

# GOOD LOOKS, NOBEL LINEAGE, SPINELESS

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Linda McQuaig, [The Toronto Star](#), 16 December 2008

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The newly crowned Liberal leader has always had some impressive trappings: good looks, noble lineage, verbal dexterity, an air of gravitas and an impressive CV of teaching human rights at Harvard.

His self-imposed, decades-long exile from his native land might pose a problem in some countries. But here, where our elite instills in us a sense of inferiority to great powers like the U.S. and Britain, Ignatieff has been forgiven for finding Canada a little confining.

Still, there are some problems.

I'm not just referring to Ignatieff's well-publicized support for George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq and for torture (but only of really bad people).

More broadly, Ignatieff seems to lack convictions, let alone basic human feeling.

In a revealing interview with the Star's Linda Diebel during Israel's 2005 invasion of Lebanon, Ignatieff was asked if his call for a ceasefire had been prompted by the Israeli bombing of the Lebanese village of Qana, which left 28 dead, including numerous children. Ignatieff denied that it was the Qana bombing that had influenced him. "This is the kind of dirty war you're in when you have to do this and I'm not losing sleep about that."

Now, it's okay to note that war is hell and innocent people die. But to say "I'm not losing sleep about that" – after media photos displayed the mangled remains of very small children – suggests a degree of detachment that borders on the unfeeling.

Ignatieff compensated by calling the Qana bombing a "war crime" during a French-language TV interview.

That turned out to be a far greater misstep politically, and Ignatieff struggled to distance himself from his own words. Two years later he was still backtracking, describing his "war crimes" comment as "the most painful experience of my short political career.

and it was an error.

Some observers chalked all this up to inexperience.

But does it really take experience – beyond being alive – to feel something when children are bombed to death? To then go full circle and denounce the bombing as a war crime, and then go full circle again and try to retract an arguably appropriate term, suggests the behaviour of someone who flaps wildly in the wind, who cuts and runs in the political heat, who lacks a basic moral compass.

Ignatieff showed the same moral evasiveness in his attempt to distance himself from his support for the Iraq invasion.

Given the scope of the Iraqi tragedy that has unfolded, anyone who played a role in facilitating the invasion has a great deal to account for. And Ignatieff did play a role. From his prestigious human rights perch at Harvard, Ignatieff's eloquent defence of Bush's war plans in the New York Times Magazine in the run-up to the invasion helped sell a preposterous war to the American people.

Rather than taking some responsibility and expressing genuine remorse in a follow-up New York Times Magazine article in 2007, Ignatieff artfully dodged and ducked any blame, absolving academics like himself of any responsibility for promoting the war. As a mea culpa, Ignatieff's piece was long on mea and short on culpa.

Media commentators here have been quick to hail Ignatieff as a natural leader, strong and resolute.

He does have good curb appeal. But beyond the measured phrases and chiseled features, the royal stuff inside may be more Jell-O than jelly.

