



# The Great Iraq Mistake

**The GOP now agrees that the Iraq War was a bad decision, but the way forward is far from clear.**

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Invading Iraq was a mistake.

That's the consensus now even among Republicans, whose presidential candidates in recent days have largely fallen in line behind Jeb Bush and denounced the 2003 invasion initiated by his brother. After first telling Fox News this month he "would have" invaded Iraq, Bush subtly changed his answer three days later, saying in a subsequent interview he would not but couching the reversal in a qualifier that blamed the decision-making on a failure of accurate intelligence.

It was a watershed moment. Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin, Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and other GOP candidates have now also repudiated the decision to go to war – usually prefacing their condemnation with some form of the phrase, "if we knew then what we know now," while keeping intact avenues for criticism about the prosecution of the campaign since Democratic President Barack Obama took office.

But the simple admission that it was an error to send U.S. troops to topple Saddam Hussein creates a quandary for Republicans, whose prospective standard bearers hope to persuade voters they can more effectively manage the battle against the Islamic State group: If even they admit the Iraq invasion a decade ago was a mistake, why should the public believe that committing U.S. money, military hardware or even American lives to the current crisis won't be proven a similar error? Especially as the Obama administration and the Pentagon incredulously insist U.S. forces are defeating an enemy that is gaining ground daily across Iraq and Syria.

"They seem to be prepared to make the same mistake today, in a different version, that [President George W.] Bush made in 2003, even as they're not wanting to re-litigate his mistake," says Gordon Adams, a regional expert who oversaw national security and international affairs for the Office of Management and Budget under the Clinton administration. "The argument that people seem to want to have is like Bush's [argument with that woman on campus](#): 'Who is to blame for Iraq going south?' And it's not, 'Who is to blame for invading Iraq and opening up the conditions for it to go south in the first place.'"

Most GOP candidates have voiced support for escalating U.S. involvement against the militants, while until recently sidestepping the widespread public perception that their party is responsible

for the unpopular conflict that contributed to the group's formation. Perhaps initially posed to resolve a conundrum in which Bush would either separate himself from his brother's administration or embrace publicly unpopular policies, the question nevertheless has become a political litmus test that has bled into the Democratic race, where front-runner Hillary Clinton has been forced to answer for her support of the invasion as a senator.

After justifying her vote during the 2008 presidential campaign as a way to give former President Bush the authority needed to make the decision, Clinton abandoned that position, calling her decision "wrong" last year in her biography and reiterating the sentiment in comments last week.

Unlike in 2012, when the presidential campaign turned in part on Obama's commitment to leave Iraq and Republican Mitt Romney was largely given a pass on whether he would have invaded, a debate about the wisdom of recommitting U.S. resources overseas looms. And the wave of reversals from candidates across the political spectrum does little to bolster public confidence.

"If any of them are elected, they're not going to take office in a background of high government trust," says Gene Healy, who studies executive power as a vice president at the Cato Institute. "They're not going to operate in a political environment where skepticism toward big government initiatives like the Iraq War is temporarily suspended."

George W. Bush enjoyed public trust in government that America hadn't seen since the 1960s, before a generation of Americans were jaded by the U.S. involvement in Vietnam – a conflict whose shadows have crept across every decision to commit U.S. troops in the half-century since. Public fear and a need to respond to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, unified the country behind the most interventionist White House since the Vietnam War era and paved the way for a response offered under the pretense of protecting the nation. Congress overwhelmingly obliged.

But despite public [polls that show a majority of Americans favor deploying U.S. troops](#) against the Islamic State group, or "ISIS," a decision to re-engage in the Middle East after eight years of an administration committed to withdrawing from conflicts there is likely to be met with skepticism, if not hostility. Even the battle against the Taliban, a brutally oppressive regime whose pre-9/11 ties to al-Qaida terrorists have been substantiated, has worn on Americans before a decisive victory can be achieved.

"I don't think anyone elected in 2016, barring some unforeseen extenuating circumstances, is going to have the kind of freedom of action that a high level of government trust provides," Healy says.

During a congressional hearing Thursday examining the progress of the battle against the Islamic State group, retired Army Gen. Jack Keane took on the Democratic narrative that the crisis stems from Bush's decision to order the invasion and the common Republican retort that the current strife is due to Obama's full withdrawal of all U.S. forces in 2011.

"We need to get past our political psychosis on Iraq," he said. The former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff left the military in 2003, and has since become one of the most vocal proponents of bolstering the U.S. military response to fighting within the country.

"While those were crucial policy decisions, and there's much to learn about them, we have to get past it," Keane said. "ISIS is much more than Iraq."

But after admitting the last war in Iraq was a mistake, it might be a little harder for the next president to win support for the next one.