

Harry Reid's Hawkish Foreign Policy Record

Late Senator repeatedly backed military aggression and spurned international law.

by [Stephen Zunes](#) January 3, 2022

he death of former Democratic Senate leader Harry Reid of Nevada has brought forth praise for his parliamentary skills, which helped make possible some critically important legislation, as well as preventing the passage of a number of seriously problematic bills. However, on the foreign policy front, it should be noted that Reid not only failed to challenge dangerous Republican initiatives that violated fundamental principles of international law and human rights, he was often among their most prominent supporters.



Harry Reid with Barack Obama 2009

As the Senate Assistant Majority Leader in 2002, Reid was prominent among the rightwing minority of Congressional Democrats who supported President George W. Bush's decision to invade and occupy Iraq. To help win public support for this illegal war, Reid teamed up with the Bush Administration, prominent neoconservatives, and Fox News in making a series of false allegations regarding Iraq's military capability.

The [resolution](#) authorizing the use of military force against Iraq accused that nation, without evidence, of "continuing to possess and develop a significant chemical and biological weapons capability [and] actively seeking a nuclear weapons capability, thereby continuing to threaten the national security interests of the US."

When other Democratic Senators tried to limit the war resolution so as not to give President Bush the blank check he was seeking, Reid helped circumvent such efforts by [signing on](#) to the White House's version.

As the Democratic whip, Reid then persuaded a majority of Democratic Senators to [vote down](#) a resolution offered by Senator Carl Levin, Democrat of Michigan, that would authorize force only if the U.N. Security Council voted to give the United States this authority. They instead supported a Republican-led resolution giving Bush the right to invade even without such legal authorization. (By contrast, a sizable majority of Democrats in the House of Representatives, under the leadership of then-whip Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, voted against the GOP resolution.)

But the alleged weapons of mass destruction were never really the issue. Indeed, Reid continued to support the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, even after it was apparent, as many arms control experts had been arguing all along, that there were no banned weapons, weapons systems, or manufacturing facilities to be found.

Historically, opposition leaders in the Senate have taken seriously Congress's role under the U.S. Constitution to place checks on presidential powers, including such illegal activities as wars of aggression. Reid, unfortunately, felt no duty to uphold this Constitutional role.

In granting Bush unprecedented war-making authority, [Reid insisted](#) that he was acting out of necessity, claiming that “no President of the United States of whatever political philosophy will take this nation to war as a first resort alternative rather than as a last resort.”

Before Reid, the last Senator from the inland West to lead the Democrats was Mike Mansfield of Montana, who served as Senate Majority Leader for most of the 1960s and 1970s. He courageously spoke out against the Vietnam War, not only when Republican Richard Nixon was President, but also when Democrat Lyndon Johnson was President. Reid, in contrast, refused to speak out even when the administration from the opposing political party was insisting on initiating a similar debacle.

Reid's support for the Bush agenda on Iraq was not a fluke. He also [co-sponsored](#) Senate resolutions defending Israel's massive onslaughts on the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon, wars which resulted in the deaths of more than 3,000 civilians. And Reid [directly contradicted](#) findings by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and various United Nations agencies, insisting that Israel's attacks against civilian population centers was legal.

Reid also was an [initiator of a letter](#) to President Barack Obama defending Israel's 2010 attack on an international humanitarian aid flotilla in international waters attempting to deliver foods and medicines to the besieged Gaza Strip. Ten participants were [killed, including](#) a nineteen-year-old U.S. citizen, who was shot at close range in the back of the head.

Reid also [co-sponsored](#) an unsuccessful resolution condemning the International Court of Justice for its 2004 opinion confirming that governments engaged in foreign belligerent occupation are required to uphold relevant provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention and related standards of international humanitarian law.

Concerns that Reid's support for wars against predominantly Muslim nations might be rooted in bigotry towards Muslims was heightened when he joined anti-Muslim extremists in [opposing](#) the planned construction of an Islamic Cultural Center in downtown Manhattan—a project defended by President Obama, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the city's Christian and Jewish leaders, and many others.

With Reid leading Senate Democrats, Bush was emboldened in his reckless and dangerous foreign policy agenda regarding Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, and elsewhere. When Obama became President in 2009, Reid joined his Republican colleagues in undermining Obama's efforts to steer U.S. foreign policy in a more moderate direction. This included [pressuring Obama](#) to veto any U.N. Security Council resolutions supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, [opposing](#) Obama's calls for a withdrawal of Israeli occupation forces, and [challenging](#) the Democratic President's opposition to recognizing illegal Israeli settlements in the Israeli-occupied West Bank as part of Israel.

It is sad to have to acknowledge that a highly effective legislator who left a generally positive mark on domestic policy, which pundits have been roundly praising, simultaneously played such a deleterious role regarding international affairs. But in remembering Harry Reid, both legacies must be acknowledged. ###