Twenty years ago, the day after the U.S. invaded Iraq, I published an op-ed in The New York Times with the completely inaccurate headline: “Good Reasons for Going Around the U.N.” I did not think that the U.S. had good reasons for going around the U.N.; indeed, I was politically naïve enough to believe right down to the last minute that the Bush administration would not act without U.N. approval. Once the invasion was underway, however, I argued that although illegal, it could still be made legitimate if: 1) U.S. troops found weapons of mass destruction; 2) the Iraqi people greeted the troops as liberators; and 3) the U.S. then went back to the U.N. Security Council and sought a post-hoc approval of the action by majority vote, as NATO did after the intervention in Kosovo.

None of these three conditions were met; the Iraq war is thus both illegal and illegitimate in the eyes of the vast majority of nations. Looking back, it is hard to remember just how convinced many of us were that weapons of mass destruction would be found. Had I not believed that, I would never have countenanced any kind of intervention on purely humanitarian terms. Many dictators brutalize their populations; they have to conduct the equivalent of active war against their own citizens to reach the threshold of the responsibility to protect doctrine. Nor is it permissible to use military force to establish a democracy, even assuming such an outcome were likely or even possible. But if you did think that Saddam Hussein had an illegal WMD program, then the terror and torture that many Iraqi civilians suffered served as an additional justification for using force.

I now see the decision to invade Iraq as cynical, tragic, immoral, and irresponsible to the point of folly. I do not think that the thousands of U.S. and allied lives lost were lost in vain: Only time can tell what Iraq will become; how the Iraqi people will look back on the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the ensuing ten years of violence; and what role Iraq will play in the larger Middle East. It is very difficult to imagine any transition from Saddam to post-Saddam without some violence and political upheaval in a nation as fractured religiously and ethnically as Iraq. But in hindsight, the U.S. decision to spend tens of billions of U.S. dollars; to ignore all knowledge, planning, and expertise about Iraq with regard to what should happen when the bullets stopped flying; and to ignore the opposition of many of our closest allies in deciding when and how to take action is virtually indefensible. And I could not in good conscience look an Iraqi widow, parent, or child in the eye and tell them that the tens of thousands of Iraqi lives lost served a larger purpose, which is a burden that every American who did not actively demonstrate against the war must carry.

In the end, Iraq served as my political coming of age in the way that the Vietnam was a coming of age for the generation ten to fifteen years ahead of me. Never again will I trust a single government’s interpretation of data when lives are at stake, perhaps especially my own
government. And I will not support the international use of force in a war of choice rather than
necessity without the approval of some multilateral body, one that includes countries that are
directly affected by both the circumstances in the target country and by the planned intervention.
If the situation on the ground in a country is not bad enough to mobilize at least some of its
neighbors to action, then it should not mobilize far away military powers.

Iraq remains a country in pain. The United States will be paying its financial and human debts
from the Iraq war for decades to come. If I could re-roll the film, I would stop the invasion.
Instead we should mark a sober anniversary by reflecting on all that the U.S., its allies, and the
Iraqis have lost. We can only hope we have gained a lesson in humility.