



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
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NINE YEARS LATER:
THE PROBLEM WITH MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

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Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

This is the third installment in a series of historical reflections by Douglas Brinkley, Ph.D., fellow in history at the James A. Baker III Institute at Rice University, in which he analyzes both the September 11 attack and its aftermath.

With the publication of *Decision Points*, the American left—anxious about vibrant book sales—has been looking for ways to clip George W. Bush’s sails. A chief liberal worry is the way the former president seems to be rewriting his early 2003 decision to go to war with Iraq. At the new Bush Presidential Library in Dallas—a project that broke ground on November 16, 2010—the most touted artifact to be placed under glass is the Fanon bullhorn he used in New York City shortly after the September 11 attacks. But what the critical left wants to know is whether the “Mission Accomplished” banner—the other memorable artifact from his White House tenure—will also be put on display.

On May 1, 2003, President Bush garnered memorable, if regrettable, publicity when he appeared in an Air Force pilot jumpsuit on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* in front of a huge banner reading “Mission Accomplished.” The cable TV media had a field day showing Bush playing peacock, donning a military uniform, prematurely bragging about victory in the Middle East. One of the reasons the photo op was considered offensive was that the Iraq War was far from being over. Saddam Hussein had been deposed, but the nation of Iraq was immediately thrown into bloody turmoil as factions representing different religious sects, like Sunnis and Shiites, and, to some extent, different regions, began to wage a violent guerrilla war. In the United States, the news surrounding the prolonged Iraq War was deeply unsettling. Had the United States stumbled into an Iraqi civil war? “At last realizing the futility of superior *kinetics*—roughly speaking, putting a lot of metal in the air—American forces belatedly adopted a counterinsurgency strategy,” *Newsweek* explained. “Using a new field manual—FM3-24, written under the supervision of General David Petraeus—U.S. forces began to focus on protecting civilians while ruthlessly targeting jihadist leaders.”

President Bush found himself in deep water with the American public. Investigations revealed that several of the intelligence reports on which the U.S. government had based its drive toward war were blatantly false. As if the breaches of trust were not damning enough, someone in the

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

Bush administration compromised the identity of a CIA agent, Valerie Plame, after her husband, Joe Wilson, wrote an article in *The New York Times* that was critical of President Bush's use of bogus intelligence in advancing its Persian Gulf military agenda. It looked to have been retribution or a kind of grim warning for those who crossed U.S. government policy. For an administration that relied on covert operations and prided itself on the support of all of its "warriors," the case was disturbing.

And then stories broke claiming that some U.S. troops had been torturing Iraqi prisoners in violation of the Geneva conventions. Even before the U.S. government seized control of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, the complex 20 miles from Baghdad had been a factory of torture and annihilation. Under Saddam Hussein's demented administration, the prison was a death house where beatings and hangings were commonplace. Constructed in the mid-1960s by British engineers with American blueprints, the campus-like penal colony was where Saddam denied human rights with the sadistic flair of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. Prisoners were kept in dungeons and subjected to electric shocks, sleep deprivation, and even castration. Arms and hands were chopped off as punishment. Saddam's son, Qusay, acting as chief of the secret police, is said to have ordered mass executions for his own on carnival-like amusement.

Even though Abu Ghraib had a horrendous reputation during the Saddam years, the U.S. government, unwilling to wait two years to build a new prison, gave the cursed facility a facelift and went into the incarceration business. A huge portrait of Saddam was replaced by a banner that read in both English and Arabic: "America is the friend of all Iraqi people."

Everybody from Ambassador Paul Bremer, presidential envoy to Iraq, to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz failed to understand the atrocious symbolism of Abu Ghraib. They scoffed at officials from Amnesty International and the United Nations who wanted the detention center closed. The absence of an Iraqi government had turned U.S. policymakers into braggarts, gloating over the fact that Saddam's palace on the Tigris River had become an American garrison. Not since the Vietnam War brought us My Lai in 1968 had American arrogance been so blatantly on display for the world community to gasp at.

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

As this debate went on, workers were ordered to speed up the remodeling of Abu Ghraib, and a huge new tented compound named Camp Ganci (named after a New York firefighter killed on September 11) was erected on Abu Ghraib's grounds. American troops had started picking up prisoners in routine sweeps, and they needed somewhere to put them. The Bush administration sanctioned interrogations about the Al Qaeda menace, and they were already under way. Ignoring concerns that the United States wasn't adhering to the Geneva Conventions, Vice President Cheney told NBC's Tim Russert that America sometimes had to work "the dark side." Members of the U.S. Army's 372nd Military Police Company, acting without conscience, started engaging in jailhouse humiliations at Abu Ghraib. Inmates were hooded and stripped, forced into sexual acts, repeatedly kicked in the groin. Ferocious dogs—a "black blur of muscle and jaw," in journalist Philip Gourevitch's descriptive words—barked at them from only one or two feet away. The U.S. military investigation ultimately found that three-quarters of all Abu Ghraib prisoners had not committed any crimes. Even President Bush deemed the abuses unacceptable after seeing the ghastly photographs taken at Abu Ghraib. One picture, for example, showed a hooded prisoner balancing on top of a box, with electrical wires connected to his outstretched arms. Americans were deeply disturbed by the photographs—snarling German shepherds, sleep deprivation, forced acts of pornography—and by the eyewitness accounts of abuses perpetrated by U.S. soldiers on Iraqi prisoners of war at Abu Ghraib.

Overseas, the reaction to Abu Ghraib was one of understandable revulsion. Objections included the fear that inhumane treatment of POWs by Americans would lower the standard of treatment of prisoners in conflicts worldwide and possibly even incite further terrorist attacks. Bush expressed his disapproval of the sickening antics portrayed in the photos, but he was inexplicably slow to act to stop further abuses. He preferred, he said, to allow the military to police itself. A crisis in confidence was underway.

As U.S. war casualties mounted, a growing number of Americans wondered what U.S. soldiers were doing in the middle of another nation's civil war. Antiwar protests grew in crescendo, but Bush was impervious to any suggestion that invading Iraq had not been in the best interests of the United States. He was equally unfazed by repeated calls for his impeachment.

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

Though the impeachment initiative came largely from Democratic liberals and moderates, the president could not ignore the fact that his popularity was slipping sharply from its high water mark in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, when everybody rallied behind Old Glory. Domestic issues were not the root cause of Bush's flagging support. His foreign policy—which had alienated many traditional allies—and the disintegrating situation in Iraq were the focus of harsh criticism. When asked about his low poll numbers, Bush pointed out that many of the U.S. presidents regarded as strong and effective by history were unpopular in their own day. He mentioned a Democrat, Harry Truman, as Exhibit A. Bush was, by nature, a cocksure sort of personality, void of insecurity or second-guessing. Moreover, his administration had one towering achievement and it was the one that mattered most to him: The United States had yet to sustain another terrorist attack. Bush was keeping the homeland safe. In September 2002, surveillance by the CIA led to the arrest of six Yemeni Americans living in or near Lackawanna, New York; while they had ties to Al Qaeda, they posed no immediate threat. In 2006, the U.S. government acted on intelligence from what it identified only as “a southeast Asian nation” to stop a planned attack on Los Angeles. Those involved apparently planned to use hijacked airliners, as on September 11. Similar covert operations resulted in the arrest of others who had the training and the plans to plot an attack. At the Bush Library groundbreaking in Dallas, former vice president Cheney spoke to these ostensible homeland successes. “Two years after you left office, judgments are a little more measured than they were,” he said to the 2,500-person crowd. “When times have been tough or the critics have been loud, you’ve always said you had faith in history’s judgment, and history is beginning to come around.”

While the face of the war on terror to which Cheney was referring continued to be the military action in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration also expanded its covert operations in the Middle East. Espionage and the infiltration of terrorist groups were renewed priorities after the September 11 attacks. Bush attempted to revamp the various spy agencies in the federal government, although the entrenched cultures of the FBI and the CIA were difficult, if not impossible, to merge. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Congress passed a law, known as the USA PATRIOT Act, which gave vast new authority to the executive branch in terms of gathering information within the United States. The act, an acronym for “uniting and strengthening America by providing appropriate tools required to intercept and obstruct

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

terrorism,” stipulated that government officials have the authority to “intercept wire, oral, and electronic communications relating to terrorism, computer fraud, and abuse offenses, and the authority to share criminal investigative information.” The rationale was that the government needed to track the communications, financial transactions, purchases, travel arrangements, and medical records of foreign nationals as easily in the United States as in other countries. While the PATRIOT Act by definition affected domestic activities, it was, in effect, an extension of some of the president’s most effective foreign policy assets. For example, because of the PATRIOT Act, the CIA could, for the first time, spy on American citizens within U.S. borders. The amount of information collected on individuals and groups, both domestically and abroad, expanded enormously. The Bush administration, which tended to trust government with private information more than many libertarians would have liked, was faced with the problem of processing a constant deluge of information. The inability of seasoned government agencies to cooperate—with far less raw data—in the days leading up to September 11, 2001, was cited as one of the missed opportunities that might have thwarted some or all of the airline hijackings.

In the summer of 2004, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (known as the 9/11 commission) issued a report that found serious fault with the actions of the Bush White House and several government agencies on the eve of the attacks. One of the most perplexing, to those outside the government, was the inability of the CIA and the FBI to share information. Bush’s solution, announced in August 2004, was to create another agency, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). It would report directly to the president, with the capacity to assess the quality of the intelligence presented by the various other agencies. In addition, the NCTC would employ representatives from those organizations to work on ways to streamline communications and open the flow of information between them.

In 2004 Bush was in the midst of a reelection campaign. The problems highlighted by the 9/11 commission don’t seem to have helped his cause. Among other things, the commission found no evidence at all of ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. In reply, Bush reiterated his belief that Hussein had indeed been working with Al Qaeda and giving its members refuge in Iraq. At the same time, Bush blocked the release of an official report on the alleged connections between Al Qaeda and the Saudi government. It was the sort of inconsistency that fostered resentment and

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

suspicion, accelerating the drop in Bush's popularity. Some veteran Washington, D.C., pundits suggested that in the 2004 election Bush would replace Dick Cheney as his vice-presidential selection. The questionable management of the war was traced by some to Cheney's hawkish advice, as was the hard-line atmosphere of the Bush administration. Bush retained Cheney, however, and they ran against a Democratic ticket headed by Sen. John Kerry (D-MA). A so-called Kennedy liberal, Kerry campaigned on a platform that advocated an orderly withdrawal of troops from Iraq, a position that was, according to polls near Election Day, popular with most voters. Bush made no such promises. Faced with widespread antipathy for the Iraq War, he continued to maintain that America was safer because Saddam Hussein had been deposed. The facts, and results of objective investigations, did not support that claim, but it was typical of Bush's leadership style that he stood stubbornly by his hard decisions. While diplomats, who are used to give-and-take, found this character trait consternating, the voters apparently considered it reassuring, as they elected Bush to a second term in November 2004 with a 286–251 win in the Electoral College.

The execution of the war in Iraq remained the most troubling aspect of Bush's second term in the White House. Immediately after the 2004 election, Colin Powell resigned as secretary of state, leaving Bush with his homogeneous senior advisers: Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Condoleezza Rice. To replace Powell at State, Bush selected Rice, who was sworn in on January 26, 2005. Closer to Bush, ideologically and personally, than Powell had been, Rice would have more latitude in the foreign policymaking realm. Among other tasks, she hoped to bring about a renewed commitment to Middle East peace. In February 2005, Bush applied pressure to Syria, with the demand that it withdraw its troops from Lebanon. Bush was able, just the same, to speak bluntly with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon about the need for greater flexibility in dealings with the Palestinians. The peace process, largely neglected during Bush's first term, began to interest the president more keenly in his second, partially as a result of Secretary Rice's steady influence.

Bush's regard for Rice continued unabated throughout his second term. But his relationship with his other senior foreign policy advisers would suffer setbacks. The situation was probably exacerbated by the pressures of two wars—Iraq and Afghanistan—neither of which was going as

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

well as planned. According to media reports, Bush became increasingly impatient with bully-like advice he was receiving in tandem from Rumsfeld and Cheney and was even annoyed by the brash attitude they displayed in meetings. In an attempt at humility, Bush dropped his defiance act and tried to burnish his global image. He made a trip to Europe in February 2005 that was planned as a way to reestablish friendly relations with nations—such as France—that had been overtly criticized by administration officials. Clearly, the geopolitical differences between the nations on either side of the Atlantic were more pronounced than they had been under previous U.S. presidents. Morale within NATO was at an all-time low. “America seems to be hard power incarnate and Europe the embodiment of soft power,” observed a British diplomat. Hard power emanated from military might and the will to use it; by contrast, soft power is, as he explained, “civilian power.” The official reception throughout Bush’s European trip was polite, but the visit elicited huge protests in the streets of European capitals.

Three months later, Bush traveled to Europe again. The trip was focused around the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. The reception from leaders was warmer, but Bush was still distressingly unpopular among the anxious throngs who turned out to march against his perceived militarism, unilateral engagement, and rejection of the rights of prisoners. The same charges were leveled at home during the summer of 2005, when massive demonstrations were held around the country. In response, Bush tried to place himself in a historical perspective, delivering the same message several times over the summer: that the 21st century war on terror was equivalent to the 20th century world wars. The argument was self-serving, but it helped to explain why Bush felt he had to win, and win outright, as opposed to withdrawing the troops on some other basis. At the same time that a majority of U.S. citizens were telling pollsters that they opposed the war in Iraq, Congress continued to vote in support of expenditures for the wars. The overriding fear was that a vote against further allocations of money would appear to be a vote against the soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In late August 2005, President Bush got distracted from foreign policy matters due to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi. As hurricanes go, Katrina was a whirling menace, wider and more disparate than the Gulf South’s coast had ever witnessed. A surge propelled by 150 mph winds caused howling breakers to swamp Louisiana

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

parishes and Mississippi counties. The Weather Channel's "blob" in the Gulf had become an on-land beast. The Category 3 storm first made landfall at Buras, Louisiana, on the morning of August 29, 2005. Then the manmade disaster started to unfold. Large sections of the levees built (circa 1965) by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were breached and then crumbled like clay. Whole cities were swallowed up in floodwaters.

A gargantuan 460 miles in diameter, Katrina devastated 90,000 square miles of Gulf infrastructure. Millions of lives were shattered by the fury. Watching their own communities collapse caused many disoriented survivors to weep and unrealistically wait for the U.S. cavalry to swoop in with massive amounts of federal aid and a kit bag full of normalcy. It never happened. Thousands of Louisiana National Guardsmen, for example, had been deployed in Iraq. Meanwhile, an unbearable humidity embalmed homes with a stuffy aquarium-like air. Breathing became difficult. Electricity was knocked out for weeks. Everything smelled rotten. People trapped in attics desperately punched holes into their rooftops with hammers and axes, praying to be rescued. And they waited, and waited. Tens of thousands of SOS calls weren't heard. And then they waited some more.

Katrina helped burst the bubble of American can-do-ism in an unprecedented way. Government ineptitude on all levels—federal, state, and local—proved as cruel as the natural disaster itself. The refugee crisis in the storm's wake was the largest in the United States since the Civil War. The U.S. Coast Guard did its heroic best but, in the end, helicopter basket drops weren't enough. The death count mounted. Dozens of horrific words and repellent images became part of our national discourse: feces contamination, toxic soup, looters, pervasive damage, highway triage, and FEMA indifference among them. The Oz curtain had been pulled back on police corruption, endemic poverty, unattended-to coastal erosion, and shoddy engineering. Rescue efforts were marred by bureaucratic inertia, bad pre-planning, and hurry-up-and-wait-ism. Was this really the same country that had won D-day and put a man on the moon?

The Department of Homeland Security, which President Bush had organized in 2001, particularly the FEMA division, failed abysmally in delivering essential items to homeless victims of the Katrina disaster (to be fair, the U.S. Coast Guard, also a division of Homeland

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

Security, did an outstanding job). The Bush administration, which ridiculously declared “mission accomplished” in Iraq, was now feebly unable to properly help the Gulf region in the recovery effort. Why was the United States spending billions to rebuild Baghdad but not New Orleans? During the first week after Katrina, aid shipments from several foreign countries reached the ravaged region before any substantial deliveries had been made by the U.S. government. Ever since the notion of international aid had its start about 100 years before, the United States had always been on the donating end; it had never been in the position of needing help to take care of its own. In the first two months after Katrina, Americans gave well over \$1 billion to help people whose lives were torn apart by the storm. But the Gulf Coast still needed assistance from countries like Saudi Arabia and Japan.

In a Veterans Day speech in November 2005, President Bush, his reputation damaged by Katrina, returned to the subject of the Iraq War. He disputed the conclusion, based on several objective investigations, that before the U.S. invasion, Iraq had not had a program to produce weapons of mass destruction. “Some Democrats and antiwar critics are now claiming we manipulated the intelligence and misled the American people about why we went to war,” Bush said. “These critics are fully aware that a bipartisan Senate investigation found no evidence of political pressure to change the intelligence community’s judgments related to Iraq’s weapons programs. They also know that intelligence agencies from around the world agreed with our assessment of Saddam Hussein.” The blunt speech took many observers by surprise, yet it highlighted the fact that the nation was divided not only by a difference of opinion over the war but also about the facts surrounding it. Some Americans, including the president, continued to believe in the specter of an Iraqi weapons program, even without evidence. The same was true of the connection between Hussein and Al Qaeda. The nation was so sharply divided, though, that the two sides did not even seem to be speaking the same language or about the same subject.

The issue of the use (or misuse) of intelligence, which had been broached more than a year before, was in the national news again because of the trial of I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Vice President Cheney’s chief of staff, who had been implicated in charges stemming from the “outing” of CIA operative Valerie Plame. Libby would eventually be convicted of perjury and obstruction of justice. Bush was openly disgusted with staff members involved in the Plame

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

affair; in fact, the Libby trial may well have constituted a turning point for Bush, who drifted away from Vice President Cheney during their last two years in office.

In waging the war in Afghanistan, and attempting to locate mass murderer Osama bin Laden in the rugged territory along the eastern border of the country, Bush cultivated—and to a great extent upheld—the government of Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan. Bush made enormous U.S. grants-in-aid in exchange for Pakistani cooperation in fighting terrorism. And yet assessing the dedication of Pakistani assistance in that regard was difficult, especially since the Pakistanis, at their best, could not claim complete control of the borderland with Afghanistan. The sustained connection with Musharraf, however, was an example of the Bush administration solidifying a relationship with an important ally.

At the same time, Bush solicited new avenues for cooperation with India, opening important negotiations over a nuclear cooperation agreement. During the Cold War, India's relationship with America was essentially frozen. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had pushed his nation toward the Non-Aligned Movement (a group of countries that were not formally associated with a major superpower), and the United States quietly backed Pakistan, which eventually pushed India to ally more closely with the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, proved to be an impetus for India to liberalize its markets. India immediately became more investor friendly and welcomed billions of dollars in direct foreign investment. International corporations found it extremely cost-effective to outsource technological operations to India, and American business leaders quickly saw the economic importance of India's emerging middle class and over one billion inhabitants. In early November 2010, President Barack Obama spent three days in India, proudly touting this bilateral relationship. Meeting with President Pratibha Patil and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Obama called the young democracy a “world power” and announced that he would support its bid for permanent membership on the U.N. Security Council.

But it was President Bush who seized on the true importance of a strong diplomatic relationship with India. Bush thought of India as the largest democracy in the world and a strong regional counterweight to China. In a major U.S. policy reversal, Bush in 2001 removed almost all

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

American sanctions imposed by President Clinton after India's 1998 nuclear tests. He bolstered American military cooperation with India's military in a vigorous bipartisan effort to combat global terrorism. In June 2005, India and the United States agreed to a "new framework" for the U.S.-India defense relationship. In April 2005, Washington and New Delhi agreed to the Open Skies aviation agreement that helped to increase air routes between both countries. With great fanfare, Singh visited Washington, D.C., in 2005, the first time an Indian head of state had visited in five years. Singh even addressed a joint session of Congress. In a reciprocal gesture, President Bush traveled to India in March 2006 and remained wildly popular in that nation throughout his second term.

The Indo-U.S. civilian nuclear agreement became the signature achievement for Indo-U.S. relations under President Bush. India consented to separate its civilian nuclear power facilities, placing them under observation of the International Atomic Energy Agency. In exchange, India was allowed to buy civilian nuclear technology from the United States. The agreement took several years to negotiate and was signed on October 8, 2008. If the Arab proverb "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" holds true, then President Bush was loved by Hindus for taking on Muslim terrorists.

Along with India, Bush focused more attention on Africa in the later years of his administration, scheduling visits for both himself and for Laura Bush, who did not typically take part in diplomatic missions of any kind. Mrs. Bush did take a real interest in Africa, though, and would make four separate trips to the continent. She brought attention to the AIDS crisis as President Bush directed a large sum, \$15 billion, to a five-year program to battle the spread of the disease in Africa. As *Decision Points* makes clear, the "compassionate conservative" side of the Bush years took firm root in the administration's African policy.

The Iraq War was in the third year of a frustrating and deadly vicious cycle in July 2006, when the newly elected prime minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki, visited Washington. His arrival should have been a cause for celebration in the Bush White House: a democratically elected prime minister from Iraq visiting his counterpart in the United States. Such were the decade-old dreams of the founders of the Project for the New American Century—and of Bush when he'd set his

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

sights on Saddam Hussein five years before. Yet even the president had to admit that the security situation in Iraq was, in his words, “terrible.” He was said to be aware that his legacy was at stake in the fortunes of Iraq, where civilians and U.S. soldiers continued to die in the quicksand chaos of the sorely unreconciled nation. In October 2006, Cheney drew further attention to one of the most detrimental controversies attached to the Bush administration, when he seemed to condone the torture of those in custody on suspicion of terrorism at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba. A radio talk show host asked the vice president, “Would you agree that a dunk in water is a no-brainer if it can save lives?” He was referring to the practice of waterboarding, a technique of torture. The vice president unfortunately answered in a brash tone, saying, “Well, it’s a no-brainer for me.” He then said that the government did not use torture on suspects. That was a lie. In fact, prisoners *had* been tortured at various installations in Iraq and elsewhere. President Bush came stalwartly to Cheney’s defense, but it was a gaffe, especially at a time when the administration was trying to leave the negative aspects of the Iraq War behind in order to find new diplomatic solutions.

The 2006 midterm elections swept antiwar Democrats into office. A strong signal had been sent that Bush’s Iraq policy was no longer acceptable to the majority of Americans. As the criticism of the execution of the Iraq War escalated, emanating from ever-higher sources, including ranking officers in the military, Bush finally made a bold reshuffling move aimed at quelling fears about the Iraqi quagmire. He asked Rumsfeld for his resignation. The notoriously unpopular secretary of defense left, and Bush made a brilliant choice in his successor: Robert Gates. Beleaguered by the Iraqi civil war, Katrina mismanagement, and the U.S. Army’s apparent pro-torture stance, Gates—who had served as CIA director in the administration of President George H.W. Bush—brought a focused, no-nonsense approach to the Pentagon. What he didn’t bring was the ideological imprint of his predecessor. A lifelong Republican, Gates was loyal to the job rather than to a particular agenda. Under his aegis, the U.S. military on active duty almost immediately experienced a distinct rise in troop morale. Many American soldiers who were serving in Iraq and Afghanistan hoped that Gates would bring a new energy to U.S. Middle East policy.

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

Such hopes were further encouraged by the release of the Iraq Study Group's final report in December 2006. Initiated by several members of Congress, the study group—headed by former secretary of state James A. Baker, III, and former Democratic congressman Lee Hamilton of Indiana—was a blue-ribbon panel that had investigated the problems and possibilities in Iraq for nine months. The final report contained 79 recommendations for the transfer of responsibilities to the Iraqis, for diplomatic initiatives in the region, and for a plethora of internal matters. President Bush, however, did not indicate that he harbored any overwhelming interest in implementing the recommendations, and instead the study group worked to inspire others to consider revisions to America's Iraq strategy, such as it existed in late 2006. The American Enterprise Institute released its own report in December 2006 and in it called for an increase in troop strength in Iraq. While people across the country debated the merits of a drawdown, a transfer (as suggested in the study group's report), or a buildup, Bush consulted with military advisers, including Secretary Gates and other Pentagon officials.

The president began 2007 by ordering a change in command in Iraq. On January 10, he delivered a television address in which he described his plan for a greatly expanded troop presence in Iraq. He did not justify it in terms of greater security for Americans; instead, speaking frankly, he said that "Victory in Iraq will bring something new in the Arab world—a functioning democracy." With 20,000 more troops on the way to Iraq, the total climbed to a wartime high of 162,000. It was called "the surge." Working in specific areas, one at a time, commanders on the ground implemented new strategies aimed at establishing permanent security.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration remained consistent in its antipathy toward Iran. In 2004, rumors had circulated that the United States was on the verge of war against the Islamic fundamentalist—yet modern—nation. While Bush did not engage in warmongering, he did continually campaign with other nations to isolate and ostracize Iran. He urged nations to join the United States in applying economic and cultural sanctions. Bush's hubris was breathtaking. For example, he riled Soviet sensibilities in February 2007 by adhering to plans to construct a medium-range missile-defense system in Europe. Moscow hotly contended that there was absolutely no reason to militarize the region. Russia felt that promoting such a missile program

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

was intolerable. The Bush administration, however, intimated that the system was intended to contain Iran's arsenal, not Russia's.

The Bush administration's relationship with the third nation in the "axis of evil," North Korea, was even more serpentine. In mid-2006, the United States had been outraged by a North Korean test of a long-range missile that could, in theory, not only reach the West Coast, but carry a nuclear warhead as well. As it turned out, the missile test failed and the projectile did not get past the Sea of Japan.

North Korea was, however, close to having nuclear capabilities, if, that is, the secretive totalitarian nation did not already have them. Bush proved that he was willing to be flexible with North Korea, if only because his foreign policy agenda had been swamped in the Middle East. In February 2007, he approved an accord with North Korea that gave the heavily armed but impoverished country substantial financial aid in return for dismantling its nuclear weapons program. Conservatives in the United States were enraged by the idea of giving U.S. taxpayers' money to North Korea and by the idealistic naïveté behind any such agreement with a "rogue nation." Apparently, Secretary Rice managed to receive Bush's approval for the accord without following the standard procedure of sending the agreement to Cheney's office. Clearly, Cheney's once formidable influence in the White House had waned.

The situation in Iraq did not see an immediate improvement in the aftermath of the troop surge. In fact, 2007 remained on track to become the deadliest year for American forces since the fall of Baghdad. And yet, November brought a glimmer of hope, as a brigade of 5,000 soldiers was actually withdrawn from a province deemed secure. The new scales and methods did eventually lead to a calmer atmosphere throughout the nation. In 2008, even while U.S. casualties were dropping to the lowest monthly rate since the beginning of the war, negotiations with the Iraqi government included discussion about a schedule for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops by the end of 2011. The war that belonged to George W. Bush was essentially winding to a close as he prepared to leave office at the end of his second term. The Iraq War was the most personal in U.S. history, at least in terms of Bush's insistence on starting it. Just as the president seemed willing, if necessary, to *wage* the war unilaterally, he also gave the impression that, on the home

Nine Years Later: The Problem with Mission Accomplished

front, he would have been willing to *support* the war unilaterally—all by himself. Bush had hawkish advisers who gave him direction in the unfamiliar area of international relations, but there is no indication that he ever went anywhere he didn't want to go. The Bush Doctrine—which embraced the notion of a preemptive strike against a possible aggressor—was indicative of his adamant opinion that no other nation could be allowed to harm the United States, either in the overt sense of a terrorist attack or in the subtle sense of an alliance that constricted it.

From the beginning, the Bush administration worked toward a more independent and aggressive position for the United States in the world community. “The problem with diplomacy,” said President Bush in 2007, “it takes a while to get something done. If you're acting alone, you can move quickly.” That hubristic Bush attitude was called “cowboy diplomacy” by his detractors. In the United States, as Bush famously put it, “we make our own reality.” The inherent danger of U.S. fantasy diplomacy, however, is that ideology naturally prevails over pragmatism. Bush never, for example, fully comprehended that Afghans would only consider American soldiers “alien occupiers”; the more U.S. troops he sent, the more he fueled the insurgency and made the Afghanistan military more codependent on Washington, D.C. Furthermore, Bush didn't grasp the *real* reality that U.S. citizens *weren't* going to tolerate a war that costs over \$40 billion a year and kills thousands of U.S. troops. And Bush also made a mess out of Wall Street with his unrealistic belief that deregulation was a curative for an ailing economy. In September and October 2008, in the midst of a heated presidential election that pitted Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) against Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), the U.S. economy almost collapsed. Due to his mismanagement of both the economy and military affairs, most historians now rank Bush at the very bottom rung of U.S. presidents, hovering somewhere between William Henry Harrison (who died after nine months in office) and Warren Harding (accused of lawbreaking). Even though historians considered him an abject failure, Bush remains confident, free from doubt that time will eventually regard him kindly and favorably. Defiant until the end, Bush insists in *Decision Points* that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were justified and that the greatest recession since the Great Depression was not his fault. The revisionism has begun. What remains to be seen is whether it will gain momentum in the coming years.