

The Lingering Effects of Iraq War Lies

Twenty years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the country [remains unstable](#), with one of the most corrupt and dysfunctional governments in the world. It is unable to provide Iraqis with many of the basic services previous generations had known. Rival militia groups are battling for influence, and serious human rights abuses are ongoing. Thousands of U.S. troops remain in the country to this day, ostensibly to counter the presence of ISIL/ISIS cells and Iranian militia groups, both of which emerged as a direct result of the 2003 invasion.

The cumulative cost of the war for American taxpayers will end up at well over [\\$3 trillion](#), adding to the national debt and giving deficit hawks the excuse to resist needed expansions, and even to impose cuts in important domestic spending. On the environmental front, the war is estimated to have resulted in the [release](#) of hundreds of millions of additional metric tons of carbon emissions into the atmosphere, seriously undermining efforts to reduce emissions elsewhere.

Both the financial and environmental costs have been compounded further by the war against ISIS, a terrorist group founded and led by Iraqis radicalized by the U.S. invasion and occupation. The spread of ISIS beyond Iraq has led the United States to deploy additional forces and engage in air strikes and commando raids in no less than a dozen countries in Africa and the Middle East. In addition, massive arms shipments and additional troop deployments have been made in response to Iran's strengthened role as a result of the rise of the pro-Iranian militia and the strong influence of pro-Iranian political parties in Iraq's government.

The predictable consequences of the U.S. invasion of Iraq are now being used to justify a bloated U.S. military budget and expanded overseas deployments in response to the threats the war created.

The Watson Institute at Brown University [estimates](#) that more than 300,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed in direct violence from the invasion and its aftermath, and several times that from damage to systems that provide food, health care, and clean drinking water, resulting in fatal illnesses and malnutrition that could otherwise have been avoided or treated.

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In light of such tragic results, supporters of the invasion have attempted to rewrite history. Among the false claims was that virtually everyone supported the invasion. In reality, the majority of Congressional Democrats [voted](#) against the war resolution, and the majority of registered Democrats nationally [opposed](#) it as well. There certainly were prominent Congressional Democrats who backed it—Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Harry Reid, Chuck Schumer, Adam Schiff, Ed Markey, Maria Cantwell, and Dianne Feinstein, among others—but they were a minority.

In *The Progressive* and other magazines and websites—as well as in scores of policy reports, newspaper articles, academic journals, and other sources—the likely tragic consequences of the incipient war, and a refutation of falsehoods being put forward by the Bush Administration to justify it, were made available to every member of the U.S. House and Senate. (See, for example, my September 2002 cover story in *The Nation*,

“[The Case Against War](#).”) Despite this, both the Republican-controlled House and the Democratic-controlled Senate voted to authorize the invasion anyway.

The 2002 vote authorizing the invasion was not like the vote on the 1964 [Tonkin Gulf Resolution](#) on the use of force against North Vietnam. For that vote, members of Congress had no time for hearings or debate, and 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 U.S. invasion; members of Congress also fully recognized that the resolution authorized a full-scale invasion of a sovereign nation and a subsequent military occupation for an indefinite period.

Nearly 80 percent of [U.S. international relations scholars](#), an estimated 90 percent of U.S. Middle East scholars, and an estimated 80 percent of State Department specialists on the region opposed the invasion, according to my research. Yet backers of the war insisted the experts were wrong and that George W. Bush and Dick Cheney were right. This is why many of us look at Biden and other politicians who supported the war the same way climate scientists look at Donald Trump and other climate change deniers—as anti-intellectuals driven more by ideology than facts and reason.

Indeed, members of Congress were repeatedly alerted by American academics, Middle Eastern political leaders, former State Department and intelligence officials, and others that a U.S. invasion would likely result in a long, bloody insurgency, a rise in Islamist extremism and terrorism, increased sectarian and ethnic conflict, increased Iranian influence, and related problems. Therefore, subsequent claims by war supporters that they were somehow unaware of the likely consequences of the invasion are completely false.

Similarly, throughout the country and across the world, trade unions, human rights, racial justice, and environmental groups, and others came out in opposition. Millions of Americans took to the streets in the largest series of demonstrations at that point in U.S. history. Yet the Bush Administration, Congressional Republicans, and more than one-third of Congressional Democrats ignored them.

What is striking is how forgiving many Democrats are of their leaders who supported the war. For example, the [Catholic Church](#) and virtually every [mainline Protestant denomination](#) also came out against the invasion, noting how it did not meet traditional Christian teachings regarding a just war. Only the rightwing evangelical fundamentalist churches voiced their support. It is hard to imagine that any Democrat who would side with the fundamentalists on abortion or LGBTQ+ issues would become a Congressional leader or be nominated for President. Yet regarding the critically important moral and theological issue of war and peace, Democratic voters have been quite tolerant of their leaders siding with the fundamentalists.

Part of the reason may be that many Democratic supporters of the invasion—such as presidential nominees [John Kerry](#), [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Joe Biden](#)—have subsequently misled the public on their role. Each has insisted that the October 2002 [Authorization for Use of Military Force](#) was somehow not really an authorization for the use of force, but simply a tool to convince the Iraqi regime to finally allow United Nations weapons inspectors—whom President Bill Clinton [ordered removed](#) in 1998—back into the country to engage in unfettered inspections.

It would be naïve to think those in Washington have somehow learned a lesson, given their efforts to rewrite history and claim that the invasion was at worst a “mistake” rather than a war crime.

However, Saddam Hussein had agreed to allow inspectors back in several weeks earlier. In addition, the resolution gave President Bush the authority to launch a war at a time and under circumstances of his own choosing, rejecting [the Levin Amendment](#), which would have linked authorization to approval by the U.N. Security Council. And all three of these future Democratic presidential nominees publicly supported Bush's decision to invade the following March, four months after the arrival of U.N. inspectors, who had been [unable to find any](#) of the proscribed weapons or weapons systems the Bush Administration claimed Iraq possessed. Even after acknowledging that they didn't really exist, all three of these Democrats defended the decision to have invaded anyway.

Both Kerry and Hillary Clinton [lost](#) very close elections they might have otherwise won due to the large numbers of progressive voters, bitter at their support for the Iraq invasion, who stayed home or voted for a third-party candidate. Had they done otherwise, there would have been no second Bush term and no Trump presidency.

There have been other political impacts of the lies by Bush and his Congressional supporters as well. Some elements of the left, including some anti-war writers and activists who came to the fore during the Iraq War, have become so jaded that they doubt U.S. government claims of atrocities or weapons procurement by adversarial governments even when they are true, such as the terror bombing of cities and the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. Regarding Ukraine, the Biden Administration's accurate warnings of an imminent Russian invasion early last year were dismissed by many as propaganda and, subsequently, the United States and other Western nations are being falsely blamed as somehow being responsible.

Meanwhile, in light of Biden's support for the invasion of Iraq, many governments in the Global South and elsewhere assume that his support for Ukraine now is simply about weakening Russia rather than defending international law.

With the absence of "weapons of mass destruction," the Bush Administration and its supporters [subsequently defended](#) the invasion and occupation as a necessary act of "regime change" in order to "promote democracy." As a consequence, from Belarus to Iran to Myanmar and beyond, autocratic governments and their apologists have cited Bush's policy as the basis for falsely claiming that popular, homegrown, pro-democracy movements are part of some kind of U.S.-sponsored soft coup.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq was opposed by virtually the entire international community, including Iraq's closest neighbors, who presumably had the most to be concerned about in terms of any possible Iraqi military threat. However, the Bush Administration and members of Congress who voted to authorize the invasion were determined to make the case that the United States—with the strongest military the world has ever known—was so threatened by Iraq that it had to launch an invasion, overthrow its government, and occupy that country for an indefinite period.

This shows a frighteningly low threshold for effectively declaring war, especially given that in most cases, these members of Congress had been informed by knowledgeable sources of the widespread human and material costs that would result from a U.S. invasion. It also indicates that they would likely be just as willing to send American forces off to another disastrous war again, also under false pretenses.

It would be naïve to think that those in Washington have somehow learned a lesson, given their efforts to rewrite history and claim that the invasion was at worst a "mistake" rather than a war crime. It is up to the American public to remember how the war came about and be determined to ensure it does not happen again.