

## Bush Administration Disasters Depicted as Triumphs

By Stephen Zunes (October 2004)

Even putting aside the many important legal and moral questions about the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, it has been a disaster even on practical terms. Mainstream to conservative strategic analysts and retired generals—along with the majority of career professionals in the State Department, Defense Department, and CIA—recognize that the invasion and occupation has made America less secure rather than more secure.

Still, the Bush administration continues to defend its actions and public opinion polls still show that a majority of Americans trust George W. Bush more than John Kerry to defend America. This is in large part because, throughout this fall's campaign, President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have been making demonstrably false and misleading claims about what motivated administration decisions as well as the results of their actions.

Ironically, a number of these claims have been supported in a series of resolutions backed by a majority of congressional Democrats—including Senators John Kerry and John Edwards—thereby giving the Bush campaign immunity from much of the scrutiny it deserves. In doing so, these congressional Democrats have significantly increased the chances of a Bush victory next Tuesday. President Bush rarely fails to note in his stump speeches that congressional Democrats, including Kerry and Edwards, also saw Saddam Hussein as a threat and voted to authorize force. Indeed, not only have the Democrats missed a number of crucial opportunities to expose the disingenuous nature of Bush administration policy, they have at times repeated the lies themselves.

Below is a sampling of the claims being made by President Bush and Vice President Cheney in recent weeks leading up to the election, followed by a critique:

"I went to the United Nations in the hopes that diplomacy would work. I hoped that Saddam Hussein would listen to the demands of the free world. The United Nations debated the issue. They voted 15 to nothing to say to Saddam Hussein: disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. I believe when an international body speaks, it must mean what it says, in order to keep this world peaceful. When you say something, you better mean it. But Saddam Hussein didn't believe the United Nations. After all, he'd ignored 16 other resolutions. And so at this point in time, I realized diplomacy wasn't working." —George W. Bush, October 1

Saddam Hussein did disclose, in the fall of 2002, detailed documentation regarding the destruction of his WMDs, WMD programs, and offensive delivery systems as required. In addition, the U.S. government now admits that he had in fact disarmed as much as a decade earlier. So, at the time of the invasion, the Iraqi government had already disclosed and disarmed, and was thereby in compliance with the major provisions of UN Security Council resolution 1441, to which Bush refers in this quote. Diplomacy had, in fact, worked.

Unfortunately, when Bush launched the invasion anyway, every Democrat in the Senate—including Kerry and Edwards—voted in support of a Republican-sponsored resolution endorsing the invasion based upon the claim that Iraq was still in violation of these Security Council resolutions. Similarly, that same week, the House of Representatives voted on a resolution, with only ten of the 205 Democrats dissenting, declaring that "reliance by the United States on further diplomatic and other peaceful means alone will neither adequately protect the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq nor likely lead to enforcement of all relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq." As a result, the Democrats lost an opportunity to challenge President Bush's assertion that Iraq was still in violation of those resolutions and that force was the only alternative.

"The last option for the Commander-in-Chief is to commit troops, and so I went to the United Nations. See, I believe we ought to try diplomacy before we commit troops. When the UN sent inspectors in, he systematically deceived the inspectors. We gave Saddam Hussein a final chance to meet his responsibilities to the civilized world. And when he refused, I faced the kind of decision that comes only to the Oval Office, a decision no president would ask for, but must be prepared to make. Do I trust the word of a madman and forget the lessons of September the 11th, or take action to defend America? Given that choice, I will defend America every time." —George W. Bush, September 3



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First of all, it is now well-known that President Bush had decided to go ahead with the invasion well prior to going before the United Nations.

Secondly, the UN was successful in the fall of 2002 in getting Iraq to allow inspectors to return and have unfettered and immediate access to anywhere they wanted to go. The Iraqi regime did, on numerous occasions, hide things from UN inspectors, but that was under UNSCOM in the 1990s. Under UNMOVIC, beginning in late 2002 until the United States forced them out in anticipation of the invasion, there were no reports of systematic deception of UN inspectors by the Iraqis.

Thirdly, no one was advocating trusting Saddam Hussein. That is why the United Nations demanded that the inspectors return.

Fourthly, while Saddam Hussein was certainly a brutal tyrant, there is no evidence that he was a “madman.”

Finally, having completely disarmed its WMD capabilities, Iraq was not any threat to the United States, so there was no need to “defend America” from Saddam Hussein.

Unfortunately, despite evidence to the contrary, both Kerry and Edwards also declared Saddam Hussein “a threat” and thereby helped give Bush and Cheney the excuse they were looking for to take over that oil-rich country. Though Kerry promised, when he voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq, that he could be “the first to speak out” if President Bush did not first allow the United Nations to attempt to disarm Iraq through non-military means, when President Bush pressed forward with plans for the invasion while UN inspectors were on the verge of completing their mission and determining that no such weapons existed, Kerry remained silent. When Bush launched the illegal U.S. invasion of Iraq, Kerry joined his fellow Democrats in supporting a resolution declaring that the action was “lawful” and that he “commends and supports the efforts and leadership of the President.”

“Saddam Hussein had the capability of making weapons of mass destruction. And had the world turned its head, he would have made those weapons. He could have passed that capability or those weapons on to terrorists that hate us.”

—George W. Bush, October 1

Since eliminating his WMD programs, Saddam Hussein no longer had such capability. In addition, there was no indication that the world was about to “turn its head” and allow such programs to be reconstituted. While the economic sanctions on Iraq were increasingly controversial, the international community was united in maintaining military sanctions,

including a strict embargo on the technology and raw materials necessary to rebuild such a program. There is also no evidence to suggest that, even when Saddam Hussein had WMDs and WMD capability, that he had any inclination to pass them on to any terrorist groups.

Unfortunately, Kerry and Edwards were among the majority of Democratic Senators who—in authorizing the invasion of Iraq and ignoring independent strategic analyses—went on record saying that Iraq was “continuing to possess and develop a significant chemical and biological weapons capability ... [and] actively seeking a nuclear weapons capability, thereby continuing to threaten the national security interests of the United States and international peace and security.” The Democratic-supported resolution also emphasized the “gravity of the threat that Iraq will transfer weapons of mass destruction to international terrorist organizations.”

“We knew Saddam Hussein’s record of aggression. We knew his support for terror. Remember, Saddam harbored Abu Nidal, the leader of a terrorist organization that carried out attacks in Europe and Asia.” —George W. Bush, October 1

Everyone knew about Iraq’s record of aggression, but thanks to mandatory disarmament initiatives by the United Nations and a strict military embargo, Iraq no longer had a serious offensive military capability.

Secondly, the State Department’s own annual report on international terrorism had failed to note any act of international terrorism by the Iraqi regime since early 1993, a full decade before the U.S. invasion.

Thirdly, while Abu Nidal—who had been in declining health for years—was living in Baghdad, his terrorist group had been moribund for more than a decade prior to the U.S. invasion. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein had him executed in 2002, the year before the U.S. invasion.

Unfortunately, Kerry and Edwards supported a resolution—along with the majority of their Democratic Senate colleagues—declaring that “Iraq continues to aid and harbor ... international terrorist organizations, including organizations that threaten the lives and safety of American citizens.”

“Saddam Hussein subsidized the families of suicide bombers. And he invaded his neighbors; he was shooting missiles at our pilots. That guy was a threat.” —George W. Bush, September 7

First of all, the money Saddam Hussein transferred to the Arab Liberation Front—the tiny Palestinian faction that passed some funds on to families of suicide

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bombers—was relatively insignificant: it went to only a small minority of the families, it was less than what they generally received from U.S. ally Saudi Arabia, and it didn't come close to covering the costs of these families' homes, which are routinely destroyed by Israeli occupation forces in retaliation.

Secondly, Iraq did invade neighboring countries, but that was back in 1980 (Iran) and 1990 (Kuwait) and Iraqi forces had long since returned to within their internationally recognized borders (unlike some U.S. allies—such as Morocco and Israel, which invaded their neighbors and still occupy them). There was no realistic threat that Iraq would be able to do so again.

Thirdly, the only time Iraq shot at U.S. pilots was when U.S. military planes violated Iraqi airspace. Since there was no UN mandate for military enforcement of the Kurdish safe areas or the establishment of “No Fly Zones,” the Iraqis had as much right to shoot at them as would any country when enemy warplanes infringe on their territory. Unfortunately, the vote to authorize the invasion of Iraq—supported by Kerry and Edwards and a majority of their Democratic colleagues—justified the invasion in part on the grounds that “the current Iraqi regime has demonstrated its continuing hostility toward, and willingness to attack, the United States ... by firing on many thousands of occasions on United States and Coalition Armed Forces engaged in enforcing the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.”

Iraq was a threat back in the 1980s when the U.S. was quietly supporting Saddam, but certainly not in the years leading up to the invasion.

Unfortunately, Bush has been able to correctly point out that most Democrats in Congress—including Senators Kerry and Edwards—also claimed that Saddam Hussein was a threat, thereby giving such outrageous claims a degree of credibility they otherwise would not deserve.

“Zarqawi ... fled to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, where he received medical care and set up operations with some two dozen terrorist associates. He operated in Baghdad and worked with associates in northern Iraq, who ran camps to train terrorists, and conducted chemical and biological experiments, until coalition forces arrived and ended those operations. With nowhere to operate openly, Zarqawi has gone underground and is making a stand in Iraq. ... If Zarqawi and his associates were not busy fighting American forces in Iraq ... these killers would be plotting and acting to murder innocent civilians in free nations, including our own.” —George W. Bush, October 18

First of all, investigations by the CIA and others have shown no evidence that Saddam's regime ever supported the Jordanian-born terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, since they saw this radical Islamist as a threat to the secular Iraqi regime. All indications are that his very brief visits to Baghdad were clandestine and that he did not have any major operations there prior to the U.S. invasion. Zarqawi's camp in northern Iraq was in the Kurdish safe area well beyond the control of Saddam's government. Journalists who visited the camp where U.S. officials claimed he was conducting ongoing “chemical and biological experiments” prior to the U.S. invasion found nothing remotely resembling such activity, a fact confirmed by U.S. Special Forces, which seized the area a few weeks later.

Unfortunately, despite all this evidence to the contrary, all but fifteen of the 210 House Democrats supported a resolution this September declaring that during Saddam Hussein's rule, “the al-Zarqawi terror network used Baghdad as a base of operations to coordinate the movement of people, money, and supplies.”

Secondly, Zarqawi's forces have grown dramatically only as a result of the U.S. occupation, with cells now operating throughout northern and central Iraq. All indications are that his goal is to rid Iraq of foreign occupation and establish his version of an Islamic state, just as like-minded jihadists did when the Soviets occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s. These jihadists came to power in Afghanistan only as a result of the Soviet invasion and occupation; they were not a threat beforehand. Similarly, jihadists were never a threat in Iraq until after the U.S. invasion and occupation. In any case, there is no evidence that Zarqawi and his followers have ever plotted or planned to attack the United States and, in any case, they do not have such a global reach in terms of operational capability.

“We'll succeed in Iraq because we've got a plan. And here's the plan: We'll train Iraqis so they can do the hard work in defending themselves; 100,000 troops are trained today, 125,000 by the end of the year. We'll continue to work with them, to give them the equipment, the training they need to defend themselves against the attacks of these terrorists.”

—George W. Bush, October 1

In reality, less than 40,000 Iraqi troops are trained and their ranks have been significantly infiltrated by insurgents. In addition, the bigger threat to the survival of the regime is not the terrorists, but the majority of insurgents who do not target civilians, but focus their guerrilla attacks on military and government installations. By claiming that the insurgency is simply composed of terrorists, outsiders and holdouts of the former regime, the

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administration is able to depict current operations in Iraq as part of the “war on terror” rather than the bloody urban counter-insurgency war that it is, where the primary victims are civilians.

Unfortunately, the House of Representatives—with only 56 of the 210 Democrats voting against it—passed a resolution this past June claiming that the attacks against U.S. forces have come not from a popular nationalist insurgency against a foreign occupation, but “former regime elements, foreign and Iraqi terrorists, and other criminals who are attempting to undermine the interests of the Iraqi people and thwart their evident desire to live in peace,” thereby giving credibility to the Bush administration’s insistence that the U.S. military occupation of Iraq be maintained in order to fight terrorism.

“Because of President Bush’s determination in the war on terror, leaders around the world are getting the message. Just five days after Saddam Hussein was captured, Moammar Gadhafi in Libya agreed to abandon his nuclear weapons program and turn the materials over to the United States.”

—Vice President Dick Cheney, September 1

Saddam Hussein’s capture had nothing to do with Gadhafi’s decision to abandon Libya’s nuclear weapons programs. In fact, the decision was the culmination of a two-year diplomatic effort led by Great Britain. Furthermore, having seen Saddam’s elimination of his nuclear weapons program nearly a decade earlier as well as

Iraq’s subsequent invasion, it is unlikely Gadhafi took that example as a motivator for unilateral disarmament.

Unfortunately, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi led a majority of her Democratic colleagues in voting in favor of a Republican-sponsored amendment that claimed that the elimination of Libya’s nuclear program “would not have been possible if not for ... the liberation of Iraq by United States and Coalition Forces,” thereby giving credence to this dubious Republican claim that the GOP is now using to enhance Bush’s credibility.

In conclusion, the only reason this election is even close is that the Bush administration has been successful at positioning its misleading interpretations of events before, during, and subsequent to the U.S. invasion of Iraq as fact, thereby avoiding the criticism Bush’s policies deserve. It is nothing short of scandalous that the Democrats—who should be coasting toward a decisive victory at this point—have made it so difficult for themselves by perpetuating the Bush administration’s misrepresentations.

If Kerry loses on Tuesday, the Democrats will have no one to blame but themselves.

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