

What Went Wrong

How the United States Got Into the Mess in Iraq

Second in the Holding Power Accountable series

The HOLDING POWER ACCOUNTABLE series

A series of reports by Common Cause that chronicle efforts to bypass or undermine the rules and laws that are in place to ensure that our government works in an open and accountable manner and that all voices are heard on critical public policy issues.



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How the United States Got Into the Mess in Iraq

A report by Common Cause

Today, the United States finds itself committed to rebuilding a hostile Iraq after invading it under false pretenses. This report, the second of the *Holding Power Accountable* series, looks at the process of going to war in Iraq and how it led to the administration's miscalculations, misleading statements and undermining of basic democratic principals of openness and accountability.

- Although Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was a key justification for the war, to date, U.S. forces have found no evidence of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons in Iraq. In January, after retiring as head of the Iraq Survey Group searching for WMDs in Iraq, David Kay told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "It turns out we were all wrong, in my judgment. And that is most disturbing." He added, "There's a long record here of being wrong."
- Another key justification was that Saddam Hussein was a threat because of his alleged ties to al Qaeda. "We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States," reported the 9/11 Commission. Yet the President and Vice President continue to highlight the connection to justify the invasion.
- The Bush administration bypassed the usual channels in the intelligence community in order to expedite directly to senior officials the flow of "raw" information, not corroborated by traditional sources. It used only selected bits of information that supported the President's plans for war.
- While some Democrats raised questions and 23 Democratic Senators voted against the resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq, the Democratic Party for the most part went along with the President, convinced that opposition to the war would be political suicide.
- As Iraqis struggle to establish a new democracy, it appears the administration's plan for a new democracy in Iraq was based on ideology rather than facts or sound strategy.
- Planning for the aftermath of the war was ignored. General Jay Garner, the retired Army officer who was first given the job of leading the reconstruction, says he was instructed by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to ignore reconstruction plans developed by the State Department.
- A series of miscalculations, deceptions and little or no accountability has undermined public support for the war. Faced with the Abu Ghraib prison atrocities, high-level Pentagon officials sought to downplay what happened and escape personal responsibility.
- One lesson from the nation's experience in Vietnam is that deception will be discovered and will have an enduring corrosive effect on our nation.

Introduction

As Americans celebrated Independence Day with cheers and fireworks, Iraqis had a different view of their own "independence" from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and the yearlong U.S. occupation. Ghazi Muklif Hamdan, a 31-year-old Iraqi man without a job, says of U.S. soldiers, "Let them leave. Let hell come after that."

The young man's dismal view of Iraq seems to be increasingly shared by many Americans as well. In late June, polls showed that for the first time since the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 that a majority of Americans believe the United States made a mistake sending troops to that country. According to the *Associated Press*:

"The CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll found that 54 percent of people say the war was a mistake, up from 41 percent in early June. The poll also found that more than half say the Iraq war has made the United States less safe from terrorism. Only a third said it made this country safer. The finding that more than half now think the Iraq war was a mistake recalls the disillusionment of Americans in 1968 with the Vietnam War."

In the view of many observers, the "hell" referred to by Mr. Hamdan has already come to Iraq, where daily bombings, killing and kidnappings make it nearly impossible for the country to be rebuilt.

What happened? This report, the second of the *Holding Power Accountable* series, looks at the process of going to war in Iraq and how it led to the administration's miscalculations, misleading statements and undermining of basic democratic principals of openness and accountability.

Decide To Go To War, Then Find a Reason

There have been many published reports about the way White House officials considered the decision to invade Iraq. Overall, those reports indicate that the administration did all it could to support the decision to invade by emphasizing arguments and evidence that made the case for war and downgrading or ignoring arguments to the contrary. In other words, the Bush administration's approach was essentially backwards. First, it decided to "take out" Saddam Hussein.

Then, it presented to the public only the intelligence – sometimes from questionable sources – that would win support for an invasion.

How could the administration have gotten it so wrong in Iraq, and where was Congress as these decisions were being made? War is difficult and complicated, and sending troops into battle and planning for the aftermath certainly required the highest level of diligence from President Bush and his advisors -- just as it required the highest level of scrutiny and oversight from Congress. But now, one year later, with many of the administration's arguments for going to war proven wrong, it is appropriate to ask how this could have happened. It is important in matters of war to *hold power accountable*.

Miscalculations and Deceptions

On March 11, 2003, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz proclaimed, "The Iraqi people understand what this crisis is about. Like the people of France in the 1940s, they view us as their hoped-for liberator." A recent poll by the now-defunct U.S.-led interim government in Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), found that just two percent of Iraqis support the U.S. occupation. On many occasions, in fact, the Bush administration miscalculated what would happen in Iraq. More importantly, it presented evidence to justify invading Iraq that was untrue.

It now appears clear how the administration arrived at some of its faulty conclusions about the Iraq war, and how the process itself was flawed. The administration was abetted in this by Congress, which failed to fulfill its own obligations in our system of checks and balances.

Here are some of the miscalculations and misleading claims made in the march toward war:

- There is definitive proof Iraq has weapons of mass destruction
- Saddam Hussein has a relationship with al Qaeda and, by extension, to the attacks of September 11
- The number of troops needed to secure Iraq and the duration of their stay will be minimal
- The cost of the war and of reconstruction will be affordable, even with massive tax cuts and rapidly increasing national debt

- Iraqi civilians will respond with celebration for the American occupying forces
- The Iraqi infrastructure is essentially sound and the Iraqis' ability to fund reconstruction projects – mainly through oil revenues – will minimize the need for U.S. or international funding
- The invasion and democratizing of Iraq will put a damper on the breeding grounds of terrorism in the Middle East and worldwide

When a democracy goes to war, it is critical that the public be part of the decision – not deciding tactics or strategy – but engaging in open debate about the reasons for the war. There should be robust debate in Congress and to the extent possible, the administration should share important information with the public. And it should tell the truth. One lesson from the nation's experience in Vietnam is that deception will be discovered and have an enduring corrosive effect on our nation.

“We Were All Wrong” – Weapons of Mass Destruction

The public may never fully know why so much of the evidence the administration used to make its case for war in Iraq proved to be false. Was the administration getting bad information from the Central Intelligence Agency? Were Iraqi dissidents such as Ahmad Chalabi given too much credence? Was there a struggle for power between the State Department, which was more wary of war, and the Department of Defense? For whatever reasons, the President and many of his closest advisers, including Vice President Cheney and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, made numerous statements about Iraq that have turned out to be false, most notably about alleged weapons of mass destruction. President Bush included such a statement in his State of the Union address in January 2003. He told the story of Iraq's alleged attempt to buy uranium from Niger in 1999 – a claim the CIA reportedly questioned months before the speech.

Before the war, the Bush administration warned repeatedly that Iraq was in the process of building nuclear weapons. In July 2003, President Bush said, “I strongly believe he [Saddam] was trying to reconstitute his nuclear weapons pro-

gram.” One week earlier on an interview on ABC, Secretary Rumsfeld said, “We said they had a nuclear program. That was never any debate.”

Vice President Cheney on many occasions mentioned Iraq's alleged nuclear weapons program. On “Meet the Press” in March 2003, Cheney said, “we know he has been absolutely devoted to trying to acquire nuclear weapons. And we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.”

To date, U.S. forces have found no evidence of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons in Iraq. In January, after retiring as head of the Iraq Survey Group searching for WMDs in Iraq, David Kay told the Senate Armed Services Committee, “It turns out we were all wrong, in my judgment. And that is most disturbing.” He added, “There's a long record here of being wrong.”

Saddam Hussein and September 11

A recurring argument presented by the administration in its case for war was the link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. In September 2003, national security advisor Rice said, “Saddam Hussein – no one has said that there is evidence that Saddam Hussein directed or controlled 9/11, but let's be very clear, he had ties to al Qaeda, he had al Qaeda operatives who had operated out of Baghdad.”

Addressing U.S. troops in 2003, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld also made the connection. “With each passing day, Saddam Hussein advances his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and could pass them along to terrorists. If he is allowed to do so, the result could be the deaths not of 3,000 people, as on September 11th, but of 30,000, or 300,000 or more.”

Vice President Cheney said on Sept. 14, 2003 of a possible victory in Iraq, “We will have struck a blow right at the heart of the base, if you will, the geographic base of the terrorists who have had us under assault now for many years, but most especially on 9/11.”

The White House web site quotes President Bush as saying, “You can't distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam.”

While no one in the Bush administration has said Saddam Hussein was directly responsible for the September 11 attacks, the repeated coupling of Saddam and 9/11 in public statements was intended to make a connection in people's minds between Iraq and 9/11. And it has worked. A poll done in August 2003 found that 69 percent of Americans thought Saddam was "personally involved" in the attacks of September 11.

However, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, also known as the 9/11 Commission, recently released several reports stating:

- "We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States."
- "Bin Laden is said to have requested space to establish training camps, as well as assistance in procuring weapons, but Iraq apparently never responded."
- "... they [contacts between Iraq and al Qaeda] do not appear to have resulted in a collaborative relationship."
- In reference to the alleged meeting between a 9/11 terrorist and an Iraqi officer in Prague oft-cited by Vice President Cheney, "We do not believe that such a meeting occurred."

Yet, President Bush and other administration officials continue to suggest that meetings between al Qaeda operatives and Iraqis are sufficient to conclude an ongoing relationship between the two. President Bush, responding to a reporter's question about the report after a White House cabinet meeting on June 17, said: "The reason I keep insisting that there was a relationship between Iraq and Saddam and al Qaeda" is "because there was a relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda."

Selective Intelligence: Dubious Sources

In making its case for war, the Bush administration bypassed the usual channels in the intelligence community in order to expedite to senior officials the flow of "raw" information not vetted by traditional intelligence sources. After September 11, a special Pentagon unit doing its own assessments of intelligence on Iraq known as the Office of Special Plans (OSP) was established under Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy. The OSP was created, at least in part, to

provide a more reliably hard-line alternative to the official intelligence estimates coming out of the CIA or State Department.

Senator Carl M. Levin (D-MI), a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Feith's work "reportedly involved the review, analysis and promulgation of intelligence outside of the U.S. intelligence community."

The OSP was also reportedly working closely with Ahmad Chalabi, who had developed relationships with a number of influential figures in the Pentagon, including Feith and Richard Perle, a member of the Defense Policy Board which provides "independent, informed advice and opinion concerning major matters of defense policy." Chalabi's status was such that he sat behind First Lady Laura Bush during the President's State of the Union speech in January 2004.

Chalabi was involved in the administration's plans in Iraq even before the war began. The White House relied heavily on the exile group called the Iraqi National Congress (INC), which Chalabi helped organize, for information about Saddam's illegal weapons. The INC has received \$27 million from the U.S. government over the last four years, according to the group.

As an exile group seeking power in Iraq, the INC had a clear interest in convincing the U.S. to invade Iraq and topple Saddam. Not surprisingly, much of the information it provided the Pentagon and eventually the President helped make the case for removing Saddam Hussein and installing a new government in Iraq.

An internal review later found that most of the information from the group was useless, misleading or in some cases, completely fabricated. One of Chalabi's "sources" reportedly provided the administration with the dubious evidence of mobile biological weapons trailers that Secretary of State Colin Powell presented to the U.N. Security Council. Secretary Powell later said he regretted using the information.

Recent communications intercepts by U.S. forces now suggest that Chalabi may have provided the Iranian government with sensitive details about U.S. operations in Iraq. "This is a very, very serious charge," said Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE), member of the Senate Intelligence Committee. "There were a number of us who warned this administration about [Chalabi].... But the fact

is, there were some in this administration, some in Congress who were quite taken with him," Senator Hagel said.

Congressional Debate: Democrats Go Along with the President

As the Bush administration prepared for war in Iraq, Congress debated a resolution approving the use of force. While some Democrats raised questions and 23 Democratic Senators voted against the resolution, for the most part the Democratic Party went along with the President, convinced that opposition to the war would be political suicide. Senator John Kerry (D-MA), now the presumptive Democratic nominee and then the leading presidential candidate, voted for the resolution. At the time, the *Baltimore Sun* noted:

"With congressional elections barely more than three weeks away, many Democrats did not want to be seen by voters as opposed to a popular president and risk allegations of insufficient patriotism, or worse. Some also bought into the argument of [Senate Minority Leader Tom] Daschle and House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt that the wise political choice was to pass the war resolution and try to get the electorate to focus on the troublesome state of the economy."

Democrats, who often complain of being deprived of even limited rights as the minority in Congress, failed to stand up on the critical issue of war. Only later, when Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean energized his party with an anti-war message, did it become clear to many Democrats that they had failed to represent even their own constituency, much less the broader public.

One of the few willing to take a strong stand against the resolution, Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), a fervent champion of the obligations of the Senate to stand up to a president, said:

"A sudden appetite for war with Iraq seems to have consumed the Bush administration and Congress. The debate that began in the Senate last week is centered not on the fundamental and monumental questions of whether and why the United States should go to war with Iraq,

but rather on the mechanics of how best to wordsmith the President's use-of-force resolution in order to give him virtually unchecked authority to commit the nation's military to an unprovoked attack on a sovereign nation."

As the *Washington Post* noted:

"And yet the debate came and went with none of the drama and little of the passion of those earlier moments. The outcome – lopsided support for Bush's resolution – was preordained. Many Republicans swallowed qualms about a new policy of American "preemptive" attacks against enemies and supported the resolution out of respect for Bush. Many Democrats did little to conceal the pressure they felt to support the resolution so they could return to other matters – which work better for their party – before the Nov. 5 elections."

In the end, Congress passed the resolution by an overwhelming margin. The *New York Times* described the "debate" as having "little passion" despite what was at stake:

"But with few spectators in the gallery, little passion in the arguments and an outcome that has been practically preordained for weeks, the reach toward grandeur occasionally fell flat. Democrats and Republicans took the floor to repeat, with little variation, the precise arguments for invasion that President Bush made on Monday. A few dissenters struggled to raise their voices above the consensus but were reduced to unsuccessfully pleading for floor time."

The Aftermath: Creating A Democracy?

"Iraqi democracy will succeed – and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Tehran – that freedom can be the future of every nation. The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution."
-- President George W. Bush

Despite the administration's rosy predictions, putting together a democracy has been difficult in Iraq. A local official's experience, described in the *Washington Post*, is illustrative:

"But Sharif said he recognized that holding an election before the end of the year would be impossible because of the security situation. Campaigning for a January national election will be hard enough, he said. Right now, he said, only a fool would attempt to go door to door or hold a community meeting to meet with constituents. 'It's far too dangerous,' he said. Asked who he thought his chief rival would be, he did not pause. 'Terrorism.'"

Many of the White House's assumptions about post-Saddam Iraq have turned out to be wrong, including the smooth transition to a Western-style democracy. The administration again gave the most credence to the research and testimony that supported its case for war when evaluating the aftermath. And like the White House's evidence on Iraq's weapons programs, its assurances of Iraq becoming a beacon of democracy for the entire region appear exaggerated – and may, indeed, have had the opposite effect of enflaming popular opinion against the U.S. plans in Iraq.

The administration has repeatedly alluded to a Middle East of American-style democracies with a new Iraq serving as the engine for change. Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz said the new Iraq would "cast a very large shadow, starting with Syria and Iran, but across the whole Arab world."

President Bush also framed the invasion of Iraq as the solution to some of the Middle East's most historic and intractable problems, such as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian crisis. In a speech on February 26, 2003, President Bush said:

"Success in Iraq could also begin a new stage for Middle Eastern peace and set in motion progress towards a truly democratic Palestinian state... Without this outside support for terrorism, Palestinians who are working for reform and long for democracy will be in a better position to choose new leaders – true leaders who strive for peace, true leaders who faithfully serve the people."

Since the occupation began, the White House has slowly scaled back its hopes for a post-Saddam Iraq as the situation has steadily deteriorated. According to a State Department official who spent several months working for the Coalition Provisional Authority, "There was this grand

idea that we were going to turn Iraq into a model nation, a model democracy, with an ideal constitution and an ideal economy and an ideal military. It was just naive."

Also troubling was that the plan for a new democracy seemed to be based more on ideology rather than facts or sound strategy. CPA head L. Paul Bremer and the many Republican operatives in the Coalition Provisional Authority imposed some policies straight from the Republican Party platform, such as a flat tax and restrictions on union organizing.

"It's extremely good news," said Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform of the flat tax plan for Iraq, and a strong supporter of conservative Republican policies. Norquist added, "They told me it's a flat rate [of 15 percent] and it appears as though it's a flat rate." Adding to the wrong-headedness of imposing a specific tax plan is the Iraqis long tradition of non-existent tax collection.

As the newly appointed interim government in Iraq 'took control' on June 28, one of the first issues discussed was the prospect of declaring martial law – hardly a way to start a new democracy. The secretive transition ceremony was itself a response to the widespread violence. "We were supposed to leave them with a permanent constitution," a senior CPA official said. "Then we decided to leave them with a temporary constitution. Now we're leaving them with a temporary constitution that the majority dislikes."

Some members of the recently dissolved CPA question what they have truly accomplished in the last year. The *Washington Post* quotes one senior CPA official saying, "Did we really do what we needed to do? What we promised to do? Nobody here believes that."

Reconstruction Gone Awry

In 2002, the State Department began to gather information and draw up its own set of plans for postwar Iraq. The Future of Iraq Project, as the program was called, was to consider every possible question likely to confront post-war Iraq and included Middle Eastern specialists from the State Department and the CIA. The Project eventually released 13 volumes of reports covering the rebuilding of infrastructure and issues of transitional justice, democracy, and economic development.

But General Jay Garner, the retired Army officer who was first given the job of leading the reconstruction, says he was instructed by Secretary Rumsfeld to ignore the Future of Iraq Project. "The Office of Special Plans discarded all of the Future of Iraq Project's planning," said David Phillips, a specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Among the Project's notable findings was the warning that "the period immediately after regime change might offer... criminals the opportunity to engage in acts of killing, plunder, and looting." When widespread looting did occur after the war ended, U.S. forces in Iraq were completely unprepared and did nothing to stop it. The destruction of important Iraqi government offices during this period turned out to be a major setback to the reconstruction effort.

On March 29, CPA head Bremer announced, "Now the contracts are signed, and in the coming weeks the dirt will begin to fly on construction jobs all over Iraq." He estimated that by the transfer of authority, "50,000 Iraqis will be working on jobs funded by the partnership for prosperity. But this is just the beginning." Currently fewer than 20,000 local workers are working on U.S.-funded construction projects. In fact, more than a year into the reconstruction, reportedly fewer than 140 of 2,300 promised construction projects have begun.

Even though Congress provided more than \$18 billion for Iraqi reconstruction, little of that money has been used so far. According to the *Washington Post*:

"Only \$366 million of the \$18.4 billion U. S. aid package had been spent as of June 22, [2004] the White House budget office told Congress in a report that offers the first detailed accounting of the massive reconstruction package. Thus far, according to the report, nothing from the package has been spent on construction, health care, sanitation and water projects. More money has been spent on administration than all projects related to education, human rights, democracy and governance."

The General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, reported on June 29, 2004, that in many areas, basic services in Iraq are worse now than before the U.S. invasion. Most of

Iraq's population has fewer hours of electricity, the court system is more clogged, and the police force is suffering from mass desertions. In addition, the number of so-called significant insurgent attacks increased sharply from 411 in February to 1,169 in May.

"We mostly did what we know how to do, instead of what needed to be done," said James Dobbins, a retired diplomat who worked in post-war Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina. "What the Iraqis needed was security, and with that they could get their electricity back on themselves."

Underestimating the Costs of War and Reconstruction

Shortly after the war started, Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz proclaimed in a House hearing, "When it comes to reconstruction, before we turn to the American taxpayer, we will turn first to the resources of the Iraqi government and the international community... The oil revenues of that country could bring between \$50 billion and \$100 billion over the course of the next two or three years."

In February, Josh Bolton, President Bush's budget director, said, "We do not anticipate requesting supplemental funding during '04." He also reportedly said, "We are projecting outlays in '04 that are well below \$50 billion for the ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan."

But President Bush's former chief economic adviser, Larry Lindsey, said the war could cost as much as \$200 billion. The White House then said that estimate was "very, very high." Lindsey later left his job at the White House. Mitch Daniels, then director of the Office of Management and Budget, said the cost in Iraq would be more like \$50 billion to \$60 billion.

When former Army chief of staff, General Eric Shinseki, said before the war that a force of roughly 200,000 soldiers would be needed in Iraq, Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz called Shinseki's estimate "wildly off the mark."

The reality has been much different. Monthly costs in Iraq went from \$2.7 billion in November 2003 to almost \$7 billion in January 2004. Including the most recent White House request for \$25 billion, the price tag so far for the Iraq war

comes to \$191 billion, with \$112 billion approved or requested in just the last nine months. The administration has lumped appropriations in Iraq and Afghanistan together, but the vast majority of the resources are going to Iraq. Congress expects another request from the White House for possibly \$50 billion early next year (after the elections).

The Pentagon also plans to keep about 135,000 soldiers in Iraq through 2005, instead of reducing the ranks to about 115,000 troops this summer. And, as Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz now explains, they will be there for years to come.

These numbers do not include the more than 20,000 private contractors in Iraq, engaged in activities ranging from preparing and serving meals to rebuilding infrastructure to providing security. It is private contractors, not U.S. soldiers, who provided security for Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority. Contractor employees were at the center of the prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib.

Contractors help the administration underestimate the number of troops actually stationed in Iraq, and the cost of the reconstruction. Many of the support functions private companies like Halliburton provide the military are done under cost-plus contracts, which tend to grow over the life of the contract.

Conclusion

As Sydney Freedberg wrote in the *National Journal*, "With the War Powers Act a dead letter and Congress unusually compliant, [the President] can commit the world's most potent military virtually at will, staking American lives, treasure, and prestige with consequences – intended and otherwise – that ripple down the decades."

Winning the war in Iraq was never in doubt. No one thought the Iraqi army could stand up to U.S. forces in a conventional war. But many observers warned that the aftermath of the war could lead to the U.S. being mired in a non-conventional war with defeated and unemployed Iraqi soldiers and foreign terrorists who would see the U.S. occupation as an opportunity.

The road to war in Iraq was strewn with failed and undermined democratic principles – secrecy, deception and a refusal to listen to expert advice by the administration coupled with lack of oversight by Congress. That we find ourselves in a mess in Iraq is an unfortunate failure of our democracy, by the officials entrusted with the responsibility for guiding our nation.

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