

The War In Iraq Is Not Over and Neither Are The Lies To Justify It

By Stephen Zunes | September 2003

President George W. Bush's nationally broadcast speech Sunday evening once again was designed to mislead Congress and the American public into supporting his administration's policies in Iraq. Despite record deficits and draconian cutbacks in government support for health care, housing, education, the environment, and public transportation, the president is asking the American taxpayer to spend an additional \$87 billion to support his invasion and occupation of Iraq.

It is disturbing that President Bush has once again tried to link the very real threat to American security from mega-terrorist groups like al Qaeda to phony threats originating in Iraq. Not only does he try to link the terrorism that has grown out of the post-invasion chaos in Iraq to the devastating al Qaeda attacks on the United States two years ago, President Bush has depicted all the current violence against Americans and other foreigners in Iraq as part of this terrorist threat.

Like most Americans, I am deeply distressed at attacks on U.S. soldiers. However, the Fourth Geneva Convention—to which the United States is a signatory—is quite clear that a people under foreign military occupation have the right to militarily engage armed uniformed occupation forces. This is not the same as terrorism, which refers to attacks deliberately targeted against unarmed civilians and is universally recognized as a war crime. It is therefore terribly misleading for President Bush to try to convince the American public that these two phenomena are the same.

President Bush also failed to differentiate between the increasingly disparate elements behind the attacks. Some of the violence may indeed come from those who have some connection with al Qaeda who have infiltrated Iraq since the invasion this spring; some may be supporters of Saddam Hussein's former regime; some may be radical Iraqi Islamists or independent Iraqi nationalists who opposed the old regime but also oppose the U.S. occupation; still oth-

ers may be foreign fighters who see driving American occupiers from Iraq as an act of pan-Islamic solidarity comparable to driving Soviet occupiers from Afghanistan.

However, President Bush now declares that a successful American-led pacification of the anti-occupation resistance in Iraq would be an "essential victory in the war on terror." In linking the legitimate international struggle against al Qaeda with the illegitimate U.S. occupation of Iraq, it becomes possible for the administration to justify the president's determination to "spend what is necessary" in controlling this oil-rich country and to depict those in the United States and elsewhere who oppose the occupation as being soft on terrorism.

Below are some excerpts from the September 7 speech that were particularly misleading:

"And we acted in Iraq, where the former regime sponsored terror..."

The Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein indeed had sponsored terror over its nearly one-quarter of a century in power. However, according to both U.S. government agencies and independent researchers, Iraqi support for terrorism primarily took place in the 1980s, when Washington was quietly supporting the regime, and had dropped off dramatically since then. No significant Iraqi links have been found to al Qaeda or other terrorist groups that currently threaten the United States.

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***“...possessed and used weapons of mass destruction,...*”**

Iraq did use weapons of mass destruction in the 1980s, when the regime was being supported by the U.S. government, but not since then.

It also appears that virtually all of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction were destroyed or otherwise made unusable some time between five and eight years ago. Neither the United Nations nor the Bush administration has been able to show any evidence that Iraq possessed such weapons in more recent years.

“...and for 12 years defied the clear demands of the United Nations Security Council.”

It is true that Iraq openly defied or otherwise failed for twelve years to live up to demands of the UN Security Council regarding its destruction of and accountability for weapons of mass destruction, certain delivery systems, and other proscribed materials. However, once Iraq allowed the UN inspectors into their country for unfettered inspections last fall and ceded to UN demands regarding aerial reconnaissance, interviews with Iraqi scientists, and other means of insuring full Iraqi accountability several weeks later, one could argue that Iraq may have finally been in compliance with most, if not all, of those outstanding resolutions at the time of the U.S. invasion.

It should also be noted that Morocco, Israel, and Turkey have failed to live up to demands from the UN Security Council for more than twice as long as Iraq. Several other countries—including Croatia, Indonesia, Sudan, Armenia, India, Pakistan, and others—continue to be in defiance of the UN Security Council from more recent resolutions. Despite these transgressions, however, the Bush administration does not appear ready to invade these countries. Indeed, most of these countries receive military and economic aid from the U.S. government, raising serious questions as to whether the Bush administration has ever really been concerned about the implementation of resolutions passed by the UN Security Council after all.

“Our coalition enforced these international demands in one of the swiftest and most humane military campaigns in history.”

First of all, the initial invasion was almost exclusively an American military operation with the exception of British leadership in some southern parts of the country. It could therefore hardly be referred to as a “coalition.”

More importantly, the invasion of Iraq was not an enforcement of these “international demands.” The United Nations Charter clearly states that only the UN Security Council itself has the ability to authorize military enforcement of its resolutions. The Security Council, however, refused to authorize the United States to enforce these resolutions through military means despite enormous pressure by U.S. officials to do so.

Finally, it was hardly a humane military campaign. More than 5,000 Iraqi civilians were killed in the U.S.-led assault, far surpassing the number of American civilians killed in the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

“For a generation leading up to September the 11th, 2001, terrorists and their radical allies attacked innocent people in the Middle East and beyond, without facing a sustained and serious response.”

This is not true at all. During this period, countries where terrorists were harbored—including Libya, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, and Afghanistan—were subjected to major bombing campaigns (though more civilians than terrorists were killed during most of these military operations). Sustained and serious responses by a series of American, Middle Eastern, and European governments—using a combination of aggressive police work, intelligence efforts, and paramilitary operations—destroyed or severely weakened most of the major terrorist groups during this period, including Abu Nidal, the PFLP-GC, the PKK, Black September, and others.

“The terrorists became convinced that free nations were decadent and weak.”

As anyone familiar with any serious study of Middle Eastern terrorism recognizes, there is no doubt on the part of anti-American extremists of the United States’ military power. Indeed, the inability to take on U.S. military might directly is what has prompted these extremists to utilize the kind of irregular warfare that targets innocent civilians. Furthermore, the use of terror by groups like al Qaeda comes in large part from the hope that the United States will respond through disproportionate and poorly targeted military actions that further alienate the general population and add to their ranks. Unfortunately, the Bush administration has fallen right into their trap.

“We have carried the fight to the enemy. We are rolling back the terrorist threat to civilization, not on the fringes of its influence, but at the heart of its power.”

If one wants to find a geographic center of the terrorist threat, it is U.S. ally Saudi Arabia, from which most of the al Qaeda leadership, sixteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers, and most of the group’s financial support comes. By contrast, none of al Qaeda’s leadership, none of the 9/11 hijackers, and none of the money trail appear to have come from Iraq.

However, the heart of terrorism’s power comes not from any particular geographic location, but from the individual terrorists whose violent anti-Americanism is rooted in large part to years of U.S. support for repressive Arab dictatorships and Israeli occupation forces. Current U.S. policy is making enemies faster than we can kill them.

“In Iraq, we are helping the long suffering people of that country to build a decent and democratic society at the center of the Middle East. Together we are transforming a place of torture chambers and mass graves into a nation of laws and free institutions.”

Most observers in Iraq have reported that the country is far from being “a decent and democratic society” and that foreign occupation forces are currently in charge of the legal system and governmental institutions.

Furthermore, the United States—both currently and over the past three decades—has been the single largest supporter of autocratic governments in the Arab world, raising serious questions as to whether freedom and democracy is even the goal of the United States in Iraq.

“The terrorists thrive on the support of tyrants and the resentments of oppressed peoples. When tyrants fall, and resentment gives way to hope, men and women in every culture reject the ideologies of terror, and turn to the pursuits of peace. Everywhere that freedom takes hold, terror will retreat.”

This is very true. This begs the question, then, as to why the Bush administration continues to arm and support tyrannical governments like those in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. These countries have produced far more anti-American terrorists than Iraq ever did, even under Saddam Hussein.

“The north of Iraq is generally stable and is moving forward with reconstruction and self-government.”

Actually, because northern Iraq had been an autonomous area under Kurdish rule ever since mid-1991, the region had been generally stable and was moving forward with reconstruction and self-government well prior to the U.S. invasion. Since the U.S. invasion, however, there has been an upsurge in ethnic clashes and other violence.

“This violence is directed not only against our coalition, but against anyone in Iraq who stands for decency and freedom and progress.”

Some of the violence may indeed come from those who oppose decency, freedom, and progress. However, history has shown that most people who have taken up arms against foreign occupation troops do so because they believe it is those who invaded and occupied their country who actually threaten its freedom and progress.

“Two years ago, I told the Congress and the country that the war on terror would be a lengthy war, a dif-

ferent kind of war, fought on many fronts in many places. Iraq is now the central front.”

The U.S. invasion of Iraq was justified primarily on the grounds that Iraq supposedly possessed chemical and biological weapons and had an active nuclear weapons program. Only now, as it is becoming apparent that Iraq did not have such weapons or weapons programs after all, is the Bush administration suddenly claiming that the reason for the United States to take over the country is that Iraq is now “the central front” of the “war on terror.”

“Following World War II, we lifted up the defeated nations of Japan and Germany, and stood with them as they built representative governments. We committed years and resources to this cause. And that effort has been repaid many times over in three generations of friendship and peace. America today accepts the challenge of helping Iraq in the same spirit—for their sake, and our own.”

There are some key differences between Germany and Japan of 1945 and Iraq today. Germany had a democratic parliamentary system prior to Hitler seizing power in the early 1930s and Japan had some semblance of a constitutional monarchy prior to the rise of militarism in the late 1920s, whereas Iraq has never had a representative government. Germany and Japan were homogeneous societies with a strong sense of national identity, whereas Iraq is an artificial creation thrown together by colonial powers from three Ottoman provinces and has only been truly independent for just 45 years; fighting between various Iraqi religious and ethnic groups has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands in recent decades. In addition, most Germans and Japanese recognized that their defeat and occupation was a direct result of their leaders’ aggression against those countries’ neighbors, whereas the Iraqis—whose government was far weaker and less aggressive during its final twelve years than it was in the past—are more prone to see the American takeover as an act of Western imperialism, not self-defense. As a result, it will be quite difficult for the United States to establish a widely accepted and stable regime. Finally, the idealistic New Deal liberals who helped create open political systems in post-war Germany and Japan arguably

had a stronger personal commitment to democracy than the right-wing neoconservatives in the Bush administration, who have a history of supporting dictatorial governments that support U.S. strategic and economic interests.

“We are taking direct action against the terrorists in the Iraqi theater, which is the surest way to prevent future attacks on coalition forces and the Iraqi people.”

These kinds of proactive U.S. military operations against alleged terrorists in crowded urban areas tend to result in civilian casualties that will likely encourage attacks by both terrorists targeting civilians as well as other armed units targeting occupation soldiers.

More importantly, however, it is important to recognize that prior to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, there were no car bomb attacks against UN offices, foreign embassies, or places of worship. Since the U.S. takeover, however, Iraq has become a hotbed of terrorism. This raises serious questions as to whether invading other countries actually makes the world safer from terrorism or if such actions actually help create terrorism.

“Some countries have requested an explicit authorization of the United Nations Security Council before committing troops to Iraq. I have directed Secretary of State Colin Powell to introduce a new Security Council resolution, which would authorize the creation of a multinational force in Iraq, to be led by America.... [W]e cannot let past differences interfere with present duties. Members of the United Nations now have an opportunity—and the responsibility—to assume a broader role in assuring that Iraq becomes a free and democratic nation.”

It is unlikely that the UN Security Council would take the unprecedented step of authorizing a multinational force to take part in an occupation that came through what most UN members see as an illegal invasion and a clear violation of the UN Charter. By contrast, if the United States were willing to transfer administration of Iraq to the United Nations—creating a UN trusteeship like the one the Security Council set up in East Timor between the withdrawal of Indonesian occupation forces in 2000 and inde-

pendence last year—most countries capable of providing peacekeeping troops, financial support, and technical expertise would probably do so. The United States has refused to allow the United Nations a significant role, however, insisting that the economic and political future of Iraq should be shaped primarily by the United States, not the international community. Until the United States allows the United Nations to take leadership, however, it is unfair to insist that UN members have a “responsibility” or a “duty” to help ameliorate the mess the United States has gotten itself into.

“I have expressed confidence in the ability of the Iraqi people to govern themselves. Now they must rise to the responsibilities of a free people and secure the blessings of their own liberty.”

This statement may be preparing the way to convince Americans that, should the Bush administration’s policy fail, it will be the fault of the Iraqis themselves, not the government that invaded and occupied them.

“This budget request will also support our commitment to helping the Iraqi and Afghan people rebuild their own nations, after decades of oppression and mismanagement.”

Iraq and Afghanistan were indeed ruled by regimes that were oppressive and mismanaged their economies. However, development officials on the ground in these countries have argued that most of the necessary rebuilding is related to damage from years of heavy bombing and economic sanctions, which—particularly in the case of Iraq—were largely a result of U.S. policy. It is thus far unclear as to how much of the \$87 billion requested of Congress will actually help in rebuilding these countries and how much will go to supporting U.S. occupation forces and well-connected U.S. multinational corporations involved in reconstruction and administration.

“We will provide funds to help them improve security. And we will help them to restore basic services, such as electricity and water, and to build new schools, roads, and medical clinics. This effort is essential to

the stability of those nations, and therefore, to our own security.”

One hopes this will indeed be the case. It should be pointed out, however, that security in Afghanistan and Iraq has actually decreased dramatically since the U.S. ousted the previous governments and basic services like electricity and water are less available in Iraq now than they were prior to the U.S. takeover.

“For the Middle East and the world, there will be no going back to the days of fear, when a brutal and aggressive tyrant possessed terrible weapons.”

One hopes this will be true as well. However, none of Iraq’s neighbors had expressed particular fear of Saddam Hussein once the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent sanctions and UN-led disarmament efforts apparently eliminated the regime’s weapons of mass destruction and its offensive military capability. Not only did the U.S. invasion do nothing to improve the regional security situation, the Bush administration has rejected calls for a weapons of mass destruction-free zone for the entire Middle East, which could help prevent other tyrants from obtaining such weapons.

“We have learned that terrorist attacks are not caused by the use of strength; they are invited by the perception of weakness.”

Again, there are no doubts among extremists in the Middle East regarding America’s military strength. The perceived weakness is in regard to America’s moral strength. Millions of people in the Middle East and beyond believe that it is morally wrong for the United States to support Arab dictatorships and Israeli occupation forces. They believe it is morally wrong that the amount of U.S. military aid to the Middle East is six times that of its economic aid. They believe it is morally wrong that the #1 U.S. export to the region is not consumer goods, high-tech equipment, or agricultural products, but armaments. They believe it is morally wrong that a powerful country from the other side of the world would invade a sovereign Arab nation and justify it by falsely claiming that its government currently had weapons of mass destruction and was supporting al Qaeda. They believe it is morally wrong that U.S.

bombing and sanctions against Muslim countries has killed far more civilians than have the terrorists themselves.

The unfortunate reality is that the more the United States has militarized the Middle East, the less secure we have become.

“And the surest way to avoid attacks on our own people is to engage the enemy where he lives and plans. We are fighting that enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan today so that we do not meet him again on our own streets, in our own cities.”

It is absurd to believe that those Iraqis and Afghans currently fighting U.S. occupation forces in their own countries actually want to somehow sneak into the United States to fight Americans here. Indeed, no Afghans or Iraqis are known to have ever committed an act of terrorism against Americans on American soil.

The president’s statement is essentially a retread of the line used by supporters of the Vietnam War that “If we don’t fight them over there, we will have to fight them here.” However, more than 28 years after the Communist victory in Vietnam, we have yet to fight the Vietnamese in our streets and there is no indication that we ever will. The Iraqis and Afghans, as were the Vietnamese, are fighting Americans because U.S. troops are in their country and, like the Vietnamese, will stop fighting Americans once U.S. troops leave their country.

(Stephen Zunes <zunes@usfca.edu> is the Middle East editor for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org). He serves as an associate professor of Politics and chair of the Peace & Justice Studies Program at the University of San Francisco and is the author of “Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism.”)

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