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Obama adjusts Iraq narrative, now blames Bush for troop withdrawal

U.S. military airstrikes against Islamic State prompt revisionist history

By Ben Wolfgang
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The president who spent years touting the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq suddenly has had to distance himself from that action.

At the White House on Saturday morning — less than 48 hours after authorizing airstrikes against Islamist militants and humanitarian air drops to save the lives of trapped Iraqi civilians — President Obama blamed his predecessor, George W. Bush, for the absence of American troops in Iraq and rejected the assertion that he could have left a small peacekeeping force in the war-torn nation.

He uttered those after three years, and a successful re-election campaign, in which the full removal of U.S. forces from Iraq was cast as this White House's most significant foreign policy achievement and one Mr. Obama had promised all the way back to the earliest days of his first presidential campaign in 2008.

Now, however, with the terrorist force the Islamic State running roughshod through Iraq, capturing key territory, slaughtering Christians and promising to “raise the flag of Allah at the White House,” Mr. Obama has begun to adjust the narrative.

President Obama places blame for Iraq on Bush

President Obama had declared he would pull the military out of Iraq, but now as violence continues, he is placing the blame on former President George W. Bush.

“What I just find interesting is the degree to which this issue keeps on coming up, as if this was my decision. Under the previous administration, we had turned over the country to a sovereign, democratically elected Iraqi government,” Mr. Obama told reporters just before leaving for a two-week vacation on Martha's Vineyard. “So let's just be clear: The reason that we did not have a follow-on force in Iraq was because the Iraqis — a majority of Iraqis did not want U.S. troops there, and politically they could not pass the kind of laws that would be required to protect our troops in Iraq. So that entire analysis is bogus and is wrong. But it gets frequently peddled around here by folks who oftentimes are trying to defend previous policies that they themselves made.”

Mr. Obama's new take on the 2011 troop withdrawal quickly came under fire from a number of political pundits who pointed out the irony of a president moving away, at least in part, from his signature foreign policy achievement.

Ron Fournier of the National Journal tweeted that the president is distancing himself from his own record.

"A promise he kept, and he's running from it?" he said.

James Taranto, a member of The Wall Street Journal editorial board and editor of OpinionJournal.com, said Mr. Obama apparently is no longer claiming credit for the removal of American forces, something that, until now, he frequently boasted about.

"Obama is not only disclaiming responsibility for the troop pullout but blaming it on George W. Bush," he wrote Monday.

Indeed, Mr. Obama's most recent description of the 2011 U.S. troop withdrawal differs greatly from how he portrayed it in 2012, when he was running for re-election against Republican Mitt Romney.

While it's true the administration did support keeping a small residual force in Iraq, Mr. Obama frequently took credit for fully ending American involvement in Iraq and for leaving no U.S. boots on the ground in that country.

In fact, during one October 2012 debate with Mr. Romney, the president seemed to deny that he supported a status of forces agreement with the Iraqi government, a deal that would have formally allowed American troops to remain in Iraq and would have protected them from prosecution in Iraqi courts.

When Mr. Romney said he, like Mr. Obama, believed such an agreement should have been worked out, the president said "that's not true" and went on to decry the presence of any American forces in Iraq.

"What I would not have done is left 10,000 troops in Iraq that would tie us down. That certainly would not help us in the Middle East. You've got to be clear, both to our allies and our enemies, about where you stand and what you mean. Now, you just gave a speech a few weeks ago in which you said we should still have troops in Iraq," he told Mr. Romney. "That is not a recipe for making sure that we are taking advantage of the opportunities and meeting the challenges of the Middle East."

The White House is changing its story on Iraq at a time when the president's broader foreign policy is under fire across the political spectrum.

In an interview with The Atlantic over the weekend, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Mr. Obama's 2008 Democratic primary rival and the party's 2016

presidential front-runner, questioned the administration's underlying foreign policy principle: "don't do stupid stuff."

"Great nations need organizing principles, and 'don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle," she said.

Republicans have been even harsher in their critiques, charging that Mr. Obama is proving his incompetence with his handling of the Iraq crisis.

"Truly, it seems as if there is no threat that has not managed to catch him utterly off-guard. And the sad reality is that his consistent inability to anticipate obvious danger has almost invariably led to the loss of innocent life on an massive and heartbreaking scale," said Rep. Trent Franks, Arizona Republican.

On the troop withdrawal, analysts say the president is entirely correct about the Iraqi government having no interest in allowing U.S. forces to remain in the country. Indeed, Iraqi leaders refused to guarantee American troops immunity from prosecution in Iraqi courts, which the administration viewed as a necessary prerequisite for allowing any kind of follow-on force.

Although the Iraqis, to some degree, kicked out American troops, Mr. Obama portrayed the withdrawal as proof that the U.S. was leaving behind a sovereign, largely peaceful Iraq.

But with the Islamic State group now in control of key areas across Iraq, including the nation's largest dam, that claim has been debunked, some analysts say.

"The bigger issue is that in pulling out he tended to emphasize the story, as Bush had, that we had stood up a lasting, stable government and a functional military. That was always doubtful and has now been proven wrong," said Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "A more honest take would have been that it's not worth being there, and we can't stabilize it. Now he's sort of trapped by past rhetoric that implied our exit was predicated on success."