This year marks the tenth anniversary of George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq. The war’s horrific toll is still being discovered. To date, 4,488 American troops died in Operation Iraqi Freedom, according to the Department of Defense. The best estimate for the number of Iraqis killed as a result of the war comes from leading British medical journal The Lancet. The figure is 654,965 dead. That count does not include deaths that took place after July 2006. Neither figure includes U.S. civilians or nationals of other countries who died in the conflict. Nor do they account for soldiers or civilians who were wounded or for Iraqis who were tortured in U.S. detention centers.

As for the war’s cost to the U.S. economy, two leading economists—Joseph Stiglitz (winner of the Nobel Prize) and Linda Bilmes—produced a 2008 study placing it at $3 trillion. Of course, not everyone suffered from the war. Oil companies received colossal profits when the price of their product more than tripled. Defense contractors such as Halliburton (where Dick Cheney served as chief executive officer) also achieved huge financial gains.

As the 10-year anniversary passed, corporate media took time to look back, reflect, and try out some new excuses for publishing lies to support the case for war. This past March, for instance, The Washington Post published a piece by Paul Farhi on whether the press failed in its prewar coverage of Iraq. You might think that is a simple question. The Post published a piece by Paul Farhi on whether the press failed in its prewar coverage of Iraq. You might think that is a simple question. The Washington Post published a piece by Paul Farhi on whether the press failed in its prewar coverage of Iraq. You might think that is a simple question. The Washington Post published a piece by Paul Farhi on whether the press failed in its prewar coverage of Iraq. You might think that is a simple question.

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Our economically segregated society is to blame for that, and higher education plays an especially large role. Most leading journalists come from a small number of prestigious private colleges and universities. Those institutions are remarkable for their social-class biases. Most grant admissions preferences to rich and well-connected applicants, while systematically discriminating against working-class ones. A 1998 book by education scholars, including the former presidents of Harvard and Princeton, revealed that only 1% of white students and 12% of black students at the most selective universities were of “low socioeconomic status,” as defined by the authors. (Not that the authors were concerned about that.)

Conversely, a series of reports on military enlistment in the 1990s showed that money for college was the top reason recruits signed up. Which will it be? Risk death or give up on going to college? If you went to one of the right schools for landing a top job in journalism, you could hardly be further removed from that dilemma.

Of course, class doesn’t always predict someone’s political views, but when the social elite hold a virtual monopoly on top posts in government...

* Some have criticized The Lancet report, citing other studies that arrived at lower death tolls. The Lancet’s approach includes actual surveys of Iraqi households, rather than just figures reported by newspapers and government entities. Many of those killed in Iraq died during breakdowns in civil order or during religious cleansing. It is ridiculous to expect that government or media organizations would possess remotely complete accounts of deaths under those circumstances.
and media, politics gets reduced to promoting the interests of the rich. Need I point out that George W. Bush is the poster child for hereditary privilege? After graduating from prep school, Bush followed numerous ancestors by enrolling at Yale University, despite his obvious difficulties with rational thought and the English language. Bush’s presidency is best understood as a medieval royal court, where longtime family servants of the House of Bush, like Dick Cheney, bled the peasants.

Servants in corporate media joined in as well, and a look at the backgrounds of top media-makers will help us understand why. The relentless push for war by Fox News Channel is explained easily enough. That network is the fiefdom of Rupert Murdoch, who got his start as a press mogul when he inherited a group of newspapers from his father, Sir Keith Murdoch. Murdoch’s media have campaigned for pro-rich, far-right policies in every country where they set up shop, launching vicious campaigns against their political opponents or just everyday people. As you may have heard, some of Murdoch’s British reporters caught running their own spy network, hacking into phones, including one belonging to a thirteen-year-old murder victim. In response to that scandal, a committee of Britain’s House of Commons issued a report in 2012 concluding that Murdoch was “not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company.” Now they tell us.

Hereditary succession is common among rightists in the media. John Podhoretz is editor of Commentary magazine, a job once held by his father. Likewise, L. Brent Bozell III, a conservative commentator and pollster, is the son of L. Brent Bozell Jr., a cronjac of right-wing icon William F. Buckley Jr. from the days when the two were students at Yale. All of these country-club philosophers supported invading Iraq.

Another aristocrat of the right is prep-school and Harvard graduate William Kristol, whose father Irving, was a famous conservative writer and editor. (Among the magazines Irving edited was Encounter, which was funded by the CIA.) During the year or so before the attack on Iraq, Kristol the Younger hyped the coming war relentlessly, offering memorable promises of easy victory. Here are just a few:

“American and alliance forces will be welcomed in Baghdad as liberators.”
“‘This is going to be a two-month war, not a year war.’
“Very few wars in American history were prepared better or more thoroughly than this one by this president.”

Shortly after the war started, Kristol dismissed concerns that Iraq’s deep divisions between Sunni and Shia Muslims would lead to sectarian violence. He blamed those worries on “a kind of pop sociology in America that, you know, somehow the Shia can’t get along with the Sunni.” Someone should have told the Sunni and Shia that, because a bloody wave of religious cleansing swept Iraq after the U.S. invasion.

You probably won’t be surprised to learn that Kristol also smeared opponents of the war as disloyal. In that task, as in others, he was simply carrying on the family business. In 2002, he wrote:

“But the American people, whatever their doubts about aspects of Bush’s foreign policy, know that Bush is serious about fighting terrorists and terrorist states that mean America harm. About Bush’s Democratic critics, they know no such thing.”

Journalist Eric Alterman noticed a striking similarity between that passage and one written by Kristol’s father. In 1952, the elder Kristol praised Senator Joseph McCarthy (R., Wis.), who lodged countless false accusations of communist spying against Americans who were far more loyal to the country than he was. Here’s Irving Kristol’s tribute to McCarthy:

“For there is one thing that the American people know about Senator McCarthy: he, like them, is unequivocally anti-Communist. About the spokesmen for American liberalism, they feel they know no such thing.”

War-mongering and far-right punditry are big business these days, just as they were in the 1950s. In the case of the Kristols, we see the shameful spectacle of a hereditary elite quoting its own lies across generations.

When Fareed Zakaria endorsed Bush’s invasion plan, he lent credibility to the argument for war. Zakaria was less stridently conservative than the usual parade of right-wingers on Fox News Channel. He also possessed greater cosmopolitan credentials than many other war-backers. An immigrant from India, Zakaria had edited the prestigious journal Foreign Affairs and met numerous world leaders. In an interview with New York magazine shortly before the start of the war, Zakaria explained why he agreed with Bush. “[Iraq] is so dysfunctional, any stirring of the pot is good. America’s involvement in the region is for the good.” In other words: Oh, what the hell? Why not? Just stir the pot and see what happens. Zakaria’s words do not spring from a careful weighing of the consequences of war—for the soldiers who fight it or the civilians who become “collateral damage.” They are the words of a rich kid haphazardly deciding to place a bet at the roulette wheel. To Zakaria, Iraq was just a game, a puzzle of dysfunction that the U.S. elite might be able to solve by tossing other people’s lives and money into it.

Like George W. Bush, Fareed Zakaria inherited his place in the game. His father was a high-ranking politician and his mother was a newspaper editor. After graduating from prep school, Zakaria received degrees from Yale and Harvard. Referring to his privileged upbringing, he told New York, “I grew up in this world where everything seemed possible.” “We saw the best architects, government officials, and poets all the time,” he added. “Nothing seemed out of your reach.”

That was the problem. Coverage of the war debate would have been better if the media’s anointed “experts” had come from a world of limited possibilities or had experience dealing with the consequences of destructive policies.

Liberal writers and media outlets also played an enormous role in building the fraudulent case for war. In fact, Bush & Co.’s preferred means of planting false information in the public mind was The New York Times—and, specifically, reporter Judith Miller. Here is a short list of bogus claims presented as true in Times articles either written or co-written by Miller.

1. Saddam Hussein was seeking components for nuclear weapons.
2. Saddam already had an array of chemical weapons, including anthrax.
3. The Iraqi military was attempting to make a biological weapon using smallpox.
Top media-makers come from the war-profiting class rather than the war-fighting class.

Such narcissism and illogic are hardly surprising, but they don’t get to the root of Keller’s war-mongering. Again, the writer’s class background may offer an explanation. Unlike many other top liberals in Bush’s war chorus, Keller is not an Ivy Leaguer. But he is a member of the You’d-Better-Believe-I’m-One-of-the-Elite Club: his father was chief executive officer of Chevron.

Here are some key events and dates to consider when weighing Keller’s contributions to the war debate. On the day Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq, the benchmark price of a barrel of oil stood at $30.01. Five years later, the price was $103.25. In 2003, Chevron reported an annual profit of $7.23 billion. In 2007, the company’s annual profit was $18.68 billion. And here are two other facts that might warrant being placed next to each other. In January 2003, executives from major oil companies, including Chevron, met with Dick Cheney to discuss what to do with Iraq’s oil. (Chevron later turned out to be a major winner in the race to acquire new Iraqi oil contracts.) The following month, Keller’s “I-Can’t-Believe-I’m-a-Hawk” column came out.

In July 2003, Keller rose to the rank of executive editor of the Times, a position he held until 2011. With gas prices skyrocketing, editor Keller published news articles blaming that development on “speculators,” rather than, say, a relentless effort by the Bushites and oil executives to craft policies that increased Big Oil’s profits. Having provided such journalistic service to his country (or should that be “company”?), Keller now advocates bombing Syria and cutting Social Security. There is no word yet on whether he is still surprising himself.

Looking back to the eve of the Iraq War, we see a group portrait of the social elite at its most incestuous. Some of that group held positions in government. Others were in the media. Still others sat on the boards of giant corporations. But those distinctions mattered little. Whatever sector of society they officially occupied, members of the elite closed ranks to ensure yet another round of profitable carnage.

Chris Pepus has written for Razorcake since 2003. His parents were manual laborers during their working lives and Chris was the first in his family to attend college thanks to financial aid. He holds a BA and an MA from a public university. He was opposed to the invasion of Iraq, and his opposition did not come as a surprise to him.