

[Iraq: Remembering Those Responsible](#)

President George W. Bush, center, during the signing of Resolution 114, authorizing the use of force against Iraq, at the White House October 16, 2002 in Washington. (Photo: Paul Hosefros / The New York Times) The formal withdrawal of US troops from Iraq this month has led to a whole series of retrospectives on the invasion and the eight and a half years of occupation that followed as well as a host of unanswered questions, including – given the tens of thousands of Americans and others on the US government payroll, many of whom are armed, who are remaining in Iraq – just how total the withdrawal might actually be.

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In any case, of critical importance at this juncture is that we not allow the narratives on the war to understate its tragic consequences or those responsible for the war, both Republicans and Democrats to escape responsibility.

The US invasion and occupation of Iraq has resulted in the deaths of up to half a million Iraqis, the vast majority of whom are civilians, leaving over 600,000 orphans. More than 1.3 million Iraqis have been internally displaced and nearly twice that many have fled into exile. Almost 4,500 Americans were killed and thousands more have received lifelong serious physical and emotional injuries. Iran has advanced its influence in the region since the overthrow of its arch-enemy Saddam Hussein, and is now the most influential foreign power in Iraq. Sectarian and ethnic tensions remain high and violence and terrorism -despite being less pervasive than a few years ago – are endemic.

A whole generation of Salafi extremists in Iraq and throughout the Islamic world have been radicalized and gained experience in urban terrorism by fighting US forces. Combined with the unprecedented wave of anti-Americanism that resulted from the war, the invasion – according to US intelligence agencies – has resulted in a backlash that could threaten the United States and other countries for decades to come.

The war has cost US taxpayers close to *one trillion* dollars, contributing greatly to the national debt, now being used as an excuse to cut vital social programs. Counting interest (money to pay for the war was borrowed), care for wounded veterans, and other residual costs, the final tally could be close to *three trillion* dollars.

The Iraqi government, a bastion of secularism prior to the US invasion, is dominated by sectarian Shiite parties which have shown little regard for human rights, particularly evident in their brutal suppression of an incipient pro-democracy struggle last March. Offices of pro-democracy groups have been raided and shut down, intellectuals and journalists – along with other supporters of the nonviolent anti-government protests – have been rounded up; torture of suspects continues on an administrative basis; government-backed death squads have murdered suspected regime opponents and the current Iraqi government is categorized by Transparency International as one of the most corrupt regimes on Earth.

To claim that invading Iraq was to support democracy, then, was as big a lie as the claim that Iraq still had “weapons of mass destruction.” And, though Saddam Hussein was a brutal tyrant, events in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen over the past year have demonstrated there are better ways to oust Arab dictators than for foreign troops to invade a country and occupy it.

Furthermore, invading a foreign country on the far side of the world that was not an imminent threat was clearly illegal under international law as well as the UN Charter, which, as a signed and ratified treaty, the US government was obliged to uphold under Article VI of the US Constitution. It will be hard to expect other countries to abide by their international legal obligations if the United States – despite the enormous military, economic, and diplomatic power at its disposal – believes it is somehow exempt.

Not a “Mistake”

The Bush administration is no longer in office. There are prominent members of Congress – as well as Obama administration officials who were in Congress at the time – who are also responsible for the war in deciding to vote to authorize this illegal and unnecessary war. The Democrats controlled the Senate at the time of the October 2002 vote and could have stopped it, but a sizable number of them chose to support Bush instead.

They did not, as many now claim, make a “mistake.” They knew full well beforehand about the consequences of the invasion and the likely absence of dangerous Iraqi weapons or weapons systems. In scores of policy reports, newspaper articles, academic journals and other sources, the tragic consequences of a US invasion of Iraq and a refutation of falsehoods being put forward by the Bush administration to justify it were made available to every member of the House and Senate.

Members of Congress were also alerted by a large numbers of scholars of the Middle East, Middle Eastern political leaders, former State Department and intelligence officials and others who recognized that a US invasion would likely result in a bloody insurgency, a rise in Islamist extremism and terrorism, increased sectarian and ethnic conflict, and related problems. (See, for example, my [cover story](#) in The Nation magazine, which was provided to every Congressional office weeks before the vote authorizing the invasion.) Few people I know who are familiar with Iraq have been at all surprised that the US invasion has become such a tragedy. Indeed, most of us were in communication with congressional offices and often with individual members of Congress themselves in the months leading up to the vote warning of the likely consequences of an invasion and occupation.

The October 2002 vote authorizing the invasion was not like the vote on the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution on the use of force against North Vietnam, for which Congress had no time for hearings or debate and for which most of those supporting it (mistakenly) thought they were simply authorizing limited short-term retaliatory strikes in response to a specific series of alleged incidents. By contrast, in regard to the resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq, Congress had many months to investigate and debate the administration's claims that Iraq was a threat as well as the likely implications of a US invasion; members of Congress also fully recognized that the resolution authorized a full-scale invasion of a sovereign nation and a subsequent military occupation of an indefinite period.

Similarly, there was never any credible evidence that Iraq possessed chemical or biological weapons, offensive delivery systems, a nuclear program, or ties to Al-Qaeda. As someone who has done extensive research on strategic studies and terrorism in the Middle East, I can say with confidence that anyone who claimed otherwise was either a naïf, an idiot or a liar.

By contrast, there was a plethora of evidence suggesting that the Bush administration was lying about so-called “weapons of mass destruction,” Iraqi links to Al-Qaeda and other rationalizations for the war. I shared these with Congressional offices, as did former UN weapons inspectors and scores of other independent strategic analysts.

In the months leading up to the US invasion of Iraq, there were many published reports challenging Bush administration claims regarding Iraq's WMD capabilities. Reputable journals like *Arms Control Today*, *the*

Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, *Middle East Policy*, and others published articles systematically debunking accusations that Iraq had somehow been able to preserve or reconstitute its chemical weapons arsenal, had developed deployable biological weapons, or had restarted its nuclear program. Among the disarmament experts challenging the administration was Scott Ritter, an American who had headed the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) division that looked for hidden WMD facilities in Iraq. Through articles, interviews in the broadcast media and Capitol Hill appearances, Ritter joined scores of disarmament scholars and analysts in making a compelling and – as people now admit – completely accurate case that Iraq had been qualitatively disarmed quite a few years earlier. Think tanks such as the Fourth Freedom Foundation and the Institute for Policy Studies also published a series of reports challenging the administration's claims.

And there were plenty of skeptics within the US government. Even the pro-war [New Republic](#) observed that CIA reports in early 2002 demonstrated that “US intelligence showed precious little evidence to indicate a resumption of Iraq's nuclear program.” [A story](#) circulated nationally by the Knight-Ridder wire service just before the congressional vote authorizing the invasion noted that “US intelligence and military experts dispute the administration's suggestions that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction pose an imminent threat to the United States” and that intelligence analysts in the CIA were accusing the administration of pressuring the agency to highlight information that would appear to support administration policy and to suppress contrary information.

The [Washington Post](#) for years had been reporting that US officials were saying there was absolutely no evidence that Iraq had resumed its chemical and biological weapons programs. Just five weeks before the congressional vote authorizing the invasion of Iraq, another nationally syndicated [Knight-Ridder story](#) revealed that there was “no new intelligence that indicates significant advances in their nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons programs.” The article went on to note, “Senior US officials with access to top-secret intelligence on Iraq say they have detected no alarming increase in the threat that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein poses to American security.”

Virtually all of Iraq's known stockpiles of chemical and biological agents had been accounted for and the shelf life of the small amount of materiel that had not been accounted for – which, as it ends up, had also been destroyed – had long since expired and was therefore no longer of weapons grade. There was no evidence that Iraq had any delivery systems for such weapons, either. In addition, the strict embargo, in effect since 1990, against imports of any additional materials needed for the manufacture of WMDs, combined with Iraq's inability to manufacture such weapons or delivery systems themselves without detection, made any claims that Iraq constituted any “significant chemical and biological weapons capability” transparently false to anyone who cared to investigate the matter at that time. Indeed, even the classified full version of the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate, while grossly overestimating Iraq's military capability, was filled with extensive disagreements, doubts, and caveats regarding President Bush's assertions regarding Iraq's WMDs, WMD programs, and delivery systems.

The House and Senate members who voted to authorize the invasion and now claim they were “misled” about Iraq's alleged military threat fail to explain why they found the administration's claims so much more convincing than the many other reports made available to them from more objective sources that presumably made a much stronger case that Iraq no longer had offensive WMD capability. Curiously, except for one misleading summary from the 2002 NIE released in July 2003 – widely ridiculed at the time for its transparently manipulated content – not a single member of Congress has agreed to allow me or any other independent strategic analyst any access to any documents they claim convinced them of the alleged Iraqi threat. In effect, they are using the infamous Nixon defense from the Watergate scandal that claims that, although they have evidence to vindicate themselves, making it public would somehow damage national security. In reality, if such reports actually exist, they are clearly inaccurate and outdated and would therefore be of no threat to national security if made public.

Rewarding Liars and Militarists

In voting to authorize the war, therefore, both Republican and Democratic supporters of the invasion demonstrated their belief that:

- the United States need not abide by its international legal obligations, including those prohibiting wars of aggression;
- claims by right-wing US government officials and unreliable foreign exiles regarding a foreign government's military capabilities are more trustworthy than independent arms control analysts and United Nations inspectors;
- concerns expressed by scholars and others knowledgeable of the likely reaction by the subjected population to a foreign conquest and the likely complications that would result should be ignored; and, faith should instead be placed on the occupation policies forcibly imposed on the population by a corrupt right-wing Republican administration.

Even after the lies about the alleged Iraqi ties to Al-Qaeda and alleged “weapons of mass destruction” were revealed as such, most supporters of the war continued to rationalize for the invasion and occupation. Democratic Senators John Kerry, John Edwards, Hillary Clinton, Dianne Feinstein, Joe Biden and others continued to defend their decision to vote to authorize the war even after acknowledging the absence of WMDs or Al-Qaeda ties, thereby effectively admitting that their vote was not about defending the United States, but ultimately about oil and empire.

Given the tragic consequences of the war, one would have thought it would have ruined their political careers. Instead, many of them were rewarded.

Though only a minority of Congressional Democrats voted to authorize the war in 2002 and even though a large majority of Democrats nationally opposed the war, the Democratic Party chose to nominate two unrepentant war supporters – Kerry and Edwards – as their nominees for president and vice-president. As a result, many of us who opposed the right of the United States (or any nation) to engage in such aggressive wars refused to support the Kerry-Edwards ticket and, not surprisingly, they lost a narrow election as a result.

Senator Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination and ultimately the presidency four years later [on his promise](#) not just to end the Iraq War, but to “end the mindset that got us into war in the first place.” However, he ended up appointing supporters of the Iraq War to most of his key foreign policy and national security positions, including his Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Homeland Security, Chief of Staff, and Vice-President from among the right-wing minority of Democrats who supported Bush's policy.

Meanwhile, pro-war Democrats in Congress continue to dominate such key positions as Senate Majority Leader, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Assistant House Minority Leader, and ranking members of other key House committees.

In effect, like the Republicans, the Democratic Party is willing to effectively reward failure.

And many of these Democrats are joining like-minded Republicans in threatening a new war with Iran.

As Gary Kamiya [put it in Salon](#), “That centrist Democrats like Hillary Clinton cannot clearly reject Bush's catastrophic war seems to reflect their deeper inability to articulate, or perhaps even to understand, two things: that Iraq has severely damaged our national security, and that the process by which the Bush administration sold their war has severely damaged our democracy... By refusing to use these legitimate arguments against Bush, the Democrats are not only committing a tactical political error, they are allowing the disease he imported to fester.”