



Unhappy 18th Anniversary: How an Unholy Pro-War Lobbying Alliance Pushed America Into the Iraq Quagmire in 2003

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March 30, 2021

Eighteen years ago, George W. Bush's administration took the fateful step of launching a war to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. That conflict set in motion developments that destabilized not only Iraq but other already fragile countries throughout the Greater Middle East. Demonstrating an astonishing inability to learn from its predecessor's blunder in Iraq, Barack Obama's administration initiated disastrous regime-change wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

The outcome has been a financial and humanitarian catastrophe. The United States has wasted more than \$6 trillion taxpayer dollars on multi-year military follies in the Muslim world since 2001, and the Iraq war gave a huge boost to that trend. Worse, several thousand Americans have lost their lives waging the crusades, with thousands more suffering drastic, life altering injuries. Still worse, more than a million people in the Middle East have perished (including at least 500,000 in Iraq and nearly 400,000 in Syria) in the various conflicts, and several million others have become pitiful refugees. Many of the latter have sought sanctuary in Europe, thereby exacerbating social tensions in countries that Washington claims are its closest friends and allies.

By every reasonable measure, the Iraq war was – and remains – a debacle. This anniversary provides an opportunity to examine the roles that the architects of the military intervention and their collaborators in the news media and the foreign policy community played.

In fairness to Bush, a ferocious lobbying effort for a war to oust Saddam began as soon as the 1991 Persian Gulf War ended without regime-change being Washington's objective. A Project for the New American Century (PNAC) open letter to President Bill Clinton on January 26, 1998, made the pro-regime-change case emphatically, urging the president "to turn your Administration's attention to implementing a strategy for removing Saddam's regime from power." The list of signatories to the PNAC letter read like a "who's who" of neoconservatives and other hawks who would lead the successful lobbying effort for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

As agitation for a formal U.S. policy to overthrow Saddam grew, so too did the role of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the most significant exile group opposed to the Iraqi dictator. The leader of the INC was Ahmed Chalabi, a murky and controversial figure, whose family fled Iraq when he was a teenager. There were long-standing indications that Chalabi and his associates were corrupt political operators. Despite such warning signs, the CIA funded the INC from the

time of its formation in 1992. Indeed, it appears that the Agency, through a public relations front entity, the Rendon Group, personally gave the organization its name.

The concerted effort of the neoconservative-INC coalition produced congressional passage of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998 with overwhelming bipartisan majorities. House Republicans voted for the measure 202 to 9, and Democrats did so 157 to 29. The Senate passed it without a single dissenting vote. Donald Rumsfeld, who would become secretary of defense in George W. Bush's administration, observed with satisfaction that "regime change in Iraq was now the official policy of the United States."

The pro-war coalition exploited the anxiety of Americans about terrorism after the 9-11 attacks – especially the fear that a future attack might use a chemical, biological, or nuclear weapon – to foment paranoia about Iraq. Chalabi and his allies cultivated key members of the news media, especially prominent journalists such as Judith Miller at the *New York Times*, to amplify and circulate their disinformation.

One bogus intelligence stream highlighted Saddam's alleged ties to Al Qaeda, including reported clandestine meetings between Iraqi officials and leaders of the terrorist organization. A *New York Times* story by Patrick E. Tyler and John Tagliabue highlighted that allegation, contending that an Iraqi intelligence agent met with 9-11 hijacker Mohammed Atta and other Al-Qaeda operatives in Prague shortly before that attack. Bush administration officials eagerly accepted the INC-supplied intelligence about Iraqi collaboration with Al Qaeda, especially the purported Prague meeting.

However, the administration already was receiving information from its own intelligence agencies that cast huge doubt about whether such a meeting ever took place. In 2012, the National Security Archive released a declassified CIA briefing paper that was issued to the White House on December 8, 2001. The document included the finding that the alleged meeting between Atta and an Iraqi official did not happen. Yet the following day Vice President Dick Cheney went on NBC's Meet the Press and cited the phantom Prague meeting to implicate Iraq in the 9/11 slaughter.

Another phony intelligence stream featured an alleged defector, Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, who provided "evidence" that Saddam's government was vigorously expanding an arsenal of "weapons of mass destruction" – specifically, chemical and biological weapons. Most worrisome, al-Haideri contended that Baghdad was actively pursuing a nuclear-weapons program and already had achieved substantial advances. Chalabi made certain that his good friend, Judith Miller, broke the story in a *New York Times* exclusive. Investigative reporter and Chalabi biographer Aram Roston, noted: "The story splashed across the newspapers of the world like a can of paint. Reuters, the AP, and other wire services picked it up. Newspapers from Australia to Austin, Texas, ran the story. Network news anchors read terse accounts of it."

Administration officials exploited the panic-generating narrative in a classic feedback loop. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice did so when she warned that "we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." When he made his infamous presentation to the United Nations Security Council in February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell stressed the bogus allegations about Saddam's connections to Al Qaeda and the equally fictional weapons of mass destruction.

Very few members of the foreign policy community or the news media sought to question, much less debunk, the case for war that the Bush administration and its allies were building. The administration's usual right-wing supporters at the *Wall Street Journal*, Fox News, the *Washington Times*, *National Review*, and other outlets were outspoken proponents of war. But liberal media outlets that frequently criticized Bush and his associates on domestic issues and were at least wary with respect to some national security issues (such as the civil liberties implications of the Patriot Act) were shoulder-to-shoulder with their right-wing colleagues when it came to policy toward Iraq. They were equally willing to believe (and disseminate) even the most thinly supported INC or administration allegations advancing the argument that Saddam was an existential security menace that had to be eliminated.

Members of the pro-war lobby got the war that they had sought for more than a decade. On March 20, 2003, the United States military, along with token forces from the international "coalition" that Washington assembled, invaded Iraq. The United States, the Middle East, and the rest of the world, are still living with (and dying with) the consequences.

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