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Iraq: One Year Later

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One year after the onset of the war in Iraq, I think it is safe to say that the United States is better off than it was before the war. Moreover, our allies are better off and the Iraqi people are certainly better off.

For the United States, the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime pays considerable strategic dividends that too often are glossed over or given short shrift by critics of the Bush Administration. True, these strategic gains have come at a considerable cost in blood and treasure: over 550 Americans killed and economic costs of about \$120 billion.

There are other troubling downsides to the war, which I will examine later, but on balance the war has enhanced U.S. national security interests in the volatile Middle East and has been a net plus in the war against international terrorism.

No Longer a Menace

First and foremost, Iraq has been transformed from a bitter foe into a potential ally. Saddam is no longer a menace to the United States or its allies. It is important to remember that he was a brutal dictator who invaded three of his neighbors, fired SCUD missiles at four of his neighbors, and used chemical weapons against Iran and even against his own people. It is worth noting that yesterday was the anniversary of the Iraqi chemical attack on the Kurdish village of Halabja, an atrocity that left at least 5,000 civilians dead.

Saddam was defeated militarily in the 1991 Gulf War, but he remained a dangerous foe. He had a finely honed sense of vengeance, as evidenced by the

Talking Points

- The U.S.-led war in Iraq has enhanced U.S. national security interests in the volatile Middle East and has been a net plus in the war against international terrorism.
- Other rogue regimes have gotten the message. Libya was induced to disarm because of the Iraq war. Iran decided to open up to more inspections of its nuclear program. Syria has suddenly found an interest in the Arab-Israeli peace process.
- Post-war Iraq is doing relatively well. Progress has been fast, compared to the reconstruction efforts in post-war Germany and Japan. The security situation is slowly improving, and the oil industry is swiftly recovering.
- Free Iraqis increasingly are joining the fight against terrorism.

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videos of the torture of political prisoners that he reportedly enjoyed watching. This is a man, after all, who tried to assassinate former President George H. W. Bush in Kuwait in April 1993, just two years after the 1991 Gulf War.

Saddam also had a long record of supporting terrorism. His regime provided funds, sanctuary, or other support for a wide variety of terrorist groups, including the PLO, HAMAS, Palestine Islamic Jihad, the Abu Nidal Group, the Palestine Liberation Front, and the Arab Liberation Front. There is also mounting evidence of numerous contacts between Iraqi intelligence officials and al-Qaeda.

After 9/11, no prudent American President could have ignored the continuing threat posed by Saddam's clandestine programs to attain weapons of mass destruction and the regime's collusion with terrorism. There was a considerable risk that Saddam's regime would at some point pass the ultimate terrorist weapons to al-Qaeda or other terrorists. As President George W. Bush said in his 2003 State of the Union Address:

Some have said we must not act until the threat is imminent. Since when have terrorists and tyrants announced their intentions, politely putting us on notice before they strike? If this threat is permitted to fully and suddenly emerge, all actions, all words, and all recriminations would come too late. Trusting in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein is not a strategy, and it is not an option.

Banned Weapons

True, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) have not yet been found, but that does not necessarily mean they are not there. The United States has found banned missiles and weapons programs with surge production capabilities for the rapid creation of chemical and biological weapons.

Moreover, WMD could still be concealed. Iraq is as big as California, and the regime had considerable experience in hiding illegal materials from U.N. inspectors. Weapons of mass destruction were Saddam's crown jewels and were entrusted to his most loyal henchmen, such as the Special Republi-

can Guard and other elite units who would be least likely to give them up.

Some of the weapons in question could be hidden in a relatively small space. For example, biological weapons, capable of killing everyone in Washington, D.C., could easily fit into this room. In addition, WMD could have been moved out of country. In fact, in the run-up to the war, and during the war itself, hundreds of trucks were observed crossing the Syrian border. Some argue that Saddam would not have exported his crown jewels, but in 1991 there was a precedent. Prior to the 1991 Gulf War, Baghdad dispatched the most sophisticated warplanes in its air force to Iran to escape destruction, even though Iran was a bitter enemy that it had fought in a bloody eight-year war only a short time before.

What became of Iraq's banned weapons remains a mystery. Kenneth Pollock probably has come up with the most coherent theory explaining what happened to them. He argues that Saddam down-scaled his banned weapons programs to better hide them while retaining a "just in time" manufacturing capability. Others have speculated that Iraqi scientists misled Saddam by building scientific Potemkin villages to extract scarce funds.

However, it is hard to believe that scientists would lie to Saddam and risk torture and death, not only for themselves, but also for their extended families. But if this assessment is accurate and Saddam's weapons programs were that much out of control, they still posed a danger of leakage—similar to the Pakistani smuggling network that sold nuclear technology to Libya and North Korea. David Kay, who led the Iraq Survey Group that is searching for Saddam's weapons, provided this sobering view in January:

I think...we will paint a picture of Iraq that was far more dangerous than even we thought it was before the war. It was a system collapsing. It was a country that had the capability in weapons of mass destruction areas and, in which terrorists, like ants to honey, were going after it.

There is one troubling problem with the theory that Saddam destroyed his weapons of mass destruction: If he did abandon this endeavor, why

didn't he prove it to the inspectors? That would have led to the lifting of economic sanctions, and he could have set about rebuilding his programs again, free of international scrutiny. It is hard to believe that Saddam walked away from more than \$100 billion in oil revenues if he was not hiding something.

Connecting the Dots

Some have leapt to the conclusion that the Administration distorted intelligence to make its case for war. This is a leap too far. Intelligence often is inherently subjective. It provides a perspective that sometimes looks more like a Rorschach test than a complete picture. The lesson of the intelligence failure of 9/11 was deemed by many critics to be that nobody connected the dots. Now some of these same critics are complaining about the ways that the dots were connected in Iraq.

The intelligence may have been incomplete or misleading, but it was not purposefully distorted. It was grounded on a common-sense reading of U.S. intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. As the President said:

...Heavy as they are, the costs of action must be weighed against the price of inaction. If Saddam defies the world and we fail to respond, we will face a far greater threat in the future. Saddam will strike again at his neighbors; he will make war on his own people. And mark my words he will develop weapons of mass destruction. He will deploy them, and he will use them.

These words were uttered by William Jefferson Clinton, not by George W. Bush, to explain why the U.S. launched air strikes against Saddam in 1998. But no one has accused President Clinton of distorting intelligence.

It is not just the Bush and Clinton Administrations that believed Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. The intelligence services of Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Israel, among many others, held similar opinions.

Regardless of what happened to Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, I think at least we can now say that the U.S. and its allies no longer have to worry about Saddam threatening us with them.

Positive Ripple Effects

Another gain from the war was the demonstration effect that it had on other rogue regimes. Libya was induced to disarm because of the Iraq war. In fact, Colonel Qadhafi told Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi that he did so after seeing what happened to Saddam's regime. Iran, also pushed by international pressure, decided to open up to more inspections of its nuclear program. Syria, now the world's only remaining Ba'athist regime, has suddenly found an interest in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The liberation of Iraq, and Iraqi efforts to build a working democracy there, have had positive ripple effects in the Middle East. Iraqis now have a fighting chance to build a stable democracy that could become a model for the Middle East. The Iraqi example already has encouraged democratic reformers throughout the region. There has been a push for long-overdue reforms, even in Saudi Arabia.

The liberation of Iraq also has liberated the U.S. and its allies from the need to contain Saddam's vengeful regime. This has freed the United States from an open-ended deployment of ground, naval, and air forces that cost the United States an estimated \$19 billion per year. Moreover, the American troops in Saudi Arabia that conducted this containment effort became a lightning rod for terrorism that partly contributed to the rise of al-Qaeda.

Another often overlooked aspect of the war is its moral dimension. Saddam Hussein is no longer killing Iraqis. After the war, mass graves were found with an estimated 300,000 bodies in them. This humanitarian calamity greatly exceeded the death toll in Kosovo, where the Clinton Administration intervened in 1999—and, by the way, without the support of a U.N. Security Council resolution.

Progress in Reconstruction

Iraqis are much better off and they know it. An Oxford/ABC poll released earlier this week indicated that 56 percent of Iraqis believe they are better off now than they were one year ago and that 71 percent believe they will be better off one year from now.

Another important gain from the war has been an improvement in global energy security. Saddam's

regime was at the center of several oil crises: the 1973 Arab oil embargo; the 1980 invasion of Iran, which disrupted oil production in Iran's Khuzestan province; the 1987 "Oil Tanker War," which disrupted oil exports after Iran tried to interdict Kuwaiti oil exports; and Saddam's pre-war threats to use oil as an economic weapon.

With the help of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the Iraqi oil industry is swiftly recovering. At present, Iraq is producing approximately 2.5 million barrels per day, compared to the pre-war level of 2.8 million. If Saddam had remained in power, Iraqi oil production would have been suppressed for the indefinite future by sanctions and failure to maintain the oil fields.

Now Iraq is free to expand production and is likely to attract considerable foreign investment for doing so. This will provide downward pressure on long-term oil prices that will benefit both the American economy and the economies of all other oil-importing countries.

Post-war Iraq is doing relatively well. Progress has been fast, compared to the reconstruction efforts in post-war Germany and Japan. The security situation is slowly improving, although problems remain, particularly in the Sunni heartland. Coalition casualties have fallen from 158 in November–December 2003 to 75 in January–February of this year. But casualties are not an appropriate measurement of progress. The coalition will sustain casualties until troops finally withdraw, even in success.

Finally, Iraq has switched sides in the war on terrorism. This is important because the United States cannot win the war on terrorism unless it eliminates or at least greatly reduces state support for terrorism. When it comes to terrorism, "It's the regimes, stupid"—to paraphrase the mantra of the 1992 Clinton election campaign. Al-Qaeda, which often is held up as the premier example of "stateless terrorism," actually was helped tremendously by the support of rogue states. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the radical Islamic regime in Sudan provided crucial help that allowed al-Qaeda to develop into the global threat that it is today.

Now Osama bin Laden has lost at least a potential ally, if not an actual ally, in Saddam's regime. And free Iraqis increasingly are joining the fight against terrorism. Osama bin Laden's associates in Iraq

clearly are worried about the expansion of the Iraqi security forces. A recent message intercepted from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian terrorist affiliated with al-Qaeda who is operating in Iraq, lamented that:

Our enemy is growing stronger day after day and its intelligence information increases. By God, this is suffocation.

The war to liberate Iraq, coming after the successful war to liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban, has disabused terrorists of the notion that the United States is a paper tiger. This perception unfortunately was created by American withdrawals due to terrorist attacks from peacekeeping operations in Lebanon and Somalia that did not involve vital American national interests. Like Colonel Qadhafi, Zarqawi has been impressed by the Bush Administration's firm resolution in Iraq.

Finishing the Job from 1991

The Iraq war also has some notable drawbacks, aside from the continued losses of American troops. The failure to find weapons of mass destruction admittedly has hurt U.S. credibility and the Bush Administration's preemptive doctrine, but this problem is frequently overstated since the U.S. has always retained the right of self-defense under international law. I would argue that the Iraq war was not a preemptive war, but a continuation of the 1991 Gulf War—an unfinished war that failed to defang Saddam.

Another downside of the war is the possibility that Iraq could become another Afghanistan. Although Osama bin Laden has been deprived of a possible ally, he has been given a new issue to exploit: the occupation of Iraq. Many worry that Iraq could become a fertile seedbed for the incubation of terrorists. The U.S. must counteract this by turning responsibility over to Iraqis as soon as they prove to be capable.

Another major worry is that Syria and Iran are in positions to support terrorism against the U.S. in Iraq as they once did in Lebanon during the 1980s, working through the Hezbollah terrorist group. The coalition must remain vigilant and take strong measures to deter Syrian and Iranian-backed subversion.

Some contend that Iraq was a detour in the war on terrorism and a distraction from the hunt for

Osama bin Laden. This criticism is greatly overstated. The war in Iraq was a different type of struggle than the war against al-Qaeda. It required different kinds of resources. Strategically, the U.S. is certainly capable of engaging in multiple operations on a global level. It can “walk and chew gum at the same time.”

True, some intelligence assets were diverted from the search for bin Laden to Iraq. But bin Laden had already gone to ground, hunkering down on the Afghan–Pakistan border 18 months before the Iraq war. And there is no evidence that bin Laden would have been caught if there had been no war in Iraq.

In conclusion, it is often said that war is evil. In the case of Iraq, it was a lesser evil. War was forced on the U.S. by a brutal dictator who put himself in a technical state of war with America by violating the cease-fire that ended the 1991 war.

I think that future historians will conclude that not only is the United States better off after the war in Iraq, but our allies are better off, particularly those in close proximity to Iraq, and the Iraqi people are better off.

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