

The Bush administration "pulled the troops out of Afghanistan, pulled the resources away, because they wanted to invade Iraq instead."

[Paul Krugman](#) on Sunday, August 1st, 2010 in on "This Week with Christiane Amanpour."

Number deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan show one war got a lot more troops

The war in Afghanistan was the main topic on *This Week with Christiane Amanpour* on Aug. 1, 2010.



Share this story:

Recommend 2
retweet 5

Liberal economist Paul Krugman noted that ongoing problems in Afghanistan should actually be pinned on the Bush administration.

"You know, when I look at this, people say, you know, 'We can't abandon Afghanistan,' all that," Krugman said. "I'm surprised that people aren't pointing out that basically the decision to abandon Afghanistan was taken eight years ago, right? Eight years ago, when the Taliban was on the run, when it might have been possible to really use the momentum to change this, that's when the Bush administration pulled the troops out of Afghanistan, pulled the resources away, because they wanted to invade Iraq instead. And now you're asking Obama to recover from a situation where we've spent eight years losing credibility."

We were interested in fact-checking Krugman's statement that "the Bush administration pulled the troops out of Afghanistan, pulled the resources away, because they wanted to invade Iraq instead."

To do this, we checked troop levels in Afghanistan from eight years ago, using monthly estimated numbers provided by the Department of Defense. (We're counting just U.S. troops here, not NATO forces.)

What we found is that troop levels were basically static during the invasion and occupation of Iraq. But we were surprised by the relatively small number of troops that were in Afghanistan eight years ago. In October 2002, there were approximately 9,500 troops there. A year later, in October 2003, that number had increased slightly to 10,400. Meanwhile, in Iraq in October 2003, there were 130,800 troops.

In Afghanistan, the number of U.S. troops stayed below 20,000 for all of 2003, 2004 and 2005. In 2006, it hit a high for the year of 23,300 in April.

President George W. Bush announced a surge for Iraq in 2007. The number of troops in Iraq climbed above 60,000, while U.S. troops in Afghanistan hovered between 10,000 and 11,000. In 2008, the number of troops in Afghanistan started increasing to between 16,000 and 18,000.

The number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan increased dramatically in 2009, the year President Barack Obama took office. By the end of 2009, troops numbered just over 67,000. And right now, there are approximately 89,000 troops.

So Krugman said that "the Bush administration pulled the troops out of Afghanistan" eight years ago, but we could not document any declines until the surge in Iraq in 2007.

Experts said Krugman was right about resources being pulled away, though, particularly intelligence operations and elite Special Forces units. (We can't quantify these shifts with data because the government considers it sensitive operational information; however, all the experts we consulted agreed on this point.)

"It was the kind of troops that we pulled out," said Marvin Weinbaum, a former Afghanistan specialist at the State Department and now a scholar at the Middle East Institute. "We pulled out special forces units and they were not replaced by similar kinds of units."

"It's more that valuable and scarce intelligence assets, Special Forces, and high command and political attention shifted to Iraq from Afghanistan. It's not overall troops that matter as much in this case," said Ivan Eland, a senior fellow at the Independent Institute, a libertarian think tank, and author of an upcoming book on counterinsurgency warfare.

"I think it would be more accurate to suggest that the Bush administration failed to reinforce the Afghan mission once it began to focus on Iraq," said Doug Bandow of the libertarian Cato Institute. "So Krugman was technically wrong on troop levels but correct in terms of some specialized forces as well as a larger strategic sense."

To add one more wrinkle: The experts we consulted also said that the situation in Afghanistan started deteriorating significantly in 2006 and 2007, years after the invasion of Iraq. That's a point when Afghanistan could have used more troops but didn't get them.

"By 2006/2007 when we saw the Taliban begin to return, we might have beefed up forces in

Afghanistan much more quickly -- except that we were tied down still (and in fact, surging) in Iraq," said Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

So to sum up, Krugman said the Bush administration "pulled the troops out of Afghanistan, pulled the resources away, because they wanted to invade Iraq instead." He's right on the substantive point that the U.S. was waging war in two countries with limited resources, and Iraq got the bulk of those resources. And experts said that key assets including intelligence operations and Special Forces units were pulled away from Afghanistan for the Iraq invasion. But he's wrong that troop levels in Afghanistan declined when Iraq was invaded in March 2003. The numbers in Afghanistan were small, and they stayed small until they declined later, in 2007. As a result, we rate his statement Half True.