



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

NINE YEARS LATER:
THE SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACKS AND THE IRAQ WAR

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The September 11 Attacks and the Iraq War

This is the second of a series of historical reflections by Douglas Brinkley, Ph.D., fellow in history at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University, in which he analyzes both the 9/11 attack and its aftermath.

New York City on the ninth anniversary of 9/11 was an emotionally numbing place to be. In lower Manhattan, all the church bells rang at 8:46 a.m. (precisely when the Islamic terrorists first flew into the World Trade Center's north tower). At Ground Zero, the names of the nearly 3,000 victims of the 9/11 attacks were read out in remembrance. Families of the victims wept and wailed in anguish as bells tolled for the deceased. Television reporters were everywhere, searching for stories of remembrance. What nobody seemed interested in was whether the U.S. government, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, had done the right thing by connecting the 9/11 attacks to Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq back in early 2002. How did the Bush administration make the leap from Ground Zero to the Battle of Baghdad? Was it a logical leap in judgment? Historians have been rough on the former president, using the famous "Mission Accomplished" banner to lambast his Al Qaeda-Iraq linkage approach. But a Bush revisionism—led by Mark McKinnon and former Bush chief of staff Karl Rove, both stalwart Republicans—is now underway. President Bush is about to publish his own memoir, *Decision Points*, defending his Iraqi war strategy. Crown Publishers has printed 1.5 million copies for a first run. Following the midterm election, as President Bush makes the TV rounds, the American public will start to re-examine exactly *why* Bush decided that the toppling of Hussein's heinous regime in Iraq was the proper U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks.

The drama began on January 29, 2002, when President Bush made perhaps the most important foreign policy speech of his presidency. Billed as a U.S. policy bullhorn-call of great urgency, the speech, in all probability, would have been hailed the hallmark of Bush's foreign policy decisions even if the 9/11 attacks had never occurred. Explaining that the eradication of Islamic terrorist activity was the primary goal of his administration, Bush then made a huge policy leap. "Our second goal," he said, "is to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction." He identified three such regimes as North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. "Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror," Bush said. "The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas and nuclear

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weapons for over a decade.” He then called three nations—Iran, Iraq, and North Korea—“an axis of evil.” The phrase, the handiwork of his speechwriter David Frum, harkened back to the Second World War, when the Nazi Germany-led coalition was known as the Axis powers. The phrase became symbolic of Bush’s view of the world order, and it was reminiscent of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) view that America needed to preemptively “challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values.” PNAC, a D.C.-based think tank in existence from 1997 to 2006, advocated neoconservative foreign policies that are recognized to have influenced Bush in his decision to invade Iraq.

Many world diplomats cringed at Bush’s overwrought “axis of evil” gauntlet. Consequently, after the State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, Bush was forced by the spread of false rumors to deny that the U.S. government had plans to attack North Korea. “We’re a peaceful people,” he said. “We have no intention of attacking North Korea ... We’re purely defensive.” While making a trip to Asia in February 2002, Bush emphasized the need for Thailand, Indonesia, and other nations to actively fight terrorist groups within their borders. Bush, of course, had to tread a fine line. He had to advocate severe action against potentially violent radical Islamists, but he also had to approach the general Muslim populations of the world with equanimity. The administration was especially careful not to criticize the Koran—the sacred seventh-century text revered by more than one billion Muslims. While in Asia, he continued to chastise North Korea and to seek U.N. support for ostracizing the leadership there. Bush’s immediate suggestion, the reunification of the two Koreas, was well received in South Korea but could not be considered a serious diplomatic initiative.

Meanwhile, in February the president instructed General Tommy Franks of U.S. Central Command to start moving U.S. troops from Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf. The next month, according to George Packer’s book *The Assassins’ Gate: America in Iraq*, Bush made his intentions unambiguously clear to three U.S. senators. “Fuck Saddam,” he said. “We’re taking him out.” Bush was interested in sending a broad message throughout the Middle East. “By the early spring of 2002,” George Packer writes in *The Assassins’ Gate*, “a full year before the invasion, the administration was inexorably set on a course of war.”

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While Bush was occupied with what became known as the “War on Terror” and with positioning the United States in opposition to the “axis of evil,” many seasoned diplomats worried that he was ignoring the escalating troubles between Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East. Violence was increasing in the Holy Land, settling into a disturbing pattern of suicide attacks by young Palestinians against civilian targets in Israeli cities like Tel Aviv. Hosni Mubarak, the moderate president of Egypt, personally appealed to his American counterpart to renew an active role in negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. The Bush administration had designated a Middle East envoy, Anthony Zinni, but he was not directed to visit the region on a regular basis. Bush’s reply to Mubarak strongly implied that the United States would not involve itself in talks on the level of an envoy, let alone of higher officials, until the violence stopped. The Bush administration’s attitude disappointed those diplomats who felt that the attention of U.S. officials in the negotiations was integral to imbuing the combatants with hope for a solution—and that hope was integral to putting an end to Middle East violence.

The president took a similarly hard-line approach in another long-standing area of U.S. diplomacy: Russia. Just as a lead role in Middle East peace negotiations was considered *de rigueur* for U.S. presidents before Bush’s term, the goal of arms reduction in conjunction with Russia (and the former Soviet Union) had been a goal of administrations of each party for two generations. But Bush stunned many observers around the world when, in early 2002, he declared his intention to withdraw America from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The treaty covered short-range weaponry, and the Russians viewed Bush’s decision as a potentially aggressive act, one that jeopardized its borders with Eastern European nations. Nonetheless, in late winter of 2002, Bush accepted overtures from Russian president Vladimir Putin for closer ties between the two powers. As a positive result of their efforts to find common ground, they signed the Treaty of Moscow, which called for a significant reduction in nuclear weaponry. He was less agreeable on another topic of intense international interest: the Kyoto Protocol. Bush refused to sign the protocol, insisting that in the interest of reducing carbon dioxide emissions, industries would do a better job of policing themselves than any gaggle of cross-border global regulations. Predictably enough, Bush’s recalcitrant position infuriated environmentalists throughout the world.

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But Bush's cavalier attitude also alienated him from GOP hard-line conservatives. Rush Limbaugh, the radio talk show host who represented the opinions of many right-wing Americans, lamented the fact that Bush had even admitted that global warming was a result of human activities. Conservatives disapproved of Bush's tact on global warming and of his overspending taxpayers' dollars. This was markedly different from the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who had maintained a firm hold over the conservative wing of the electorate with policies that were, in many cases, far more moderate than those of Bush. Many fiscal conservatives rejected Bush's war in Afghanistan (and later in Iraq) because they would cost trillions of dollars. Libertarian conservatives believed that the United States needed to mind its own business.

In the aftermath of the 2002 State of the Union address, the Bush administration focused on Iraq, one of the three nations that comprised the so-called axis of evil. U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld claimed in early June that Iraq and its president, Hussein, were actively producing weapons of mass destruction in direct violation of United Nations sanctions imposed after the Gulf War. The U.N. had carefully monitored Iraq's capabilities through the intervening years, albeit with periodic friction from Baghdad. But the current U.N. assessment was that Iraq was not engaged in the development of banned weapons. The American view was far harsher. "They've had an active program to develop nuclear weapons," Rumsfeld said of the Iraqis. "It's also clear that they are actively developing biological weapons. I don't know what other kinds of weapons would fall under the rubric of weapons of mass destruction, but if there are more, I suspect they're working on them, as well."

Vice President Dick Cheney was also commenting freely on the weapons threat from Iraq and the need for the United States to combat it. An unusually active second-in-command, Cheney traveled on high-level diplomatic missions, including one to the Arab nations in the spring of 2002. According to one contemporary report, Cheney's well-staffed office was "a kind of free-floating power base that at times brushed aside the normal policymaking machinery under National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. On the road to war, Cheney, in effect, created a parallel government that became the real power center" by exerting his influence both inside and outside the White House. He made statements warning that the window of opportunity for

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destroying Iraq's nuclear capability was drawing to a close and that, in any case, the U.N. inspectors like Hans Blix of Sweden could not be trusted to spot more active installations. He also made repeated allusions to a direct connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein—a connection that was even more incendiary than the specter of weaponry in the minds of Americans unable to forget the horror of the terrorist attacks on New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.

The fierce opinions of Cheney and Rumsfeld were vividly clear: A U.S. invasion of Iraq aimed at destroying illegal weapons stockpiles was necessary. The two were undoubtedly potent in presenting their hawkish viewpoint in the White House policy meetings. The degree to which Bush drew his own sense of military imperative from them is not certain (though Washington insiders suspected in the early years of the Bush administration that Bush was fundamentally influenced by his vice president and defense secretary). In a speech at West Point on June 1, 2002, the president expressed the Bush Doctrine forcefully, stating that the United States would make preemptive strikes against nations suspected of preparing to attack the United States or of giving a home to terrorists who might be planning such attacks. "If we wait for threats to materialize, we will have waited too long," he told a thousand graduates of the academy.

By then, the United Nations was evaluating Iraq's compliance and the potential need for intervention in the country. But with the rhetoric heating up, no one could be sure that Bush would wait for the final U.N. report. The administration began leveling more damning charges at Hussein. The rhetoric got so harsh, in fact, that Bush was compelled to assure the nation that he would *not* attack Iraq without congressional approval. On the first anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it was apparent that, in terms of priorities, the Bush White House had changed its policy mind. Bush and his senior advisers were no longer speaking of Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden as the primary threat to the American homeland. While the perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorism acts were certainly still wanted, the Bush administration was pointedly directing even more attention toward Iraq, which it painted as the potential perpetrator of violence against Americans in the future. Bush's remarks on the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while somber, contained the same tone of impending action he had used at West Point. Clearly, he was preparing the American citizenry for a second war front in the form of military action against

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Iraq. Opposition voices insisted that he produce tangible evidence to support another war (i.e., proof of Iraq's production of weapons of mass destruction or of the Iraqi government's support of Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups with designs on Western targets).

In September 2002, the White House issued its update of the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. The white paper laid out the hard realities of diplomacy and defense in a crazy world in which multinational groups with no state sponsorship and well-armed fanatics could realistically wage war on a superpower (such as the United States) or even on huge segments of civilization (e.g., on capitalism as a whole or on the entire Western way of life). "The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology," the *Strategy* explained. Much of the seminal document described the need for increased cooperation with allies and diplomatic groups such as the United Nations. It accentuated the goal of enhancing human dignity. And yet one document phrase stood out as if it had been written in Day-Glo paint. It was employed to describe the most forceful of the goals listed for the nation: to "prevent our enemies from threatening us, our allies and our friends, with weapons of mass destruction."

The term "weapons of mass destruction" became the fulcrum of the debate over Bush's apparent inclination to attack Iraq. In discussions regarding the wisdom of such a move, the evidence of Iraq's ability—or imminent ability—to make such weapons was presented as sufficient justification; it meant that Iraq was in direct violation of international agreements. The *National Security Strategy* explained that the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq would destabilize the entire Middle East region. Certainly, Israel concurred, publicly calling for Iraq to be held accountable. By the late summer of 2002, the debate no longer centered on supranational militias or cave-dwelling terrorists in the Al Qaeda mold. The Bush administration had reverted to what might be called a traditional enemy—a country, and one with an antagonistic leader. That was a throwback to the sorts of cold war conflicts that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, and Secretary of State Colin Powell had been fighting—in reality or in their minds—throughout their careers. The mood caused by the war in Afghanistan both supported Bush's impulse to declare war on Iraq and, in another sense, countered it. A new war would cause American military strength, and the resources that support it, to be stretched thin, leaving the United States

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vulnerable in the event of another attack. Would a draft have to be reinstated? Could America fight in the Middle East and make infrastructural improvements at home? In addition, the will of the nation to wage two wars at once was in question. But even though the war in Afghanistan was not producing the quick results that Americans had hoped for when the first bold assault was made one year earlier, the inclination to start with a more familiar, more strategically “winnable” war made the possibility more acceptable. Bush, in any case, was making an aggressive move in preparing to wage war on Iraq. In poker terms, Bush was placing practically all his chips on the table, and many skeptical observers wondered what was behind the president’s absolute determination to unseat Hussein. Was it to finish off the Gulf War of 1991? To defend his father’s honor?

In speaking to the nation on October 7, 2002, President Bush cited CIA reports that supported the claim that weapons production sites were being rebuilt and that “if the Iraqi regime is able to produce, buy, or steal an amount of highly enriched uranium a little larger than a single softball, it could have a nuclear weapon in less than a year.” At the time, Congress was waiting for reports from the United Nations, due at the end of 2002, regarding the Iraqi weapons program. Nevertheless, on the basis of the CIA’s grim assertion, Congress authorized the president to use force, at his own discretion, to disarm Iraq. Even if Iraq had admitted that it had nuclear capability, if that were not even a debatable question, it would be hard to understand Bush’s obsessive focus on the oil-producing nation. Career diplomats made the case that Iraq, as harsh and unreasonable as its leader was, was one of the few places in the Middle East that had successfully held Al Qaeda at bay. Hussein had no use for religious fundamentalists or for any Islamic group that might disturb his own totalitarian grasp on power in Baghdad. Among countries in the so-called axis of evil, for example, North Korea not only had various nuclear weapons of mass destruction but had proven itself active in selling arms to other countries. Yet Bush concentrated on Iraq. His father had waged war against Hussein in the Gulf War, ordering Operation Desert Storm to successfully boot Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. The president, along with Cheney and Powell, was well-schooled in the first Iraq war. One possible rationale behind his determination to send troops to Iraq again stemmed from the legacy of the Gulf War and what some hawks considered the unfinished business of defeating—and deposing—Hussein. Taking Baghdad seemed like an easy and logical next step. “Hussein faced the prospect of being

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the last casualty in a war he had started and lost,” Bush said in 2003. “To spare himself, he agreed to disarm of all weapons of mass destruction. For the next 12 years, he systematically violated that agreement.” That deep resentment might have formed the impetus of Bush’s feelings toward Hussein, but a broader implication might have been at work as well.

Part of the philosophy that Bush brought with him into the White House was that all nations—even indigent and helpless ones—would benefit from democracy and that the United States could not shirk from its historic role in spreading the gospel. One of the goals delineated in Bush’s *National Security Strategy* was to “expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy with ever-increasing speed.” While few of Bush’s presidential predecessors (particularly President Woodrow Wilson in the early twentieth century) would have argued about the gold-starred value of democracy for all human societies, they didn’t necessarily consider a U.S. military invasion a reasonable preamble to democratic rebuilding. Certainly, the idea that the United States has an inherent right—or even obligation—to remake repressive governments into democratic ones had gone out of style when the last helicopter evacuated Saigon in 1975 (thereby ending U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War). Bush and his advisors (Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Rice) were all adamant, however, that if the United States could exchange Hussein’s dictatorship for a fair democratic system based on popular sovereignty—taking Iraq, as it were, from worst to first in the region—then democracy would spread to other nearby nations as well. It was the old Cold War domino theory in reverse. That impulse, born as it was long before September 11, 2001, was one factor at the heart of the administration’s gloomy march toward war at the end of 2002.

The prefabricated idea of invading Iraq, on almost any basis, was sorely unpopular with America’s allies and other nations. Judging by the negative reaction of the U.N., it’s safe to say that Bush quickly became something of an international joke. The mere sight of Bush’s ironic smile—a smirk, really—caused Old World leaders to cackle about his incompetence. The post-9/11 sympathy that many of those foreign countries had expressed vanished. International suspicion grew that Bush was using the War on Terror as an excuse to break the human rights conventions that had guided Western powers for decades. Invading a sovereign nation without

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direct cause was an insane act, considered beneath the aforesaid standards of American foreign policy.

Prime Minister Tony Blair of Great Britain, a Labourite generally regarded as a liberal-moderate leader, was staunch in his initial support of the Bush initiative on Iraq. But he was *sui generis*—the only leader of a powerful European nation to take such a public pro-war stance in late 2002. A majority of other European allies, such as France, pleaded with Bush to allow the United Nations to oversee the difficult Iraqi situation. Secretary Powell, alone among the president's advisers, was of much the same opinion. Being experienced in war (unlike Bush's other senior advisers), Powell was wary of U.S. overextensions. As the so-called Powell Doctrine went, "You break a nation. You own it." Did the United States really want to run Iraq? Were we really going to mediate grievances between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds? Powell suggested a diplomatic solution and worked toward it around the clock. He traveled to Europe early in the New Year, looking for military support in France, Germany, and other countries. He got only tepid responses.

And then Bush was proved wrong. The forensic evidence went against his administration's claims that Iraq had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction. The U.N. report released on January 27, 2003, contended that Iraq's weapons program was inert, if not totally dead. That conclusion, however, did not satisfy the Bush administration. The next day, the president spoke to the nation in his State of the Union address and delivered a stunning revelation. "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa," he said. "Our intelligence sources tell us that he has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear weapons production." The evidence that Iraq was indeed in the market for the ingredients of nuclear production changed the minds of many Americans, who had been wavering about whether a war with Iraq made sense.

A little bit more than a week later, Secretary Powell appeared at the United Nations. His goal was to draw support in the Security Council for a resolution calling for military action against Iraq. Known for his fact-based analytical skills, Powell was a convincing witness as he underscored the president's frightening assertion that Hussein had attempted to buy the

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specialized aluminum tubes. Moreover, Powell made a bedraggled case for the connection between Hussein and Al Qaeda. “Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda lieutenants,” Powell said. “[A Hussein representative] offered Al Qaeda safe haven in the region. After we swept Al Qaeda from Afghanistan, some of its members accepted this safe haven. They remain there today.”

Powell’s testimony before the United Nations, widely repeated as fact, was instrumental in bringing the American public to accept the proposition that, for its own security, Hussein had to be removed and Iraq reborn as a democracy. Two years later, Powell would recant much of his testimony before the United Nations and admit that it had been based on faulty intelligence given to him by the CIA. He contended that there were those at the CIA who knew that the facts presented were fabricated. Bush would later make the same admission about the intelligence that he reported to the American people in his State of the Union address. There was also a great deal of controversy centered on the extent to which the White House might have coerced the erroneous intelligence into existence.

On March 17, after the United Nations failed to support the Security Council resolution calling for military action against Hussein, Bush issued an ultimatum to the Iraqi president: resign and leave in exile—or face a U.S. military assault. A disbelieving Hussein did not obey, and on March 19, 2003, the United States sent more than 200,000 soldiers into war against Iraq. The total force included a somewhat smaller, but potent, military contingent from Great Britain. The number of troops from other nations—the so-called Coalition of the Willing—fell off sharply after Britain. The specter of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in fact, was devastating in terms of foreign relations. Theodore A. Couloumbis, the director general of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy in Athens, Greece, wrote about the effect of the news: “Following the decision to attack Saddam Hussein without authorization of ... a U.N. Security Council resolution, the Bush administration has managed to squander the unconditional goodwill that the U.S. had enjoyed after the 11 September terrorist attacks.”

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But U.S. forces did an excellent job of capturing Baghdad. The Iraqi army was pitiful. The Iraqi government, in fact, collapsed within two months of the invasion. A panicked Saddam Hussein fled his palace and lived as a fugitive. (He was later captured, hiding in a foxhole, by the U.S. occupational forces and, after a trial, executed via gallows by the new Iraqi government.) With the initial American victory, Baghdad and other Iraqi cities came alive with citizens celebrating the end of Hussein's reign. In Baghdad, the towering town-square statue of Saddam Hussein was torn down by jubilant citizens as surely as were the ugly concrete slabs of the Berlin Wall. That was, perhaps, the high point of the Iraq War during Bush's administration. The U.S. occupational force was soon bogged down in a long, costly, and grueling war.