

# Background

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## Dispelling Myths About Iraq

*James Phillips*

The bruising debate over U.S. Iraq policy often seems to stray far from the reality on the ground inside Iraq. Although Iraq's progress on the political, security, and economic tracks has been uneven and many difficult problems remain, there is considerable evidence indicating that there has been gradual progress across many fronts. This paper seeks to contribute to the public debate over Iraq by refuting some of the major myths that have distorted the public's understanding of U.S. policy regarding Iraq.

**MYTH: The U.S. is making no progress in defeating the insurgency in Iraq.**

**QUOTE:** "I'm absolutely convinced that we're making no progress at all, and I've been complaining for two years that there's an overly optimistic—an illusionary process going on here." — Representative John Murtha (D-PA), "Meet the Press," NBC, November 20, 2005.

**REALITY:** Over the past 18 months, the U.S.-led coalition and the Iraqi government have made substantial progress in eliminating insurgent strongholds in Fallujah, Mosul, Najaf, Samara, and Tal Afar and in many smaller towns in western Anbar province along the Syrian border. Most of Iraq is secure from major guerrilla attacks, particularly the predominantly Shiite south and the predominantly Kurdish north, which actively support the Iraqi government. Most insurgent attacks are mounted in the heavily Sunni Arab central and western portions of Iraq, although small numbers of insurgents continue to launch terrorist attacks, including suicide bombings at soft targets, throughout the country. Outside of Iraq's Sunni

### Talking Points

- Iraq has made remarkably rapid progress in establishing the foundations of a democratic political system. Pessimistic critics of U.S. policy have been repeatedly wrong in predicting that Iraqis would not be ready for the June 2004 transfer of sovereignty, the January 2005 transitional government elections, the writing and approval of a constitution by October 2005, and the December 15 elections that will create a government that will lead Iraq for the next four years.
- Those who argue that the U.S. fights "alone" in Iraq ignore the contributions of the Iraqis themselves, who have committed 212,000 soldiers and police to fighting the insurgency and suffer the largest number of casualties.
- Reconstruction and economic progress have come relatively quickly, compared to the reconstruction efforts in postwar Germany and Japan, and this is despite continued insurgent attacks on Iraq's infrastructure and economic targets.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/iraq/bg1904.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/iraq/bg1904.cfm)

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heartland, which benefited the most from Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime, the insurgents lack popular support. Their terrorist strategy has failed to intimidate Iraqi Shiites, Kurds, Turcomans, and Assyrians, who altogether comprise more than 80 percent of Iraq's population.

The Iraqi army and police forces are growing larger, better trained, and more effective. The Iraqi army and security forces have grown from just one operational battalion in July 2004 to more than 120 today. Over 200,000 trained and equipped Iraqis are now playing an increasingly active role in rooting out insurgents. While only one battalion is rated at the U.S. Army category "Level One," about 40 are at "Level Two." Level Two battalions are capable of fighting "with some support"—usually just logistics and air/artillery support—from American forces. These units patrol their own areas of operations, relieving U.S. troops to perform other duties. The cities of Najaf and Mosul are now exclusively patrolled by Iraqi security forces, as are large portions of Baghdad.

There are now six police academies in Iraq and one in Jordan, training 3,500 Iraqi police every 10 weeks. Today the vast majority of Iraqi police and army recruits are trained by Iraqis, not Americans—the result of systematic efforts to "train the trainers." Since the January 30, 2005, elections, no Iraqi police stations have been abandoned under attack, as used to happen frequently, because police have fiercely resisted attacks even when outnumbered and outgunned, confident that help would come from 20 provincial SWAT teams and coalition forces.

Unlike during several military offensives in 2004, Iraqi security forces now are strong enough to garrison and control the cleared areas, making the Bush Administration's recent adoption of a "clear, hold, and build" security strategy possible. Iraqi forces were able to take a leading role in the successful September 2005 offensive at Tal Afar, which involved 11 Iraqi and five coalition battalions.

The increasing effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces has inspired optimism among the Iraqi people. This is reflected in the growing number of intelligence tips from Iraqi civilians. In March 2005,

Iraqi and coalition forces received 483 intelligence tips from Iraqi citizens. This figure rose to 3,300 in August and more than 4,700 in September. According to a poll from early November, 71 percent of respondents believed that the Iraqi security forces are winning the war against the insurgents, while only 9 percent believed they are losing. The data were gathered from Iraqi callers who were passing intelligence tips to the Iraqi National Tips Line, which was created to provide Iraqis with a safe and anonymous means of passing on information about insurgent activity to their own government.

**MYTH: The U.S. is making little or no political progress in Iraq.**

**QUOTE:** "It is surely a joke of history that even as the White House sells this weekend's constitutional referendum as yet another 'victory' for democracy in Iraq, we still don't know the whole story of how our own democracy was hijacked on the way to war." — Frank Rich, "It's Bush–Cheney, not Rove–Libby," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2005.

**REALITY:** Iraq has made remarkably rapid progress in establishing the foundations of a democratic political system after more than three decades of dictatorship. Pessimistic critics of U.S. policy have been repeatedly wrong in predicting that Iraqis would not be ready for the June 2004 transfer of sovereignty, the January 2005 transitional government elections, the writing and approval of a constitution by October 2005, and the December 15 elections that will create a government that will lead Iraq for the next four years.

The insurgents' inability to block the January elections, combined with a simmering resentment of their indiscriminate violence, has led many Sunni Arabs to reconsider their boycott of the political process. Even the Association of Muslim Scholars, an anti-American group, has called for Sunni Arabs to join the Iraqi security services. The insurgents' political base is weakening as it becomes clear that they are opposed not just to the American presence, but also to the elected government.

Despite terrorist attacks and threats of intimidation, 8.5 million Iraqis voted in the January elections; almost 10 million voted in the October referendum on the new constitution; and turnout

for the December 15 elections is expected to be even greater. Many Sunni Arabs realize they erred in boycotting the January elections and are likely to vote in far larger numbers on December 15. More than 300 parties and coalitions have registered for the elections. Iraq's political process is messy and slow, as in other newly democratic political systems, but a new class of political leadership is emerging that over time can build a national consensus and drain away support for the insurgency, which is dominated by Islamic radicals and diehard adherents of Saddam's hated regime.

Ironically, while Americans appear to be growing more pessimistic about Iraq's future, Iraqis are growing more optimistic. According to a poll conducted by Iraqis affiliated with the country's universities, two-thirds of Iraqis believe they are better off now than they were under Saddam's dictatorship, and 82 percent are confident that they will be better off a year from now than they are today. An October survey conducted by the International Republican Institute found that 47 percent of Iraqis believed that their country is headed in the right direction, while 37 percent believed that it was going in the wrong direction. And 56 percent believed the situation would get better in six months, while only 16 percent believed the situation would get worse.

**MYTH: The Bush Administration exaggerated the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to justify the war.**

**QUOTE:** "In his march to war, President Bush exaggerated the threat to the American people." — Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), quoted in *U.S. Fed News*, November 10, 2005.

**REALITY:** The Bush Administration acted on the basis of intelligence conclusions that were widely shared by previous Administrations and foreign governments. President Bush was not the first American President to emphasize the long-term threat posed by Iraq. President Bill Clinton justified Operation Desert Fox, a three-day U.S. air offensive against Iraq, by invoking the threat posed by Iraqi WMD on December 16, 1998:

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.

Clinton's National Security Council adviser Sandy Berger warned of Saddam's threat in 1998, "He will use those weapons of mass destruction again, as he has ten times since 1983." Former Vice President Al Gore said in 2002, "We know that [Saddam] has stored secret supplies of biological and chemical weapons throughout his country." CIA Director George Tenet, a holdover from the Clinton Administration, declared that the presence of Iraqi WMD was a "slam dunk."<sup>1</sup>

The intelligence services of Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Israel, among many others, held the same opinion. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin told the U.N. Security Council on February 5, 2003:

Right now, our attention has to be focused as a priority on the biological and chemical domains. It is there that our presumptions about Iraq are the most significant. Regarding the chemical domain, we have evidence of its capacity to produce VX and Yperite. In the biological domain, the evidence suggests the possible possession of significant stocks of anthrax and botulism toxin, and possibly a production capability.

The German Ambassador to the United States, Wolfgang Ischinger, said on NBC's "Today" on February 26, 2003, "I think all of our governments believe that Iraq has produced weapons of mass destruction and that we have to assume that they still have—that they continue to have weapons of mass destruction."

The Bush Administration may have been wrong about Iraqi WMD, but so were many other govern-

1. For more on the political campaign to paint intelligence mistakes as deliberate lies, see Norman Podhoretz, "Who Is Lying About Iraq?" *Commentary*, December 2005.

ments, few of which have been accused of lying. Moreover, three independent commissions have found that there is no evidence that the Bush Administration exaggerated the intelligence about Iraqi WMD.

In July 2004, the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee issued a report with the following conclusions:

Conclusion 83. The Committee did not find any evidence that Administration officials attempted to coerce, influence or pressure analysts to change their judgments related to Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capabilities....

Conclusion 84. The Committee found no evidence that the Vice President's visits to the Central Intelligence Agency were attempts to pressure analysts, were perceived as intended to pressure analysts by those who participated in the briefings on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs, or did pressure analysts to change their assessments.<sup>2</sup>

In March 2005, the bipartisan Robb–Silverman commission reached the same conclusion:

The Commission found no evidence of political pressure to influence the Intelligence Community's pre-war assessments of Iraq's weapons programs. As we discuss in detail in the body of our report, analysts universally asserted that in no instance did political pressure cause them to skew or alter any of their analytical judgments. We conclude that it was the paucity of intelligence and poor analytical tradecraft, rather than political pressure, that produced the inaccurate pre-war intelligence assessments.<sup>3</sup>

The July 2004 Butler Report, issued by a special panel set up by the British Parliament, found that the famous "16 words" in President Bush's January

28, 2003, State of the Union address were based on fact, contrary to the claims of former ambassador Joseph Wilson, who has alleged that Bush's assertion was a lie. Bush said, "The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." The Butler Report called Bush's 16 words "well founded." The report also made clear that some forged Italian documents, exposed as fakes after Bush spoke, were not the basis for the British intelligence that Bush cited or the CIA's conclusion that Iraq was seeking to obtain uranium.

**MYTH: The war in Iraq has set back the war on terrorism.**

**QUOTE:** "It's the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time." — Senator John Kerry (D–MA), September 6, 2004.

**REALITY:** Some critics contend that Iraq is a detour in the war on terrorism and a distraction from the hunt for Osama bin Laden, but this criticism is greatly overstated. The war in Iraq was a different type of struggle from 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.

True, some intelligence assets were diverted from the search for bin Laden to Iraq, but bin Laden had already gone underground, 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.

Moreover, the U.S. has made substantial progress in the war against al-Qaeda. More than three-quarters of al-Qaeda's known leaders have been detained or killed. These include:

- Mohammed Atef, al-Qaeda's senior field commander, killed in a bombing raid in Afghanistan;
- Abu Zubaida, Osama bin Laden's field commander after the killing of Atef, captured in Pakistan;

2. *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, July 7, 2004, pp. 284–285.

3. Charles S. Robb and Laurence H. Silberman, "The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction," March 31, 2005, p. 50.

- Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, mastermind of the September 11 attacks, captured in Pakistan;
- Ramzi Binalshibh, a coordinator of the September 11 attacks, captured in Pakistan;
- Hambali, top strategist for al-Qaeda's associate group Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia, captured in Thailand;
- Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, al-Qaeda's chief of operations in the Persian Gulf, captured in the United Arab Emirates;
- Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, a suspect in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, captured in Pakistan;
- Abu Issa al-Hindi, an operations planner, captured in Britain; and
- Abu Faraj al-Libbi, another major field commander, captured in Pakistan.

In addition to the leaders, more than 4,000 suspected al-Qaeda members have been arrested worldwide since September 11, 2001. Al-Qaeda cells have been uncovered, dismantled, and disrupted in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. More than \$140 million of its assets have been blocked in over 1,400 bank accounts worldwide.

One often overlooked benefit of the war is that Iraq is no longer a state sponsor of 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. Al-Qaeda, often held up as the premier example of "stateless terrorism," actually was helped tremendously by the support of states. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the radical Islamic regime in Sudan provided the sanctuary and cooperation that allowed al-Qaeda to develop into the global threat that it is today.

Now Osama bin Laden has lost a potential ally, if not an actual ally, in Saddam's regime, which had a long and bloody history of supporting terrorists and many reported contacts with al-Qaeda. Moreover, 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 2004 message from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who later was named al-Qaeda's

leader in Iraq, lamented Iraq's progress: "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 was created by American withdrawals, following terrorist attacks, from peacekeeping operations in Lebanon and Somalia that did not involve vital American national interests.

Another gain from the war is the effect that it has had on other rogue regimes. Libya was induced to disarm because of the Iraq war. In fact, Libyan leader Muammar 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 its nuclear program to more inspections. Syria, caught red-handed in the assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, now is isolated and on the defensive.

While it is true that some Islamic extremists are going to Iraq to join the fighting, many of them would have ventured elsewhere to slaughter civilians had the Iraq war never occurred. As well, the indiscriminate murder of innocent Iraqis by Zarqawi's terrorists has undermined al-Qaeda's appeal throughout the Muslim world. Zarqawi's November 9, 2005, bombing of three hotels in Jordan outraged Jordanians and other Muslims, even those who previously had been sympathetic to al-Qaeda. While the war in Iraq has helped al-Qaeda's recruitment efforts, on balance it has helped the war on terrorism by preventing Osama bin Laden and other terrorists from receiving any future support from Saddam's regime.

Now that Iraq has become, by al-Qaeda's own reckoning, a crucial front in the global war against terrorism, the United States and its allies cannot allow Zarqawi's thugs to establish a permanent base in Iraq. From there, al-Qaeda would be in a better position to penetrate the heart of the Arab world, threaten moderate Arab regimes, and disrupt Persian Gulf oil exports than it enjoyed under the pro-

tection of Afghanistan's Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001. Finally, any "exit strategy" for withdrawal from Iraq that is perceived by Muslims as a victory for al-Qaeda would boost the group's ability to recruit new members far beyond the current rate.

**MYTH: The war in Iraq is another Vietnam.**

**QUOTE:** "Iraq is George Bush's Vietnam." — Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), April 5, 2004.

**REALITY:** Iraq is Iraq. Most Iraqis share American goals of building a pluralistic, democratic, and prosperous Iraq. Even many Sunni Arabs who boycotted the January elections due to terrorist intimidation now are participating in politics. The Iraqi insurgents do not have the military strength, popular support, political unity, ideological cohesiveness, major power support, charismatic leadership, or alternative political program that the Vietnamese communists possessed. Nor are the Iraqi insurgents likely to develop these advantages in the future. The insurgents are divided by ideology, religious affiliation, and factional rivalries into separate groups, including remnants of Saddam's Baathist regime, Sunni Islamic radicals, Shiite Islamic radicals, tribal forces, and foreign Islamic radicals such as Abu Musab Zarqawi's al-Qaeda faction.

Tensions appear to be growing between some of the insurgent groups—particularly animosity toward Zarqawi's group, which has killed hundreds of civilians in indiscriminate suicide bombings and provoked a backlash that other groups fear will undermine the insurgency. While many insurgent factions have been hurt by the improved flow of intelligence to government forces since the January elections, Zarqawi's group has suffered disproportionately heavy losses. More than 20 of his lieutenants have been captured or killed since the beginning of the year, and Zarqawi himself reportedly was almost captured twice. His predominantly non-Iraqi forces are so concerned about being betrayed by Iraqi informants that they reportedly confiscate cell phones in the areas that they control.

Unlike the insurgency in Vietnam, which had a relatively broad base of support, the Iraqi insurgents are actively supported by only a minority of

the Sunni Arab population, which makes up at most 20 percent of the Iraqi population. The Iraqi insurgents cannot defeat the Iraqi people, but can only play a spoiler role.

Vietnam veterans who have served in Iraq see little comparison between the two wars. A *USA Today* reporter who interviewed many Vietnam War veterans now serving in Iraq wrote, "They see a clearer mission than in Vietnam, a more supportive public back home and an Iraqi population that seems to be growing friendlier toward Americans."<sup>4</sup>

**MYTH: The U.S. has little allied support in the war in Iraq.**

**QUOTE:** "With the exception of British troops in Basra, we are essentially going it alone across the rest of Iraq." — Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), quoted in *U.S. Fed News*, October 25, 2005.

**REALITY:** Those who argue that the U.S. fights "alone" in Iraq ignore the contributions of the Iraqis themselves, who have committed 212,000 soldiers and police to fighting the insurgency and suffer the largest number of casualties. In addition, the U.S. has the strong cooperation of the 26 other nations that have deployed troops in Iraq. In addition to 155,000 Americans, there are 8,000 Britons, 3,200 South Koreans, 3,000 Italians, 1,400 Poles, 900 Ukrainians, 450 Australians, 400 Bulgarians, and smaller contingents from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Estonia, Georgia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mongolia, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, and Slovakia.

**MYTH: Iraqi women were better off under Saddam's regime than they are under the new constitution.**

**QUOTE:** "It looks like today—and this could change—as of today, it looks like women will be worse off in Iraq than they were when Saddam Hussein was president of Iraq." — Howard Dean, "Face the Nation," CBS, August 14, 2005.

**REALITY:** Iraq's new constitution mandates that women hold one-quarter of the seats in Iraq's par-

4. Steven Komorow, "Vietnam Vets in Iraq See 'Entirely Different War,'" *USA Today*, June 21 2005.

liament and protects them against gender discrimination, unlike Saddam's capricious legal system. In 1990, women held 11 percent of the seats in Saddam's rubber-stamp parliament. Today, they hold 31.6 percent of the seats, according to the 2005 United Nations *Human Development Report*.<sup>5</sup> Iraqi women now enjoy more political power than they did under Saddam's dictatorship, which was run exclusively by men. There were no high-ranking women at the top of Saddam's regime.

Saddam's 1980 invasion of Iraq and 1990 invasion of Kuwait resulted in the deaths of so many men that many women were brought into Iraq's labor force to replace them. But this economic advancement came at a terrible price in repression. Entire Iraqi families were jailed as collective punishment for alleged crimes against the state. Saddam's goons tortured, killed, and raped women to punish their husbands or male relatives for political opposition. Those who argue that Iraqi women were better off under Saddam ignore the terrible crimes against women that were carried out by his regime.

**MYTH: Iraq's economy is getting worse.**

**QUOTE:** "Basic services such as electricity have never been worse and the economy of Arab Iraq is in ruins." — Andrew Gilligan, *The Evening Standard* (London), February 14, 2005.

**REALITY:** Reconstruction and economic progress have come relatively quickly, compared to the reconstruction efforts in postwar Germany and Japan, and this is despite continued insurgent attacks on Iraq's infrastructure and economic targets. Unemployment remains high, estimated by the government at 28 percent, but U.S. policy did not create that unemployment.

Iraq's economy is beginning to thrive. Real GDP is expected to grow 3.7 percent in 2005 and 16 percent in 2006. Iraqi per-capita income has doubled

since 2003, according to the World Bank. Private investment, bolstered with capital remitted from family members abroad, has fueled rapid growth in the private sector. More than 30,000 new businesses have registered with the authorities since the war, and thousands of other businesses are believed to have been established without registering.

Iraq's oil production has not recovered as fast as many projected, due to sabotage of pipelines and other facilities and the greater-than-expected damage done to Iraq's oil infrastructure by many years of neglect, poor maintenance, and lack of investment under Saddam's regime. Oil production, which was approximately 2 million barrels per day in 2002, is approximately 1.9 million barrels per day today. But the slow recovery of oil production is partially offset by high world oil prices. Iraq is expected to earn about \$17 billion in revenues from oil exports this year.

Iraq's infrastructure, neglected by Saddam's regime for many years and damaged in three wars triggered by Saddam, has been strained to its capacity, but the situation is gradually improving. Since the war, U.S. efforts have added 1,400 megawatts of power to the Iraqi power grid, expanding access to 4.2 million Iraqis throughout the country. While some Baghdad residents had more electrical power under Saddam's regime—because it diverted power from other parts of Iraq—many Iraqis now have much greater access to electricity than they had before the war. While Iraqis outside of Baghdad only had three to six hours of access to electricity in 2002, today they average almost 14 hours a day.

—James Phillips is Research Fellow in Middle Eastern Studies in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

5. United Nations, *Human Development Report*, 2005, at <http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/countries.cfm?c=IRQ>.