

10 Years Later: Looking Back on the Iraq War So We Can Clearly Look Forward

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"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." It's one of Milan Kundera's most famous lines, from his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. It's one worth keeping in mind as we approach March 20, the 10th anniversary of one of the biggest disasters in the history of the United States. That was the day George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and a team of others -- along with much of Washington and a very complicit mainstream media -- took the nation to war against Iraq. The devastating consequences of that war will continue for decades, but a full accounting has still yet to happen. And that in itself has consequences. Allowing the toxic mixture of lies, deception and rationalizations that led to that war to go unchallenged makes it more likely that we will make similar tragic mistakes in the future. So I hope we can use this moment to assess what really happened, to look back in order to look forward.

At HuffPost, we'll be doing what we can in that effort by using the anniversary to look at the war and what led up to it from all angles: Who got it right and who got it wrong? What was the role of the media? What are the ongoing consequences? We'll be featuring analysis, blogs, video and more in an attempt to aid that struggle of memory against forgetting.

Of course, the most glaring manifestation of our failure to have a collective accounting of this fiasco is that those who are most responsible for it still have loud voices in our foreign policy. "For a decade or more after the Vietnam war, the people who had guided the U.S. to disaster decently shrank from the public stage," writes James Fallows. "Rusk, Rostow, Westmoreland were not declaiming on what the U.S. should and should not do."

And yet, after what Fallows calls "the biggest strategic error by the United States since at least the end of World War II," that accounting has not happened:

After Iraq, there has been a weird amnesty and amnesia about people's misjudgment on the most consequential decision of our times. ... Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Bremer, Rice, McCain, Abrams, and others including the pro-war press clique are still offering their judgments unfazed.

He concludes: "I don't say these people should never again weigh in. But there should be an asterisk on their views, like the fine print about side effects in pharmaceutical ads."

Actually, the warning should be a lot bigger than fine print -- it should be as big and glaring as their blunders and falsehoods. There is, of course, almost no end to the lies and deceptions that led to this

calamity -- we will be featuring many of them in our anniversary coverage and you can also revisit them in these timelines here and here. But here are just a few of the classics.

There's George Tenet, who, according to Bob Woodward's book *Plan of Attack*, was asked by President Bush, "George, how confident are you?" Tenet's answer? "Don't worry, it's a slam-dunk." And what were the personal consequences of that colossal misjudgment? He was awarded the Medal of Freedom, as were then-General Tommy Franks and former Coalition Provisional Authority head Paul Bremer. "These three men symbolize the nobility of public service, the good character of our country, and the good influence of America on the world," said President Bush. So much for accountability.

Then, of course, there was Vice President Cheney:

"We do know, with absolute certainty, that [Saddam Hussein] is using his procurement system to acquire the equipment he needs in order to enrich uranium to build a nuclear weapon."

Or this one, from 2005 -- and note the question preceding the now-infamous answer, which has obvious relevance now:

Larry King: "...it's not going to be -- it's not going to be a 10-year event?"

Cheney: "No. I think we may well have some kind of presence there over a period of time. But I think the level of activity that we see today, from a military standpoint, I think will clearly decline. I think they're in the last throes, if you will, of the insurgency."

Or this one, from then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, uttered in the midst of the rioting and looting that broke out in the very predictable vacuum created when we toppled a central government with not much of a plan to replace it:

"Stuff happens... and it's untidy and freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things. They're also free to live their lives and do wonderful things. And that's what's going to happen here."

Or how about then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice's warning that "we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

Or, of course, when President Bush declared the end of "major combat" in Iraq on May 1, 2003, while standing in front of a banner that read "Mission Accomplished." Over 90 percent of coalition deaths occurred after that victory lap.

Then there was the moment when then-General Eric Shinseki told Congress that an occupation of a country as large as Iraq would require a force of "several hundred thousand soldiers." Two days later, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz indirectly called Shinseki's analysis "outlandish" to a House committee. He continued:

I would expect that even countries like France will have a strong interest in assisting Iraq's reconstruction ... We can't be sure that the Iraqi people will welcome us as liberators ... [but] I am

reasonably certain that they will greet us as liberators, and that will help us to keep requirements down ... It's hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam's security forces and his army. Hard to imagine.

Actually, not so hard, given that Shinseki had just imagined it. And that's one of the most maddening -- and dangerous -- things about the Iraq War: the claim that everybody was in agreement and that everybody got it wrong. Because, hey, if everybody got it wrong, nobody's to blame, so there are no lessons to be learned, no accountability to be had.

In fact, there's a good chance that Barack Obama wouldn't be president without his stance on Iraq, which early on was one of the defining differences between him and Hillary Clinton. And even among those in Congress there was disagreement. On the resolution authorizing the war, 126 Democrats, one Independent, and six brave Republicans voted against it. In the Senate, 21 Democrats, 1 Independent, and 1 Republican (Rhode Island's Lincoln Chafee) voted no. The dissenters included the chairs of the Senate Intelligence Committee (Florida's Robert Graham) and the Senate Armed Services Committee (Michigan's Carl Levin).

Of course, the media played a huge role in allowing -- indeed, enabling -- this catastrophe. What should have been a brake on a process fueled by lies was instead an accelerator. But here, too, there were those who got it right. As HuffPost's Max Follmer put it in 2008:

In the months before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the reporters in the Knight Ridder Newspapers Washington ■■■ bureau were virtually alone in their questioning of the Bush Administration's allegations of links between Saddam Hussein, weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism. The team of Knight Ridder reporters, led by Jonathan Landay, Warren Strobel, John Walcott and Joe Galloway, produced stories that now read like a prescient accounting of how the Bush Administration sought to sell the war to the American people.

There was also the AP's Charles Hanley, who actually looked into the Iraqi sites that the Bush administration had claimed had failed inspections. "In almost two months of surprise visits across Iraq," he wrote, "■■■ arms monitors have inspected 13 sites identified by U.S. and British intelligence agencies as major 'facilities of concern,' and reported no signs of revived weapons building, an Associated Press analysis shows."

And the consequences of this disastrous war are still very much with us. In the seemingly endless manufactured crisis over the "fiscal cliff" and the sequester, it's amazing how much airtime and print space have been devoted to the deficit with the word "Iraq" barely getting a mention. Clearly a triumph of forgetting.

"It's really the decision of how to pay for it that has had such a negative effect on the U.S. economy," said Linda Bilmes, lecturer at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and co-author, along with Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, of *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq*

Conflict. "Because unlike any previous war in U.S. history, this was paid for entirely by debt at the same time that we cut taxes."

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, by 2019, the Iraq War and the Bush tax cuts will account for nearly half of our \$17 trillion projected debt. And even less discussed than the ongoing costs of the war are the opportunity costs -- the many things we might have spent that money on instead. In 2010, Bilmes and Stiglitz wrote that not only was their \$3 trillion estimate of the war's cost too low, but so was their estimation of the opportunity costs:

The Iraq war didn't just contribute to the severity of the financial crisis, though; it also kept us from responding to it effectively. Increased indebtedness meant that the government had far less room to maneuver than it otherwise would have had ... The result is that the recession will be longer, output lower, unemployment higher and deficits larger than they would have been absent the war.

In addition to the ongoing debt, there's the issue of the cost of the care for the millions of Iraq war veterans. "We will have a vast overhang in domestic costs for caring for the wounded and covering retirement expenditure of the war fighters," said policy expert Loren Thompson in 2011. "The U.S. will continue to incur major costs for decades to come."

Will those who argued vehemently to get us into the war advocate as single-mindedly on behalf of those who fought and died and got wounded in that war? I think we already know the answer to that one.

More proof of our losing struggle against forgetting could be seen just a few weeks ago, in the battle over Chuck Hagel's confirmation to be Secretary of Defense. Not only was opposition to his nomination led by those who were most wrong on the biggest foreign policy catastrophe in recent memory, the opposition was, to a large extent, actually based on the fact that Hagel had been right about Iraq. Having been in favor of the war initially, Hagel quickly saw it for what it was, and committed the grave error of speaking the truth. Like the fact that:

"Iraq is not going to turn out the way that we were promised it was."

And that:

The Iraq War was "ill-conceived" and "poorly prosecuted."

And:

"When I think of issues like Iraq, of how we went into it -- no planning, no preparation, no sense of consequences, of where we were going, how we were going to get out, went in without enough men, no exit strategy, those kind of things -- I'll speak out."

And yet, here we are, 10 years later, when being right about a war actually costs a nominee for Secretary of Defense confirmation votes.

And what of Iraq today? As it turns out, it's one of the closest allies of Iran. Just last week, it was reported that Iraqi Premier Nouri al-Maliki has turned down the U.S. demand for sanctions against Iran

for its nuclear program. Iraq also just approved the building of a pipeline for natural gas to flow across Iraq to connect Iran and Syria, which, as the AP put it, is "likely to strengthen Tehran's influence over its neighbors."

Meanwhile, 136 Iraqis were killed in February. In January, it was 177 killed. For 2012, the body count was 4,471 civilians killed. This week, a bombing in Baghdad killed four. A few days earlier, bombings in Baghdad and elsewhere killed 22.

In December of 2011, as the last combat troops were being brought home from Iraq, President Obama stood at Fort Bragg and declared, "The war in Iraq will soon belong to history." That may be true, but it's vital that our accounting of the failures that led to this tragedy not be relegated to the past. Does President Bush, while painting his pictures in Texas, ever look back and assess the worst decision of his presidency (and that's a pretty high bar)? It seems doubtful, but that doesn't mean the rest of us shouldn't.

No doubt there will someday, rightly, be a monument to those who bravely fought and died in Iraq. But for the 10th anniversary, let's also build online monuments dedicated to those who planned and provoked and fomented the war, so we can join in the struggle of memory against forgetting.
