

# **I Was Wrong About Iraq**

## **(and So Were You)**

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One of the many criticisms leveled at President George W. Bush during the 2004 presidential campaign, was the President's apparent inability to both recognize his own errors, and to publicly acknowledge or correct them. The President has been wrong about so many things, the line of thinking went, yet he has never given even the slightest hint that he recognizes his errors, and has given even less indication that he would change his plans as a result of those errors.

Putting aside the obvious partisan nature of many of these attacks, there clearly is some truth to the charge that Bush's errors have gone unacknowledged, and perhaps uncorrected. A clear reckoning of how well the President's insights have fared as events have unfolded, and a reckoning of how his critics' insights have also fared, offers some interesting conclusions. The lack of mea culpas, from both the President and his critics, speaks volumes about the competing world views in our political system, and the emotional forces which drive them.

### **The Cases For and Against the War**

President Bush based his decision to go to war in Iraq primarily on the threat that Saddam Hussein posed through his possession and active development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (now universally referred to as WMDs<sup>1</sup>). The secondary aim of freeing the Iraqi people from a brutal dictator and of cutting off the oxygen to terrorist groups by building a Middle Eastern democracy was mentioned, but only as an aside. The principle aim of the war was to enforce UN resolutions which called for Saddam to disarm himself of WMDs, and to make Iraq fully available for inspection to prove he had properly disarmed.

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<sup>1</sup> The second Iraqi war and the War on Terrorism have changed our vocabulary in many interesting ways. The acronym WMD has joined our everyday lexicon. Also in use now is the term "operative" to describe someone who works for a political entity, either as a terrorist or a political hack. Some writers are now referring to the "War on Terrorism" as "World War IV". (In this case, the "Cold War" was "World War III.")

Saddam had, as Bush pointed out, already used chemical and biological weapons on two occasions<sup>2</sup>. Further, he had invaded two of his four neighbors. Bush suggested that Saddam, with lethal WMDs such as chemical or biological or even nuclear weapons at his disposal, would be likely to provide them to terrorists so that the terrorists would attack America. If anybody had a desire to hurt the US, it was Saddam. The only way to ensure that Saddam's WMDs were not used against the US was to remove Saddam from power and install a more American-friendly democratic government in Iraq.

Critics of the war at the time never disputed that Saddam possessed such weapons, although they did dispute that the threat from Saddam was serious enough to justify war. The first Gulf War, the sanctions, and international pressure, they thought, had already greatly weakened Iraq's military capability, and were probably sufficient to force Saddam's disarmament. And even if international pressure proved unsuccessful in forcing his compliance with UN demands, the threat posed by a hostile Iraq was greatly overstated. Links between al-Qaeda and Iraq were tenuous at best. Engaging in a military campaign against Iraq would isolate the United States at a time when international cooperation was critical to the goal of destroying Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Saddam, Bush's critics pointed out, was a despicable tyrant, but if we engaged in war on all despicable tyrants, we'd be fighting half the planet. Worse, engaging him would de-focus our attentions from more pressing challenges posed by bin Laden and North Korea.

Although not clearly or repeatedly stated as an explicit strategy, Bush clearly wanted to take a very aggressive stance against terrorism. To that end, he adopted an offensive strategy that would "take the war to the terrorists" rather than build a Maginot Line against them.

While Bush's critics begrudgingly accepted that the war had to be fought against bin Laden in Afghanistan, they felt that homeland security was being short-shifted by our actions in Iraq. Resources being utilized in Iraq would be much better utilized defending American shores, they reasoned.

Bush viewed the creation of a democratic Iraq as the cornerstone to a free Middle East. He reasoned that democratic societies are inherently less likely to wage war on their neighbors, and less likely to generate Jihadists with no other legitimate releases for their pent-up anger. The economic stagnation that is typical of repressive regimes adds to the high level of disquiet among their citizens, and further fosters the development of terrorists.

Bush's critics foresaw that the war would spark a general revolt against American interests from the "Arab Street". Our military attack against Iraq would be viewed as an attack on all Islam. How could the US hope to defeat bin Laden, when our

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<sup>2</sup> The first was against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. The second was against his own people on numerous occasions as he violently suppressed dissent.

military actions inflamed Moslem opinion, and served as an effective recruiting tool for al-Qaeda? We would be creating an essentially infinite pool of eager young terrorist who would gladly die to be able to injure the “great Satan” of the United States.

In summary, Bush sold his war primarily as a method of preventing future attacks by eliminating a source of WMDs which could be eventually provided to terrorists. Also, he wanted to take the war to our enemies and “drain the swamps” of totalitarianism by creating the nucleus of a democratic society in the Middle East. Bush tended to see the war as a way of eradicating a fundamental evil in the world, a first and necessary step in defeating worldwide terrorism.

Critics condemned the war as the “wrong war, at the wrong time” because it was directed against someone other than our prime enemy, and made our position in the world more likely to engender anger and hatred. Resources used for the war would not be available to defend us at home. Bush’s critics saw evidence of mental instability in Bush’s confidence, and suspected that his belligerence against Saddam was in amends for the senior President Bush’s failure to remove Saddam after the first gulf war. The critics thought that the prospects for democracy in Iraq were slight, and felt that the Jihadists’ political aims (to create Islamic theocracies akin to Iran) were widely shared by the Iraqi people.

## **Prognostications Correct, Incorrect, & Not Yet Known**

As Yogi Berra said, it is always dangerous to make predictions, especially about the future. Events have a nasty habit of completely ignoring the wisdom of those who predict them. As this is written (about a month after the Iraqi elections), there are many chapters of the Iraq story yet to be written. Neither Bush nor his critics have been vindicated. Luckily however, events have moved along to a point where many of the predictions Bush and his critics made can now be checked for how well they matched the actual flow of events.

In many significant areas, Bush’s predictions were wildly incorrect. In many areas, however, his general approach to terrorism and building democracy in the Middle East seems to be working spectacularly well. Similarly, many of the predictions made by his critics turned out to be dead wrong, while many of their concerns still seem to resonate and may yet be proven correct by events.

## **Bush Was Wrong**

Foremost among Bush's predictions was the presence of WMDs. His administration had suggested they knew minute details of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons programs, including which specific bunkers contained which specific chemical and biological agents. Expecting to be attacked as they raced towards Baghdad, US troops were equipped with chemical weapons warfare gear. American military intelligence had intercepted Saddam's battle orders and thought they knew which commanders could (and would) order chemical attacks on US troops.

The reality of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons program was almost exactly opposite of what the Bush administration had claimed. Although Saddam clearly had once possessed WMDs, and had once had an active program to develop these weapons, his activities had been almost completely thwarted by UN sanctions. It is likely that Saddam would have continued to try to acquire WMDs had he remained in power, but his probability of success for this effort is debatable. In this respect, Bush's critics were exactly correct; Iraq's WMD program was moribund. It had been decimated by sanctions.

The Bush administration also apparently expected the Blitzkrieg-like war to be very short. They expected the Iraqi people to cheer US troops as liberators, and rise up against Saddam. Iraqi military officers were expected to defect en-masse with their troops, forming the backbone of a new interim Iraqi civil authority until elections could be held. The US effort at "shock and awe" was expected to "decapitate" the senior Iraqi leadership, leaving intact the next level of (untainted) leadership. While the war itself played out very similarly to plans (the Iraqi military was completely outgunned – again – by the very professional and very well equipped US military), there were no significant cheering crowds, and the Iraqi officer corps had to be disbanded since the leadership they could provide was suspect, at best.

Critics of the Bush administration accuse them of 'having a plan to win the war, but not having a plan to win the peace'. While it is true that the original plan to "win the peace" fell apart with the disintegration of the Iraqi bureaucracy, and there seemed to be nothing but a vacuum to replace it, the administration did go to war in possession of a plan to win the peace. That plan, however, turned out to be completely unworkable.

The Bush administration also apparently expected world public opinion to turn their way once Saddam was out of power and the full extent of his WMD program was revealed. They apparently expected "Old Europe" and NATO to fully support (if not formally join) the American coalition. However, the state of world opinion did not change after the fall of Baghdad. Despite some revelations about the horrors of Saddam's regime, the lack of WMDs annihilated Bush's hope for a quick rapprochement with Europe. As this is written, the successful Iraqi

elections and the passage of time have somewhat reduced the animosity towards the US, but to nowhere near the level the administration would have hoped. Europe has pledged some assistance to rebuild Iraq, but any reconstruction will remain predominately a US effort. Europe, and much of the world, remains hostile to (and distrustful of) America.

## **The Critics Were Wrong Too**

The critics of American policy were also frequently and repeatedly wrong. Seemingly at every stage in the war, from the first delays in the military thrust into Baghdad caused by a massive sandstorm, to the attacks on US troops by the Saddam Fedayeen, the anti-war group predicted disaster and imminent defeat.

Critics of the Iraq war had predicted serious consequences would arise as a result of the invasion. Foremost among these would be the immediate, public “explosion” of the “Arab Street”<sup>3</sup>. The invasion of Iraq would enrage the average Moslem, and lead him to march in the streets to demonstrate that anger. Further, the invasion would induce him to join al-Qaeda or other anti-American organizations, and provide a nearly inexhaustible supply of Jihadists to fight the Great Satan.

Surprisingly, the reaction by the Moslem world was comparatively mild. While reliable opinion polls in the Moslem world are hard to come by, the invasion clearly and dramatically lowered the level of good will toward America. But the “explosion” never materialized. There were no riots or mass demonstrations of any consequence against American interests. Even in countries such as Iran and Syria that are antithetical to America and were feeling threatened by American military actions, the response was nothing more than pro-forma denunciations of American “imperialism”.

Terrorism as a whole did not rise as a result of the invasion, and no major attacks were carried out against US interests. The insurgency in Iraq, which was predicted to be a magnet for anti-American Jihadists, does not appear to be a resounding recruitment success for al-Qaeda. The number of new recruits appears to be relatively small<sup>4</sup>, and it is not at all clear that these same fighters

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<sup>3</sup> This is another phrase which has almost instantly joined our everyday lexicon.

<sup>4</sup> Reliable data about the membership of the Iraqi insurgency is very difficult to obtain, but anecdotal evidence suggests that most of the insurgents are Iraqis, with a small, but vociferous, minority of non-Iraqi foreigners.

Bush supporters could argue that the invasion of Iraq tended to help concentrate terrorists (and would-be terrorists) in Iraq, where the US military has been relatively successful in engaging them in combat and killing them. In this way, Bush’s plan to “bring the war to the terrorists” seems to be moderately successful.

would not be in Afghanistan or Palestine, or even New York City if they were not in Iraq.

Bush's critics also foresaw an immediate "quagmire" (think Vietnam), and often explicitly compared US military activities in Vietnam with Iraq. While Bush expected Iraqi citizens to cheer the incoming troops, Bush's critics foresaw vicious house-to-house combat, where insurgents would not simply mingle with civilian non-combatants, they would **be** the civilians. This point of view was famously promulgated by filmmaker Michael Moore, who considered the insurgents to be Iraqi patriots who were the Iraqi equivalent of "minute men".

While there were repeated military challenges to the US armed occupation, and hundreds of suicide bombings, these challenges were generally ineffective in a military sense. They did produce the emotional reaction in the American public in ways that were reminiscent of the Tet Offensive<sup>5</sup> in South Vietnam, but the strength of the insurgents never posed a militarily significant threat to the occupation. Even when organized and led by charismatic local religious leaders, the insurgents were never able to control any major city or region once the US had begun to exert its control.

Finally, and most significantly, Bush's critics dismissed the Iraqi election as both irrelevant, and unlikely to succeed operationally due to the ongoing insurgency. The day of the vote, John Kerry dismissed it as having only "a kind of legitimacy". The Shiite sects were expected to boycott the vote en-mass. The Sunni vote was expected to be dominated by Iran-leaning fundamentalists. The Kurds, with a 10-year history of de-facto self rule, would be in fundamental conflict with the Shiites, and this would lead to political paralysis at best, or civil war at worst.

As most people now realize, the elections in Iraq were a tremendous success. Overall turnout was higher than turnouts in most western democracies. Photos of joyful blue-fingered Iraqis exalting in the democratic process were everywhere. The insurgents, who had publicly vowed to prevent the vote, were all but powerless, as Iraqi civilians reportedly disarmed and killed would-be suicide bombers at polling stations. The "kind of legitimacy" predicted by John Kerry

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There is also evidence, supplied by captured communiqués from Zarqawi to bin Laden, that al-Qaeda viewed the conflict in Iraq as crucial to the jihad against America. In an almost eerie line of reasoning that tends to support Bush's aggressive anti-terrorism plans, Zarqawi clearly believed that a defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq would be a disaster for the movement.

<sup>5</sup> The Tet Offensive in South Vietnam is now considered to be a military disaster for the Viet Cong, but a political triumph. By exposing all their military assets in a single, coordinated burst, the Viet Cong allowed those assets to be hunted down and destroyed. The attack's shock to the American Public, however, far outweighed its minimal military impact, and started the beginning of the end of American military involvement in Vietnam.

turned out to be a profound legitimacy that has been acknowledged throughout the Middle East.

The impact of the elections has been so powerful that the “Domino Theory” has been resurrected and appears to be in full swing. In the last few months there have been: 1) Free elections in Iraq; 2) Free elections in Palestine; 3) “People Power” demands for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon; 4) Announcements of future free elections in Egypt; and 5) Municipal elections (male voters only) in Saudi Arabia. This is in addition to the “Orange Revolution” in the Ukraine, and the repudiation of WMDs by Libya. The Iraqi elections are being compared to the fall of the Berlin Wall in that it has apparently awakened and invigorated a pervasive desire for democracy and freedom throughout the Middle East.

## **Do You Ever Say You’re Sorry?**

Now that events have progressed to the point where some predictions and assumptions can be evaluated, we can see who was right and wrong, and listen for the faint sounds of the admissions of error. As we have seen, many very astute participants in this drama have turned out to be very wrong about very many things. Bush’s critics were merciless that Bush was wrong about Iraq and that his refusal to admit these errors constituted a serious character flaw showing both arrogance and stupidity. Bush’s supporters condemned the critics as Chicken-Littles who repeatedly declared disaster and defeat at every juncture in the conflict, and sometimes seemed to be cheering for defeat as a proof of Bush’s errors. Neither side ever gave any indication of self doubt. But now that events have progressed, what errors have both sides admitted to?

Bush has explicitly admitted that there were no WMDs in Iraq, but never publicly admitted that his primary justification for the war has evaporated. The lack of WMDs is like the unpleasant uncle that no one (in the administration) talks about. Bush’s silence on this point is deafening.

Likewise, the core of the organized anti-Bush group (the Democratic Party) has given at most begrudging compliments to Bush’s achievements, but never varied from the position that the war was fought on false pretenses and counterproductive for American security.<sup>6</sup> When confronted with successful elections, this group (as personified by Ted Kennedy) immediately called for a troop withdrawal timetable, which most observers feel would completely undermine the gains already made in Iraqi.

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<sup>6</sup> The lone exception is Hillary Rodham Clinton, who appears to be positioning herself as a “moderate” for the 2008 presidential election.

Neither Bush nor his critics have ever admitted to the errors they made in predicting the tactical results of the invasion. Nobody in the pentagon has publicly conceded that the Iraqi people were bystanders to the invasion and not cheerleaders. Nobody on the Left has admitted that Saddam was reviled in Iraq and that the majority of Iraqis are thrilled to have him gone, and that the majority of Arabs have less love for Saddam than they have hatred of the United States.

Amazingly, the apparent surge in democracy in the Middle East has lead many of the Left to publicly reconsider their positions. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman<sup>7</sup> has acknowledged that the Middle Eastern mindset has been “reframed from a story about Iraqi ‘insurgents’ trying to liberate their country... to a story of the overwhelming Iraqi majority trying to build a democracy”. Likewise, Claus Christian Malzahn of the German magazine “Der Spiegel” equated the Iraqi elections to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and has asked if “maybe the peoples of Syria, Iraq or Jordan will get the idea in their heads to free themselves from their oppressive regimes just as the East Germans did.” He further added that “Bush might be right, just like Reagan was.” NPR commentator Daniel Shore, a staunch Bush critic, echoed this idea in an editorial in *The Christian Science Monitor*.

“During the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, President Bush said that ‘a liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region.’

“He may have had it right.”

Events are still fluid, and things may not be as bright as they seem. The regimes of Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt can still suppress democracy and force the genie of democracy back into the bottle. The only certainty is, as Bob Dylan once sang, that “the winner now will later be last/for the times they are a’ changin’”.

But even if either side in this debate were ever to be proven 100% wrong, the chance of them admitting this error publicly and acknowledging a change in strategy is essentially nil. Competent politicians who change their minds never do so because the opposition was “right”; they do so due to “changing world conditions”. Any politician who does change his mind is subject to the charge of being a “flip-flopper”, a charge used to great effect against John Kerry. We expect our politicians to be prescient, clearly seeing the future and working unflinchingly to make it happen. Jimmy Carter was pilloried when he admitted that the Soviet Union was far more hostile than he had thought following their

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<sup>7</sup> Friedman is a rare among Bush’s critics in that he has generally been pro-war. He has consistently condemned Bush for inept execution of his anti-terror strategy, however.

invasion of Afghanistan. Likewise, Robert McNamara was never applauded for deciding that his leadership of the Vietnamese war was a mistake.

We like winners. Admitting weakness by admitting error leaves us open to all kind of nasty consequences, and during a hyper-charged political campaign, these consequences are like gasoline on a fire.

Nobody likes to be on the losing side of history, especially when the goal of the battle is as profound as redefining the fundamental role of American power in the world. The anti-war Left has the more difficult position in that if they had been correct (and Bush's tactics were wrong), the world would be a much worse place. As events have tended to support Bush, they find themselves caught between their desire to be right (and for Bush to suffer public disdain for his errors), and their desire for a safer and more secure America. Comedian Jon Stewart expressed this quandary on his television show saying, "Here's the great fear that I have," he said. "What if Bush, the president, ours, has been right about this all along? I feel that my world view may not sustain itself, and I may, and again I don't know if I can physically do this, implode."

Personal implosions are not pretty, and very rare. Don't ever expect to hear Michael Moore condemn the insurgents as anti-democratic fascists. And don't expect Donald Rumsfeld to apologize for idiotically thinking a decapitated Iraqi army would take orders from the American generals. And don't expect Ted Kennedy to admit that a fixed troop withdrawal timetable would be just what bin Laden and Zarqawi wants. And don't expect John Kerry to say that Iraqi elections are as momentous as the fall of the Berlin Wall. And don't expect George Bush to tell François Mitterrand that those sanctions had been working pretty well after all.

And don't expect me to admit that I feel positively smug about the rise of democracy, even though I too thought the Iraqis would have cheered us as liberators. If I did, I'm not sure that my world view could sustain itself, and I fear I might implode.