Invasion of Iraq

The “Invasion of Iraq” refers to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq between March 20 and May 1, 2003. Called “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” the invasion of Iraq initiated a controversial period of American dominance of Iraq that continues today (as of December 2010). In order to fully understand the complex reasons for the U.S. invasion of Iraq, we must first understand the history of U.S.-Iraqi relations between the late 1980s and the early twenty-first century. This essay places the 2003 invasion of Iraq in historical context by exploring the events, ideas, and people involved.

The First Persian Gulf War

Nearly as soon as he had concluded hostilities with Iran (please see the entry on the Iran-Iraq War), Saddam Hussein had moved onto his next target: Kuwait, the small, oil-rich emirate directly south of Iraq. The collapse of world oil prices at the end of the 1980s, coupled with the expenses from the Iran/Iraq War, had devastated Iraq’s economy. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which had loaned Iraq billions of dollars to prosecute the war against Iran, refused to forgive Iraq’s debts. Iraq also claimed that Kuwait was stealing Iraqi oil through “slant-drilling,” a process by which one country constructs an oil rig near another country’s borders and then drills at an angle under the border separating the two countries, making it possible for the first country to tap oil reserves that belong to the second country. Finally, Iraq’s sovereign, Saddam Hussein, renewed the perennial Iraqi claim that Kuwait was not an autonomous country but was, in fact, a southern province of Iraq. Following threats to take military action earlier in the month, on July 23, 1990, 30,000 Iraqi troops massed at the Iraq-Kuwaiti border. Two days later, Saddam Hussein met with the American ambassador, April Glaspie, who reportedly told the Iraqi ruler that America had “… no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait.”

Approximately one week later, on August 2, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait; within two days, Iraq controlled Kuwait’s capital (Kuwait City) and began moving south toward the Kuwaiti-Saudi Arabian border. More disturbing, from the Saudi Arabian and American perspective, was the fact that Saddam Hussein began criticizing the Saudi/American “special relationship.” He also called the Saudi


ruling family “illegitimate,” using rhetoric mirroring that of Islamist groups who had emerged over the previous decade.

International condemnation was swift and unequivocal: the same day Iraq invaded Kuwait, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 660 (Yemen abstained), which condemned the invasion and demanded an immediate withdrawal. Four days later, the United Nations Security Council unanimously (Yemen and Cuba abstained) passed Resolution 661, which placed sanctions on Iraqi and Kuwaiti exports and limited to humanitarian aid products the items that U.N. member nations could export to either country. Saddam Hussein responded on August 12 by proposing that all cases of occupation, including Israeli occupation of Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese territories, be resolved simultaneously; this offer was rejected by the United Nations. Later that month, Iraq again offered to leave Kuwait, this time in exchange for concessions on oil fields bordering Kuwait and access to Kuwaiti-controlled shipping lanes; the United States again rejected this offer, reiterating that it would not negotiate with Saddam Hussein as long as Iraq occupied Kuwait. The United Nations followed the United States’ lead, and on November 11, the Security Council passed Resolution 678, which demanded that Iraq completely withdraw from Kuwait by January 15, 1991 and authorized member states to use all necessary means (including force) to ensure Iraq’s compliance. According to Geoffrey Leslie Simons, the United States used the threat of economic retaliation to induce members of the Security Council to support the resolution. Despite this pressure, the People’s Republic of China abstained and both Cuba and Yemen voted against the resolution.3

Between August 1990 and January 15, 1991, the United States undertook a massive mobilization and deployment of armed forces to the Gulf region, an operation known as “Desert Shield.” Though joined by thirty-three other countries, the United States was identified as the primary partner, eventually committing nearly three-quarters of the coalition’s troops. Moreover, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia had specifically requested U.S. military aid to defend the kingdom, though only after then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney promised the king that American troops and materiel would be removed once the crisis had abated.4 When Iraqi forces failed to meet the United Nations Security Council’s January 15th deadline for withdrawing from Kuwait, the coalition began bombarding Iraq in an operation now codenamed Operation Desert Storm. Iraq responded by counterattacking with Soviet-made SCUD missiles aimed at Israel. The goal was to split the coalition by provoking the Israelis into counterattacking Iraq; Saddam Hussein hoped that the coalition’s Arab members would refuse to

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4 It is worth noting that America’s continuing military presence in Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War was one of Osama Bin Laden’s reasons for plotting the September 11th terrorist attacks against the United States.
fight with the Israelis against another Arab nation. Due to American pressure, the Israelis never counterattacked, neutralizing Saddam Hussein’s strategy.

Following the success of the coalition air campaign against Iraq, on February 24, 1991, the coalition launched Operation Desert Sabre, a ground offensive into Iraq. Approximately one hundred hours into the ground offensive, U.S. President George H.W. Bush declared a cease-fire, noting that Kuwait had been liberated. The coalition negotiated cease-fire terms that largely stripped Iraq of its military autonomy, though Iraqi forces were allowed to retain and use helicopters, ostensibly for transporting troops. Saddam Hussein later used these helicopters to suppress a Kurdish rebellion in Northern Iraq that was fueled, at least partially, by the Kurds' belief that they would receive American military support; this belief was fostered by CIA-produced broadcasts known as “The Voice of Free Iraq.” When American military support failed to materialize, Saddam Hussein brutally crushed the uprising, fostering a great deal of anti-American sentiment among Kurds and Iraqis alike. In fact, by March 10 (approximately two weeks after declaring the ceasefire), the United States began redeploying its military out of the Gulf region.

Interregnum
Following the Gulf War, the United Nations Security Council imposed economic sanctions on Iraq; these sanctions, largely the result of American pressure, heavily damaged Iraq’s economy by restricting the country’s imports and exports. The Bush administration fully supported these measures and was, in many ways, the driving force behind them. Due to the popularity of the Gulf War in America, most people expected President George H. W. Bush to be easily reelected. Unfortunately for Bush, a downturn in the economy and waning support among conservatives eroded his chances of reelection, and Bush lost the 1992 presidential election to Bill Clinton, 38 percent to 43 percent, respectively. Moreover, Clinton ran on a platform that revolved around domestic issues, many of which were economic. In practice, Clinton continued many of Bush’s foreign policies, particularly with regard to Iraq.

Clinton’s presidency coincided with three interrelated trends that were to decisively shape future events. The first was the end of the Cold War. The Cold War had shaped American identity and politics for nearly half a century. Many scholars, pundits, and politicians believed that “politics stopped at the water’s edge” during the Cold War, and while that is a gross over-simplification, it is true to say that the Cold War bound Americans together in a way that was no longer true after the Soviet Union collapsed. One result was the so-called “Culture Wars” of the 1990s. A second related development was the reassertion of American Exceptionalism, or the idea that America was exempted from the rules of history. The most infamous example of this idea is Francis Fukuyama’s 1992 book, The End of History and the Last Man, which argues that history is driven by dialectics, or battles between syntheses and antitheses, and that when the battle between antitheses and syntheses has produced the perfect synthesis, history
will end.\(^5\) According to Fukuyama, the Cold War was history’s last battle, and the United States now occupied a unique position: the soul superpower in a unipolar world; literally, the last man left standing. Fukayama’s ideas, now largely dismissed, reflected a powerful current in post-Cold War American culture, namely that America has vanquished the Soviet Union due to the inherent superiority of the “American Way.”

Due to America’s “victory” in the Cold War, to a large extent, Americans’ attention during the 1990s shifted toward domestic issues: first the economy and then, during the economic boom times of the mid- to late-nineties, to the so-called “Culture Wars.” The topic of the Culture Wars is broad and complex; in general, it can be understood as a series of political battles over “hot-button” political issues like abortion, homosexuality, censorship, religion, sexuality, and education.\(^6\) Many historians view the Congressional investigation and subsequent impeachment of President Bill Clinton (1994-1998) as the greatest example of the Culture Wars at work. As political scientist Steven Schier has argued, “…the cultural cleavages underlying political conflict actually widened during the Clinton years.”\(^7\) These wars debilitated Clinton’s range of action and forced his hand with regard to two crucial decisions: his decision in October 1998 to sign the Iraq Liberation Act, which specifically committed the United States to seek regime change in Iraq, and his decision in December of that year to launch bombing raids against Iraq in the hope of “degrading” the country’s ability to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Taken together, these actions provided some of the justification for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

**Neo-Conservativism and the Project for a New American Century**

The enthusiasm for regime change and military action against Iraq led to the emergence of an ideology known as neo-, or new, conservatism. Neo-conservativism is an incredibly broad term for a very complex set of ideas, and not everyone agrees on what or who is a “neo-conservative.” Irving Kristol, the so-called “godfather” of neo-conservativism, describe the word as signifying “…the erosion of liberal faith among a relatively small but talented and articulate group

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\(^5\) For more information on Fukayama and his work, please see this Wikipedia entry on him and his personal website. You can read an interesting criticism of this work via this Wikipedia page.


of scholars and intellectuals, and the movement of this group (which gradually gained new recruits) toward a more conservative point of view." In his book *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectual and Foreign Policy, 1945-1994*, John Ehrman notes that “Neo-conservatives are a diverse group… [but all share a] common identity as activist intellectuals, as well as deep anti-Communist commitment.” Certainly, the stereotypical first generation neoconservative was a former Democrat who bolted to the Republican Party during the late 1960s and early 1970s in reaction to the perception that the Democratic Party had gone “soft” on Communism because prominent Democrats began calling for a withdrawal from Vietnam (this, incidentally, is the root of the Culture Wars, which were described above). In addition, many first generation neoconservatives perceived *Great Society* programs as disproportionately benefiting minorities (particularly African-Americans) at the expense of whites. Lastly, many of the first generation neoconservatives—Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Midge Dector, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Glazer—were Jewish, a fact that some scholars believe explains neo-conservatism’s aggressive advocacy of Israel’s interests.

While the intellectual development of neo-conservatism is beyond the scope of this course, it is important to note that many prominent neoconservatives banded together in 1997 and formed the *Project for The New American Century* (PNAC). This organization’s ideas, which were announced in a press release dated June 3, 1997 and titled *Statement of Principles*, called for the U.S. to increase defense spending, challenge regimes “hostile to our interests and values,” promote the “cause of political and economic freedom abroad,” and recognize America’s “unique role” to extend an international order “friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles.” This statement was signed by many future architects of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, including Elliott Abrams, Dick Cheney, Zalmay Khalilzad, I. Lewis Libby, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz. On January 16, 1998, the PNAC posted to its website an open letter to President Bill Clinton, urging the president to attack Iraq over Saddam Hussein’s perceived unwillingness to cooperate with U.N. weapons inspectors. This letter asserted that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and was a threat to the United States.

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The PNAC fully supported, and pressured members of Congress to vote for, the so-called *Iraq Liberation Act*, a piece of legislation declaring the U.S. intention to support regime change in Iraq and allocating nearly 100 million dollars to support forces opposed to Saddam Hussein; according to political scientist Peter H. Merkl, the PNAC was the “driving force” behind the legislation. The House of Representatives passed the bill 360-38, and the Senate vote was unanimous. On October 31, 1998, President Bill Clinton signed the bill into law. It is very important to understand the timing of this action: President Clinton was officially impeached by the House of Representatives on December 19, less than two months after signing the bill into law. In other words, the president was on the cusp of being only the second president in U.S. history to be impeached at the same time and was therefore in no position to veto a bill that had overwhelmingly passed both houses of Congress and would therefore almost certainly be passed again over his veto. This law would later be cited as a justification by the Bush administration for invading Iraq in 2003.

An outgrowth of the Iraq Liberation Act was President Clinton’s decision to order *bombing strikes* against Iraq, which took place between the sixteenth and the nineteenth of December, exactly the same moment the President was being impeached by the House of Representatives. Some at the time argued that the president’s actions were calculated, at least in part, to divert attention from his political difficulties and boost his popularity by recasting him as a “war president.” For instance, journalist Christopher Hitchens (who later became one of the most outspoken defenders of the 2003 invasion of Iraq) argued in his book *No One Left to Lie To* that: “Not once but three times [that year], Bill Clinton ordered the use of cruise missiles against remote and unpopular countries. On each occasion, the dispatch of missiles coincided with bad moments in the calendar of his long and unsuccessful struggle to avoid impeachment.” President Clinton denied that this was a “Wag the Dog” moment (a reference to a movie released the year before that depicted a fictional president starting a war to avoid the repercussions of a sex scandal), but this did nothing to change the general perception that the bombing attack was at least partially motivated by political considerations.

*Changing of the Guard*

After the bitterly contested *2000 election*, Republican *George W. Bush* was declared the victor and replaced Bill Clinton as president of the United

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States in January, 2001. The son of former president George H.W. Bush (now often called “Bush ‘41,” a reference to the fact that he was the forty-first president), President Bush assembled a cabinet that included many former members of his father’s administration; this included vice-president Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Vice-Presidential Chief of Staff I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, U.S. Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill, Deputy National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Chairman of the Defense Policy Advisory Committee Richard Perle, U.S. Deputy Director of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense Dov Zakheim, and U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick. Collectively, this group comprised “The Vulcans,” a group of foreign policy specialists who advised President Bush during the 2000 campaign and planned for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. According to journalist James Mann, who wrote the definitive analysis of this group in his book *Rise of the Vulcans*, the Vulcans represented neoconservative ideas in action, especially with regard to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.14

Exactly when the administration decided to invade Iraq is a matter of some controversy. Clearly, many members of the administration—Richard Armitage, John Bolton, Zalmay Khalilzad, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Zoellick—had advocated for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as early as 1998 in the previously mentioned PNAC open letter to President Bill Clinton. This lends some credence to former Secretary of the Treasury Paul O’Neill’s contention that planning for an invasion of Iraq began at the administration’s first National Security Council meeting on January 30, 2001.15 According to O’Neill and Powell, they were surprised by the interest in Iraq and the vehemence with which certain members of the administration (led by Vice-President Dick Cheney) promoted military action to depose Saddam Hussein. O’Neill later claimed that these preparations were merely a continuation of the Clinton-era policy regarding regime change in Iraq, downplaying the significance of the NSC meeting.16 Journalist Bob Woodward claims in his 2004 book *Plan of Attack* that President Bush began seriously planning for regime change in Iraq only after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Certainly, some prominent members of the administration came into office in 2001 believing that the United States should use military force to depose Saddam Hussein and, while it is unclear how early concrete plans for

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military action against Iraq actually existed, it is undeniable that, by September 11, 2001, the wheels of regime change were turning.

Following the September 11th attacks, President Bush endorsed a strategy of preemptive military action, unilateral action, and democratic regime change that came to be known as the Bush Doctrine. This doctrine was the rationale for the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and became philosophical justification for invading Iraq beginning in September 2002. Citing noncompliance with the terms of the 1991 ceasefire that had ended the Gulf War, as well as various crimes against humanity and the ongoing attempt to develop or obtain weapons of mass destruction, on October 16, under strong pressure from the Bush Administration, Congress passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002. The Bush Administration began building a coalition similar to the one President George H. W. Bush had built for the 1991 Gulf War; while some allies, like Great Britain, supported U.S. movement against Iraq, France and Germany were more skeptical and criticized the perceived haste with which the U.S. moved toward invading Iraq. As a compromise, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed resolution 1441 on November 8; this resolution asserted that Iraq was in materials breach of the disarmament terms of various Security Council resolutions passed in the aftermath of the Gulf War.

Though a majority of Americans supported taking military action against Iraq, the rest of the world was skeptical; on February 15, 2003, between 6.5 and 10 million people took part in the largest anti-war demonstration in human history. Earlier that same month, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations General Assembly and argued that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and implied that Saddam Hussein’s government had connections to al-Qaeda. Powell later admitted that his testimony contained numerous false assertions based on faulty, unreliable, and falsified testimony. At the time, however, administration officials continued making the assertion that there was some connection between al-Qaeda (a religiously motivated organization) and Saddam’s regime in Iraq (an avowedly secular government). On March 6, 2003, President Bush asserted that Saddam Hussein had still not disarmed and that Iraq’s alleged failure to do so would trigger an invasion. Eleven days later, President Bush offered Saddam Hussein and his two sons, Uday and Qusay, forty-eight hours to surrender and leave Iraq, though U.S. bombing began before that deadline had passed.

**Military Action**

Actual military action against Iraq began at approximately 5:30 A.M. on March 19, 2003 with a bombing raid on Dora Farms. The following day, shortly after President Bush’s forty-eight hour deadline elapsed, the United States commenced air strikes against Baghdad and U.S. ground forces crossed the border into Iraq. The Iraqi military and government collapsed after approximately three weeks, and on April 9, 2003, U.S. and coalition forces occupied Baghdad. During the approximate three-week duration of military campaigning, the U.S.
and coalition forces engaged in a number of well-known battles, including the Battle of Nasiriyah and the Battle of Najaf. On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush landed a Lockheed S-3 Viking on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. Standing in front of a banner that read “Mission Accomplished,” the president declared an end to major combat activities.

**Controversies**

The decision to invade Iraq remains controversial despite initially high American approval of the decision. This is partly due to the effort’s failure to find significant quantities of weapons of mass destruction or an active manufacturing program in Iraq; this was one of the main justifications for the war. The failure to find weapons of mass destruction was a major embarrassment for the Bush administration, and led to increasingly vehement charges that the administration had lied or presented unverified evidence. One source of such questionable intelligence, codenamed “Curveball,” turned out to have been completely discredited by other intelligence agencies prior to the invasion. Eventually, both Secretary of State Powell and President Bush conceded that Iraq had no WMD. Furthermore, the president admitted that there was no link between Saddam Hussein’s government and al-Qaeda. Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet eventually took responsibility for these intelligence lapses and resigned. Moreover, the Bush administration engaged in an aggressive campaign to discredit critics who questioned the existence of WMD or the alleged connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda. The most blatant example is the so-called “Plamegate” affair, in which administration officials selectively leaked classified information to discredit an administration critic, former ambassador Joseph C. Wilson.