

Is the Endless Iraq Conflict Finally Over?

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The First Gulf War (1990-1991)

How did U.S. military intervention in Iraq—the wealthiest Arab country in the 1970s—begin? The First Gulf War started in August 1990, when Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein's army occupied neighboring Kuwait. The Iraqi dictator invaded Kuwait City after first consulting with U.S. Ambassador in Baghdad April Glaspie who assured him that Washington would stay neutral in the incipient Iraq-Kuwait conflict. Baghdad had long accused the Kuwaitis of illegally pumping and stealing crude oil from Iraq's underground oil wells located just across their common border. Less than a year later, a large international coalition of troops, led by U.S. military forces, were dispatched by President George H.W. Bush to expel the Iraqis from occupied Kuwait. But "liberating Kuwait" was just the beginning of the U.S.-Iraqi military confrontation. Armed hostilities resumed in March 2003 after 12 years of comprehensive economic sanctions and a protracted campaign of U.S. air and missile strikes against Iraqi targets.

The Second Gulf War (2003-2011)

Speaking before a nonacademic audience, the late American historian Howard Zinn (a WWII bomber pilot and author of the landmark People's History of the United States) said,

"If you study history, what you learn is that wars are always accompanied by lies, wars are always accompanied by deceptions, wars are always accompanied by falsehoods like 'We are going to war to fight for democracy, we are going to war to fight for freedom.' Behind all the lies and deceptions that accompany all these wars was one basic motive that was behind all war—expansion, power, economics, business" (Howard Zinn: You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train, a First Run Features film by Deb Ellis and Denis Mueller, 2004).

That is why Deputy Nazi leader and German Air Force commander (Luftwaffe Reichsmarschall) Hermann Goering was emphatic when explaining to American prison psychologist Gustave Gilbert:

"Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship.... Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce

the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country” (a 1946 interview with Hermann Goering during the Nuremberg Trial).

These revealing comments of Hermann Goering in Nuremberg about how people are easily duped into going to war are fully applicable to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003-2011. Iraq was an easy target: its military had been all but destroyed in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the First Gulf War, while its oil-producing economy and civilian population had been decimated by the most comprehensive and punishing international sanctions ever imposed on a nation. When asked about a 1995 report of U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) that 567,000 Iraqi children under the age of five had died as a result of the international sanctions, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told Lesley Stahl that “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it” (60 Minutes, May 12, 1996).



The George W. Bush Administration used lies and deceptions on a massive scale to justify its war of choice against Iraq, once a friend and an ally against the anti-American government in Tehran. In fact, the Reagan Administration had been an enthusiastic supporter of Saddam Hussein during his long war with Iran, providing him with generous financial loans and military-technical assistance, including helping him develop the nerve gas he used against the Iranians and their Kurdish allies. Through his presidential envoy to Baghdad, Donald Rumsfeld, President Reagan had even sent Saddam Hussein a pair of golden cowboy spurs signed “A personal gift from Ronald Reagan” (later U.S. Marines retrieved that infamous signed gift from one of Saddam’s abandoned palaces).

The march to war

The Bush White House charged that Saddam Hussein was pursuing a clandestine program to develop nuclear arms and other WMD (weapons of mass destruction, later to be dubbed by the news media as Bush’s “weapons of mass deception”). In a 2002 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vice President Dick Cheney brazenly lied,

“Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us” (Mother Jones, April 26, 2019).

Top Administration officials also accused Iraq of secretly collaborating with al-Qaeda, the Islamic terrorist group which carried out the September 11, 2001 terror attacks—an accusation which even U.S. intelligence believed to be false. The charge of secret ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda was patently absurd because Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden had been mortal enemies ever since the Reagan Administration helped create, with Saudi help, al-Qaeda to fight the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden had been a little-known construction business millionaire when he was plucked out of total obscurity in Saudi Arabia and provided with training, money, weapons, ammunition, and secret operational bases in Pakistan to form and lead al-Qaeda in battling the “godless” Red Army in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Saddam Hussein’s regime promptly hanged as a “terrorist” any al-Qaeda operative that they had captured inside Iraq.

The equally dubious charge that Saddam Hussein was trying to build a nuclear arsenal in secret was based on what later turned out to be fake reports that Baghdad was trying to clandestinely import from Africa nuclear-weapons components like aluminum tubes and the now infamous “yellow-cake” (a uranium concentrate powder). U.S. Ambassador Joe Wilson had been secretly dispatched to Niger to investigate these allegations but found no evidence to confirm them. He openly refuted the whole story as a fabrication in an op-ed article entitled “What I Didn’t Find in Africa” (NYT, July 6, 2003) after President Bush had kept repeating in public these false allegations, including in his 2002 State of the Union address. The right-wing attack machine, led by Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News, branded Ambassador Wilson “unpatriotic” and a “liar” while the White House illegally revealed to the pro-GOP media the secret identity of his wife, CIA undercover officer Valerie Plame, who consequently lost her job as a globe-trotting spy on nuclear proliferation (see Ambassador Wilson’s 2004 memoir *The Politics of Truth: Inside the Lies that Led to War and Betrayed My Wife’s CIA Identity*, A Diplomat’s Memoir and Valerie Plame’s own 2007 memoir *Fair Game*).

The Clinton Administration had also lied about Baghdad having WMD to justify their policy of regime change through subversion, economic sanctions, and frequent bombing campaigns. So did leading congressional Democrats like Sen. Joe Biden, the bellicose chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Jim Bronke, “How Biden’s Secret 2002 Meetings Led to War in Iraq,” *Truthout*, July 28, 2019). But this absurdity was contradicted by none other than Swedish-born Hans Blix, the U.N. chief weapons inspector in charge of disarming Iraq at that time, who personally assured the Bush Administration on the eve of the Iraqi invasion that his inspectorate had carried out “about 700 inspections, and in no case did we find any weapons of mass destruction.” And his personal assurances were fully backed by the top inspector on Blix’s own staff, U.S. Marine Captain Scott Ritter (a registered Republican). Embarrassed but far from deterred, the Bush Administration still ordered Captain Ritter and all the other U.N. weapons inspectors immediately to leave Iraq just a few days before the “Shock and Awe” invasion began. Obviously, the White House was completely uninterested in any U.N. inspections or, for that matter, in Iraq’s WMD disarmament.

Throughout 2002 and into early 2003, White House officials persisted in trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the American public, warning darkly of some “clear and present danger” supposedly posed by Iraq’s alleged “nuclear ambitions” even as they presented absolutely no proof for all their ominous accusations. When pressed on a TV news show to produce such evidence, all that Bush’s national security adviser Condi Rice could say was that she did not want the “proof” to be in the form of a “mushroom cloud” over Washington, D.C. (even though she knew very well that Baghdad had no long-range missiles capable of hitting North America). Defense Secretary Donnie Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney

(CEO of oil giant Halliburton) even proclaimed that Saddam Hussein had already developed a nuclear bomb. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz assured Americans that ordinary Iraqis would welcome our troops as “liberators” with “flowers and cheers in the streets.” He and his boss Rumsfeld insisted that Iraq’s occupation would last no more than “a couple of months” and would cost “only” between \$50 and \$60 billion—to be fully paid for out of conquered Iraq’s oil revenues. But according to Dr. Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes’s article “The True Cost of the Iraq War: \$3 Trillion and Beyond” (Washington Post, September 5, 2010), the Iraq War had cost American tax-payers in toto well over \$3 trillion.

“Weapons of Mass Deception”

What were the real reasons for Bush’s controversial Iraq war? One reason often mentioned was that after the First Gulf War, Saddam Hussein had tried to punish Washington by refusing to accept what he called “worthless” U.S. paper money as payment for Iraqi exports of crude oil. He preferred instead to take the EU’s euro, even though it is, like the U.S. dollar, a “fiat” paper currency that is not backed either by gold or by anything else that is of value. The Iraq war was also a shot over the bow meant to warn Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi who had proposed minting a new Third-World currency, the gold-backed African dinar, to replace both the U.S. “petrodollar” and the euro as payment for OPEC’s oil exports. The so-called “neo-conservatives”—pro-defense hard-liners in the Bush Administration like Wolfowitz, Defense Department hawks Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, and other hawkish architects of the Iraq War—wanted to remove every anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli regime throughout the Middle East and remake the entire region to their liking. Another possible explanation is suggested by Prof. Richard Falk, U.N. Special Rapporteur on Palestinian Human Rights, whose article “The New American Idol: Should America Rule the World?” (Aljazeera, January 18, 2014) argues that our foreign-policy establishment in Washington, D.C. aspires to act as a “world government” (thereby negating the “Realist” assumptions about “state sovereignty” and the “anarchic state” of international relations). But the most likely reason may have been the seething anger felt by America’s closest ally, Israel, over Saddam Hussein’s payments of \$25,000 to the family of each Palestinian suicide bomber who blew himself up attacking Israelis in the Israel-occupied Palestinian territories.

As we know, President Bush’s own weapons inspectors found absolutely no WMD in occupied Iraq. The final outcome of the Second Gulf War was replacing Saddam Hussein’s Sunni-dominated regime with a Shia-dominated government which is very closely allied with neighboring Iran and which refused to allow the continued presence of any American troops on Iraqi territory after 2011. Another result was a vicious Shia-Sunni civil war which eventually led to the rise of ISIS. Among the other known casualties from “Operation Iraqi Freedom” were close to 5,000 U.S.-led coalition military deaths (this figure excludes the many dead among military contractors and hired non-military personnel) and nearly 40,000 wounded and maimed, as well as over a million Iraqis killed, wounded, or missing (according to the prestigious British medical journal *Lancet*). Discussing the final toll from the Iraq misadventure reminds one of a bitter but memorable verse written by Britain’s first winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature—the previously gung-ho “pro-Empire” poet and novelist Joseph Rudyard Kipling—ruefully mourning his son who was killed in action in WWI: “If any question why we died / tell them, because our fathers lied.” Of course, absolutely none of the Bush Administration’s top officials who had instigated and lied about that war ever sent a son or a daughter to fight on Iraq’s battlefields.

In remembrance of things past

Outrages like the Iraq War have been happening long before 2003. Our “George of Arabia” was not the first U.S. president to use lies and deceptions to dupe reluctant Americans into going to war. Abraham Lincoln, a freshman congressman from Illinois, accused President James K. Polk of using falsehoods and deceptions to launch a war of conquest to annex Mexico and extend slavery to its territory. Lincoln challenged President Polk to produce any evidence proving his public accusation that “Mexicans shed American blood on American soil,” when it was illegal American “settlers” who had violently occupied the Mexican province of Texas in 1836 and had been fighting their way into other Mexican border provinces. Union Army General (and later U.S. President) Ulysses Grant believed that the “most wicked” and “pro-slavery” American-Mexican War (1846-1848) was based on the White House’s lies and deceptions, and even claimed that our Civil War was punishment from God for having seized by force more than half of Mexico’s territory. Grant is quoted as saying that

“I was bitterly opposed to the measure (the declaration of war), and to this day regard the war, which resulted, as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker nation” (quoted in William S. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography*, Norton, 1981, pp. 31, 37).

On February 15, 1898, a suspicious explosion sank the USS Maine along with 266 of its crew in the harbor of Spanish-ruled Havana, Cuba. By 1974, U.S. Admiral Hyman George Rickover and his naval staff established conclusively that the massive explosion had been caused by careless mishandling of the ship’s stored munitions. But back in 1898 President William McKinley and media magnate William Randolph Hearst’s scandal-mongering “Yellow Press” blamed Spain, paving the way for the predatory Spanish-American War, in which the McKinley Administration conquered and turned into colonies Cuba (briefly), the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and other Spanish territories—all under the jingoistic battle-cry of “Remember the Maine!” McKinley even used the Spanish-American War as a pretext to annex the heretofore independent kingdom of Hawaii.

Having run as the “peace candidate” in the November 1916 presidential election, President Woodrow Wilson entered WWI as early as April 1917 with a bombastic promise:

“This is a war to end all wars...to make the world safe for democracy.” (David Lloyd George, Britain’s Prime Minister at the time, pretended—tongue in cheek—to agree with him: “This is, like all the next wars, a war to end all war.”)

“Peace” President Wilson used what he knew was a British forgery—the infamous “Zimmerman Telegram”—to convince isolationist-minded Americans of the need to enter the “Great War.” (Unlike another notorious British forgery—the so-called “Zinoviev Letter” of 1924—London has still not owned up to having falsified the Zimmerman Telegram, perhaps due to its potential to embarrass the Brits and hurt their image in America). Wilson then hired some 75,000 propagandists to fan rabidly anti-German hysteria across the nation, claiming German “atrocities” in Europe, and threw in prison everyone who “opposed the war effort” (speaking against the war or against President Wilson even in private brought an automatic 10-year prison sentence).

And on August 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson took advantage of some unconfirmed Navy reports of North Vietnamese patrol boats firing on two U.S. destroyers on the high seas

to engineer the enactment of the “deceptive” and “misleading” (in the words of then Democratic Senator and war critic J. William Fulbright) Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in Congress, opening the floodgates to the ill-fated involvement of over 550,000 American troops in the disastrous Vietnam War (1964-1975).

Conclusion

The George W. Bush Administration hoodwinked the American people into supporting the totally unprovoked Iraq war, capitalizing not on their patriotism, but on their misguided fears about an invented “Iraqi threat” and their desire for blind revenge for September 11. The White House used lies and deceptions on a massive, perhaps unprecedented scale to convince many gullible Americans (who at that time still believed naively in the words of their President) that Iraq was supposedly behind the September 11th attacks and that Iraq was developing WMD or was even in possession of WMD.

There were massive antiwar demonstrations in many places—from NYC to San Francisco—with numerous protesters carrying slogans like “No to Bush’s War!” and “No Blood for Oil!” In the House of Representatives, 133 congressmen (6 of them Republicans) voted against the Iraq War resolution and 3 abstained. And in the Senate, 23 Senators, including Sen. Barack Obama, voted against it. But many congressmen and senators who had voted in favor of the war later recanted and turned against it, when they learned the ugly truth behind all the White House’s lies and deceptions. Also, many high-ranking national security personnel, top brass (including active-service generals), and foreign-service veterans were at the time adamantly opposed to the impending invasion (Wikipedia, “Opposition to the Iraq War”) and some of them resigned their posts in protest.

Is the Iraqi conflict finally over? First, there was the “Islamic State” near-disaster—many Iraqis believe that the Saudis, UAE, Turkey, Qatar and Israel were responsible for ISIS’s successful military offensive capturing Mosul and other Iraqi cities in 2014. As a result, the Pentagon has deployed an estimated 6,000 U.S. troops back to Iraq—ostensibly to train Iraqi forces and prevent the re-emergence of the Islamic State. Donald Trump has added another rationale: “I’m keeping troops in Iraq so I can watch Iran.” But our troops in Iraq seem to be potential targets of Iranian retaliation for any U.S. military action against Tehran. Last May, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a surprise visit to Baghdad to meet with Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi and President Barham Salih. He discussed with them threats against U.S. forces in Iraq, including the firing of a couple of Katyusha rockets by Iranian-aligned Shiite militias against the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad (where the sprawling American Embassy is located). This may be one of the reasons for President Trump’s last-minute cancellation of a military response to Iran’s shooting-down of an American drone earlier this summer. As glib people like to joke, nothing is over until it’s over....

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