

# Book Review: Blair's Just War: Iraq and the Illusion of Morality, by Peter Lee

Apr 1 2012

*When is it right to go to war? Peter Lee argues that Tony Blair's "illusion of morality" evaporated after the 2003 Iraq invasion because the ideas he relied upon were taken out of their historical context. Dr Matthew Partridge is not convinced by the author's arguments, and finds that exaggerations make the book into a polemic, rather than a serious academic study.*



**Blair's Just War: Iraq and the Illusion of Morality. Peter Lee. Palgrave Macmillan. 224 pages. November 2011.**

## Find this book:

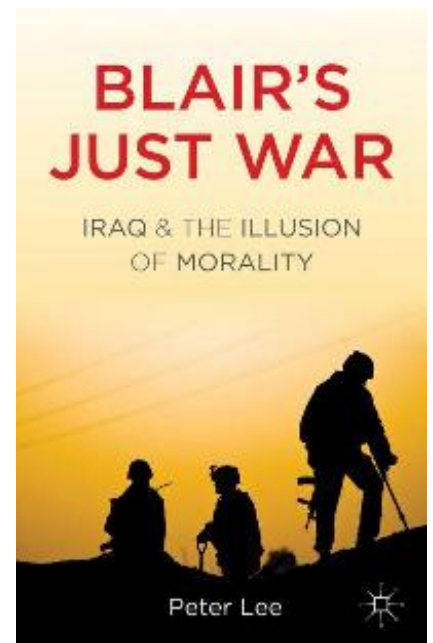
Last year NATO intervened in Libya. There is also talk about doing so again in Syria. Many of the same people who marched against the Iraq war nine years ago are now tweeting demands that Obama, who also opposed it, send more advisors to Uganda. Does Tony Blair therefore deserve an apology? One person who doesn't think so is Peter Lee. His book, *Blair's Just War: Iraq and the Illusion of Morality*, argues that the Iraq war was not morally right.

Drawing on approaches to just war from Augustine to modern scholars, Lee uses the book's nine chapters to argue that the conflict did not meet the required standards. Indeed, he states that it "subverted the values that underpin a political system". Lee also claims that it went against the idea that "[people's] children, partners or friends in the armed forces will be put in harm's way... for only the most just and justifiable of reasons".

The author's argument can be summarized in four stages. Firstly, he attacks the claim that intelligence indicating that Saddam had WMD permitted action on grounds of self-defence. Next, he argues that Blair's real goal was regime change on humanitarian grounds. Lee concedes that this goal "has a long heritage in the just war tradition". However, in this case Lee claims that it was not justified by the situation on the ground. He also looks at the role the former Prime Minister's beliefs played in the decision and questions whether just war theory is appropriate to the modern era.

Few of these arguments stack up. Lee is correct that a desire to improve human rights, not worries about Saddam's stocks of chemical weapons and attempts to acquire nuclear weapons, was the main reason for the war. However, the Butler inquiry found that the claims were made in good faith. In a deeply ironic twist, there are now concerns that many of Saddam's WMD's may now be in the hands of the Syrian regime.

It is not true to say that by 2003, Saddam "posed no...threat at that time: either to his own people or to others". Clips of regime forces shooting and shelling Iraqis may not have appeared on TV or computer screens, as they did last year. However, this masked his rule through fear. As reports on human rights during the prewar period make clear, Saddam not only tortured, maimed and killed anyone he suspected of opposing him, but also did the same to their families.









It is also strange that Lee, a former army chaplain, should be so against using Christian morality to guide political decisions. At one point he even compares Blair to Islamic terrorists and Soviet spies. “Kim Philby, Don McLean and Guy Burgess...[were] won over to Communism at around the same age as Blair was when Christianity became a major part of his life”. Lee argues that the idea of good and evil is “out of place in ...a multi-faith world”. However, he then has to admit that “the notion of reaching out to help the weak and vulnerable is commonplace in most societies”.

The author’s disgust of the book’s subject leads him into hyperbole. For instance, he claims that Blair will never be able “to walk undisturbed and without security escort through the streets of the country he led for a decade”. Earlier, he all but accuses the ex-PM of making up a meeting with an Iraqi exile. This turns the book into a polemic, rather than a serious academic study.

This is a pity, because *Just War* theory is a rich topic. As well as the theorists that Lee mentions, a large number of writers and thinkers through the ages have looked at the question of when is it right to go to war. This book does enough to earn a place on reading lists. However, there is room for a better work on this area.

---

**Dr Matthew Partridge** has recently completed a PhD in Economic History at the London School of Economics. He is a freelance journalist who has written for The Guardian, Times Higher Education and the websites of Prospect and New Statesman. [Read more reviews by Matthew.](#)

**You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):**

1. [Book Review: The Development of British Defence Policy: Blair, Brown and Beyond](#)
2. [Book Review: Britain and Africa under Blair: In Pursuit of the Good State](#)
3. [Book Review: Outside In by Peter Hain](#)
4. [Book Review: In Defence of Politicians \(In Spite of Themselves\) by Peter Riddell](#)

This entry was posted in [British Politics and Policy](#), [Global Politics](#), [Matthew Partridge](#) and tagged [Barack Obama](#), [foreign policy](#), [human rights](#), [Humanitarian Intervention](#), [Iraq](#), [Libya](#), [Saddam Hussein](#), [Syria](#), [Tony Blair](#), [Twitter](#), [war](#). [Bookmark the permalink.](#) [Edit](#)