



## The Iraq War was a bipartisan disaster

By Gene Healy  
June 23, 2014

“Sorry” seems to be the hardest word for neoconservatives who championed the Iraq War, but sometimes they manage to squeeze it out.

Here, for instance, is former Bush speechwriter Marc Thiessen in Wednesday’s Washington Post: “Sorry, but this is a mess of President Obama’s making.”

It’s a common refrain among unrepentant hawks. In a piece titled “What Obama Has Wrought in Iraq,” Thiessen’s American Enterprise Institute colleague Danielle Pletka insists that “when the United States fled Iraq in 2011, the country was stable, reasonably integrated, and on the road to new prosperity and unprecedented freedom.”

“We had it won,” declares Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. Thanks to the 2007 troop surge, Obama had inherited “a strong Iraq,” only to squander it rushing to the exits.

Watching the ongoing collapse of the Iraqi state not three years later, you have to wonder just how “strong” and stable it could have been in the first place. We’ve spent \$25 billion over the last decade building up the Iraqi security forces, only to get an updated version of the old gibe about the South Vietnamese Army: “want to buy some ISF rifles? Never been fired and only dropped once!”

But Iraq wasn’t “lost” in 2011, when Obama failed to broker a deal that would let U.S. troops stay. Iraq was a losing proposition from the start.

In April 2003, as U.S. forces rolled into Baghdad, the Carnegie Endowment’s Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper warned that “historically, nation-building attempts by outside powers are notable mainly for their bitter disappointments, not their triumphs.” Democratization-at-gunpoint is nearly always a fool’s errand, and especially foolish in a socially fractured basket case like the Iraq of 2003.

In 14 cases of nation-building in underdeveloped societies, Pei and Kaplan noted, the United States achieved its aims only in tiny Panama and Grenada: “a success rate of just 14 percent.” Moreover, they cautioned, “ethnically fragmented countries, such as Iraq, pose extraordinary challenges to nation builders because, lacking a common national identity, various ethnic groups ... tend to seize the rare opportunity of outsiders’ intervention to seek complete independence or gain more power. This can trigger national disintegration or a backlash from other ethnic groups, with the outside powers caught in the middle.”

Indeed, "despite what interveners hope," writes George Washington University's Alexander B. Downes, "more than 40 percent of states that experience foreign-imposed regime change have a civil war within the next 10 years."

Obama's great mistake, then, according to the neoconservatives, was that he missed his chance to have U.S. troops stick around, "caught in the middle." The idea was to keep a residual force of perhaps 20,000 Americans there indefinitely, taking fire while waiting for the emergence of the Shiite Nelson Mandela. Not a great plan.

If Iraq was a doomed enterprise from outset, who's to blame? We tend to think of the Iraq War as a neoconservative project, and with good reason. But they weren't alone.

"The underrated villains in this drama," Matt Yglesias observes, "are the leading Democratic Party politicians of the 2002-2003 era." Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Madeline Albright -- "the whole crew" -- went along. In 2003, center-left opinion on Iraq was dominated by a kettle of "Liberal Hawks" nearly indistinguishable from the neoconservative variety. Brookings scholars proved instrumental as well, playing a key role in getting liberal opinion leaders behind the war.

Many "one-semester neoconservatives" renounced their liberal hawkery when they saw the results. But others retain their faith in the healing force of American arms.

"Obama's Favorite Think Tank: We Should Prepare to Bomb Iraq" the Daily Beast reports, citing a new white paper from the Center for American Progress.

The Iraq War was a bipartisan disaster -- and one we seem all-too-capable of repeating.

*Gene Healy, a Washington Examiner columnist, is vice president at the Cato Institute and author of "The Cult of the Presidency."*