



The Last Time We Fought A Preemptive War In The Middle East

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The question of a preemptive war in the Middle East seems to be on the table again. The president says that Iran is “the chief sponsor of terrorism,” and links this to Iranian development of ballistic missiles. A former State Department official says that the Trump administration is obsessed with Iran, and that Iran, ISIS, and Al Qaeda “are all mentioned in the same breath, as a menacing threat.” An editorial by John Glaser of the Cato Institute worries about a tendency to generalize the threat posed by Iran, as Sen. Tom Cotton, who is reportedly on deck as the next Director of the CIA, did when he said that “I don’t see how anyone can say America can be safe as long as you have in power a theocratic despotism” [sic]. These claims of existential threat and alliance between a Middle Eastern sovereign state and Al Qaeda are familiar. Before we turn our sights on Iran, we owe it to our children and to the veterans we celebrate every day to recall what happened the last time the United States went down this path.

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 was the deadliest foreign act of destruction on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor in 1941. The terrorists’ targets—Congress, the Pentagon, and the World Trade Center—symbolized the foundations of American power: democratic governance, military might, and the global economic influence of Wall Street.

All three institutions faced tremendous challenges in the years to come. At first, the catastrophic events of 9/11 and the heroic responses of government officials, first responders, and ordinary citizens unified the nation. But two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, strained the military capacity of the United States and reversed the financial stability that had been achieved under the administration of President Bill Clinton. An aggrandizement of executive power under President George W. Bush resulted in secret policy-making, serious breaches of civil liberties, and human rights violations. Worst of all, the Bush administration’s misrepresentations about the threat posed by Iraq resulted in a U.S. invasion that triggered a civil war there and destabilized the entire Middle East.

When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt asked Congress to declare a state of war between the two nations. Because the 9/11 attacks were carried out by non-state actors, it was not clear what the correct response was. Who was the enemy?

The CIA and the counterterrorism experts in the Office of National Intelligence (ONI) were unanimous that al Qaeda, and therefore Ussama bin Laden, was behind the 9/11 attacks. Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Under-Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz agreed, but insisted that Saddam Hussein's Iraq stood behind al Qaeda. All three men had been architects of the 1990 Gulf War, which repelled the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq but left Saddam Hussein, whom Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz considered a continuing threat to regional stability in the Middle East, in power. Now they insisted that Iraq had played a role in the September 11 attacks, and maintained that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that either Iraq or al Qaeda might use against America.

Intelligence officials were flummoxed by the administration's focus on Iraq. There was no evidence at the time (and none was found later) that Saddam Hussein had any connection with al Qaeda. There were no links between bin Laden and Iraq. A CIA report, *Iraqi Support to Terrorism*, produced in the summer of 2002, found no evidence of any working relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda before, during, or after 9/11, and no evidence of Iraqi complicity in or foreknowledge of 9/11. Counterintelligence chief Richard Clarke erupted in one meeting that attacking Iraq in revenge for 9/11 made about as much sense as bombing Mexico after Pearl Harbor. Subscribe to the Politics email.

In the absence of verifiable links to al Qaeda, the administration turned to Iraq's desire and capacity to manufacture and use weapons of mass destruction, thereby linking the global war on terror with nuclear proliferation. It was true that in 1998 Saddam had ejected the U.N. weapons inspectors posted there since the Gulf War, and it was likely that he had resumed his effort to develop a nuclear weapon. But there was no evidence that he had made any progress on this front, and no reason to think that an Iraqi attack on the United States was plausible.

Despite the consensus of the intelligence community that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, Bush administration officials, particularly Vice President Cheney, continued to assert publicly that there was an ongoing link between Iraq and al Qaeda. Much of the public was convinced. A *Washington Post* poll conducted in August 2003 revealed that 70% of respondents believed it was likely that Saddam Hussein had been involved in the 9/11 attacks. The administration also downplayed the likely cost of a war. When Lawrence Lindsey, Bush's National Economic Council Director, warned in the *Wall Street Journal* that a war in Iraq would cost between \$100 and \$200 billion, he was forced to resign. Donald Rumsfeld insisted that the war would cost under \$50 billion, and that most of the cost would be paid for with Iraqi oil revenue.

Beginning in the fall of 2002, administration officials kept up a steady drumbeat for war. There was "no doubt" that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, reported Cheney. He and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice insisted that Saddam would acquire nuclear weapons "fairly soon." Did it make any sense, asked Rice, "for the world to wait . . . for the final proof, the smoking gun that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud?"

There was little debate about the merits of preemptive war in Congress. With midterm elections approaching, only a handful of Democrats dared question the war rationale or oppose the president. The venerable West Virginia Democratic senator Robert Byrd delivered a lonely

dissent: “There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. We stand passively mute... paralyzed by our own uncertainty, seeming stunned by the sheer turmoil of events.”

On March 19, 2003, the United States attacked Iraq. Military victory came quickly, and triumphant American troops entered Baghdad on April 9. But there was no plan for postwar reconstruction. Rival political organizations and militias thrived in a power vacuum created by the US decision to disband the Iraqi Army. In 2007, Retired Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, who commanded U.S. forces in Iraq from 2003-2004, declared the Bush war plan “catastrophically flawed.”

By 2012, nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers had died in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and more than 32,000 were wounded, many grievously. Between 100,000 and 200,000 Iraqis died of war-related causes. In addition to the American lives lost and shattered, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq cost an estimated \$800 billion. When combined with Bush tax cuts, these wars produced soaring deficits, as well as a sober reckoning with the trade-offs between national security and national values. The war in Iraq tarnished America’s image abroad, destabilized the Middle East, and incited anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world. At home, the “war on terror” polarized American politics, undermined faith in democratic institutions, and endangered the core values of the American Republic.