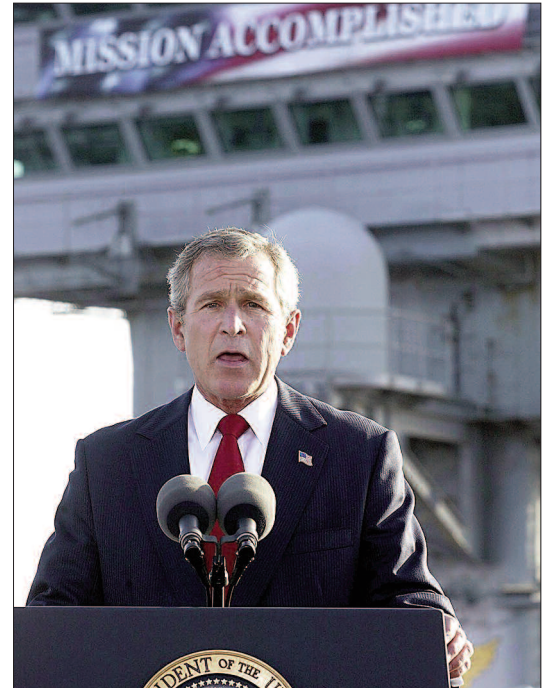


The Iraq War: 10 Years Later

Was the war worth the cost in money and lives?

As the world marks the 10th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the war is fast fading from the memories of many Americans. After more than eight years of combat, the U.S. and Iraqi governments couldn't come to terms on keeping U.S. combat troops in the country. They were withdrawn at the end of 2011 except for a small contingent involved in training Iraqi forces. But Iraq remains mired in sectarian and religious conflict. In the United States, debates about the justification for the invasion have given way to arguments about whether Iraq is a budding democracy — an objective of the George W. Bush administration — or a new dictatorship. That dispute intersects with the question of whether U.S. withdrawal from Iraq will spur the country to solve its own problems or push it into friendlier relations with its anti-American neighbor, Iran.



Six weeks after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush stood on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln beneath a banner reading "Mission Accomplished" and told the crew, "The tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free." The war lasted eight more years and cost the lives of some 122,000 Iraqis and nearly 4,500 U.S. military personnel. The banner, suggested and hung by the crew, was printed by the White House.

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MANAGING EDITOR: Thomas J. Billitteri
tjb@cqpress.com

ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR: Kathy Koch
kkoch@cqpress.com

SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR:
Thomas J. Colin
tcolin@cqpress.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Kenneth Jost

STAFF WRITER: Marcia Clemmitt

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS: Sarah Glazer,
Peter Katel, Barbara Mantel, Tom Price,
Jennifer Weeks

SENIOR PROJECT EDITOR: Olu B. Davis

ASSISTANT EDITOR: Darrell Dela Rosa

FACT CHECKER: Michelle Harris

EDITORIAL INTERN: Ethan McLeod



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**VICE PRESIDENT AND EDITORIAL DIRECTOR,
HIGHER EDUCATION GROUP:**
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**SENIOR DIRECTOR, ONLINE LIBRARY AND
REFERENCE PUBLISHING:**
Todd Baldwin

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The Iraq War: 10 Years Later

BY PETER KATEL

THE ISSUES

A decade after the United States invaded Iraq, American combat troops are gone from the country, and Iraq no longer dominates U.S. public life as it did for much of the 2000s.

Yet fiery debates over the war and its aftermath continue to smolder: Was the war worth the deaths of 4,475 U.S. troops and more than \$800 billion — so far — in American resources? ¹ And did President Obama make the right call by not pressing harder to keep U.S. troops in Iraq?

Backers of the war, launched by the George W. Bush administration 10 years ago this month, insist it was necessary. “I am not apologetic about my advocacy for the war,” says Michael Rubin, a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute who worked in the Pentagon and Baghdad as a member of the Bush administration during the war. Rubin casts Iraq favorably as moving toward a state of “messy democracy” after decades of repression under former dictator Saddam Hussein.

But others see today’s Iraq in a far dimmer light. Paul Pillar, who emerged as a war critic after retiring as a senior Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst, says Iraq’s elected government is “moving quite a bit toward authoritarianism.” And he contends the war brought about one of the very dangers the Bush administration said it was trying to eradicate: the presence of al Qaeda terrorists in Iraq. “There was no al Qaeda in Iraq” before the war, Pillar says, “and now there is.”



Iraqi Sunnis chant anti-government slogans against Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shiite-dominated administration during a mass street demonstration in Baghdad on Feb. 8, 2013. American combat troops pulled out of Iraq in December 2011, but religious and ethnic tensions continue to plague Iraq, with bombings and shootings a persistent part of the political landscape.

AFP/Getty Images/Ahmad al-Rubaye

Although debates that dominated the buildup and early days of the war were resolved when Iraq was found not to possess weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), current debate over the war focuses on Obama’s handling of the conflict’s end. When the last U.S. combat troops left Iraq in December 2011, Obama, who won the White House as the anti-Iraq War candidate when the conflict was a hot political issue, said he had fulfilled his pledge to end the war, “responsibly” and that “a new day is upon us.” ²

However, some critics say toppling the Hussein dictatorship has altered

the balance of power among the region’s rival Sunni- and Shiite-dominated nations and driven Iraq — formerly led by Sunnis — into the arms of neighboring Iran, a Shiite-run theocracy that its mostly Sunni neighbors and the international community want to keep from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Iran and the United States have been at odds since 1979, and Obama has led an international campaign to toughen trade sanctions against Iran. He vowed in February to “do what is necessary to prevent them from getting a nuclear weapon,” indicating that military action is not off the table. ³ But some critics say Obama gave up the chance to blunt Iran’s power in the region by failing to convince the new Iraqi government to accept a continuing U.S. military presence in Iraq after 2011.

“We failed to take advantage of the surge,” says Peter Mansoor, a retired Army colonel. Mansoor served as executive officer to Gen. David Petraeus, commander of U.S. and allied forces in

Iraq during the so-called surge — when Bush controversially boosted U.S. troop levels in Iraq by 20,000. “I get the sense we don’t have any leverage,” says Mansoor.

As a result, Obama may have made it harder to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions, critics say, and given Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki more reason to rely on a country ruled by fellow conservative Shiites. “I think Maliki would say, ‘I’m going to put my bets on my Iranian neighbor,’” says Mansoor, now a professor of military history at Ohio State University’s Mershon Center for International Security Studies.

Iraq and Iran Share a Common Religious View

Iraq and neighboring Iran are the only Muslim countries with predominantly Shiite populations led by Shiites, who represent 15 percent of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims. The tiny Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain — the only other Muslim country with a majority-Shiite population — is ruled by Sunni sheiks. Lebanon and Yemen have mixed Sunni-Shiite populations. In majority-Sunni Syria, Sunni insurgents have been waging a two-year civil war against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiism. Islam's Sunni-Shiite split developed in the 7th century over who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis believed the best qualified leader should succeed him, while Shiites believed Muhammad's blood descendants were his rightful successors.

Branches of Islam in the Middle East



Source: John R. Bradley, "The Ancient Loathing Between Sunnis and Shi'ites Is Threatening to Tear Apart the Muslim World," Daily Mail, March 2011, www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1367435/Middle-East-unrest-Sunni-Shiite-conflict-threatens-tear-Muslim-world-apart.html

Al-Maliki has reason to feel comforted by the presence of a friendly neighbor. Iraq is suffering a continuing plague of suicide and vehicle bomb attacks — al Qaeda trademarks. At least 150 people died in such attacks so far

this year, either individually or in groups targeted by bombers. Individual victims included a member of Iraq's parliament. (See "Current Situation.")⁴

Optimists point out that the violence, though persistent, remains at a level far

below what it was in 2007, when the surge began. (See graphic, p. 213.) The move was aimed at suppressing escalating violence and preparing the government to assume responsibility for the country's security. For the United States, the surge sharply reduced American casualties in Iraq and paved the way for the withdrawal of U.S. forces.⁵

Some experts say Obama was correct in ending the military presence because the surge succeeded. Douglas Ollivant, an Army veteran of the war who also served as Iraq director on the National Security Council during the Bush and Obama administrations, says, "When you overthrow a state and start to rebuild, it's going to be a job of decades." Ollivant, currently a senior national security fellow at the New American Foundation think tank, says Iraq today "is what victory in one of these operations looks like — and it's not very pretty."

But others, including some who share Ollivant's on-the-ground experience, see the picture getting uglier. "The war is not over," says Lt. Col. Joel Rayburn, an Army intelligence officer who served in Iraq and is now a research associate at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies in Washington.

Last year, he notes, about 4,500 civilians died violently in Iraq, 400 more than the year before.⁶ That is a far cry from the nearly 27,000 civilians who died violently at the peak of the war — the 12 months that ended in March 2007.⁷ But Rayburn still argues that today's level of violence "meets the textbook definition of civil war." And, he adds, "It will be higher this year, mark my words."

Even at its lower level, the violence reflects the religious and ethnic divisions that marked the Iraq War and continue to fester. Victims of the mass-casualty suicide bombings this year largely fell into three categories: civilian Shiites; police officers of the Shiite-dominated government; and Sunni mili-

tia who had once fought the U.S. occupation and Iraqi government but gave up their insurgency and turned against al Qaeda.⁸

In pre-invasion Iraq, Shiites were relegated to second-class status. Iraq's ruling Baath Party, along with top military and security officials, was dominated by members of the Sunni branch of Islam, Hussein among them. (Hussein's regime was secular. The new Iraq is non-sectarian in principle, with freedom of religion and women's equal rights guaranteed, but Shiite religious leaders have powerful though informal influence on government).⁹

When American military officers realized that some Sunni insurgents were growing hostile to al Qaeda, the United States adopted a counterinsurgency strategy aimed at turning the Sunni fighters into U.S. allies and full-fledged participants in building the new Iraq.

Whether that realignment survives the U.S. withdrawal is not clear. American officials poured enormous effort into persuading Iraqis to make their new government represent the country's religious and ethnic diversity. Accordingly, Prime Minister al-Maliki is Shiite, Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi is Sunni and President Jalal Talabani is a Kurd (a Muslim people for whom their non-Arab ethnicity is more key to their identity than religious affiliation).

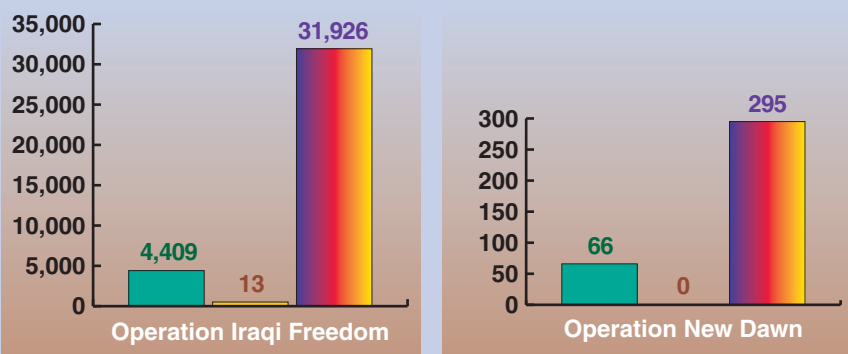
Talabani suffered a stroke in December and is being treated in Germany.¹⁰ Al-Hashimi fled the country in 2011 after al-Maliki accused him of commanding a death squad that assassinated government officials and police officers. Al-Hashimi was later sentenced to death in absentia and now lives in Turkey, a majority-Sunni country that has refused to extradite him. In Iraq, Sunnis saw the case as part of an anti-Sunni campaign by al-Maliki.¹¹

In another reflection of ethno-religious tensions, al-Hashimi had earlier taken up refuge in a semi-autonomous northern region that is home to the coun-

Nearly 4,500 U.S. Military Personnel Killed in Iraq

More than 4,400 U.S. military personnel died and nearly 32,000 were injured in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. combat mission in Iraq. An additional 66 died and nearly 300 were injured in a sequel mission, Operation New Dawn. It ran from September 2010 until Dec. 15, 2011, and focused on training and advising Iraqi security forces. A small number of U.S. military personnel remain in Iraq.

U.S. Military Casualties in Iraq War



Source: Department of Defense casualty figures, February 2013, www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf

■ Military personnel deaths
■ Department of Defense civilian deaths
■ Military personnel wounded in action

try's Kurdish minority, who had also refused to turn him over.

Though tensions and conflicts between and within the country's sects and ethnic groups (which include small populations of Turkmen and Christians) loom large in Iraq, they had gotten little official notice during the U.S. buildup to war.

Instead, debate centered on intelligence reports that Iraq was storing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), attempting to acquire nuclear arms and, in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, possibly harboring links to al Qaeda. "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," National Security Adviser (later Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice said in 2002, representing the Bush administration doctrine that the post-9/11 world didn't allow the United States to require 100 percent certainty before taking military action against a potential threat.¹²

But even before the Iraq invasion's one-year anniversary, exhaustive on-the-ground searches discredited the information about WMDs and nuclear weapons. (See "Background.") And Pillar — the intelligence community's top Middle East analyst in 2000-2005 — rocked Washington after retiring in 2006 when he said that spy agencies' WMD information had not been as definitive as the administration claimed when it launched the war.

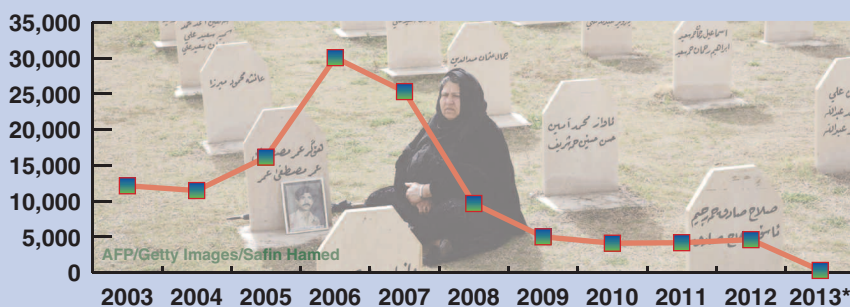
"Intelligence was misused publicly to justify decisions already made," Pillar wrote.¹³

Specifically, some CIA analysts had expressed considerable skepticism about Hussein's alleged al Qaeda links — skepticism later validated by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence — but Bush administration officials had declared the connections a reality that added to the Iraq regime's perceived danger to Americans.¹⁴

Civilian Deaths Track Course of War

Estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths vary widely, depending on the organization collecting the data and the nature and circumstances of the fatalities. Iraq Body Count, a British organization that cross-checks media reports with hospital and morgue records, government reports and other information, estimates that 122,000 Iraqi civilians have died since 2003 as a result of the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq. Some deaths stemmed from direct military action, while others were the result of terror attacks or sectarian violence. Deaths peaked in 2006 as violence between Sunni and Shiite factions escalated, then declined sharply after additional U.S. troops were deployed in what was called the “surge.” Civilian deaths have edged up during the past two years but remain far below the 2006 peak.

Iraqi Civilian Deaths related to the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq, 2003-present



* 265, through Jan. 31

Source: “Documented Civilian Deaths From Violence,” Iraq Body Count, February 2013, www.iraqbodycount.org/database/

Once U.S. troops, with some help from Britain and other allies, had toppled the dictatorship, post-invasion problems upended Bush administration forecasts of a quick war and a peaceful transition to democracy. “There is no plan for an extended occupation in Iraq,” Richard N. Perle, a longtime invasion advocate who chaired the advisory Defense Policy Board, said shortly before the war began. He predicted a warm welcome from Iraqis grateful for the toppling of the dictator.¹⁵

As policymakers, military planners and national security officials look back on the war and ponder Iraq’s future, here are some of the questions they are debating:

Did the mission succeed?

Forty-two days after the invasion of Iraq, President Bush stood on the deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* beneath an enormous banner reading “Mission Accomplished.” Bush never uttered those words. But what he did say to the assembled aircraft carrier crew and to the military in general delivered the same message: “In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed. . . . Because of you, our nation is more secure. Because of you, the tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free.”¹⁶

Only months later, combat was intensifying for U.S. troops, and the war’s original main objective — securing Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction

— had proved groundless. In response, the Bush administration said the war’s major goal was to build democracy in a country emerging from decades of vicious dictatorship rooted in deep ethnic and religious divides.

“Let freedom reign!” Bush wrote on the note informing him, in June 2004, that the United States had formally passed sovereignty to a newly formed Iraqi interim government.¹⁷

The remodeling of the U.S. campaign in Iraq came on the heels of conclusive evidence that Iraq didn’t have WMDs or factories to make them. Vice President Richard B. Cheney also had insisted that the Hussein regime had colluded with the 9/11 plotters, but CIA and FBI analysts disputed that conclusion and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence upheld the analysts in a massive 2004 report on pre-war intelligence.¹⁸

Bush insisted that he had made the right decision based on intelligence reports he had before the war. But even as he and his administration shifted their focus to instilling democracy in Iraq, a Sunni insurgency against both U.S. forces and Shiites, aided by al Qaeda, was already under way. Meanwhile, Shiite militias, aided by Iran, were organizing to fight the occupation and the Sunnis, and the Kurdish population was solidifying control of an autonomous region in northern Iraq.¹⁹

During the ensuing years — which were marked by the surge, parliamentary elections and the 2011 U.S. troop withdrawal — the American public’s focus on Iraq gradually receded. But among those with military connections or special interests in foreign affairs, the debate over the war’s mission has never ended.

The consensus is that Iraq is not a democracy today, though there is disagreement as to whether it is heading in a democratic or dictatorial direction. Freedom House, a nonpartisan U.S. nonprofit that evaluates the state of

democracy around the world, classifies Iraq as “not free.” Elections were honest, the organization said, but “political participation and decision-making . . . remain seriously impaired by sectarian and insurgent violence, widespread corruption and the influence of foreign powers.”²⁰

Pillar, the retired CIA analyst, argues that the U.S. campaign was close to a complete failure. “There is no conceivable way in which a balance sheet on the Iraq War can consider it a net plus,” he says. Noting Iran’s growing influence in Iraq, he says, “We achieved nothing and in some ways hurt ourselves.”

The one concession that Pillar makes to the pro-war argument centers on the brutality of Hussein’s regime, which was notorious for atrocities such as 1974 and 1987-’88 massacres of Kurds, which included the use of napalm and poison gas. At least 50,000 people, and perhaps as many as 150,000, died in the second of these campaigns.²¹ “The current Iraq regime isn’t as brutal as Saddam was,” he says.

But Rubin, of the American Enterprise Institute, argues that “we were somewhat successful in building democracy” in Iraq. “Iraqi democracy ain’t pretty but it’s certainly better than Syria’s or Egypt’s.”

He maintains that Hussein was planning to rebuild Iraq’s stock of WMD’s, such as the gases used on the Kurds, when pre-war international economic sanctions against the regime collapsed. Hussein, in Rubin’s view, remained a regional and global security threat as long as he remained in power.

Rubin echoes the consensus that planning for a post-Hussein Iraq suffered from a fundamental flaw: “No one had an idea of what the U.S. goal would be until after war began,” he says. Even so, the Bush administration from the beginning acted with the intention of planting a democratic government in Iraq, he contends. The administration, he says, had answered a



AP Photo

Cpl. Charles A. Graner Jr., a U.S. Army reservist, poses next to a detainee who died during interrogation in late 2003 at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Iraq. Similar photos surfaced along with revelations that American troops at the prison had tortured and humiliated Iraqi prisoners, causing a worldwide uproar. Graner was convicted of prisoner abuse and served more than six years of a 10-year sentence.

resounding “no” to a crucial pre-war question: “If you remove Saddam Hussein, do you just replace him with his sons or another general?”

Yet James F. Jeffrey, U.S. ambassador to Iraq in 2010-12 and a senior diplomat in Baghdad during the Bush administration, says the Bush administration was overly optimistic that it could transform Iraq into an egalitarian state. “The theory that we could create Norway or Poland in the Middle East and [that] the region would become pro-Western or democratic — it didn’t turn out that way.”

Jeffrey, now a distinguished visiting fellow at the Washington Institute, a think tank on Middle Eastern affairs, rejects the view that the United States exacerbated Iraq’s ethnic

and sectarian problems. The Sunni-Shiite divide existed long before the invasion, he notes. And armed jihadists are active throughout the region. Still, he says, “It might have made more sense to look for an option where we would have toppled Saddam and asked the U.N. to come in and try to set up a process but not overthrow the entire political structure.”

But Iraqi-American Zainab al-Suwaij views the U.S. approach as a success, especially given the contrast between the Hussein era and the present. “People are not afraid any more to speak out about things they don’t like,” says al-Suwaij, executive director of the American Islamic Congress, which is teaching peaceful conflict resolution in Iraq under a State Department contract. “Before, you cannot even mention Saddam’s name and cannot express your feelings and your religious identity.”

Al-Suwaij, who travels to Iraq every six weeks and fought in a 1991 Shiite uprising in southern Iraq that followed the defeat of Iraq in the brief Persian Gulf War (see p. 215), acknowledges that conditions remain difficult.

“People talk about corruption and say that basic services are not there,” she says. “But at the end of the day, we know that Saddam is not there. They don’t want to go back to Saddam’s time.”

Did the war boost Iran’s regional and global power?

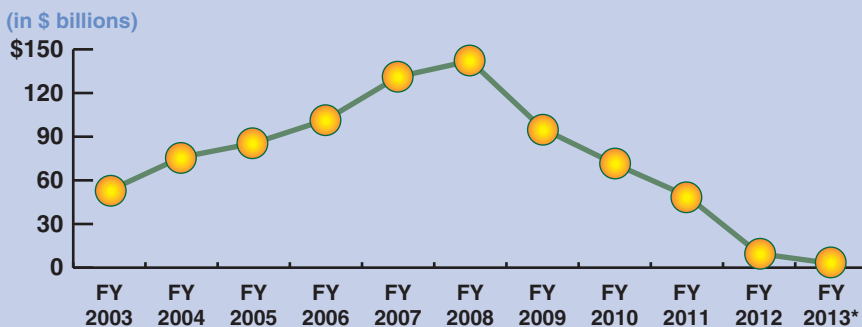
An irony of the Iraq War was that it was launched by an administration that viewed Iran as part of a so-called axis of evil (see p. 216). Yet the war changed Iraq and Iran from hostile to friendly neighbors, if not allies.

That change stems above all from the toppling of Hussein, a sworn enemy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hussein, who after the 1979 Iranian revolution saw the newly established Shiite regime as a mortal threat to his rule, launched a bloody, eight-year war against Iran in 1980. An estimated 1.5 million

Iraq War Tab Approaches \$1 Trillion — At Least

The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service (CRS) estimated the cost of the Iraq War through March 2011 at \$806 billion. The Obama administration withdrew remaining U.S. troops from Iraq in December 2011, but a small contingent of U.S. advisers remained to train Iraqi forces. The war's costs grew sharply from 2006 through 2008 as sectarian violence in Iraq peaked. Some experts say the war's total cost may exceed \$1 trillion as veterans require future medical care. Others say the conflict's impact on the U.S. economy could drive the total cost to \$3 trillion or higher.

Estimates for U.S. Funding for Iraq War, FY2003-FY2013



* Budget request

Sources: Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11," Congressional Research Service, March 2011, p. 3, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf; 2012 and 2013 figures are from Department of Defense.

people on both sides were killed or wounded.²²

The war, which involved the use of chemical weapons by both sides, and the hostility that persisted afterward had elements of religious conflict, deeply rooted historical enmity between Arab Iraqis and Persian Iranians and geopolitical rivalry between the two oil powers.²³

Notably, Prime Minister al-Maliki's career demonstrates the complexities of ties between Iran, whose theocratic government is overseen by conservative Shiite religious authorities, and the Shiites who make up the dominant political force in Iraq, which has a secular government.

Al-Maliki, a member of the Dawa Shiite party that was outlawed during

the Hussein dictatorship, dodged arrest by fleeing to Iran in 1979. He helped direct clandestine operations against Hussein's regime from there, but clashed with Iranian officials whom he considered too meddlesome. By one account, he refused orders to work against Iraq on behalf of an enemy country during the Iran-Iraq War and departed Iran for Syria.²⁴

For all its complications, the new Iran-Iraq relationship has given Iran considerable military as well as political influence in Iraq. During U.S. military involvement in Iraq, American officials tracked a deadly form of improvised explosive device (IED) — one to which even tanks were vulnerable — to factories in Iran. The Americans also found a series of po-

litical and military connections between Iran and Iraqi militia and political leaders.²⁵

Today, although Iran's influence on Iraq is evident, experts disagree on how deep it runs.

Not surprisingly, some of the gloomiest views come from Iraqi Sunnis. "In the United States, if you ask anyone, they say, 'We did not give Iraq to Iran,'" says Najim Abed al-Jabouri, a research fellow at the National Defense University's Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies in Washington. "But the truth is that the United States gave Iraq to Iran. All the Arab countries now do not like Iraq because they think Iraq is part of Iran."

Iran exerts influence within Iraq's security forces and in the economies of Shiite cities in southern Iraq, says al-Jabouri, a former mayor of the Iraqi city of Tal Afir who was granted refuge in the United States after his close cooperation with the U.S. military during the war's counterinsurgency phase.²⁶ (See sidebar, p. 222.) Ordinary Iraqis, Shiites as well as Sunnis, are alarmed, al-Jabouri says. "The Sunni people hate Iran so much — you cannot imagine," he says, "but I have many friends in the Shia area who do not like the influence of Iran in those cities. We know they [Iranians] hate the Arabs."

Nevertheless, given the centuries of rivalry between Arab and Persian empires in the Middle East, some non-Iraqi experts question the extent of Iranian authority in Arab Iraq, despite the shared religious affiliation of the country's majority populations. "I do not believe that the Iranians are suddenly super-powerful," says Joost Hiltermann, former Middle East program director of the International Crisis Group, a conflict-resolution advocacy group based in Brussels. "They have influence. When it comes to the prime minister, they may not be able to say who it should be, but they can say who it shouldn't be."

At the same time, says Hiltermann, now the Crisis Group's chief operating officer, the United States has maintained some level of influence as well. "Iraqis are balancing between Iran and the United States and even Turkey," he says. "Their loyalty is not to anyone. I like that; they ought to be independent and not have terms dictated by anyone."

Nevertheless, says Rayburn of the National War College, Iran — though it doesn't enjoy undisputed power in Iraq — has a vested interest in keeping its neighbor politically divided. "For the Iranians, the best outcome is an Iraqi government that is friendly, weak and divided among factions over whom the Iranians have some influence or control," he says.

In that state of affairs, Rayburn says, Iran becomes the deciding voice when disputes arise within the Iraqi political class. Iranian officials, he says, ensured that al-Maliki retained the post of prime minister only with the support of Shiite political parties, despite his earlier attempt to put some distance between himself and those groups. "It was an Iranian victory to force him to go to the other Shia parties," Rayburn says.

But some Middle East experts argue that Iran's gain from the Iraq War shouldn't be seen as permanent. For now, says Ollivant, the former National Security Council Iraq director, Iran "absolutely" gained from Iraqi regime change. "Saddam Hussein was part of the league of Sunni states aligned against Iran," he says.

Iraq's elected secular government, he points out, challenges the Iranian regime in a way that Hussein did not. "The existence of the Iraqi state is an existential challenge to Iranian government legitimacy," he says. "Iranian [citizens] can look across the border and say, 'It doesn't have to be this way. [The Iraqis] are not under sanctions, the people vote and their government is not run by clerics.'"

Troop Levels Peaked During 'Surge'

The number of U.S. military personnel in Iraq was highest in 2007 when 20,000 extra troops were sent in as part of the "surge," designed to quell rising sectarian violence. Troop levels dropped significantly in 2010, as the United States ended its combat mission and focused more on security and counterterrorism. All U.S. troops except for about 200 military advisers and trainers left Iraq in December, 2011.



Did the war weaken the U.S. economy?

As soon as the first signs of the U.S. economic crisis appeared in 2008, economists and others began debating what role the costly Iraq War, along with the war in Afghanistan — which began in 2001 — might have played in damaging the American economy. Since then, the debate has broadened to include the overall effects of the two wars — such as long term health care for thousands of injured veterans along with related security and military costs — on U.S. economic health.

As of the end of fiscal 2011, according to the most recent detailed accounting by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, since Sept. 11, 2001, the United States has spent \$1.28 trillion on the so-called war on terror. That includes \$806 billion for the Iraq War, plus the cost of the war in Afghanistan and \$29 billion for security upgrades at military bases

around the world and \$6 billion in unallocated funds.²⁷

But some experts say other spending on war-related programs significantly raised the overall cost. Another part of the war-funding picture is the fact that the Bush administration had won a major tax cut from Congress in 2001, two years before the war began, reducing federal revenues by \$1.6 trillion over 10 years.²⁸ There was no effort to raise taxes to fight the war.

For the same 10-year period, the Eisenhower Study Group at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies arrived at a total of at least \$3.2 trillion, which includes not just the cost of the war but war-related spending by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, which oversee nation-building programs in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as domestic anti-terrorism costs.²⁹ By 2013, estimates

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Linda J. Bilmes, a senior lecturer in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who was part of the Eisenhower Study Group, spending on the wars has reached \$2 trillion in direct expenses. But the economic effects of the conflicts will be felt for decades, she says.

"What is certainly true is that the United States has much less wiggle room in terms of spending on other things because of legacy costs of the wars," says Bilmes, who was assistant secretary of commerce in the Clinton administration. Those costs include a soaring budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (from \$50 billion in 2001 to \$140 billion requested this year). The costs also include maintenance of the \$750 million U.S. embassy in Baghdad, the world's biggest diplomatic outpost.³⁰

Bilmes, who has been collaborating on studies of war costs with Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University, also argues that the Iraq War helped set the stage for the housing market crash that set off the 2007-2008 recession, spurred in part by a huge increase in oil prices. Petroleum prices skyrocketed from \$25-\$30 a barrel in 2003 to as much as \$150 a barrel in 2008. Oil-producing Iraq is located in a region that's central to world petroleum shipping, so war there typically triggers fears of supply disruption.³¹ Bilmes says when the Federal Reserve sought to keep interest rates low to compensate for the oil-price spike, the low rates led

to rampant speculation in housing, creating a bubble that helped spark the economic crisis.

But some Iraq War critics as well as supporters take issue with that idea.

Another Nobel laureate economist, Paul Krugman, wrote that higher oil prices caused by the war did slow down the economy. "Overall, though," the Princeton professor and *New York Times* columnist added, "the story of America's economic difficulties is about the bursting housing bubble, not the war."³²

And some war supporters view economy-based critiques as attempts to devise new reasons to oppose the

Center and a former interpreter and analyst in Iraq, also disputes the view that war spending helped bring on the recession. On the contrary, he says, the war may have delayed the crash via government spending that benefited government contractors, including himself. "What got us in the recession was mortgages," he says.

Jensen advances another economics-based argument — that the war in time will prove to have been worth the spending. The "Arab Spring" uprisings in the Middle East, a revolutionary series of popular protests in the region that began in December 2010, promise

to provide political stability that could reduce U.S. security spending, he contends.³³

And, Jensen adds, "If Iraq is able in five years to produce 5 million barrels a day, that will lower world oil prices, with the net effect that the U.S. economy will be doing better. And that buys time for the United States for renewable energy."

But if the region remains tumultuous, even increased oil output may not lower oil prices. Jeffrey, of the Washington Institute, argues that the hopes for a political transformation of the Middle East weren't sub-

stantial enough to have justified a debt-financed war. "If you are allowed to fund a war on debt," he says, "then you can fund other things on debt. The war was a bad symbol of that kind of thinking."

As for hopes for a more stable and peaceful Middle East — as important as oil output is in keeping oil prices low — Jeffrey says, "The war was seen by some . . . as a good thing — that we would be able to transform a re-



Members of the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Regiment, known as The Old Guard, carry the flag-draped coffin of Army Pfc. Dylan J. Johnson of Tulsa, Okla., during burial services in Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Va., on Aug. 9, 2011. Johnson was among the 4,475 American military personnel killed in Iraq since the war began in 2003.

Getty Images/Alex Wong

gion that badly needs transformation. I don't think we can affect the region, and I don't think we did affect it by invading Iraq.” ■

BACKGROUND

The Buildup

The idea of toppling Hussein by invading Iraq had been circulating in Washington since the end of the 42-day Persian Gulf War. In that conflict, President George H. W. Bush — father of President George W. Bush — assembled a massive, U.S.-led international military force to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait, which Iraq had invaded and occupied.³⁴

Bush decided against extending the war to force Hussein from power, fearing the regional effects of a U.S.-led regime change. He hoped the Persian Gulf War would encourage the Iraqi military to do the job.³⁵

But when, in the immediate aftermath of the war, Shiites in southern Iraq and Kurds in northern Iraq rose up against Hussein, the United States withheld aid to the rebels, in part because the administration feared that the Shiites would secede from Iraq, which would benefit Iran. Hussein's forces crushed the Iraqi rebels.³⁶

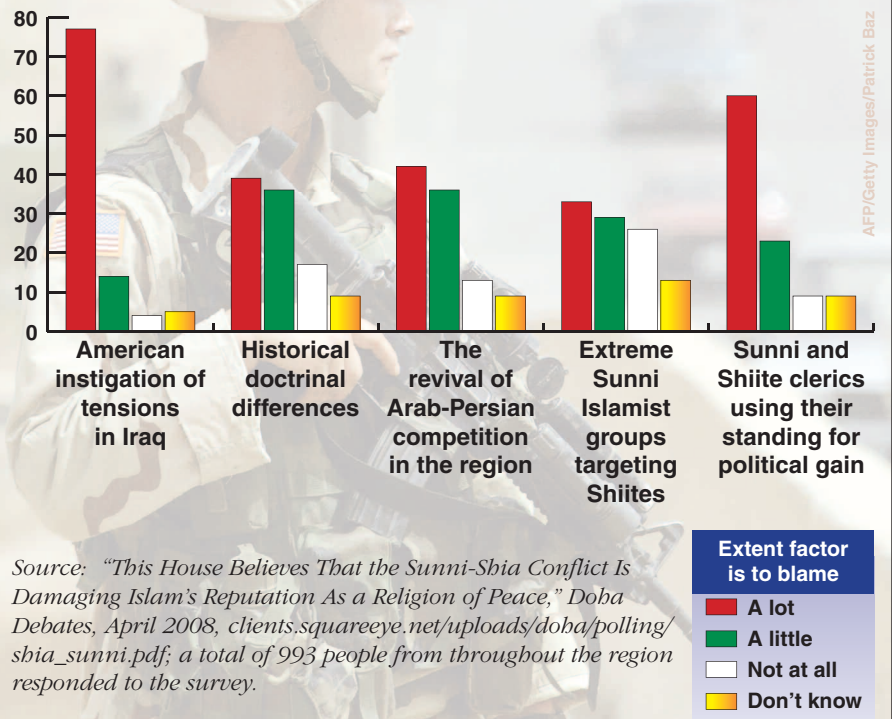
In response, the United Nations in March 1991 authorized a “no-fly zone” for Iraqi warplanes in the north and south, enforced by the United States and its allies. Meanwhile, trade sanctions against Iraq on oil exports and imports of militarily useful goods, authorized by the U.N. after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, remained in place.³⁷

These measures did not prevent Hussein from amassing WMDs, argued Washington conservatives who wanted the Clinton administration to do more than try to slowly erode Hussein's rule

Muslims Say U.S. Worsened Sunni-Shiite Divide

More than three-quarters of Muslims surveyed in the Middle East blamed American “instigation of tensions” in Iraq for exacerbating the Sunni-Shiite divide in the Middle East. Another significant factor was the age-old rivalry between Saudi Arabia, a Sunni Arab nation, and Iran, a country of Shiite Persians.

To what extent do you blame these factors for the Sunni-Shiite conflict?



by maintaining the no-fly zones and sanctions.³⁸

The call for toppling Hussein enjoyed a far more sympathetic reception in the George W. Bush administration, which began in early 2001. Bush already saw Hussein as a long-range threat. And his deputy defense secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, was one of the leading advocates of toppling Hussein.³⁹

Still, the Bush administration had no immediate plans to invade Iraq. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States immediately changed things. In its aftermath, questions arose (later confirmed) about whether the administration had downplayed accurate warnings that al Qaeda was plan-

ning an attack within the United States. After the 9/11 attacks, officials depicted Hussein as a danger that the United States could not ignore.⁴⁰

Nearly a year after 9/11, the invasion plan surfaced in a Sept. 8, 2002, article in *The New York Times*. It cited unnamed Bush administration officials as saying Iraq was searching for nuclear bomb materials.⁴¹ Iraq had had a nuclear weapons program before the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but it was dismantled after discovery by international nonproliferation inspectors.⁴²

A series of other episodes in 2002 made clear that the administration was planning war. In his State of the Union address that year, Bush declared that

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Iraq, together with Iran and North Korea, formed an “axis of evil.”⁴³

In June 2002, Bush told the graduating class at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point: “If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.”⁴⁴

And in August, Vice President Cheney declared that Hussein was on the verge of obtaining nuclear weapons. “The risks of inaction,” he said, “are greater than the risks of action.”⁴⁵

By October, Congress had authorized the president to “use the armed forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate . . . against the continuing threat posed by Iraq.”⁴⁶ Intelligence agencies supported the belief that Hussein had non-nuclear chemical and biological WMDs, but they debated whether Iraq was trying to acquire nuclear weapons. Intelligence analysts were even more skeptical that the Iraqi dictatorship had ties to al Qaeda and the Sept. 11 plot.⁴⁷

Skeptics attempted their own public and private information campaign against an Iraq War. Heavyweight Republican foreign policy establishment figures including Brent Scowcroft, a former national security adviser in the H. W. Bush administration, argued that an invasion would dangerously destabilize the entire region.⁴⁸

Invasion

A related fear among some senior military commanders was that the

invasion plan supervised by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld provided only sketchily for what the United States would do in Iraq after overthrowing the regime.⁴⁹

Rumsfeld opposed use of the military for “nation-building” and claimed that military doctrine calling for massive deployment of troops was outmoded.

When the invasion plan was ready, the administration sent Secretary of State Colin Powell to the United Nations in February 2003 to argue that Hussein was violating U.N. resolutions

ful of other nations later joined the occupation, becoming part of what was called a “multinational coalition” despite the United States’ overwhelming dominance of the operation.

As Army and Marines troops in tanks and Humvees raced to Baghdad, they were prepared for attacks by Iraqi forces using chemical and biological weapons. But shortly before the invasion, Hussein told his top commanders that Iraq didn’t have WMDs — a disclosure they found surprising, given his past use of chemical weapons and his determination to retain power. But

he foresaw a short war that would end with his remaining in power, as in 1991. For that reason — also contradicting U.S. expectations — Hussein had not ordered a “scorched-earth” strategy of destroying Iraq’s oilfields.

As the invasion began at dawn on March 21 (March 20 in Washington) U.S. troops ran into deadly opposition not only from the Iraqi Army but from well-armed and highly trained foes in civilian garb and vehicles, the *fedayeen* (Arabic for guerrillas). Hussein had formed the



Reuters/Goran Tomasevic

The first U.S. Marines entered downtown Baghdad on April 9, 2003, and some marked the event by pulling down an iconic statue of Saddam Hussein. However, the fight for Baghdad — and all of Iraq — was only beginning.

on possession of WMDs and on building nuclear weapons.

On March 18, Bush used the same information to explicitly set the stage for war. He delivered an ultimatum to Hussein and his two sons to leave Iraq within 48 hours. “Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict commenced at a time of our choosing,” Bush said.⁵⁰

The military plan initially called for the major phase of the campaign to start at dawn with a ground invasion. A British contingent was part of the force, and small groups from a hand-

paramilitary corps in 1994, setting up a nationwide network of weapons and ammunition depots and safe houses. U.S. spy agencies hadn’t known.

Nevertheless, the U.S. military still had the air and ground firepower to reach its objectives. “Shock and awe” was the term used by invasion commander Gen. Tommy Franks to describe how massive air assaults on key targets in Baghdad during the early days of the war would overwhelm the enemy.

On April 9, the first U.S. forces entered downtown Baghdad. Symbolizing

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Chronology

2002-2005 *President George W. Bush orders invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein and seize reported weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).*

September 2002

U.S. officials report Iraq is developing nuclear weapons. . . . In U.N. speech, Bush calls Iraq a threat because of human rights violations and production of biological and long-range weapons.

March 7, 2003

Chief U.N. weapons inspector says there is no evidence of Iraqi WMDs.

March 17-21, 2003

Bush gives Hussein and his two sons 48 hours to leave Iraq, which they ignore. . . . Bush orders invasion of Iraq, which begins March 21 (March 20 in the United States).

April 9, 2003

U.S. soldiers topple statue of Hussein in central Baghdad.

May 22, 2003

U.S. disbands Iraqi army, bans high-ranking members of former ruling Baath Party from government jobs.

Dec. 14, 2003

The fugitive Hussein apprehended in underground hiding place in his home region, near Tikrit.

April 2004

The New Yorker and CBS' "60 Minutes II" detail abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

Jan. 12, 2005

White House announces end of WMD search.

Jan. 30, 2005

Iraqi citizens vote in first transi-

tional National Assembly election since occupation; few Sunnis vote.

Oct. 15, 2005

Iraqi voters approve new constitution.

2006-2008

Sunni-Shiite conflicts intensify into civil war, prompting Bush to reinforce troop levels.

Jan. 20, 2006

Preliminary results of first postwar parliamentary elections show that Shiite party alliance has won. Political activist Nouri al-Maliki will form government as prime minister.

November-December, 2006

Iraqi court sentences Hussein to death for crimes against humanity. . . . Hussein hanged.

Jan. 10, 2007

Bush announces "surge" of at least 20,000 additional troops.

Jan. 12, 2008

Iraqi Parliament passes bill permitting former Baath Party members to return to their government jobs.

July 2008

Last of "surge" brigades withdrawn from Iraq.

December 2008

U.S. and allied casualties for the year are down by nearly one-third from 2007; civilian deaths decline to about 9,000 from about 25,000 in 2007.

2009-Present

President Obama, who won election as anti-Iraq War can-

didate, oversees final U.S. withdrawal from Iraq as sectarian violence continues.

Feb. 27, 2009

Obama announces withdrawal of most U.S. troops by Aug. 31, 2010, and all troops by Dec. 31, 2011.

June 30, 2009

U.S. troops leave cities and towns in Iraq; responsibility for security formally passed to Iraqi military.

March 7, 2010

In new parliamentary elections, secular party bloc wins narrowly but lacks majority. . . . After nine months of political maneuvering, al-Maliki forms a governing coalition.

Dec. 18, 2011

Last U.S. troops leave Iraq, except for 200 military advisers.

September 2012

Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi sentenced to death in absentia on grounds he organized political assassinations; from refuge in Istanbul he denies charges.

December 2012

Civilian death toll for the year rises to 4,600, from 4,100 in 2011.

January 2013

Bombings and individual shootings kill 265 civilians and police officers. . . . Defense secretary nominee Chuck Hagel clashes with Republican Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., over impact of the Iraq surge, which Hagel had opposed.

February 2013

Car bombs in Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad kill at least 21.

March 20, 2013

Ten-year anniversary of U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

Iraq Conflict Was a Costly Learning Experience

“War should be the last resort, not the first.”

All wars hold bitter lessons. For the men and women who planned and fought the Iraq war, the first lesson may have been that the civilians to whom they reported didn't always know as much as they thought they did.

“The early Bush administration had a belief in American military power and its ability to do things that was not necessarily misplaced — that you could rely on American military power to topple foreign leaders relatively quickly,” says retired Army Col. Peter Mansoor. “In this high-tech war,” he added, summarizing the view that prevailed at the time, “we could go around the world and get rid of evil-doers and replace them with someone more to our liking.”

The years of heavy combat that followed the Iraq invasion made plain to the Americans doing the fighting, however, that toppling even a widely hated dictator doesn't guarantee overall success, says Mansoor, a professor of military history at Ohio State University. He commanded a tank brigade early in the U.S. occupation and later served as executive officer to Gen. David Petraeus during the 2007-2008 surge.

Some of the career officers who helped plan the war echo his view. Throughout the conflict, the military found itself doing the kind of nation-building that the Bush administration initially said wouldn't be necessary. Only Saddam Hussein's removal would be needed to assure a peaceful future, Bush administration officials said.

The split between military brass and the administration's Pentagon leadership burst into public view even before the war started. In February 2003, Gen. Eric Shinseki, then Army chief of staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that “something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers” would

be needed to occupy Iraq and keep the country from descending into a civil war between rival ethnic groups. Shinseki pointed to his experience in the 1990s as a commander of the U.S.-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia, where a war between Serbs and Bosnian Muslims had claimed more than 97,000 lives, 65 percent of them Muslims — 8,000 of whom were killed in a single episode of what the U.N. war crimes tribunal defined as genocide.¹

But two key civilian architects of the Iraq war — Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz — dismissed Shinseki's warnings. “Wildly off the mark,” Wolfowitz declared shortly before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Unlike Bosnia, he said, Iraq had suffered no history of ethnic conflicts.²

As events turned out, U.S. troops found themselves fighting a heavily ethnic and sectarian war in Iraq. The conflict continues today on a smaller scale. Their experiences led to yet another lesson of the Iraq conflict: that applying overwhelming force, until then the standard U.S. military doctrine, wasn't always the best strategy. Instead, Petraeus and other commanders worked to break the bond between Iraqi insurgents and the general population, using such “counterinsurgency” tactics as improving the economy and opening schools.³

Petraeus' strategy — known in pre-Iraq days as “Military Operations Other Than War,” or “Moot-Wah” — wasn't widely endorsed then. The prevailing Army view, writes Fred Kaplan, author of a new book on the counterinsurgency debate, was that “real men don't do moot-wah.”⁴

Counterinsurgency, by most accounts, proved the best approach when Petraeus applied it nationwide in Iraq during the surge. But it may have been oversold as a solution in Iraq,

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the event, a soldier used a cable on a tank retriever — a heavy-duty towing vehicle — to pull down a statue of Hussein in downtown Baghdad. But the fight for Baghdad, and all of Iraq, was only beginning.

With the U.S. troop presence in Baghdad under-strength for an occupation, and with the Bush administration still planning a quick exit, crowds of Baghdadis descended on government offices and museums and took everything they could lay their hands on — from office furniture to plumbing fixtures to antiques. U.S. troops, with no orders to do police work, looked on.

TV cameras captured the scenes, leading to questions in Washington about

collapsing public order. “Stuff happens,” Rumsfeld responded. “Freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things. They're also free to live their lives and do wonderful things, and that's what's going to happen here.”⁵¹

Insurgency and Politics

Meanwhile, seeds of violent rebellion were sprouting in both the Sunni and Shiite communities.⁵²

The trend was less surprising among the Sunnis, Hussein's branch of Islam.

But Sunni resistance might not have turned so deadly had it not been for two major U.S. actions, according to

some experts. The Americans ordered the total elimination of the Iraqi army; and a “de-Baathification” order banned senior Baath Party members from future public employment.

The orders reflected an assumption that all military commanders and party members were hard-core Hussein loyalists. In fact, many were people who had managed to survive the dictatorship by playing along.

Sunni insurgents struck their first major blows in August 2003. The most significant was a truck-bomb attack on the newly opened U.N. headquarters building. Among the 22 people killed was the mission chief. In response, the U.N. cut back its Iraq operation to a token presence.

Kaplan argued in *Foreign Affairs* magazine. The strategy worked in sectors where Sunnis turned against al Qaeda, but it failed to persuade many Iraqis that the country's post-invasion government was legitimate, he wrote.

"Counterinsurgency is a technique, not a grand strategy," Kaplan wrote. It is unlikely to become the prevailing U.S. military doctrine, given its failed application in Afghanistan, where conditions favor the insurgents, he argued. "No one could make it work in Afghanistan."⁵

Whatever strategy guides commanders, their troops still get killed and wounded. In Iraq, where a small number of U.S. military personnel remain, 4,475 service members died between the 2003 invasion and early February 2013, and 32,220 were wounded in action.⁶ (U.S. military operations ceased on Dec. 15, 2011, but about 200 military advisers remain in Iraq.)

Combined with injuries from the war in Afghanistan, casualties as of last December 7 included 253,330 traumatic brain injuries — 6,476 of them classified as "severe or penetrating" — and 1,715 amputations.⁷ In addition, both wars left 103,792 deployed service members with diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁸

Yet, despite the Iraq war's legacy of carnage and loss, Mansoor argues that today's Army has little in common with the U.S. military that fought America's last drawn-out conflict, the war in Vietnam.

As in Iraq, the Vietnam War also saw divisions between field commanders and Washington officials, as well a debate within the military about counterinsurgency versus massive firepower. But "after Vietnam," Mansoor says, "the Army became

a hollow force." By contrast, he says, the post-Iraq War military is stronger than it was in 2003, when the invasion began.

"Now that the frequency of overseas tours has diminished, people are restoring their health in mind, body and spirit," Mansoor says. And from the standpoint of military readiness, "the Army is full of combat-experienced veterans," he says. "You can't create that in any other way than going to war."

Even so, the collapse of the Iraq War's original justification — to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction, which turned out not to exist — reinforced another lesson, Mansoor says: "War should be the last resort, not the first."

— Peter Katel

¹ Quoted in "Army chief: Force to occupy Iraq massive," *The Associated Press (USA Today)*, Feb. 25, 2003, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2003-02-25-iraq-us_x.htm; "Bosnia war dead figure announced," BBC News, June 21, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6228152.stm>; Marlise Simons, "Court Convicts a Bosnia Serb General of Genocide," *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/12/13/world/europe/zdravko-tolimir-former-commander-of-bosnian-serb-army-is-convicted-of-genocide.html.

² Quoted in Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon Contradicts General On Iraq Occupation Force's Size," *The New York Times*, Feb. 28, 2003, p. A1.

³ Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (2013).

⁴ Fred Kaplan, "The End of the Age of Petraeus," *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2013, www.foreignaffairs.com/print/135904.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Hannah Fischer, "U.S. Military Casualty Statistics: Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom," Congressional Research Service, Feb. 5, 2013, p. 5, www.fas.org/srg/crs/natsec/RS22452.pdf.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

As the insurgents organized, jihadists poured in from other countries.

One of the insurgents' most notorious acts was the killing of four U.S. security contractors in Fallujah in early 2004. Two of the men's bodies were hung from a bridge. A major Army and Marine force later that year retook the city, with high death tolls on both sides: 70 Marines and 2,175 insurgents.⁵³

By then, the Bush administration and U.S. intelligence agencies had suffered a devastating blow to their credibility. In October 2003, the leader of the search for WMDs, David Kay, reported that inspectors had found nothing thus far. Three months later he announced that Iraq had no WMDs and

that pre-war intelligence — which he acknowledged having believed — had been wrong. Kay's successor reinforced that conclusion in 2004.⁵⁴

Even as insurgencies by Sunnis and al-Qaeda-linked jihadists grew, some Iraqi Shiites were also fighting the Americans, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, son of a revered religious figure believed to have been killed by the Hussein regime. The younger al-Sadr, whose base of support lay in poor Shiite communities in Baghdad and southern Iraq, preached violent resistance to the occupation.

Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia launched at least three uprisings against U.S. forces in 2004 and 2006, leading American officials to target him for

capture or death. But because of the depth of his political support among some of the country's majority population, the Americans agreed to drop him as a target in return for a ceasefire from his militia.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, U.S. officials from President Bush on down plunged into the inner workings of Iraqi politics, hoping to further the stated U.S. goal of helping to build a stable democracy.

Administration plans were hampered, however, by shocking revelations by investigative reporter Seymour Hersh of *The New Yorker* and CBS News that U.S. troops had tortured and humiliated prisoners at Abu Ghraib Prison. Photos taken by some

of the military guards for their own amusement illustrated the article, which caused a worldwide uproar and made “Abu Ghraib” a synonym for inhumane treatment of prisoners.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, the Bush administration continued its new nation-building strategy. In June 2004, the United States formally handed over national sovereignty to a caretaker government appointed by the United Nations, with American officials also heavily involved.

The country’s first elections, to choose an assembly to draft a constitution, were held in January 2005. Though the vote was peaceful, it failed politically, since most Sunnis boycotted the polls.⁵⁷

Subsequent votes in 2005 — to ratify the constitution and form a parliament and cabinet — were preceded by intense U.S. efforts to ensure that Sunnis weren’t excluded from the political process. In the December 2005 elections to form a government, Sunnis did vote in big numbers.

But negotiations in early 2006 among parties and coalitions with the highest vote totals resulted in formation of a government headed by al-Maliki, a Shiite with a long record of resistance to Hussein and seen as allied to Shiite militias — including al-Sadr’s — that were killing Sunni opponents.⁵⁸



Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (right), a Shiite, greets Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (left) in 2009 during al-Maliki’s fourth visit to the Shiite-led country since taking office in 2006. Critics say the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq risks allowing Iran to increase its influence in Iraq. The backdrop for the debate is the international community’s attempt to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

AFP/Getty Images/Behrouz Mehri

ernment, enjoyed support in western, majority-Sunni provinces. A precisely targeted U.S. airstrike killed a top foreign jihadist leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian, in June 2006, but it did not cripple the organization, as officials had hoped.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, government security forces in Baghdad were actively cooperating with Shiite militias in killing Sunnis living in mixed neighborhoods. A classified CIA analysis summed up the situation in two words: “civil war.”⁶¹

The Bush administration was receiving conflicting advice on how the military should respond. One school of thought was that boosting U.S. troop strength would reduce the violence.

Bush was persuaded. In January 2007, he announced that he was ordering five brigades, more than 20,000 troops, to Iraq.⁶² “To step back now would force a collapse of the Iraqi government, tear that country apart and re-

sult in mass killings on an unimaginable scale,” he said.⁶³

Bush also appointed Gen. Petraeus, a veteran of the invasion and first phase of the occupation, as Iraq’s new military commander for Iraq. Petraeus was also the U.S. military’s leading advocate of counterinsurgency — the strategy of using both political and military action to defeat popular uprisings. During his first stint in Iraq, Petraeus had used that approach in the majority-Sunni area around the city of Mosul.⁶⁴

Counterinsurgency seemed well-suited to developments in western Iraq,

Surge and Departure

Despite Bush administration hopes, sectarian violence worsened even as Iraq’s elected government got up and running.⁵⁹

The 2003 capture of Hussein in an underground hiding place had not weakened the Sunni insurgency. Neither had his trial and execution by hanging three years later, surrounded by guards chanting al-Sadr’s name.

Al Qaeda in Iraq, capitalizing on Sunni fears of the new Shiite-led gov-

where Sunni tribes were abandoning their alliance with al Qaeda. The Sunnis resented the jihadists' suicide bombing campaign against Shiites and Americans; their practice of forcing families to hand over their daughters as wives for al-Qaeda fighters; and their extremist religious rules — such as prohibiting smoking — enforced by violence.⁶⁵

In 2006, Sunnis in the city of Ramadi announced the Anbar (Province) Awakening, in which Sunnis organized against al Qaeda and accepted U.S. help toward that goal. The following year, Petraeus ordered a variant of that approach, in which Sunnis who organized into paramilitary units dubbed the Sons of Iraq were paid by the U.S.-led military.⁶⁶

As the Sunni threat to Shiites diminished, Americans encouraged the al-Maliki government to support suppression of Shiite militias in Baghdad and the southern city of Basra. In 2008, the prime minister agreed, leading some Americans to hope that he had changed his attitude toward those groups, to some of which he had longstanding ties. The surge officially ended in July 2008.

During the last year of the Bush administration, Iraq and the United States signed a "Status of Forces Agreement" under which U.S. troops would pull out of Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, and leave Iraq entirely by the end of 2011.

U.S. officials assumed that the incoming Obama administration, which took over in January 2009, would negotiate a deal with al-Maliki to keep a military force of some size in the country.

But neither side was eager for a troop deal. Negotiations ended about two months before the final U.S. contingent pulled out in December 2011, when the Iraqis refused to grant legal immunity to U.S. troops, which the Obama administration defined as an ironclad condition for a continuing military presence.

The last 500 U.S. troops deployed in Iraq drove out in a convoy on Dec. 18, 2011. As they neared the Iraqi border, Sgt. First Class Rodolfo Ruiz told his men: "Hey guys, you made it."⁶⁷ ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Bombs and Repression

Religious and ethnic differences continue to play out violently in the new Iraq, with bombings and shootings a regular part of the political landscape.

In recent months, mass-casualty suicide bombings have targeted Shiites and Sunni enemies of al Qaeda. Among

"The latest evidence suggests that the country remains in a state of low-level war little changed since early 2009, with a 'background' level of everyday armed violence punctuated by occasional larger-scale attacks designed to kill many people at once," Iraq Body Count, a British-based group that tracks casualties, said in early 2013.⁶⁹

Suicide bombings — attributed to al Qaeda-linked jihadists — capture most attention. But some analysts point to killings and repression by the Shiite-dominated government, citing the case of Vice President al-Hashimi, who was tried in absentia. "They rounded up his bodyguards and tortured one to death and used confessions to sentence him [al-Hashimi] to death," says Army intelligence officer Rayburn, describing a trend of growing repression.

Human Rights Watch, a New York-based advocacy organization, said pho-

"No one had an idea of what the U.S. goal would be until after the war began."

— Michael Rubin,

Resident scholar, American Enterprise Institute;

Former adviser (2002-2004) at the Pentagon and in Baghdad

them were a series of bombings aimed at Shiite Muslim pilgrims in January that killed nearly 60 people; an attack on a funeral in a community of Turkmen (a minority ethnic group) that killed about 35 people; a suicide car-bomb attack on a police headquarters in the northern city of Kirkuk in early February that killed at least 36; and a series of car bombs in late February that killed at least 21 people in Shiite neighborhoods of Baghdad.⁶⁸

tos and other evidence suggested the guard had been tortured. Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council denied the torture accusation, made by al-Hashimi himself, saying the guard died of natural causes while in custody.⁷⁰

Overall, Human Rights Watch concluded in a report last year: "Iraqi security forces arbitrarily conducted mass arrests and tortured detainees to extract confessions with little or no evidence of wrongdoing."⁷¹

Doors Close on Iraqis Who Aided U.S.

Advocates say thousands in peril as visa applications pile up.

Najim Abed al-Jabouri knows how lucky he is. The former mayor of Tal Afar collaborated with top U.S. military commanders during the most lethal years of the Iraq War. So when the American drawdown began in 2008 and al-Jabouri's options narrowed, his high-placed friends helped him reach safety in the United States.

As a top leader of the anti-al Qaeda Sunni Awakening, al-Jabouri was a big jihadist target. He also was unpopular with Iraq's new government because he'd served as a brigadier general under toppled dictator Saddam Hussein. "Many American officers knew very well that after they left Iraq, the government will fire me from my position, and I would be good hunting for al Qaeda," al-Jabouri says.

But the vast majority of the tens of thousands of Iraqis who worked for American military and civilian agencies as interpreters and helpers during the war never came in contact with American generals or ambassadors who could offer protection.

As a result, hundreds of Iraqis — at least — have been killed because of their work for the United States. Thousands more are exposed to danger after applying for special U.S. visas because the approval process under both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations moves at what critics say is a glacial pace. "The U.S. government did not stand behind everyone who worked with them," al-Jabouri says from his office at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in Washington. "Many interpreters staying in Iraq are in a very dangerous situation."

So dangerous, in fact, that many have not survived. For example, an ex-interpreter for the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) who was trying desperately to get a U.S. visa was kidnapped, tortured and beheaded last June while his application was going through a slow-motion review process, says Kirk W. Johnson, who served with the agency in Fallujah in 2005.

Johnson founded and directs the List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies, a nonprofit organization that works to help Iraqis reach safety in the United States. Johnson was working with the former U.S. AID interpreter when the man was killed, and he has tried to help thousands of others. "What has happened [in post-war Iraq] is a slow trickle of decapitations or an assassination here and there — never enough to focus attention, but they're happening," he says.

Working for U.S. and allied forces was dangerous for Iraqis even when foreign troops were on the ground. In 2003-2008, one contracting firm registered 360 interpreters killed, some

after being tortured. (Some of the dead were non-Iraqis.) And in a notorious 2006 episode in the southern city of Basra, 17 Iraqi interpreters and other aides to the British forces occupying that region were kidnapped from a bus and murdered. A senior Iraqi police official later was accused of complicity.¹

Johnson, aided by a small staff and volunteer lawyers, has managed to help about 1,500 Iraqis and their families reach the United States. But the list of people who have asked for help is thousands long. "When we submitted an application on behalf of an Iraqi interpreter a few months ago," Johnson says, "we were told by Embassy Baghdad that unless they expedite a case, their current expected wait time is two years for the very first interview — not for arriving in the United States, but for an interview."

That process applies to asylum applications under the long-standing U.S. refugee program, the standard path for those fleeing persecution because of politics, race, nationality, religion or membership in a social group. As for obtaining a "Special Immigrant Visa" under a 2007 law designed specifically to aid Iraqi and Afghan interpreters and other helpers, prospects appear hopeless. Since January 2012, no special visas have been issued, and the program is scheduled to end Sept. 30.²

The late Sen. Ted Kennedy sponsored the bill creating the five-year program. It authorized 5,000 special visas a year for Iraqi employees and contractors of the U.S. government and their families. "America owes an immense debt of gratitude to these Iraqis," Kennedy said. "They've supported our effort, saved American lives and are clearly at great risk because of it."³

Johnson, who had started the List Project the previous year, says passage of the legislation seemed to be a definitive win. "At the time, my list was only 1,000 names long," he says, "and Kennedy had just blasted open 25,000 visa slots."

As of January 31, about 8,300 of the special visas had been granted, and — under the separate, long-established refugee program — about 80,000 refugee visas were granted since fiscal 2007 began.⁴ The latter number is relatively large, but Johnson says it appears to include only a small number of former interpreters and other direct allies and may include many Iraqis who had applied for visas after having fled to nearby countries during the Hussein dictatorship.

The dangers facing citizens of a country who help foreign troops is an old story in warfare. It is an also an old story for the United States. In 2005, the Al Jazeera network broadcast notorious film footage of Vietnamese who were seen as having some U.S. connections trying desperately to reach depart-

Following the al-Hashimi case, 10 bodyguards of Finance Minister Rafe al-Essawi, also a Sunni, were arrested on terrorism charges, and many Sunnis viewed the arrests as a pre-

lude to criminal charges against al-Essawi.⁷² In response, Sunnis mobilized.

"This is targeting all the Sunnis," Sunni leader Sheik Hamid Ahmed told a demon-

stration of 2,000 in Fallujah. "It was Hashimi first. Essawi now. Who knows who it will be next? The conspiracy against the Sunnis will never stop. We will not keep silent for this."⁷³

ing American helicopters during the final U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. “The message for Iraqis working with Americans was clear,” journalist George Packer wrote in *The New Yorker*.⁵

President Obama’s 2009 inauguration aroused hope among Iraqi refugee advocates because during a major campaign speech on Iraq in 2007 Obama had slammed the Bush administration for abandoning Iraqi allies. “The Iraqis who stood with America — the interpreters, embassy workers, subcontractors — are targeted for assassination,” he said. “And yet our doors are shut. . . . That’s not how we treat our friends.”⁶

But Johnson notes that Obama has not accelerated the Iraqi visa process. In fact, a recent terrorism case involving two Iraqi refugees has prompted a wave of congressional concern about Iraqis seeking refuge in the United States, delaying the immigration process even more.

In January, a recently arrived Iraqi refugee was sentenced to life in federal prison and another refugee to 40 years. Both had pleaded guilty in Bowling Green, Ky., to supporting a foreign terrorist organization and to lying in their U.S. admission documents. Both were admitted under the standard refugee program, and neither had worked for U.S. forces, but the repercussions of the case affected all Iraqis seeking to enter the United States.⁷

Both had been anti-American insurgents in Iraq. But a fingerprint from one on an Iraqi roadside bomb was discovered only after the men were already in the United States and were suspects in the terrorism case.⁸

“It is imperative that the interagency security screening process for all refugees be formidable and credible,” Rep. Patrick Meehan, R-Pa., told a panel of government witnesses last December at a hearing of the House Homeland Security Committee’s Counterterrorism and Intelligence Subcommittee.⁹

For government employees weighing Iraqis’ visa applications, Johnson says, the lesson is clear. “The fewer Iraqis, the fewer



Najim Abed al-Jabouri — a former mayor of a town in Iraq — cooperated with top U.S. military commanders during the anti-al Qaeda Sunni Awakening. Although he has successfully immigrated to the United States, tens of thousands of Iraqis who worked for American military and civilian agencies during the Iraq War have run into bureaucratic hurdles.

Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies

Muslims, the fewer Arabs you sign your name on a visa for,” he says, “the more you’re doing your job.”

But that attitude carries its own risks, given the inevitable need for bilingual local allies in future conflicts, he argues. “I don’t know why anyone thinks we’ll be able to recruit people in future wars,” he says. “We’re obviously not done fighting.”

— Peter Katel

¹ Thomas Harding, “British troops in Basra seize ‘rogue’ police officers,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), Dec. 23, 2006, p. 14; T. Christian Miller, “Foreign Interpreters Hurt in Battle Find U.S. Insurance Benefits Wanting,” *ProPublica*, Dec. 18, 2009, www.propublica.org/article/iraqi-translators-denied-promised-health-care-1218; T. Christian Miller, “Chart: Iraqi Translators, a Casualty List,” *ProPublica*, Dec. 18, 2009, www.propublica.org/article/chart-iraqi-translators-a-casualty-list.

² “FY 2013 Arrivals Sorted by Nationality by Month,” Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, “State Department, Refugee Processing Center Reports, Cumulative Arrivals by State for Refugee and SIV — Iraqi,” www.wrapsnet.org/Reports/AdmissionsArrivals/tabid/211/Default.aspx.

³ Quoted in Helene Cooper, “U.S. Officials Admit Delays in Issuing Visas to Iraqis,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2007, p. A10; “USCIS Announces New Special Immigrant Visa for Certain Iraqi Nationals Who Worked for the U.S. Government,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, July 9, 2008, www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f614176543ff6d1a/?vgnextoid=91b661ccdc20b110VgnVCM1000004718190aRCRD&vgnextchannel=68439c7755cb9010VgnVCM10000045f3d6a1RCRD.

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⁵ George Packer, “Betrayed: The Iraqis who trusted America the most,” *The New Yorker*, March 26, 2007, www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/26/070326fa_fact_packer?currentPage=all.

⁶ Barack Obama, “Remarks in Clinton, Iowa: ‘Turning the Page in Iraq,’” Sept. 12, 2007, The American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=77011; for video excerpt, Beth Murphy, “Forgotten in Iraq,” Op-Doc, *The New York Times*, Dec. 5, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/12/06/opinion/forgotten-in-iraq.html.

⁷ Andrew Wolfson, “2 Iraqi terrorists sentenced,” *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky.), Jan. 30, 2013, p. B1.

⁸ Brian Bennett, “Security checks redone on Iraqis in U.S.,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2011, p. A1.

⁹ “Rep. Patrick Meehan Holds a Hearing on Terrorists and Refugee Programs,” CQ Transcriptions, Dec. 4, 2012.

Nevertheless, some anti-Maliki demonstrators in Fallujah in the Sunni heartland, say they are not motivated by sectarianism. Indeed, *The Washington Post* reported that some Shiite leaders, in-

cluding militia leader al-Sadr, have sympathized with Sunni protesters.⁷⁴

To add to the Sunnis’ danger, a branch of al Qaeda is pressuring them to disavow the Shiite-led government of the

“new Iraq.” A cousin of al-Essawi — parliamentarian Efan al-Essawi — was assassinated in January in a suicide bombing carried out by Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia (the ancient Greek name

Iraq War Coverage From the *CQ Researcher* Archives

For background on Iraq, see the following CQ Researcher reports:

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for Iraq). The terrorist group called the parliamentarian a "criminal infidel" because of his membership in the Awakening movement.⁷⁵

And an Iranian-supported Shiite militia that boasts of its wartime attacks on U.S. troops is shifting to a militant political role, with the support of al-Maliki. Asaib Ahl al-Haq — the League of the Righteous, sees Iran's cleric-dominated government as a model for Iraq. "If a majority votes for it, why not?" a league leader told *The Washington Post*.⁷⁶

But Ollivant of the New America Foundation says the country is not fracturing irreparably along religious and ethnic lines, which it would have done if the surge and counterinsurgency strategy had not defeated the Sunni insurgency. "The Sunnis in 2004-2005-2006 tried to overthrow the state and failed," he says. "For a group that tried to overthrow the state and failed, they have it just about as good as it gets."

Continuing U.S. Debate

The war in Iraq may be over for the United States, but American

politicians are still arguing fiercely over who among them was right or wrong when the big decisions were made.

A confirmation hearing for Obama's defense secretary nominee, former Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, provided the most recent stage for the conflicts to play out.

Among Hagel's toughest critics was fellow Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona. "Were you correct or incorrect when you said that the surge would be the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam?" McCain asked during a sharp exchange. "Were you correct or incorrect?"⁷⁷

After refusing to give a yes-or-no answer, Hagel said he'd let history decide. And he added, "As to the comment I made about the most dangerous foreign policy decision since Vietnam — [it] was about not just the surge but the overall war of choice going into Iraq." McCain retorted: "I think history has already made a judgment about the surge, sir, and you're on the wrong side of it."⁷⁸

Democrats aiming to bolster Hagel made a point of portraying his skepticism about the war as prescient. Sen.

Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said of himself, "This senator was one of many that voted for the authorization to go into Iraq, and as it turns out, [with] the lessons of history, we were given incorrect information as a justification for going into Iraq. We were told by the secretary of defense, by the secretary of state, by the national security adviser and the director of the CIA that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq."⁷⁹

Hagel also had voted for the 2002 authorization for war — but with extreme reluctance. "Imposing democracy through force in Iraq is a roll of the dice," Hagel, a combat veteran of the Vietnam War, had said in a Senate floor speech. "A democratic effort cannot be maintained without building durable Iraqi political institutions and developing a regional and international commitment to Iraq's reconstruction. No small task. . . . In authorizing the use of force against Iraq, we are at the beginning of a road that has no clear end."⁸⁰

Hagel's clear skepticism had hardened into opposition by the time the

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At Issue:

Is Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki becoming a dictator?



JOEL D. RAYBURN
LT. COL., U.S. ARMY;
RESEARCH FELLOW, NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, MARCH 2013

What a long way Nouri al-Maliki has traveled since National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley questioned in 2006 whether he was strong enough to confront his most malignant political rivals. Today no one worries that al-Maliki might not be strong enough. Over the past six years he has pulled all the levers of state power to himself.

On paper, Iraq is a democracy, with a presidency, premiership, judiciary and ministries accountable to a parliament. Also on paper, al-Maliki is the head of a coalition government, sharing power with all the other major Iraqi parties.

In practice, the presidency is virtually powerless (especially with President Jalal Talabani sidelined by a stroke), the judiciary is an extension of the executive, the parliament is marginalized and the ministries answer directly to al-Maliki's office. Iraq is not governed as a democracy, but ruled as a regime.

Al-Maliki controls the Iraqi military through his military advisers. He runs the vast intelligence apparatus through his national security adviser. He has racked up one favorable constitutional interpretation after another from his ally, the chief justice, who ruled that only the prime minister, not the legislative branch, could initiate legislation. Outside official channels, al-Maliki's son Ahmed commands the guards who physically control the Green Zone, Iraq's seat of government.

Policy decisions are taken not by the coalition government, but by al-Maliki and a small "politburo"-style group of party allies.

The United States bequeathed Iraq a political system of checks and balances, but they no longer exist. There are no institutional checks on al-Maliki's power, only political ones. If al-Maliki's hand is stayed, it is only because of the street power wielded by his chief opponents: the Sadrists, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Massoud Barzani and the Iraqi Sunnis who have taken to the streets in tens of thousands to call for al-Maliki's ouster.

There are plenty of grievances for these groups to leverage. The al-Maliki government cannot meet Iraqis' expectations for services and security, and they are growing angrier about it by the month. Iraqis now speak of a potential "Iraq Spring."

Iraqis don't seem to care very much about whether Americans are willing to call al-Maliki a dictator. They know what he is, and their patience is wearing thin.

Rayburn served in Iraq and Afghanistan. His opinions do not represent those of the Defense Department.



DOUGLAS OLLIVANT
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT,
MANTID INTERNATIONAL; SENIOR FELLOW,
NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, MARCH 2013

Prim Minister Nouri al-Maliki has perhaps the world's toughest job: administering a country just emerging from 20 years of war and sanctions, capped by a decade of occupation and civil war. He was elected by a Shiite constituency that acutely feels its oppression, both historical and recent. But he must also accommodate the interests of the (formerly ruling) minority Sunni sect, along with nearly unbridled autonomy aspirations of a third ethno-sectarian group — the Kurds. The challenges for democratic governance are without precedent.

Continuing terrorist attacks challenge the government's legitimacy and demand the forceful and legitimate use of state power to protect the people. Al-Qaeda in Iraq continually tries to reboot the 2005-2008 civil war, though without success.

In addition, al-Maliki's administration suffers from three handicaps. First, government instruments are immature, and an ambiguous constitution allows divergent interpretations. Second, ongoing corruption — from petty to grand — remaining from prior governments continues to undermine progress. Finally, the "national unity" government formed in 2010 puts key ministries under the control of parties seeking to undermine al-Maliki.

In this environment, al-Maliki has wielded executive power forcefully. While this is customary in all parliamentary systems, the nascent government and ever-present threat of terrorism accentuates this need.

He has not been perfect in all of his choices. But no leader is. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the actions of an elected government, acting forcefully to overcome uncertainty, inertia and friction does not a dictator make.

There is plenty of bad news coming out of Iraq. But Iraq has made great strides. It now pumps well over 3 million barrels of oil per day, infrastructure projects are beginning to mature and Iraq is beginning to assert its place in the region, building paths for reasonable compromise and advancement.

With a remarkably open election process, al-Maliki must answer to all of Iraq in the spring of 2014. His opponents have been vocal in their opposition, as is their democratic right. But that al-Maliki is so openly branded a "dictator" by his opposition is in itself testimony to democratic tolerance. Regardless of who wins in the coming elections, he will be, by definition, no dictator.

Nor is the incumbent.

Ollivant served as a Director for Iraq at the National Security Council, 2008-09, after two military tours in Baghdad.

THE IRAQ WAR: 10 YEARS LATER

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Bush administration decided on the surge. Congress had no direct power to block the escalation, but Hagel co-authored a resolution opposing the move and voted for legislation designed to set a deadline for troop withdrawal.⁸¹

Given an opening by Nelson to further explain his position on the surge, Hagel did so by alluding indirectly to his own wartime experience, during which he suffered severe wounds. “I always ask the question, ‘Is this going to be worth the sacrifice?’” Hagel said. “We lost almost 1,200 dead Americans during that surge, and thousands of wounded. . . . I’m not certain that it was required.”⁸² ■

OUTLOOK

Sectarian Strife

Iraq analysts differ as sharply in their forecasts of the short-term future of the country and its neighbors as they do about virtually every other aspect of the war and its effects.

Pillar, the former CIA analyst, argues that the war heightened religious conflict. “There will be continued high levels of sectarian strife that the war unleashed directly in Iraq,” he says. “We see the spillover effects in Syria today.”

Jihadist extremism, he says, is likely to remain more of a danger than it would have if the United States had never invaded Iraq. “The worst of the negative vibrations that have generated more anti-Americanism have subsided now that we are actually out of Iraq,” he says. “Nevertheless, it takes a long time for those sorts of waves to disperse. We will still be hearing more than we would have about Americans being out to kill Muslims

and occupy their lands and steal their resources.”

Al-Suwaij of the National Islamic Council sees Iraqis adapting to democratic political culture. “I don’t think people will ever be quiet if a dictator comes,” she says. “They are not going to accept that someone does to them what Saddam has done. It’s a huge change.”

Nevertheless, she says, some of Iraq’s neighbors, including Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, may each have an interest in keeping Iraq unstable. “So I am optimistic,” she says, “but at the same time very cautious.”

Al-Jabouri, the former Tal Afir mayor now at the National Defense University, expresses a different version of restrained optimism. “If Maliki does not stay in power, and [if] many leaders of the Shia parties work together like Iraqis with the Sunni and Kurds, we are going to establish democracy in Iraq,” he says. But if al-Maliki remains at the helm, “Iraq will become three states” — for Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds.

As for what the Bush administration had hoped would become an example of democracy for the entire Middle East, former ambassador Jeffrey says, “The region is going to be much as it is now and as it was 10 years ago — dysfunctional, full of violence, full of dictators.” Moreover, he says, oil-producing Iraq will play a critical role in supplying U.S. energy needs.

Jeffrey adds, “All our efforts to keep on an unhappy but livable trajectory, as opposed to allowing things to slip totally out of control, will slip out of control if Iran gets nuclear weapons.”

Hiltermann of the International Crisis Group shares the view that U.S. or Israeli military action against Iran would shake up the entire region, including Iran’s neighbor Iraq — in unpredictable ways. The outcome of the Syrian rebellion is another wild card, he says. Otherwise, “Iraq muddles along,” he says. “It will become more autocratic.”

The sense of Iraq as one nation is eroding, Hiltermann says. Hussein’s dictatorship “was a Mafia regime but a secular regime that held the country together. People did have a sense of Iraq identity until 2004-2005,” he says. “Now you have a Shiite-run Iraq.”

Army intelligence officer Rayburn sketches out a possible effect on Iraq of the ongoing uprising in neighboring Syria. “Say that al Qaeda in Iraq begins to control territory in Syria and that territory becomes a terrorist sanctuary from which they can launch attacks back into Iraq,” he says. In that case, the United States might have to consider a military response, he says.

Rayburn does see a democratic culture taking hold in Iraq. “My fear is that they’re going to have to go through another round of war” before rising sectarian tensions fade, he says. “Then we’ll see how this next generation will do, but it would be hard to conceive of them doing worse.”

Jensen of the Near East South Asia Center argues that the Maliki government’s autocratic tendencies won’t fully take hold. “Because of the freedom of journalism, the government will never have a monopoly on the narrative. They’d have to use complete brute force, and if they do, there will be consequences both from the United States and within Iraq. Iraqis don’t want another dictator.” ■

Notes

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About the Author

Peter Katel is a *CQ Researcher* contributing writer who previously reported on Haiti and Latin America for *Time* and *Newsweek* and covered the Southwest for newspapers in New Mexico. He has received several journalism awards, including the Bartolomé Mitre Award for coverage of drug trafficking, from the Inter-American Press Association. He holds an A.B. in university studies from the University of New Mexico. His recent reports include "Mexico's Future" and "3D Printing."

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