



No, we shouldn't have stayed in Iraq – and “history” is not on our side if we go back

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September 10, 2014

Before Americans follow Barack Obama into another war in the Middle East — this time in two countries simultaneously — it would be a good idea to get a handle on the history of the last few U.S. wars there.

This history is, after all, relevant with respect to the current debate over what the United States should do to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

If one believes, for example, that nation building in Iraq could have worked, or was working in January 2009, when George W. Bush left office, then one can also believe that Barack Obama is the reason why it failed, and that Obama can succeed this time around, so long as he is truly committed to the mission.

We see this notion among some Republicans in Congress who seem to believe that the relevant history of the last Iraq war begins in January 2007, and ends in January 2009.

“We can argue over whatever about the Iraq war, but most of our guys believe Bush left in 2009 with the U.S. in position to win,” Representative Tom Cole (R- OK) [told the New York Times](#). Barack Obama has been president for nearly six years. “At some point,” Cole continued, “it can't be Bush and Cheney's fault.”

According to Washington Post columnist Mark Thiessen, [none of it](#) is their fault. George W. Bush set Iraq on the path to peace and reconciliation. He warned that a failure to leave troops in Iraq for an indeterminate period of time would amount to “surrendering the future of Iraq to al-Qaeda.”

It would risk, Bush said, “mass killings on a horrific scale.” And, of course, leaving Iraq would increase “the probability that American troops would have to return at some later date to confront an enemy that is even more dangerous.”

But this particular history is flawed on several counts. First, it ignores the depths of the political dysfunction in Iraq precisely at the time when Bush was boasting of the success of the surge. As Gen. David Petraeus explained during congressional testimony in November 2007, “The fundamental source of the conflict in Iraq is competition among ethnic and sectarian committees for power and resources.”

Bush’s own White House touched on a similar theme in its Benchmark Progress Report that same month: “Reconciliation in a society marked by nearly four decades of dictatorship will not be linear and will take time, patience, and support from the international community.”

These problems in Iraq were not solved in the span of 14 months. Iraq had not been fixed by January 2009, when George W. Bush left office. They were not fixed by the time that U.S. forces left Iraq at the end of 2011. And they are not fixed now, as ISIS’s rise clearly demonstrates.

The magnitude of the political challenges facing the Iraqi people was clear long before the Iraq war began in 2003. Many experts foresaw the problems that would likely ensue following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s government.

The CIA prepared two different estimates pertaining to post-Saddam Iraq, but their warnings were dismissed, or simply ignored. Paul Pillar, at the time the national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia, recalled one administration official telling him: “You guys just don’t see the possibilities. You’re too negative.”

Another military analyst explained “Nothing would derail them, and their assumption was that it would be a lot easier than we had put it. They felt arguments that it would be hard were actually designed to cause people to rethink whether the war was worth doing in the first place. This was appalling,” he went on, “They were trying to rig the cost-benefit analysis.”

We now know how that turned out.

And this leads to the second problem with the “if we’d stayed, it would have all worked out” narrative: we weren’t going to stay. The Iraqis didn’t want it. The American people didn’t want it. And there was precious little that Barack Obama could have done, even if he had wanted to, to change that.

The reason why is obvious enough: because the costs of maintaining a U.S. presence in Iraq indefinitely would not have been offset by the benefits that were likely to see. A force large enough to significantly influence Iraqi politics – larger, in other words, than prevailed even during the surge in 2007 – would have been too costly. A smaller force would have been ineffective.

So let’s have a debate about what to do about ISIS now. Let’s have the American people weigh in, through their representatives in Congress. But let’s not forget how we got here.

And let’s not be under any illusion that the United States has a magic elixir for repairing Iraqi and Syrian politics. We may be exceptional, but we’re not that exceptional.

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