



A Dishonest History of the Last War

Republicans want to paint the Iraq war as an honest mistake, while laying the groundwork for the next one.

By [Jamelle Bouie](#)

For the last week, liberals and conservatives have been arguing over the Iraq war. They agree that it was a mistake. But where liberals see lies and misinformation—“America invaded Iraq because the Bush administration wanted a war,” [writes Paul Krugman](#)—conservatives see an honest error. “[C]learly there were mistakes as it related to faulty intelligence in the lead-up to the war and the lack of focus on security,” said Jeb Bush in [one of his four follow-ups](#) to a now-consequential question on the Iraq war last week. “The intelligence was clearly wrong,” [said former CEO Carly Fiorina](#), “And so had we known that the intelligence was wrong, no, I would not have gone in.”

Outside of the presidential race, conservative writers have tried to highlight the “honest” part of the mistake by emphasizing the national consensus around Saddam Hussein and weapons of mass destruction. “Though certainly not unanimous,” [writes Matt Lewis for the *Daily Caller*](#), “the truth is that there was a strong bipartisan consensus that Iraq had WMDs. This included President Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, and even Nancy Pelosi.” Lewis ends there, but the intended argument is clear: You can’t accuse Bush of misleading the public when everyone, independent of the administration, also believed that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

Except that you can. As Jonathan Chait [notes](#) for *New York*, “misleading the public” into a war of choice isn’t mutually exclusive to having faulty intelligence, especially given the [official conclusion](#) that “the administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent.” As Chait writes, “The Bush administration was the victim of bad intelligence, but also the perpetrator. Its defense lies in pretending that those two things cannot both be the case.” And at *Mother Jones*, David Corn [points to the long trail of evidence](#) showing the extent to which Bush officials exaggerated existing evidence and actively deceived the public about Iraq’s threat to the United States. Not only did Vice President Dick Cheney insist there was “very clear evidence” Hussein was developing nuclear weapons (there wasn’t), but he—along with President Bush and other members of the administration—worked to link Hussein to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11,

2001. “In November 2002,” notes Corn, “Bush said Saddam ‘is a threat because he’s dealing with Al Qaeda.’ ”

But there’s more to this dispute than the details of the run-up to the Iraq war. Conservatives don’t just want to avoid the extent to which the invasion was an active decision and not the passive result of “faulty intelligence.” They also want to enshrine the underlying logic of the war. The argument that the Iraq war was an honest mistake from bad assessments is also an argument that the invasion was the proper response to the potential threat of a WMD-equipped Saddam. It’s an endorsement of the Bush-Cheney strategy of “[preventive war](#).”

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To that point, Sen. Marco Rubio [flatly states](#) that Iraq “was not a mistake” because “the president was presented with intelligence that said Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, it was governed by a man who had committed atrocities in the past with weapons of mass destruction.” Hussein’s brutality, in other words, was justification enough for the invasion. Likewise, in an [interview](#) with *Bloomberg*, Elliott Abrams—a former foreign policy adviser in the Bush administration and adviser to Rubio—said that “the proximate cause of the invasion was the intel about WMDs.” The intelligence, in other words, *compelled* the invasion. Anyone else would have made the same choice.

But they wouldn’t have. In his [speech](#) against the Iraq war authorization bill, then-Wisconsin Sen. Russ Feingold agreed that Saddam posed “a genuine threat, especially in the form of weapons of mass destruction,” but didn’t think this required a new war:

Mr. President, I believe it is dangerous for the world, and especially dangerous for us, to take the tragedy of 9–11 and the word “terrorism” and all their powerful emotion and then too easily apply them to many other situations—situations that surely need our serious attention but are not necessarily, Mr. President, the same as individuals and organizations who have shown a willingness to fly planes into the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon.

Other opponents, like Al Gore, made similar statements. “It is reasonable to conclude that we face a problem that is severe, chronic, and likely to become worse over time,” said the former vice president of international terrorism [in a September 2002 speech](#), “But is a general doctrine of pre-emption necessary in order to deal with this problem? With respect to weapons of mass destruction, the answer is clearly not.” Millions of Americans—[upward of 40 percent](#)—agreed. And to this you can add the scores of analysts, journalists, and wonks who sharply disagreed that a war was needed to keep Iraq from distributing or using nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. Writing in *National Review*, for example, one Cato Institute scholar made the sensible point that Hussein had [no incentive](#) to give away the fruits of a nuclear program: “Baghdad would be the immediate suspect and likely target of retaliation should any terrorist deploy nuclear weapons, and Saddam knows this.” His conclusion? “There’s certainly no hurry to go to war. Nothing is different today from September 10, 2001, or any time since Iraq was ousted from Kuwait.”

Present arguments aside, the consensus over the presence of weapons in Iraq—and even Saddam’s threat to global security—wasn’t a consensus to invade. The intelligence didn’t compel a war; the Bush administration [started one](#). And if today’s Republicans can’t admit this, it’s because they haven’t [abandoned](#) the [doctrine](#) that brought us our disaster in the Middle East. Given our tense negotiations with Iran—and the degree to which the entire GOP presidential field wants to abandon engagement in favor of confrontation—a future Republican president may resurrect the same Bush-era arguments with the same distortions, the same hyped threats, and the same calls to act now, regardless of all the things that could go terribly, catastrophically wrong.