

The Other Reason Biden Shouldn't Run

Biden used his leadership to get a Democratic-controlled Senate to give then-President Bush in 2002 the unprecedented authority to invade a country on the far side of the world that was no threat to the United States.

Anyone wondering about former Vice-President Joe Biden's fitness for the presidency ought to be concerned about the recent allegations of inappropriate touching. But there is another issue that deserves consideration: his key role in making possible an inappropriate and utterly disastrous war.

As chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2002, Biden [stated](#) that Saddam Hussein had a sizable arsenal of chemical weapons as well as biological weapons, including anthrax, and that "he may have a strain" of smallpox, despite [UN inspectors](#) reporting that Iraq no longer appeared to have any weaponized chemical or biological agents. And even though the International Atomic Energy Agency had [reported](#) as far back as 1997 that there was no evidence whatsoever that Iraq had any ongoing nuclear program, Biden insisted that Saddam was "seeking nuclear weapons."

At the start of hearings before his committee on July 31, 2002, Biden [stated](#), "One thing is clear: These weapons must be dislodged from Saddam, or Saddam must be dislodged from power. If we wait for the danger from Saddam to become clear, it could be too late."

"I do not believe this is a rush to war. I believe it is a march to peace and security."

In an Orwellian twist of language designed to justify the war resolution, Biden [claimed](#) in Senate session in October 2002, "I do not believe this is a rush to war. I believe it is a march to peace and security." This gave President Bush the unprecedented authority to invade a country on the far side of the world that was no threat to the United States.

Violent deaths resulting from the war in Iraq are estimated at over 180,000 by the Iraq Body Count project, including over 4,400 dead U.S. armed forces. Over 34,000 members of U.S. armed forces were wounded.

During the summer of 2002, as the Bush Administration was pushing for war, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, under Biden, had the opportunity to hear from any number of academics, former foreign service

officials, United Nations personnel, and others specializing in Iraq. Public statements and leaks from the administration in the preceding months had been filled with false claims regarding Iraq's military capabilities and links to terrorist groups while insisting a U.S. invasion and occupation of that country would go smoothly, with minimal casualties or other negative consequences.



When the [hearings](#) commenced on July 31, eighteen witnesses were called, none of whom challenged the administration's claims that Iraq was in possession of chemical and biological weapons and a nuclear weapons program. All three witnesses who addressed the question of Al-Qaeda claimed that Iraq directly supported the Islamist terrorist group.

Despite overwhelming opposition among academics and foreign service officers familiar with the region, among the twelve witnesses who addressed whether the United States should invade, six were supportive, four were ambivalent, and only two opposed it. Among the witnesses was former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, whom Biden insisted was credible despite [multiple perjury indictments](#) for lying before Congress and his history of grossly exaggerating the military capabilities of Nicaragua, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other designated enemies of the United States.

Throughout the hearings, Biden insisted that Iraq was a threat to U.S. national security and that “regime change” was a legitimate U.S. policy. And he expressed skepticism that renewed inspections would work.

Scott Ritter, the former chief U.N. weapons inspector, [noted](#) just prior to the hearings, “For Senator Biden’s Iraq hearings to be anything more than a political sham used to invoke a modern-day Gulf of Tonkin resolution-equivalent for Iraq, his committee will need to ask hard questions—and demand hard facts—concerning the real nature of the weapons threat posed by Iraq.”

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But Biden had no intention of doing so, refusing to even allow Ritter—who knew more about Iraq’s WMD capabilities than anyone and would have testified that Iraq had achieved at least qualitative disarmament—to testify. (Ironically, on [Meet the Press](#) in 2007, Biden defended his false claims about Iraqi WMDs by insisting that “everyone in the world thought he had them. The weapons inspectors said he had them.”)

Biden also refused to honor requests by some of his Democratic colleagues to include in the hearings some of the leading anti-war [scholars](#) familiar with Iraq and Middle East. Nor did Biden call some of the dissenting officials in the Pentagon or State Department who were willing to challenge the alarmist claims.

Ritter [accused](#) Biden of having “preordained a conclusion that seeks to remove Saddam Hussein from power regardless of the facts and . . . using these hearings to provide political cover for a massive military attack on Iraq.”

Had Biden allowed for additional hearings with a witness list more representative of the widespread opposition by those actually familiar with Iraq, it is possible the vote in the Democrat-controlled Senate authorizing the war could have turned out differently, and tragedy would have been averted.

Biden has [claimed](#) that his support for the war resolution was largely an effort to pressure Iraq to allow for the return of United Nations inspectors. Ironically, Biden supported President Bill Clinton’s decision to remove the inspectors in 1998 in order to launch a four-day bombing campaign that December despite [being warned](#) that it would likely end Saddam’s cooperation, and then subsequently [insisted](#) that “Saddam kicked them out.”

More significantly, even after the U.N. weapons inspectors had been engaged in months of unfettered inspections in early 2003, Biden expressed no objections when Bush decided to invade anyway. And a full year after it became apparent that Iraq didn’t actually have these weapons or weapons systems, Biden [insisted](#) that he still didn’t regret voting “to give the President the authority to use force in Iraq. I still believe my vote was just.”

Indeed, Biden supported the subsequent bloody counter-insurgency war for the rest of his Senate career, speaking out against bringing the troops home or even setting a timetable for withdrawal. He even became a major advocate of splitting Iraq along ethnic and sectarian lines, seen by most people familiar with the region as [very dangerous and irresponsible](#).

Despite arms control analysts and former U.N. inspectors informing Biden that Iraq had achieved at least qualitative disarmament, and articles in [newspapers](#), [arms-control journals](#), and [online think tanks](#) challenging the Bush Administration's claims regarding Iraqi possession of "weapons of mass destruction," Biden [continued to falsely claim](#) "everyone in the world thought he had them."

Was Biden's support for the war simply a "mistake" as he claims, or is it indicative of a broader disdain for the United Nations Charter and Nuremberg Principles' prohibition against such invasions by one country of another? Indeed, as far back as 1998, [Biden](#) was openly questioning the efficacy of the then-ongoing UN inspections and calling for an invasion to remove Saddam.

Despite Biden's role in making possible the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it is not necessarily a reflection of what his foreign policy would be like if he became President. Along with many hawkish positions, Biden has taken relatively moderate ones as well. For example, he opposed U.S. intervention in Central America in the 1980s, opposed the 1991 Gulf War and, as vice-president, supported negotiations with Iran, opposed the troop surge in Afghanistan and questioned U.S. intervention in Libya.

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Biden has never been consistently allied with neoconservative intellectuals, or the unreconstructed militarists who so heavily influenced the foreign policies of the Bush Administration. Nor was he as hawkish as former Secretary of State and 2016 Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton.

Given the imperative of stopping Trump from being re-elected, it may be necessary to support Biden should he become the 2020 Democratic nominee. Still, an examination of the four presidential elections since the Iraq War resolution is instructive. The anti-Iraq War nominee Barack Obama coasted to two decisive victories while John Kerry and Hillary Clinton—burdened by their support for the Iraq War, which lowered turnout and overall enthusiasm among the party's anti-war base—ended up losing close elections.

In the meantime, in what will likely be a competitive primary season among a large number of candidates, none of whom supported the war and some of whom will likely contrast his reluctance to support Medicare-for-all and the Green New Deal with his support for a war which will likely end up costing American taxpayers two trillion dollars.

Biden's role in making possible the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the carnage and destabilization that resulted, is something for which he needs to be held accountable. It should be a central issue in the upcoming campaign.