

## Iraq War Anniversary Finds Republicans Regretful, Seeking A Path Forward

Jon Ward – March 19, 2013

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WASHINGTON -- Back when the Iraq war was going to be a surgical operation and not an eight-year occupation, Barack Obama was a largely unknown state senator in Illinois and Republicans like Karl Rove were dreaming of maintaining their party's newfound political dominance for decades.

Rove, then a top White House adviser to President George W. Bush, is often credited with saying at the time that he wanted to create a "permanent Republican majority." This is something of an urban legend. Rove did not use that language, but he did say a year before the 2004 election that he wanted to help the GOP stay on top for many years. He later referred to it as a "durable majority."

For example, Rove spoke about this majority in 2002 and 2003 during a series of interviews with The New Yorker's Nicholas Lemann for a nearly 12,000 word profile that ultimately ran in the May 12 issue, which would have hit news stands days after Bush's infamous May 1 "mission accomplished" speech. Lemann wrote at the time: "While the war in Iraq--which probably wasn't Rove's idea, but which he has been skillful at playing for maximum political advantage--was still going on, I asked him how voters might see the war during the 2004 campaign."

Was still going on?

The New Yorker's language conveys a great deal about the way that Iraq was sold to the press and the public, compared to how it turned out. It was such a hard sell that even the New Yorker described the war as over, only for U.S. troops to remain in the country until the end of 2011.

Bush's failure to deliver on his promise of a quickly resolved conflict, and the way that the U.S. became bogged down in Iraq for so many years, has had lasting consequences for the Republican party. And since President Obama's emergence on to the American political scene, Rove's talk of a long-lasting GOP

majority has evaporated. Rove has instead had to argue against the idea that the Democrats may have constructed a new coalition that could help them dominate like they did after the New Deal.

More recently, the emergence of Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) onto the national stage following his 13-hour filibuster of the Obama administration's drone policy has exposed some of the deep schisms about foreign policy on the right, as well as some of the deep regret among conservatives about Iraq.

"The Republican Party built an advantage on foreign policy across generations, and then began demolishing it 10 years ago this month," wrote New York Times columnist Ross Douthat. Paul's ascension, he wrote, was "the first real sign that the Republican Party might someday escape the shadow of the Iraq war and enter the post-post-9/11 era."

Conversations with Republican operatives at last week's Conservative Political Action Conference were reminders of how stridently Republicans treated those within their own ranks who disagreed with Bush's wars. Positions in the Bush administration, or on the Bush reelection campaign, were withheld from those who had voiced dissent.

Now, with the GOP in a moment of crisis and struggling to find a direction, condemnation of the war flows quickly and easily out of the mouths of movement leaders.

"It didn't work, ok?" veteran conservative activist Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform, said in an interview. "I'm waiting for the architects of those policies to get up and say it didn't work, but it's tough to expect that because they never articulated what the hell they were doing."

"It's taken away the Republican party's historic advantage on foreign policy that dates back at least to the beginning of the Cold War," he said.

Conservatives also feel that Bush's response to 9/11 reduced the GOP's other advantage over Democrats, as the party of fiscal responsibility and limited government. The size of government grew dramatically after the attacks, as Bush created the Department of Homeland Security and opened up the government check book to an army of defense contractors. It was the biggest expansion of the federal budget since the New Deal.

"The Bush administration, whenever it saw a crisis, increased the size of government," Norquist said.

Obama has moved assertively to step into the foreign policy gap left by the GOP. He authorized the mission that killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, he has prosecuted an aggressive drone strategy in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere, and his withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan has been seen as responsible leadership, and not dovish retreat.

"It has taken a generation for the American people to forgive the Democrats for being right about Vietnam. In truth a lot of the distrust of Dems was justifiable because of the way some on the anti-war left disrespected the heroes who fought that god-awful war," said veteran Democrat consultant Paul Begala. "But the left has rallied to support our troops even as it has opposed the war. So perhaps now it is the GOP who will pay a price -- and this time for being wrong."

Perhaps. Some on the right dismiss concerns about the political impact of the party's foreign policy struggles.

"The party's brand is horrible. I would put foreign policy at the bottom of the reasons why," said Curt Anderson, a Republican consultant whose most prominent client is Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, a likely 2016 candidate. "Voters don't care about foreign policy, until they do."

"The GOP intelligentsia, or the conservative intelligentsia ... are far more focused on foreign policy than the Republican primary voters are. By a mile," Anderson wrote in an e-mail.

Yet for one potential 2016 candidate in particular, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Iraq is one of the chief reasons why his last name remains such a handicap.

Norquist suggested a straightforward solution for W's younger brother: appeal to the foreign policy experience of his father, former President George H.W. Bush, as the ideal and cast his brother's as something of a learning experience.

"His father managed to kick ... the Saddam Hussein regime out of Kuwait, and didn't get stuck occupying the place. He did it right," Norquist said. "He managed the collapse of the Soviet Union without a lot of blood on the floor. [Jeb Bush] could stand up and say that's the way you run things and this other is not."

"If the answer is, 'I refuse to criticize anything my dad or brother did, that is a statement that I can't earn anything from 12 years of history because I'm too close to it,'" Norquist said.

On the whole, the right is reassessing the actions of the last decade, and wondering what happened, how much of it went so wrong.

At a foreign policy panel during the CPAC conference, Doug Bandow, of the libertarian Cato Institute, said that after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early '90s, America "had this moment where we dominated the globe more than, I would argue, I think more than any other power in history."

"The U.S. is in a position over the last 20, 25 years where we could basically take on any power or group of powers and we win," Bandow said. "I think that gave rise to hubris, the sense that we could kind of do anything we wanted. I think that's what we have to deal with as we found out that's simply not the case."

Obama, wrote scholar Aaron David Miller, has moved the U.S. "from a hyperactive foreign policy driven by ideology to an approach grounded more in the way the world actually is, including the reality of America's own financial and economic travails."

Of course, Bush and his defenders, as well as the neoconservatives who spurred them on and supported the military interventions, believe the current narrative about Iraq is far too one-sided and ignores some positive results that did emerge.

"Yes it took too long, yes it cost too much in terms of lives and treasure for the U.S. coalition and Iraqis. We lost control of things in 2003, '04, '05 and '06, really, but we did achieve something there," Stephen Hadley, Bush's national security adviser during his second term, said in an interview.

"There is an Iraqi government that doesn't threaten our interests, that in its own peculiar way governs itself and is an ally in the war on terror, and it is a government that in 2007 and 2008 made deals that allowed Sunni, Shia and Kurds to work together in a democratic framework," Hadley said.

Hadley continued that the "consensus is fraying under pressure from the Iranians from the east, the Turks from the north and particularly the Syrians from the west," and he faulted the Obama administration for "sitting on [its] hands" as Syria unravels and threatens to destabilize Iraq and the broader Middle East.

Hadley also took issue with Obama's version of events, which he said has been that "the Iraq war was bad, a terrible disaster, and he ended it."

"But actually Bush ended it with the surge strategy that Obama opposed, and Bush was the one who negotiated the agreement for withdrawal of troops, and Obama has implemented it," Hadley said.

He countered Rand Paul's argument that the majority of Americans support immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan because of "war weariness."

"I think that's what people want; I think that's what people are ready for, that we're coming home. In fact I'd come home even quicker than the president," Paul said last week.

"This war weariness thing I think is well overstated," Hadley said. "The American people are always ready to do what they need to do if they have a leader who is willing to step up and explain it to them."

The Weekly Standard's Bill Kristol wrote something similar this past weekend: "There are many politicians all too willing to seek power and popularity by encouraging weariness rather than point out its perils," he said.

Where the GOP goes from here is unclear. It is in the midst of what The Atlantic's Steve Clemons called "an unresolved simmering civil war."

And Rand Paul's rise raises more questions than it answers. The traditional conflict within the party between two dominant schools -- what Clemons called the "cold-eyed realists" of the Nixonian bent and the "messianic" interventionist neocons -- has been complicated with the entry of a third wing: the Randians.

"Something else is emerging," said Kiron Skinner, an associate professor at Carnegie Mellon University who was also a foreign policy adviser to Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign. "I'm still trying to figure out what it actually means for the future but I think it's important. And it resonates with young conservatives."

But many conservatives remain highly skeptical of Paul.

"For our lifetime, one of the most consistent separators between Democrats and Republicans is the importance of the projection of American power abroad and now for the first time you have a group of Republicans taking the liberal and weaker position on that," said Brad Todd, a Republican consultant and partner with Anderson.

When asked if the GOP advantage on foreign policy has been erased, Todd responded: "Not yet. But nominating an isolationist could cause that."

Those outside the party also think Paul's views go too far to have mainstream appeal.

"Rand, like his father, is feeling an electric current," said Clemons, referring to former Rep. Ron Paul's (R-Texas) appeal to anti-war sentiment during the last two presidential elections. "But it's limited to a certain number of people."

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), considered by many at the moment to be the leading GOP candidate for 2016, has stuck so far to a conventional pro-Israel, hawkish view on foreign policy. Miller, writing for Foreign Policy, called it "long on rhetoric commitment and very short on operational and practical tactics and strategy."

While the right fights it out, Begala said, Obama has repositioned the Democrats between extremes in an appealing middle position on foreign policy.

"Even many in the GOP no longer accept the Bush-Cheney doctrine that America must invade, conquer and occupy huge countries," he said. "Americans are not ready to embrace Rand Paul's neo-isolationism, either, which is why I think President Obama has got it right: project American power, advance American interests, kill America's enemies, engage in the world, but end the occupations and nation-building."