

# INSIDE THE BELTWAY

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## WAS IRAQ WORTH IT?

By Jamie M. Fly





## Was Iraq Worth It?



**With the withdrawal of the last U.S. combat forces from Iraq, the debate over the Iraq War returned to Washington in early September. In an Oval Office address, President Obama, desperate to pacify a leftwing base that has already abandoned him on Afghanistan, touted his fulfillment of a campaign promise to end the war, while noting his skepticism about the war from the outset.**

Many conservatives, while supportive of President Obama's willingness last year to modify his campaign timeline for withdrawal from Iraq from sixteen to nineteen months, warned that the road ahead in Iraq was still uncertain and required a sustained American commitment. House Republican Leader John Boehner noted that "The hard truth is that Iraq will continue to remain a

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target for those who hope to destroy freedom and democracy" and called on President Obama to outline "what America is prepared to do if the cause for which our troops sacrificed their lives in Iraq is threatened."

Recent weeks have brought scenes of touching reunions between veterans and their loved ones, as they return home to bases across the

United States. However, with low-level violence continuing to plague Iraq, and Iraqi politicians unable to agree on the outlines of a new governing coalition more than five months after what appeared to be a successful parliamentary election, some critics assert that the meager fruits of seven years of war were not worth the lives of more than 4,400 American men and women, the tens of thousands of injured American soldiers, and countless killed Iraqis.

The Obama administration, which was swept into office in part on the frustration of Americans with a protracted war, has primarily focused on the ending of the war rather than its justification. This, combined with rhetoric about Iraqis controlling their own destiny, has led to Iraqi concerns that, despite its public optimism about Iraq's future, a U.S. administration focused on Afghanistan and numerous pressing domestic issues, will not be willing to revisit the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement that calls for the withdrawal of U.S. forces by the end of 2011.

Despite its attempt to score political points on the war's end, the Obama administration does not appear to be interested in rehashing the past, whether it is the rationale for the war, or the lack of support by many leading members of the administration for President Bush's 2007 surge of forces that created the very success they today trumpet.

With polls showing that a majority of the American people now believe that the Iraq War was not worth it, the country thus appears to lack an appreciation for the very real gains that have been achieved in Iraq. Describing the mood in America as the Vietnam War came to an end, Henry Kissinger wrote in the Foreword to his book *Ending the Vietnam War* of "the brash



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confidence in the universal applicability of America's prescriptions with which it all began and the progressive disillusionment with which it ended; the initial unity of purpose and the ultimate divisive trauma." While the end of combat operations in Iraq resulted in triumphant scenes played out in the desert landscape of the Iraqi border with Kuwait, there is a danger that for many Americans, the purported lessons of Iraq will be no less formative than their parents' views of the legacy of Vietnam.

Most of the analysis of the war that has appeared as the troops return has concluded that this was a war that is ending on an optimistic note, but was a war that should have never been fought. In an editorial on August 28<sup>th</sup>, *The New York Times*, calling Iraq "a war that should never have been fought," summed it up thusly:

*"The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's murderous rule and the stirrings of democratic politics are all positive outcomes. But they are overshadowed by overwhelming negatives. President George W. Bush invaded Iraq in 2003 looking for weapons of mass destruction, and defended that rationale long after it was clear that those weapons were not there. America's credibility has still not recovered. The war cost the lives of more than 4,400 Americans, as well as those of an estimated 100,000 Iraqi civilians, and hundreds of billions of dollars. The Iraq war also, disastrously, shifted attention and resources away from the far more important fight in Afghanistan. The Taliban — routed by the United States and Afghan forces after 9/11 — quickly regained the battlefield momentum after the Pentagon and White House lost interest. The two wars have grievously overtaxed American forces."*

From the original stated goal of President Bush when he announced the invasion on March 19, 2003, "to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger," U.S. motives have been picked apart perhaps more than was the case for any other conflict. Missing in all of this was the realization that the Iraq War was at its heart an American reaction to the new security environment it faced after the greatest attack on the U.S. homeland since Pearl Harbor.

Although the United States faces a continued threat from terrorism, which is being combated in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere, the U.S. victory in Iraq has sent a strong message to prospective state sponsors of terror, who have now been put on notice that in the post-9/11 environment, the United States will not continue business as usual. Libya gave up its weapons of mass destruction programs in December 2003 and Iran appears to have halted its nuclear weapons program, albeit momentarily, the same year. In both cases, it does not require a leap of faith to assume that the quick U.S. dismantlement of Saddam's regime caused Tripoli and Tehran to weigh their actions carefully.

Despite these early successes of Iraq, the chaos that followed the initial invasion and the lack of adequate U.S. preparation for the insurgency that developed, gave rise to years of death and destruction that could have been avoided. It is thus worth examining whether these gains were worth the significant U.S. effort in Iraq. To do this, one must examine three aspects — the threat posed by Saddam, the implications of a democratic Iraq for the Middle East, and the



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moral case for removing Saddam. Despite the tenuous state of progress in Iraq today, viewed in combination, the record presents a convincing case for the Iraq War despite the significant blood and treasure invested by coalition forces in Iraq since March 2003.

### Saddam Threatened the West

Much as some are now beginning to argue that Iran poses no direct threat to the United States and its allies or that a nuclear Iran could be contained, the notion that the Iraq of 2002-2003 was a harmless regime run by a weakened despot has become popular fiction.

The fact is that the United Nations sanctions in place against Iraq were falling apart, with some of America's closest allies ready to abandon them. Iraq was not contained – it was on the cusp of being allowed to again threaten its own people and its neighbors. Although after the invasion, it was concluded that Saddam had actually destroyed his stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons after the Gulf War, the 2004 Duelfer Report concluded that Saddam's regime still possessed the elements of WMD programs that could have been easily reconstituted. Given Saddam's apparent concern about regional perceptions of his true capabilities, it does not require a leap in faith to assume that a Saddam unchecked by international sanctions and facing neighbors such as Iran and Syria with active nuclear programs would likely have resumed his own quest for a nuclear weapon.

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Seven years later, people also forget that Iraq was not some sort of peaceful version of Saudi Arabia or Egypt, where brutal regimes hold sway, but with which the United States enjoys uneasy but good relations. Saddam was an avowed enemy of the United States, especially since U.S. forces drove Iraq out of Kuwait during the first Gulf War. U.S. and British planes patrolled no-fly zones in the north and south of Iraq on a daily basis and were routinely fired upon by Iraqi forces. Iraq was essentially unfinished business from a suspended war. The status quo was unsustainable.

Even given this, some opponents of the Iraq war continue to argue that there were alternatives; that new sanctions or other arrangements to pressure Saddam should have been pursued. The problem is that the horrific events of September 11, 2001 led U.S. and British policymakers to believe that time was not on their side. As Tony Blair writes in his newly released memoirs,



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*“After 11 September, the thinking was this: if these terrorist groups could acquire WMD capability, would they use it? On the evidence of 11 September, yes. So how do we shut the trade down? How do we send a sufficiently clear and vivid signal to nations that are developing, or might develop, such capability to desist? How do we make it indisputable that continued defiance of the will of the international community will no longer be tolerated?”*

In the post-9/11 world, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair rightly deemed it unacceptable that an avowed enemy of their countries that had used weapons of mass destruction against his own people, that was thought by the leading intelligence agencies of the world to possess such weapons, that had connections to terrorists (regardless of whether or not these connections included links to al Qaeda), would be allowed to potentially provide such weapons to terrorists for use against the United States or its allies.

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## The Implications of a Democratic Iraq

After the failure of coalition forces to find stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, much of the Bush administration’s rhetoric about the justifications for the war turned to the benefits of a democratic Iraq. In his memoirs, former Defense Department official Doug Feith wrote:

*“After coalition forces overthrew Saddam and failed to find WMD stockpiles, however, the President changed his rhetoric. In the second period – September 2003 to September 2004 – he chose to talk virtually not at all about the Baathist regime’s history or the danger Saddam represented. Instead, President Bush focused on the current situation – in particular, that Iraq had become a battleground on which we were fighting terrorist insurgents – and he stressed that in Iraq we now had an opportunity to bring democracy to the Arab and Muslim worlds.”*

Feith notes that this failure to enunciate the strategic case for the war after weapons of mass destruction were not found created an opening for critics. But Bush’s late embrace of the democratic argument does not mean that it was not a component of the case prior to the war. For many Americans, September 11, 2001 brought a realization that for decades, successive U.S. administrations of both political parties had propped up and rewarded illegitimate and repressive regimes, resulting in breeding grounds for the very hatred and extremism that evidenced itself in the attacks on New York, Pennsylvania, and the Pentagon.

It made sense that if a vibrant democracy developed in Iraq, it would be a powerful symbol



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to the people of its repressive neighbors such as Syria and Iran and even send a message to U.S. allies in the Gulf as well as further afield in Egypt. Although President Bush's clearest enunciation of this argument for "ending tyranny," as he described it, came during his second

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inaugural address nearly two years after the invasion of Iraq, it was not a theory arrived at only because of the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Despite the chaos and violence that plagued Iraq in the years that followed the invasion, we did see developments in the region that appeared to be due, at least in part, to developments in that country. Several Gulf States began to take small steps toward more openness and as Iraqis routinely went to the polls, even amidst the threat of violence, it sent a powerful message to opposition forces in statist Middle Eastern regimes that they too might one day possess the same rights now possessed by Iraqis.

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### The Moral Case for the War

Even if the concerns about Saddam's potential as a threat to the United States or the implications of a democratic Iraq for the Middle East fail to convince, the moral case for the war should. This argument was doubly persuasive in the case of Iraq because of the utter brutality of Saddam's regime. Saddam murdered his own family members, imprisoned and tortured political opponents, and killed his own citizens on a mass scale on multiple occasions. The international community intervened in the 1990s in Bosnia and Kosovo to halt ethnic cleansing that occurred on a smaller scale than the acts perpetrated by Saddam's regime. But, because of the perceived cost, it had failed to act for moral reasons to remove Saddam after removing Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991.

The moral case for the 2003 Iraq war was routinely outlined by members of both political parties, but many politicians who originally supported the war ended up conveniently forgetting their pre-war statements, later advancing tenuous claims about being misled solely by politicized intelligence, implying that if it weren't for weapons of mass destruction, they would have left Saddam in power to continue his reign of terror.



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The United States or even the international community writ large cannot respond to every atrocity committed in the world on a regular basis, but recent decades have seen an evolution of a so-called Responsibility to Protect. The slow pace of progress in Iraq runs the risk of convincing future Presidents that taking action is not worth the effort or the cost. Much as Norman Podhoretz described the impact of Vietnam on U.S. foreign policy, as the sense that “we lacked the power, the will, and the wisdom to carry out a more ambitious strategy with any hope of success,” we now run the risk that future U.S. Presidents will be overly cautious when it comes to intervening in the future.

This view may be tempered by the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> security environment currently faced by the United States and ongoing commitments in Afghanistan and the war on terror, but there is the potential that some U.S. polity will turn inward, rejecting adventures abroad not strictly tied to security threats to the homeland. The Obama administration runs the risk of contributing to this trend. For example, the President’s address on August 31 drew a connection between the current sad state of the American economy and the cost of the war in Iraq, decrying the record deficits that supposedly resulted.

### Conclusion

For those of us who did not wear the uniform of the U.S. or a coalition military and serve in Iraq, the question of the war’s worth obviously cannot be viewed as intimately and personally as those who gave years of their lives, and in many cases, left comrades in arms behind. But a review of the main rationale for war shows that the United States is better off today than it would have been had Saddam remained in power. It should be celebrated that the Iraqis are now ready for this new phase in their relations with America, but it is also incumbent upon this administration and those that follow to ensure that American and coalition blood and treasure were not invested unnecessarily.

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For me personally, as someone who supported the war well before it was waged, but doubted even my own position at some of the war’s lowest points, a trip that took me to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq earlier this year swept away any lingering doubts. On our penultimate day in Kurdistan, our group visited Halabja, a small town surrounded on three sides by Iran, where thousands of Iraqi Kurds were gassed by Saddam’s regime in 1988. We followed up this visit to the moving memorial at Halabja with a dinner under the stars with the region’s Prime Minister, Barham Salih. Salih is an impressive figure, rumored as a possible Parliamentary speaker in the next Iraqi government. As Salih recently told *The Wall Street Journal*, some Iraqi officials have squandered the opportunity they’ve been given by the United States, but there is still hope that people like



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Salih represent a new face of the Middle East – a Middle East that is in America’s interest.

Iraq was a war that was not waged perfectly. Mistakes were made, but it was a war waged for the right reasons, not those put forth by conspiracy theorists. The years to come will provide the final answer to the question about whether Iraq was worth it, but as the combat phase ends, the early results indicate it was.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and should not necessarily be taken to represent those of the Henry Jackson Society.