rumsfeld came over to shake his hand and put the arm around the shoulder, and that emboldened Saddam and legitimised him in the eyes of the world, and you did that, and they resented it. But that's what the US and the West did.

And of course in this room we know the other way. We'd put up our hands and say, yes, there is another way, non-violence, which we've seen since in terms of the Arab Spring actually can work, too, can have the same result.

I show now a picture which leads into a topic that we'll get to later, and that is the impact of weapons that were used in Iraq.

This is a picture of a girl named Arian. I'm in Baghdad children's hospital here, walking through the wards. She's dying of leukaemia. That's dry blood you see in her mouth, from an infection, she's got a needle hanging out of

her arm where you see that pool of blood. She would have died a few days after I met her. She was very ill, as you can see. She wasn't the only one. The wards were packed. Hundreds in these five or six wards, hundreds and hundreds of these children.

The reason why Arian is dying is because of the bad luck of where she was born, that is, she was born in the south of Iraq, in Basra, and since a year after 1991 the birth deformities began with women miscarrying, etc. and getting sick. Why? Because in 1991, as we know, the US forces, and Australia and the UK used weapons that they had not used before, and these were weapons containing uranium, what's called 'depleted uranium'.

The reason why it's called 'depleted uranium' is simply because it's a waste product. It's a by-product of making nuclear energy and of making atomic weapons. There's a waste and it's usually buried, but someone had an idea once and said, this is a very dense material, it will basically penetrate anything, and wouldn't it be great as a weapon. So they started to alloy the conventional weapons. This is not a special weapon; this is putting depleted uranium into a conventional weapon, so you have depleted uranium tank shells, missiles and bullets.

What would happen, if you have the tank shell alloyed with depleted uranium? Because its armour-piercing qualities are second to none, it's so dense, it's one of the densest materials known in the universe, second to tungsten but tungsten is expensive, depleted uranium is cheap – if you hit an Iraqi tank, that Iraqi tank will dissolve as if it's made of cardboard. So it's a perfect deadly weapon – except uranium and human beings don't go together.

Nevertheless, this was used widely. Depleted uranium when it's fired disperses into dust particles immediately, catches fire and then drizzles out dust particles. Once these dust particles are breathed in – by the way, they remain in the air as dust particles for at least 1,000 years; the half life, of course, is about half a million years – when it's inhaled into the lungs, your death will begin from that second it's inhaled.

DU dust particles will also fall to the ground, leach into the soil and the water sources, so what we have then is a human and an environmental catastrophe.

The first instance of what we saw, the damage done, was back in the United States when soldiers who fought in that war started to get sick and developed cancers and tumours, and their wives started to miscarry, have stillborn births, cancers, etc. They call it 'Gulf War syndrome'. It's acknowledged by this community but it's never been acknowledged by the United State Department of Defense to this day and they will refuse to do tests still to this day because they'll probably have one of the largest class actions in history.

It's very similar to Agent Orange, That's why I'm also drawing comparisons with the latest news on Agent Orange, which you may have heard. The United States announced the week before last a major program, multi-million dollar program, to clean up areas of Vietnam where Agent Orange was used, to decontaminate. Quite a few years too late but the fact that that was acknowledged and done and even though they still deny that there's a link between health and Agent Orange, they funded through NGOs and organisations some health and medical help, even though they don't acknowledge that connection.

Go back to Iraq and of course increase that by hundreds and hundreds of thousands, because you have an entire community there: the city of Basra, Iraq's second largest city. Within a year, the women started to miscarry. A woman in Basra to this day will miscarry six to eight times before she gets a baby to full term. There's probably a 50% chance that that baby will be born dead and then a very high proportion of those babies born alive will be born with severe birth deformities.

I have pictures of babies from Basra. I wouldn't even dream to show you. They are far too shocking and highly disturbing. Some of the pictures look more like animals than human beings. That's depleted uranium.

If your child lives, she's considered a miracle. By the age of 8, that's when leukaemia sets in and that's why Arian is dying.

The sanctions didn't help at this period because, of course, the sanctions that were imposed on Iraq to punish Saddam Hussein, the greatest impact was on medicines, medical facilities. We know that leukaemia can be treated and often successfully, so in Australia, if a child has leukaemia, they would have a good chance of survival if they get the care that they need, but that was never available to children in Iraq because they could not import into the country the medicines required because of the sanctions that we imposed on their country.

So you can imagine how I felt, standing by Arian's bed, because I felt my world was part of the reason she was dying. (1) We were there in that war in 1991 and (2) we imposed sanctions to make sure she couldn't recover and die with any dignity. Instead, she's dying in pain.

The worst part of this story is that they did it again.

You would think that those stories of the soldiers and the babies would be enough, but there's a lot of denial going around. Do you remember the statue of Saddam they tore down in the square? This is the greatest media manipulation in modern history. The commentary that was shown when that statue came down was basically about mass jubilation on the streets of Baghdad, Saddam has fallen, spontaneous outbursts – actually that didn't happen. All you saw back here on the news was the tight shot of the proof at the bottom of the statue. You never saw the wide shot, and that statue is in a big square. It's the size of a soccer field. The rest of the world, Europe, Middle East, saw the wide shot as well, so they knew the story.

The person giving that commentary was not there; he was in a studio sitting in Kuwait, because CNN had been dismissed from Iraq some time before. He was just watching the footage and the cameraman never widened the shot. He only kept that tight shot, because if he'd widened the shot you'd have seen the empty square and it would have contradicted the narrative that the

speaker was giving, so he wasn't able to do that; therefore you didn't get the full story.

The greatest victims by far from the war were children. It always is. Shrapnel wounds was the greatest cause. This boy lost his mother, his father and his two little brothers; he lives on his own, the nurses told us, whispering to us because they hadn't told him, they feared the shock would kill him. That's just from a missile strike near his apartment, not on it.

You don't have to hit something for you to be affected by it. If it's within a 10km radius, your building's gone. They called it 'precision bombing'. They thought it was great. They didn't take into account the fact that if a missile explodes 10km away, your windows will implode with such a high velocity the glass will embed into your body and slash you, and that was the wounds that we saw that killed most people in the hospital who died, and mostly children.

I returned to Iraq to work with street kids, mostly dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, which was widespread, as you can imagine. Baghdad went from that beautiful city full of culture, very sophisticated, to a mess which has never, ever been cleaned up. You can't walk out your front door and know that you'll survive. You don't know that you will.

The soldiers have gone. It makes such a difference. The oppressive feeling all those years I went there and lived in Baghdad when the soldiers were there, just the extra anxiety and tension that created, was unbearable. It's such a relief for the people that the soldiers have gone.

It's eased the tensions a lot, but there's still a lot of checkpoints and army. It's Iraqi army – it's not American, so that does make a difference, because at least someone speaks your language and at least they're not calling you names and swearing at you and calling you pigs and dogs, which was standard daily conversation with the American soldiers, sticking their machine gun in the backs of mothers and children. So that's been a great help.

I'm just going to finish this section with these pictures from Fallujah. You might want to recall the Geneva Conventions, of which this is a very dramatic breach.

Fallujah is called by the media a 'flashpoint' or a 'hotbed of resistance' or whatever cliché they might want to use. Fallujah is actually just a city of about a quarter of a million people, a couple of hours west of Baghdad. It's a very historic city, a very proud city. It's called the City of Mosques.

There were some massacres that occurred. You never hear this part on the news, though. What you will hear about is the killing of three US contractors who had worked for Blackwater Corporation. They were killed in Fallujah. God knows why they even went there. No one else did. They drove through, totally armed. They're security contractors, which means they are private soldiers, so they're looking like Rambo with all the machine guns, driving through Fallujah. They were hijacked and killed and their bodies were burned and hung from a bridge. That's what you might remember from that time – this is 2004.

The response to that was to punish the entire city for that, although the US defence forces at the time in Falluja, in Iraq, were saying 'Please don't have a knee-jerk reaction. We will respond to this slowly and we will arrest and we will have a court' but they were overridden by Donald Rumsfeld, who had consulted with President Bush, and they overrode every senior military figure in Iraq. I did my master just last year on Falluja, so I had to read all this gory detail. Every general recommended otherwise but they were all overridden because of the media and the politics. They wanted to show that they were going to teach them a lesson. *We'll show these guys. They can't do that to us!*

So in April 2004 was unleashed the first attack on Falluja. US Forces cut off the city. They didn't let anyone in and they didn't let anyone out. The strategy they used was sniping as well as bombing from the air and sole strikes.

We were called, we being a group of independent human rights activists living in Baghdad, working with the kids, etc., we were called by some doctors in Baghdad and they said: 'You call yourselves human shields or human rights activists? You need to get yourself to Falluja.' It's being bombed and it's under attack, They're killing our children. They're shooting at us as doctors. We can't deliver aid.' Obviously we had a big decision to make but we decided to go. We got smuggled in on the back of a ute, penetrated the US fortifications, and got into Falluja. I was one of only five foreigners to witness what we called the 'massacre of Falluja'.

What we saw was quite shocking. There were snipers placed on the rooftops of mosques, churches and houses, and their orders were to shoot anything that moved. By this stage, if you hadn't got out of Falluja beforehand, if you didn't have a chance to get out, you were locked in and you would just pray to survive.

Falluja city hospital was closed down on the first day. It was one of the first buildings taken by US forces. They arrested all the doctors for treating wounded Iraqi people. They did not allow from that point any Iraqi person to be treated in Falluja hospital; only the US soldiers were to be treated there.

That meant that the doctors, how could they deal with the hundreds of people being wounded? This group of doctors set up in a little clinic, they kept the blood in a Coke machine and they had no anaesthetic. When the power was out and it was night they had to surgery by cigarette light. A group of people would hold the cigarette lighters up, or candles or torches, so that the surgeons could do some work. The doctors were the heroes of this story.

As you can, here's a woman with a gunshot wound to the head. Here's a little girl, and the bodies just kept coming and coming and coming.

Then I saw this. I don't know about you – that gives me chills every time I see this picture. She's a little girl wearing pink, holding that Kalashnikov a little bit too comfortably for my liking, but it's the anger in her eyes that gets me.

I took this picture and I walked away and there were some Iraqi women standing nearby. They had broken English but they said to me, 'Oh miss, miss, do you think this is interesting, do you? Do you want to take a picture? Do you think this is interesting for a picture?' You know what? I said, 'I think that's shocking. I've never seen anything like it. She's just a little girl. She should be holding a tennis racquet or a doll. What would she be? Eight, nine years old? It's really disturbing.' They said, 'Oh, you think it's disturbing? You think that's disturbing?' I said yes. They said, 'You know what we think is disturbing? We think it's disturbing that you come from a place, a culture, a community where you think it's okay to kill children. Your community kill children as part of your culture.' I said, 'Hey, hey, come on, that's not true. It's not true. I don't come from a community or a place where it's okay to kill children, no, not at all.'

One of them said, 'Let me rephrase. You come from a place, a community, a culture where you think it's okay to kill our children.'

What could I say? The bodies were at my feet. Dozens of them. They had to dig up Falluja football stadium to bury the bodies because the cemetery had overflowed.

Then they said to me, 'Let me tell you the story of this little girl.'

Early in the attack, maybe the second or third day, her father went out on to the street. They don't know why; it was a silly thing to do. He was a pharmacist. Perhaps he thought he could have helped somebody. He went out on to the street and he was shot immediately. His body slumped to the ground. His wife did something even more reckless – she went immediately down to try to pull him in and she was shot as well. Their bodies were taken away, lifeless. Everybody saw this, the neighbours.

The neighbours then came into this girl's house where the parents had just been killed. She has two little brothers and sisters, aged three and two. The neighbours gave her this gun and they said, 'You are now the head of your household. You are the protector of your little brothers and sisters.' So they

gave her this gun and taught her how to use it, to protect herself from us, what we'd sent.

I often wonder what happened to her. This is the cycle. This is what war does. This is what war creates. Don't ever think there's any honourable result from war. I don't have to convince you of this. That's what you get: dead children, shooting kids with impunity, kids losing their parents and having to defend themselves against us. Child soldiers. That's what she'd become, in defence. She wasn't forced to; she was defending. So I often wonder what happened to her.

We're going to go now to the legacy, nine years later.

The reason I went back to Iraq, and I hadn't been for quite some time, last time I went was an extremely violent period. I had to wear full hijab and disguise, which I did this time as well. It was my second time held or captured by pirates. My translator had to leave Iraq as a result of that experience, and I promised I wouldn't go back until it was safe for people that I worked with to go back. So it took about seven years before I could return.

I was shocked by what I saw. It was worse than I expected. The place was crumbling. I hope you can recall what I described before: a beautiful place. I wanted to set that first, before going to this. None of that exists any more so don't think that's what Iraq is like. That's what Iraq was like.

There was a man who heard me talk a few years ago, an Iraqi man, and when Iraqi people are in the audience they find this really difficult. There were three Iraqi women, just before I went to Iraq, in the audience, I talked at a library in Campbelltown, and they were in tears, but they say the same thing that Iraqis always say to me: 'Thank you for sharing what we were like because nobody knows that and they don't believe us. Thank you that you're saying it because maybe they'll believe you.'

.What you have is a place that looks like a third world country now, whereas before it was wealthy and people had access to health and education. That's

now under challenge. The fact that it was just crumbling – it looks like some of these buildings are held together with ropes. I'd never seen such mess and poverty and rubbish on the streets. There was no sense of order. There's a sense of chaos, a sense of anarchy, there's no security, people walking around in fear.

This is Sadu Street. This was the major thoroughfare in Baghdad - always thriving. This is where the coffee shops were and big party atmosphere and people around. The shops are still shut. This is what you see instead: concrete blast walls. They are everywhere. Whoever made these had a very good business lately, in the last ten years. Blast walls and razor wire are all over the city, and the city has been divided into different areas, cantons.

This is what's called sectarian violence. I wouldn't call it sectarian violence; I'd call it political violence because it had very little to do with different sects and everything to do with politicians and militia and who wanted to gain power where. Some areas were divided up and considered a Sunni area, a Shi'ite area, etc. so these blast walls are everywhere. It's very confronting. You just drive down the street and you've got this wall in front of you. It's just everywhere, so it makes for a very ugly, very oppressive city, you can imagine the Iraqis are very saddened by it.

This is in the centre, right in the centre of town. This is unrecognisable for anyone who's been to Baghdad. If there's a building behind these blast walls generally it would be a government department or a hotel where there might be foreigners or some kind of political office but Iraqis are artists, so they've also gone to paint some of these walls in defiance.

Now instead of the American troops everywhere you have Iraqi troops everywhere. You have checkpoints all over the city. It's hard to get from A to B. It would normally take you 10 minutes – it would take you an hour to get here and there. When there's bombing and attacks it's generally targeted at police or army and that's because they're considered collaborators. You might say, 'Collaborators with whom?' The US forces have gone. Well, for a

long time now it hasn't been about them; it's actually been about the Iraqi government.

What you have in Iraq now is a government which was not elected. You might think, *didn't we bring them democracy?* No, we didn't. There was a bloc that was elected at the last election in 2009. They got the majority of votes, but it was not enough to form a government, just as happened here. We had three days of negotiations – how long did Windsor and Oakeshott take? A bit longer? Whatever it was, a week, the same thing happened in Iraq but it went for about six months. You can imagine how destabilising that was.

In the end, the US announced a leader and it was a man who did not get the majority of votes; he came second. His name was Al-Maliki and he's now the prime minister of Iraq and he is despised and hated, as you imagine anyone would be who is imposed by America. He's a religious Shi'ite man. He has now imposed on the people of Iraq a religious government for the first time in their history. Iraqis are not used to having clerics and mullahs telling them what to do, speaking as government spokespeople. They find it offensive and they are outraged, and I'm talking about religious people, religious Muslim people, saying, religion and politics have no place together.

The grand ayatollah Al-Sistani is the head of all Shi'ite Iraqis. He's based in the holy city of Najaf. He's been saying time and time again, you've got to separate this religion from the politics. He's been forced into retirement; he'll be gone by the end of the year. He's going to be replaced by an Ayatollah from Iran. Why? Because Iran now runs Iraq. It's a big statement. The US still has a very big influence so everything is still checked with the US, but the government is bankrolled, funded, the militia, everything, by Iran, so Iraq is now a fundamentalist theocracy run by America's greatest enemy.

Imagine that! So that war worked, didn't it! Imagine, the worst nightmare of those guys sitting in the White House is coming to pass.

What that means for the ordinary Iraqis – and this is why the police and the army are considered collaborators. They're considered to be working for a government that's not legitimate, that they didn't vote in and is run by Iran and by clerics and mullahs, so some of that is reaction just against that, but of course some of it comes from other countries' influence.

What's happened in Iraq in terms of the bombings? The day I was there, I did some interviews or wrote some stories, but the questions most people asked was *Who's doing it? Who's doing all those bombings?*

Anyone you ask in Iraq will have a different answer to that, but my little theory is Iraq has become a football field; it's become a playing field for regional power interests because of its strategic location. Iran is there, Saudi Arabia is there, Syria is there, Turkey, Lebanon The Iraqis will say to you, before 2003, they never had a car bomb in Iraq. Suicide bomber – are you kidding? Never, never. How could they? Saddam was in power. They said, 'We had one source of violence.' They said to me, 'Donna, we used to have one Saddam. Now we have hundreds, but the master is here now. Saddam was the apprentice.' That's what they say. The apprentice came first; now is the master, Maliki.

Maliki has torture chambers underneath most police stations. You cannot speak against him or you'll be arrested and questioned. Human rights violations, various minorities. You might have heard the problems with the Christian communities in Iraq. Christian communities used to thrive in Iraq. It was about 25% at one stage. Saddam used to call Christians 'the flowers in the garden of Iraq', so they flourished, and so did the Mandaeans, the Sabians, a religion that is indigenous to Iraq. So there's now many terrorists there and some of the violence would come from the Wahabis, the Wahabist sect, or Salafists from Saudi Arabia.

Iraq has never harboured or engaged in any form of Islamic extremism, ever. It's always been secular or moderate Islam. As soon as the invasion happened and the borders went down, these groups just poured in, and of course there was a vacuum in terms of security. Paul Bremer, the American

stooge who came in immediately after the invasion sacked the entire Iraqi army, the protectors of the country, he sacked them, and the police, and every civil servant who was a member of the Baath party. Every civil servant.

If you were a teacher in Iraq, you had to join the Baath party. You would never go to a meeting; no one I knew ever went to a Baath party meeting, but you had to have a membership card to get a job in the civil service. So he sacked them all. They called it 'de-Baathification'. It was one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the last nine years, because that's what created this security vacuum, They say, look, Saddam could keep us secure. He kept the lights on. He gave us these conditions, and now that's all gone. So they do relate it and connect it all. The Wahabists have now been able to set up their cells because of the lack of security and they say to the government, You are not even strong enough or able to protect us.

Iraq at the moment has four to six hours of electricity per day. You're talking about a place, when I was there, in summer, 45 to 50 degrees. 52 on one day. What some families do is take shifts in holding a piece of cardboard or towels and fanning the faces of the babies or the elderly, just staying up all night, taking shifts.

You may have remembered and asked the question, *Why would the Sunni and the Shi'ia attack each other?* Again, that's not what happened, because the Sunni and the Shi'ia have lived together for 1,500 years; why would they all of a sudden wake up and hate each other. So obviously that's not the case, and the media misled you.

What happened in 2006-7-8 was the peak of the violence, which I have called political violence, and then it dissipated, and no one else had really come in to say why it had dissipated. The US forces take credit. They say, oh well, we did that.

Do you know what happened? Iraqis refused to participate. They stopped turning up to the militia groups and they refused, because they said, 'He's my neighbour, he's my cousin, it's my auntie. We refuse to hurt our

neighbours.' Whenever there was a bomb in a Shi'ite mosque then the Sunni suburbs would come to rebuild it. If there was a bomb in a Sunni mosque, the Christians and the Shi'ias would come to rebuild it. This is peacemaking in Iraq that you didn't hear about. So that's why on that level the people are trying to bring those walls down and to rebuild. Their main enemy now is the government.

The city of Falluja, which suffered the greatest military attacks from the US forces, more than any other city, became rubble. It was basically flattened. There was the first attack in April 2004, which I mentioned before and which I saw part of for the days I was there.

The US forces were forced to withdraw from that city after about two weeks and after about 2,000 civilians were killed because the backlash in the Iraqi community was so intense that the leaders had to say pull out.. Then it became known that the military were waiting for the US Presidential election of that year to be done and within a couple of weeks after that they went in again, in November 2004 and they finished it off. They flattened the city. Probably 70% of public buildings were flattened, probably half of all residential houses, just dozens of mosques, schools, etc.

For my Masters thesis, I called it urbicide – the killing of a city. What I did was I compared it to the ancient sacking of a city. Remember mediaeval times, it would be barbaric that they'd raise a city and then plunder it, but my thesis was that because of modern weaponry it actually still happens today.

The other comparison I gave, which links to the next story, is Rome's sacking of Carthage. Then there was the myth of the sowing of the salt, that the salt was strewn over the rubble of Carthage so that it would contaminate it and make it infertile and nothing could ever be built there again, which is exactly what happened. So the Carthage culture ceased to exist as we know it. That was a complete sacking of the city, never to be recovered. Urbicide, the killing of a city.

I have compared that with what's now happening in Falluja and as we now have a situation where most women will not give birth to a healthy child.

This is Falluja hospital. The only new thing in Falluja is the hospital. What we have now is a situation starting from about a year after the attacks when women started to miscarry, have stillborn babies, and babies born with deformities. The doctors didn't know what was happening. It was such a dramatic increase.

I went there and spent a week staying at the hospital. I just camped out in the hospital. Every day there were babies born - spina bifida, spinal problems, neurological problems, but the greatest cause of death of the babies is congenital heart problems. Sometimes it's not even a physical deformity, although there would be many babies who have actual physical deformities.

This is Falluja football stadium. From 2003 it had to be dug up. Every grave you see here is connected to the US attacks in 2004, either directly, in that they were killed there, because again in the November attacks the city was cut off and nobody was allowed to leave as well, so they were killing people who didn't want to fight them.

There's a section of the cemetery which is just for babies. It's heart-breaking.

There were two issues for me. There's the bigger story and then there was the problem for this community. The bigger story is what is happening here, what is causing this? The theory from the doctors and many people is the types of weapons used in 2004. Before 2004 Falluja had a rate of birth defects similar, the same as other Middle Eastern cities, so this has been an epidemic since 2004. What happened in 2004? Two major attacks on the city. What type of weapons were used? The US forces refuse to say. They deny they used depleted uranium in the second attack, and the first attack they say *We have no records of the weapons we used.*

Julian Assange knows, though!

Falluja hospital doesn't have the facilities to cope with this; neither does Baghdad. So now I'm asking that question, to respond to this community, to assist them, and then the bigger picture is the bigger issue of the question of the use of the weapons.

I asked the doctors what's needed – of course, they need research, they need someone to come in and do proper scientific research. Everyone doubts everything they do, doubts their motives, etc. so they need a neutral, independent team of scientists to come in and do testing of the soil and the water and the babies and the DNA and the blood and everything. It's never been done.

The United Nations World Health Organisation has always been dismissive of depleted uranium. They don't believe there's a link between depleted uranium and human health. But there was such a backlash against the WHO in Iraq about doing nothing for seven years that they've decided to do some basic research. They wouldn't just do it for Falluja because of the politics involved now, because the government in Iraq doesn't support Falluja. . So now they've announced it for other parts of Iraq in which there's very little defects but now in all of these areas of Iraq the WHO are now training people to do some basic research and gather data. So that's something.

The other thing, on a basic level, that Dr Semira, the paediatrician who is now documenting all of these cases, said, 'I don't know what to do with some of these cases.' She was trained in Baghdad, she's only worked in Iraq. She said, 'I need training in a foreign hospital.' So of course I thought, okay, Randwick Children's Hospital, Westmead Children's Hospital. So now one little project that I can do, if anyone wants to be involved, is contact paediatricians at Westmead Children's Hospital or Randwick and say, Can you host an Iraqi doctor for a month or six weeks or two months? She can stay with an Iraqi family, we raise money for an air fare, she comes over and she gets good training. That's what she needs. We can do that. Surely we can do that. It's easy.

On this bigger story of depleted uranium, there's going to be action happening in the next couple of months that you can be involved in. That is, the international campaign to ban uranium weapons have a resolution that's going to be put forward to the United Nations first committee in October. This was a resolution that was put two years ago. It's not for a ban, because that takes a long time. The resolution that went two years ago that's going to come back in October is simply about transparency. It's calling on the countries that have used depleted uranium weapons to declare where they have used them so that communities can know and clean up and not grow their tomatoes there or drink the water or not live there.

It's quite non-threatening. It's quite a gentle proposal, just about transparency; you just have to declare that you've used it. So 148 nations voted in favour of that, as you would. Four nations voted against. They are the makers or users of depleted uranium, so you can probably guess them: United States of America, the United Kingdom, France – France makes DU – you would think Russia, but Russia abstained – Russia does make DU as well but Israel, and it's rumoured, I'm not sure what South Africa did. I do have a list of the countries but Israel is rumoured to have used depleted uranium in Gaza. They certainly used white phosphorus and this is what I haven't mentioned yet.

White phosphorus was used widely, in both the April and November attacks. White phosphorus is banned under the chemical weapons convention but the way they got around this, they said *We didn't use it as a weapon, we used it as an illuminator*. So they threw white phosphorus into a room and that's what it did – it illuminated the room and then they would to see if there was anyone in there and then know whether to shoot them all.

The thing is, the white phosphorus had burned the flesh off those people before anyone could have a look at who was in there.

So the vote in October - four countries voted against it, Australia abstained. You might think, what's going on there? I wrote a letter to Bob Carr to ask him and he wrote back as if to say, *You're lucky we abstained*, implying we

should have voted 'no' but because we were being careful and using precaution we decided to abstain.

What we need is people, voices, voices, voices, because if Members of Parliament are getting their letters, they are self-interested, they just want to be re-elected, if they think it's an issue then they're going to respond, so what we need is just that campaign of letter writing and there is help with information. Many of you are aware of depleted uranium, I think, and there's also the website of the international campaign, ICBUW, their website is called [www.bandepleteduranium.org](http://www.bandepleteduranium.org).

I don't think this call for an enquiry into the war in Iraq got enough publicity last week. Some people are asking where to get this booklet. It can be downloaded from the website or you could contact the Medical Association for the Prevention of War, that great group of doctors who are behind it. The website is <http://iraqwarinquiry.org.au/> and there's a petition on that website you can sign to say that you support the call, you add your voice to it.

I'm sorry for leaving that with you on a sunny Sunday afternoon but hopefully you might agree with me, with my last little thought that people do care and it's just how to channel that care and energy to make sure that we determine the end of this story and that the end of this story isn't as bleak as it looks to be now. Something can happen.

In history that does happen. People do rise up and change things and we do get cluster munitions legislation or conventions, and we do get some of the things we want. It's a matter of just keeping this community and this issue in our awareness, I think, awareness and being engaged.

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### About Donna Mulhearn

Donna was a human shield during the war in Iraq. She returned as a humanitarian aid worker to set up a shelter for street kids and support displaced families. She is a former journalist and political adviser who now works in war and conflict zones around the world. She has just returned from her fourth trip to Iraq where she researched the effects of toxic weapons and depleted uranium weapons on the civilian population, particularly babies. She has faced trial and prison time for breaking into Pine Gap US military base to do a 'Citizens Inspection'. She speaks on nonviolence and peacemaking, and coordinates the Australian Campaign to Ban Uranium Weapons. Featured on ABC's Australian Story program, Donna is inspired by the Prayer of St Francis of Assisi and describes herself as a 'pilgrim and storyteller.' Her book, *Ordinary Courage*, a memoir about her experience as a human shield, was published in 2010.

