

How I Tried to Prevent the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq, and Why I Failed. Scott Ritter

No amount of truth can stop the world's most powerful war machine fueled by the lies of its president

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In fulfillment of his solemn, [constitutionally-enshrined](#) obligation, the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush, on January 28, 2003, stood before the rostrum in the chambers of the United States Congress and [addressed the American people](#).

"Mr. Speaker," the President began, "Vice President Cheney, members of Congress, distinguished citizens and fellow citizens, every year, by law and by custom, we meet here to consider the state of the union. This year," he intoned gravely, "we gather in this chamber deeply aware of decisive days that lie ahead." The "decisive days" Bush spoke of dealt with the decision he had already made to invade Iraq, in violation of international law, for the purpose of removing the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, from power.

Regime change had been the cornerstone policy of the United States toward Iraq ever since Bush 43's father, Bush 41 (George H. W. Bush) compared Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler and demanded Nuremberg-like justice for the crime of invading Kuwait. "Hitler revisited," the elder [Bush told a crowd at a Republican fundraiser in Dallas, Texas](#). "But remember: When Hitler's war ended, there were the Nuremberg trials."

American politicians, especially presidents seeking to take their country into war, cannot simply walk away from such statements. As such, even after driving the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait in February 1991, Bush could not rest so long as Saddam Hussein remained in power—the Middle East equivalent of Adolf Hitler had to go.

The Bush 41 administration put in place UN-backed sanctions on Iraq designed to strangle the nation's economy and promote regime change from within. These sanctions were linked to Iraq's obligation to be disarmed of its weapons of mass destruction capabilities, including

long-range missiles and chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs. Until Iraq was certified as being disarmed by UN weapons inspectors, the sanctions would remain in place. But as Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, made clear, these sanctions would never be lifted until Saddam Hussein was removed from power. "We are not interested," [Baker said on May 20, 1991](#), "in seeing a relaxation of sanctions as long as Saddam Hussein is in power."

Despite the sanctions, Saddam Hussein outlasted the administration of Bush 41. Bush's successor, Bill Clinton, continued the policy of sanctioning Iraq, combining them with UN weapons inspections to undermine Saddam Hussein. In June 1996, the Clinton administration [used the UN weapons inspections process as a front to mount a coup against Saddam](#). The effort failed, but not the policy. In 1998, Clinton signed the [Iraqi Liberation Act](#), making regime change in Iraq an official policy of the United States.

Saddam outlasted the Clinton administration as well. But, when it came to implementing US regime change plans in Iraq, the third time proved to be the charm—Saddam's fate was sealed when Bush 41's son, George W. Bush, was elected president in 2001. While Clinton had failed to remove Saddam Hussein from power, he did succeed in killing the UN inspection effort to oversee the disarmament of Iraq, allowing the US to continue to claim Iraq was not complying with its obligation to disarm, and therefore justify the continuation of economic sanctions.

This is where the issue becomes personal. From 1991 until 1998, I served as one of the senior UN weapons inspectors in Iraq, overseeing Iraq's disarmament. It was my inspection team that the CIA tried to use, in June 1996, to help launch a coup against Saddam, and it was the continued interference of the US in the work of my inspections teams that prompted my resignation from the UN in August 1998. A few months after I departed, the Clinton administration ordered UN weapons inspectors out of Iraq before initiating a bombing campaign, Operation Desert Fox.

"Most of the targets bombed during Operation Desert Fox had nothing to do with weapons manufacturing," [I wrote in my book](#), *Frontier Justice*, published in 2003. "Ninety-seven 'strategic' targets were struck during the seventy-two hour campaign; eighty-six were solely related to the security of Saddam Hussein—palaces, military barracks, security installations, intelligence schools, and headquarters. Without exception, every one of these sites had been subjected to UNSCOM inspectors (most of these inspections had been led by me), and their activities were well-known and certified as not being related to UNSCOM."

I concluded by noting that

"The purpose of Operation Desert Fox was clear to all familiar with these sites: Saddam Hussein, not Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, was the target." Following these air strikes, the Iraqis kicked the UN inspectors out for good.

This, of course, was the goal of the US all along. Now, with a new administration in power, the US was seeking to use the uncertainty about the status of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs as leverage with the American people, and the world, in order to justify an invasion of Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power once and for all. By the fall of 2002, it was clear we were a nation heading for war.

I took this personally and decided to take action to prevent it. I went to Congress and tried to get the Senate Intelligence and Foreign Relations Committees to hold genuine hearings about Iraq. They refused. The only way to prevent the invasion was to get the inspectors back in to Iraq so they could demonstrate that the country was not a threat worthy of war, but the Iraqis were putting up so many preconditions that it just wasn't going to happen.

I then decided to intervene as a private citizen. I met with Tariq Aziz, Saddam's advisor and former Foreign Minister, in South Africa, and told him I needed to speak to Iraq's National Assembly publicly, without my words being edited or vetted. That was the only way to have them let the inspectors back in. At first, Aziz said I was crazy. After two days of discussion, he agreed.

I spoke to the Iraqi National Assembly. For that alone, people have accused me of treason, even though in that speech, I cut the Iraqis no slack and held them accountable for the crimes they had committed. I warned them that they were about to be invaded and that their only option was to let the inspectors back in.

Having broadcast that, the Iraqi government had to deal with me. I met with the vice president, the foreign minister, the oil minister, and the president's science advisor. Five days later, they convinced Saddam Hussein to let weapons inspectors back into Iraq without preconditions. I count this as one of the highlights of my life.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. Yes, UN inspectors returned, but their work [was undermined at every turn by the US](#), which sought to discredit their findings. Now, on that fateful evening on January 28, 2003, the President stepped forward to complete the mission—to make a case for war on the basis of the threat posed by Iraq and its unaccounted-for WMD.

This was not a new debate. In fact, I had been trying to debunk this sort of argument ever since the US ordered UN weapons inspectors out of Iraq in December 1998. In June 2000, at the behest of Senator John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, and a critical member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [I had put my case down in writing](#), publishing a long article in Arms Control Today which was then distributed to every member of Congress. In 2001, I had made a documentary film, [In Shifting Sands](#), in an effort to reach out to the American public about the truth regarding Iraqi WMD, the status of their disarmament, and the inadequacy of the US case for war.

Nonetheless, here was the President of the United States, taking advantage of his Constitutional obligation to inform Congress, promulgating a case for war built on a foundation of lies.

“Almost three months ago,” Bush declared, “the United Nations Security Council gave Saddam Hussein his final chance to disarm [note: this is after I helped convince Iraq to allow UN weapons inspectors to return without precondition]. He has shown instead utter contempt for the United Nations and for the opinion of the world.” Bush observed that Iraq had failed to cooperate with UN weapons inspectors, noting that “it was up to Iraq to show exactly where it is hiding its banned weapons, lay those weapons out for the world to see and destroy them as directed. Nothing like this has happened.”

Iraq had declared that it had no WMD left, and as such was in no position to show anyone where it was hiding non-existent weapons. In fact, the UN weapons inspectors, working in full cooperation with the Iraqi government, had debunked the intelligence provided by the

US alleging Iraqi non-compliance. The US was operating on principles dating back to James Baker's May 1991 declaration that sanctions would not be lifted until Saddam Hussein was removed from power.

The President went on to articulate specific claims about unaccounted-for anthrax and botulinum toxin biological agents. He made similar claims about Sarin, mustard and VX chemical weapons. "The International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed in the 1990s that Saddam Hussein had an advanced nuclear weapons development program, had a design for a nuclear weapon and was working on five different methods of enriching uranium for a bomb," the President said.

This was true – I was one of the inspectors at the center of tracking down Iraq's nuclear weapons ambition. But then the President went on to utter 16 words that would go down in infamy: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

CIA Director George Tenet was later [compelled to admit before Congress](#) that "[t]hese 16 words should never have been included in the text written for the president." As Tenet later noted, while the assertion regarding the existence of British intelligence was correct, the CIA itself did not have confidence in the report. "This [the existence of British intelligence] did not rise to the level of certainty which should be required for presidential speeches," Tenet said, "and the CIA should have ensured that it was removed."

The fact of the matter is that the entire case made by President Bush about Iraq was a lie, and the CIA was complicit in helping the President promulgate that lie. The sole purpose of this lie was to engender fear among Congress and the American people that Iraq, and especially its leader, Saddam Hussein, was a threat worthy of war.

'Year after year,' Bush intoned, 'Saddam Hussein has gone to elaborate lengths, spent enormous sums, taken great risks to build and keep weapons of mass destruction. But why? The only possible explanation,' Bush said, answering his own question, "the only possible use he could have for those weapons, is to dominate, intimidate or attack.'

'With nuclear arms or a full arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, Saddam Hussein could resume his ambitions of conquest in the Middle East and create deadly havoc in that region.

'And this Congress and the American people must recognize another threat. Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of Al Qaeda. Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own.

'Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained. But chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily contained.

'Imagine those 19 hijackers with other weapons and other plans, this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.

We will do everything in our power, to make sure that that day never comes.'

The President then got down to the crux of his presentation on Iraq. "The United States will ask the UN Security Council to convene on February the 5th [2003] to consider the facts of Iraq's ongoing defiance of the world. Secretary of State [Colin] Powell will present information and intelligence about Iraq's illegal weapons programs, its attempts to hide those weapons from inspectors and its links to terrorist groups."

The President stared into the camera, addressing the American people directly. "We will consult," he said, "but let there be no misunderstanding: If Saddam Hussein does not fully disarm for the safety of our people, and for the peace of the world, we will lead a coalition to disarm him."

I stared back at the television screen, sick to my stomach. The President's speech was composed of lies. All lies.

I had expended every ounce of my energy trying in vain to debunk these lies, but to no avail. My country was on the verge of going to war on the basis of words I knew to be false, and there was nothing more I could do to prevent it.

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Featured image: U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell holding up vial of simulated anthrax at UN Security Council meeting as he makes the case for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

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