

Hillary Clinton's Iraq War Albatross

George W. Bush's Iraq invasion may rank as the worst foreign policy disaster in U.S. history spreading chaos across the Mideast and now into Europe, yet polls show Democrats nationwide favor nominating Hillary Clinton, who voted for the war and backed it even after Bush's WMD claims were debunked, recalls Stephen Zunes.

By Stephen Zunes

Former Sen. and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is the only candidate for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination who supported the invasion of Iraq. That war not only resulted in 4,500 American soldiers being killed and thousands more permanently disabled, but also hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths, the destabilization of the region with the rise of the Islamic State and other extremists, and a dramatic increase in the federal deficit, resulting in major cutbacks to important social programs.

Moreover, the primary reasons Clinton gave for supporting President George W. Bush's request for authorizing that illegal and unnecessary war have long been proven false.

As a result, many Democratic voters are questioning, despite her years of foreign policy experience, whether Clinton has the judgment and integrity to lead the United States on the world stage. It was just such concerns that resulted in her losing the 2008 nomination to then-Sen. Barack Obama, an outspoken Iraq War opponent.

This time around, Clinton supporters have been hoping that enough Democratic voters, the overwhelming majority of whom opposed the war, will forget about her strong endorsement of the Bush administration's most disastrous foreign policy. Failing that, they've come up with a number of excuses to justify her October 2002 vote for the authorization of military force. Here they are, in no particular order:

—"Hillary Clinton's vote wasn't for war, but simply to pressure Saddam Hussein to allow UN weapons inspectors back into Iraq."

At the time of vote, Saddam Hussein had already agreed in principle to a return of the weapons inspectors. His government was negotiating with the United Nations Monitoring and Verification Commission on the details, which were formally institutionalized a few weeks later. (Indeed, it would have been resolved earlier had the United States not repeatedly postponed a UN Security

Council resolution in the hopes of inserting language that would have allowed Washington to unilaterally interpret the level of compliance.)

Furthermore, if then-Sen. Clinton's desire was simply to push Saddam into complying with the inspection process, she wouldn't have voted against the substitute Levin amendment, which would have also granted President Bush authority to use force, but only if Iraq defied subsequent UN demands regarding the inspections process. Instead, Clinton voted for a Republican-sponsored resolution to give Bush the authority to invade Iraq at the time and circumstances of his own choosing.

In fact, unfettered large-scale weapons inspections had been going on in Iraq for nearly four months at the time the Bush administration launched the March 2003 invasion. Despite the UN weapons inspectors having not found any evidence of WMDs or active WMD programs after months of searching, Clinton made clear that the United States should invade Iraq anyway.

Indeed, she asserted that even though Saddam was in full compliance with the UN Security Council, he nevertheless needed to resign as president, leave the country, and allow U.S. troops to occupy the country.

"The president gave Saddam Hussein one last chance to avoid war," Clinton said in a statement, "and the world hopes that Saddam Hussein will finally hear this ultimatum, understand the severity of those words, and act accordingly."

When Saddam refused to resign and the Bush administration launched the invasion, Clinton went on record calling for "unequivocal support" for Bush's "firm leadership and decisive action" as "part of the ongoing Global War on Terrorism." She insisted that Iraq was somehow still "in material breach of the relevant United Nations resolutions" and, despite the fact that weapons inspectors had produced evidence to the contrary, claimed the invasion was necessary to "neutralize Iraq's weapons of mass destruction."

—"Nearly everyone in Congress supported the invasion of Iraq, including most Democrats."

While all but one congressional Democrat, Representative Barbara Lee of California, supported the authorization of force to fight Al Qaeda in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a sizable majority of Democrats in Congress voted against the authorization to invade Iraq the following year.

There were 21 Senate Democrats, along with one Republican, Lincoln Chafee, and one independent, Jim Jeffords, who voted against the war resolution, while 126 of 209 House Democrats also voted against it.

Bernie Sanders, then an independent House member who caucused with the Democrats, voted with the opposition. At the time, Sanders gave a floor speech disputing the administration's claims about Saddam's arsenal. He not only cautioned that both American and Iraqi casualties could rise unacceptably high, but also warned "about the precedent that a unilateral invasion of Iraq could establish in terms of international law and the role of the United Nations."

Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, stood among the right-wing minority of Democrats in Washington.

The Democrats controlled the Senate at the time of the war authorization. Had they closed ranks and voted in opposition, the Bush administration would have been unable to launch the tragic invasion, at least not legally. Instead, Clinton and other pro-war Democrats chose to cross the aisle to side with the Republicans.

—"Her vote was simply a mistake."

While few Clinton supporters are still willing to argue her support for the war was a good thing, many try to minimize its significance by referring to it as simply a "mistake." But while it may have been a terrible decision, it was neither an accident nor an aberration from Clinton's generally hawkish worldview.

It would have been a "mistake" if Hillary Clinton had pushed the "aye" button when she meant to push the "nay" button. In fact, her decision, by her own admission, was quite conscious.

The October 2002 war resolution on Iraq wasn't like the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing military force in Vietnam, which was quickly passed as an emergency request by President Lyndon Johnson when there was no time for reflection and debate. By contrast, at the time of the Iraq War authorization, there had been months of public debate on the matter. Clinton had plenty of time to investigate the administration's claims that Iraq was a threat, as well as to consider the likely consequences of a U.S. invasion.

Also unlike the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which was disingenuously presented as an authorization to retaliate for an alleged attack on U.S. ships, members of Congress recognized that the Iraq resolution authorized a full-scale invasion of a sovereign nation and a subsequent military occupation. Clinton had met with scores of constituents, arms control analysts, and Middle East scholars who informed her that the war was unnecessary, illegal, and would likely end in disaster.

But she decided to support going to war anyway. She even rejected the advice of

fellow Democratic Sen. Bob Graham that she read the full National Intelligence Estimate, which would have further challenged some of the Bush administration's claims justifying the war. It was not, therefore, simply a "mistake," or a momentary lapse of judgment. Indeed, in her own words, she cast her vote "with conviction."

As late as February 2007, Clinton herself refused to admit that her vote for the war resolution was a mistake. "If the most important thing to any of you is choosing someone who did not cast that vote or has said his vote was a mistake," she said while campaigning for president, "then there are others to choose from." She only began to acknowledge her regrets when she saw the polling numbers showing that a sizable majority of Democrats opposed the decision to go to war.

—"She voted for the war because she felt it was politically necessary."

First of all, voting for a devastating war in order to advance one's political career isn't a particularly strong rationale for why one shouldn't share responsibility for the consequences, especially when that calculation proved disastrously wrong. Clinton's vote to authorize the invasion was the single most important factor in convincing former supporters to back Barack Obama in the 2008 Democratic primary, thereby costing her the nomination. Nevertheless, it still raises questions regarding Hillary Clinton's competence to become president.

To have believed that supporting the invasion would somehow be seen as a good thing would have meant that Clinton believed that the broad consensus of Middle East scholars who warned of a costly counterinsurgency war were wrong, and that the Bush administration's insistence that U.S. occupation forces would be "treated as liberators" was credible.

After all, for the war to have been popular, there would have had to be few American casualties, and the administration's claims about WMDs and Iraq's ties to Al Qaeda would have had to be vindicated. Moreover, some sort of stable pro-Western democracy would have emerged in Iraq, and the invasion would have contributed to greater stability and democracy in the region.

If Clinton believed any of those things were possible, she wasn't paying attention. Among the scores of reputable Middle East scholars with whom I discussed the prospects of a U.S. invasion in the months leading up to the vote, none of them believed that any of these things would come to pass. They were right.

Nor was pressure likely coming from Clinton's own constituents. Only a minority

of Democrats nationwide supported the invasion, and given that New York Democrats are more liberal than the national average, opposition was possibly even stronger in the state she purported to represent. Additionally, a majority of Americans polled said they would oppose going to war if Saddam allowed for "full and complete" weapons inspectors, which he in fact did.

Finally, the idea that Clinton felt obliged to support the war as a woman in order not to appear "weak" also appears groundless. Indeed, every female senator who voted against the war authorization was easily re-elected.

—"She thought Iraq had 'weapons of mass destruction' and was supporting Al Qaeda."

This excuse is problematic on a number levels. Before the vote, UN inspectors, independent strategic analysts, and reputable arms control journals all challenged the Bush administration's claims that Iraq had somehow rebuilt its chemical and biological weapons programs, had a nuclear weapons program, or was supporting Al Qaeda terrorists.

Virtually all of Iraq's known stockpiles of chemical and biological agents had been accounted for, and the shelf life of the small amount of materiel that hadn't been accounted for had long since expired. (Some discarded canisters from the 1980s were eventually found, but these weren't operational.)

There was no evidence that Iraq had any delivery systems for such weapons either, or could build them without being detected. In addition, a strict embargo against imports of any additional materials needed for the manufacture of WMDs, which had been in effect since 1990, made any claims that Iraq had offensive capability transparently false to anyone who cared to investigate the matter at that time.

Most of the alleged intelligence data made available to Congress prior to the war authorization vote has since been declassified. Most strategic analysts have found it transparently weak, based primarily on hearsay by Iraqi exiles of dubious credibility and conjecture by ideologically driven Bush administration officials.

Similarly, a detailed 1998 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency indicated that Iraq's nuclear program appeared to have been completely dismantled by the mid-1990s, and a 2002 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate made no mention of any reconstituted nuclear development effort. So it's doubtful Clinton actually had reason to believe her own claims that Iraq had a nuclear weapons program.

Additionally, there was no credible evidence whatsoever that the secular

Baathist Iraqi regime had any ties to the hardline Islamist group Al Qaeda, yet Clinton distinguished herself as the only Senate Democrat to make such a claim. Indeed, a definitive report by the Department of Defense noted that not only did no such link exist, but that none could have even been reasonably suggested based on the evidence available at that time.

Moreover, even if Iraq really did have “weapons of mass destruction,” the war would have still been illegal, unnecessary, and catastrophic.

Roughly 30 countries (including the United States) have chemical, biological, or nuclear programs with weapons potential. The mere possession of these programs is *not* legitimate grounds for invasion, unless one is authorized by the United Nations Security Council, which the invasion of Iraq, pointedly, was not. If Clinton really thought Iraq’s alleged possession of those weapons justified her support for invading the country, then she was effectively saying the United States somehow has the right to invade dozens of other countries as well.

Similarly, even if Iraq had been one of those 30 countries, and remember, it was not, the threat of massive retaliation by Iraq’s neighbors and U.S. forces permanently stationed in the region provided a more than sufficient deterrent to Iraq using the weapons beyond its borders. A costly invasion and extended occupation were completely unnecessary.

Finally, the subsequent war and the rise of sectarianism, terrorism, Islamist extremism, and the other negative consequences of the invasion would have been just as bad even if the rationale weren’t bogus. American casualties could have actually been much higher, since WMDs would have likely been used against invading U.S. forces.

But here’s the kicker: Clinton stood by the war even after these claims were definitively debunked.

Even many months after the Bush administration itself acknowledged that Iraq had neither WMDs nor ties to Al Qaeda, Clinton declared in a speech at George Washington University that her support for the authorization was still “the right vote” and one that “I stand by.” Similarly, in an interview on Larry King Live in April 2004, when asked about her vote despite the absence of WMDs or Al Qaeda ties, she acknowledged, “I don’t regret giving the president authority.”

No Excuses

The 2016 Democratic presidential campaign is coming down to a race between Hillary Clinton, who supported the Bush Doctrine and its call for invading countries that are no threat to us regardless of the consequences, and Bernie Sanders, who supported the broad consensus of Middle East scholars and others

familiar with the region who recognized that such an invasion would be disastrous.

There's no question that the United States is long overdue to elect a woman head of state. But electing Hillary Clinton, or anyone else who supported the invasion of Iraq, would be sending a dangerous message that reckless global militarism needn't prevent someone from becoming president, even as the nominee of the more liberal of the two major parties.

It also raises this ominous scenario: If Clinton were elected president despite having voted to give President Bush the authority, based on false pretenses, to launch a war of aggression, in violation of the UN Charter, the Nuremberg Principles, and common sense, what would stop her from demanding that Congress give her the same authority?

Foreign Policy In Focus columnist **Stephen Zunes** is a professor of politics and coordinator of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of San Francisco. [This story appeared originally at <http://fpif.org/five-lamest-excuses-hillary-clintons-vote-invade-iraq/>]

The Dangerous Ideology of Religion

Ideology, in the hands of true-believers, tends to reject facts in favor of some grander "truth," an especially dangerous tendency when mixed with religious conviction and certainty, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson

Ideologies are pre-set forms of thinking that shape people's worldviews and, supposedly, help to order and simplify reality. While this supposition is always flawed to one extent or another, ideologies can be very seductive. In part this is because they free their adherents from the hard work of critical thinking. Thus, they are often held onto tenaciously.

Because ideologies distort reality, they are particularly unsuited for those aspiring to power as well as their devoted supporters. History is full of examples of politically powerful ideologies that underscore this fact: fascism, communism, various military cults (particularly popular in South America and the Middle East) and even the ideology of democracy as manipulated by corrupt

elites, who play the Pied Piper to the masses.

Yet there is still one more ideology out there which, even now, wreaks havoc by either claiming for itself the trappings of secular power or attaching itself in some influential advisory way to the institutions of power. That ideology is religion in its various institutional manifestations.

I want to emphasize that I am not referring to the personal religious convictions of millions by which life is made to appear understandable and meaningful. Whether such convictions are accurate or not, they play an important role at the individual level and, as long as they do not promote harmful intolerance, should be left to benignly function at the local level.

What I am referring to are religious ideologies that are institutionalized in bureaucracies that can project power much as do secular institutions of authority. Religious ideologies so institutionalized see themselves as possessed of God-given truth while playing the game of power amidst human competitors.

Religion in Power

It is often said that we live in an age of religious revival. Whatever this might say for the "spiritual" shortcomings of modernity, this is a state of affairs rife with political danger. A quick look at history can again easily demonstrate why this is so.

,In the Tenth through Fifteenth centuries in Europe, Roman Catholicism was a strong political power centered in the Papacy. Historians often claim it preserved what was left of Greco-Roman civilization. It also brought with it the bloodletting of the Crusades and the tortures of the Inquisition.

,When, briefly, the Protestants tasted political power in the form of Calvin's Geneva, Savonarola's Florence, Cromwell's England, and the early New World establishments of North America, the result was widespread intolerance, civil war, burning flesh at Salem and elsewhere and, of course, no dancing. It does not take great imagination to see the potential for high levels of intolerance occurring if some representative of today's Christian Right, say Ted Cruz, takes power in the U.S.

,Buddhism used to be universally revered as a religion of peace and tolerance. However, put it in power or ally it to those who politically rule, and what once was benign turns malignant. Thus, consider the self-identified Buddhist government of Sri Lanka and its brutal campaign against the Tamils in the north of that country. Likewise, you can find Buddhists allied to the government of Myanmar crying for the blood of the country's Rohingya, a Muslim minority.

,There is a lot of Hindu fanaticism in India, and It remains to be seen if the present government of that country, dominated now by Hindu nationalists, will again turn loose the religious passion which, in the recent past, has led to sectarian violence and massacres of India's religious minorities (again, notably Muslims).

,Where the Muslims seek or hold state power, the situation is little different. According to Sunni tradition, the ethical standards of behavior set down in the Quran did not dictate state behavior beyond the brief reign of the so-called "rightly guided Caliphs." Shiites often point out that things fell apart almost immediately upon Mohammad's death. Civil war and internecine slaughter followed in both scenarios.

Today, in Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf emirates, one finds Sunni intolerance of Shiite Islam and the exploitation of non-citizen laborers despite their being fellow Muslims. In Shia Iran, authorities seem unsure just how tolerant or intolerant to be toward more moderate interpretations of their own, now politicized, religious tenets.

Then, of course, you have various organizations, claiming to be Sunni Muslim, ranging from ISIS to Al Nusra or some other Al Qaeda variant, all reaching for political power. Where they have tasted success, as in the case of ISIS, the consequences have been particularly bad.

,Since 1948 Judaism has succumbed to the same fate as other world religions entangling themselves in politics. Despite all the rationalizations, propaganda and self-deception, it is clear that institutional Judaism is now firmly melded to the deeply discriminatory and particularly brutal political ideology of Zionism.

I use the word "melded" because what we have here is something more than just an alliance of two separate entities. The Zionists have insisted since 1917, the year of the Balfour Declaration, was proclaimed, that the fate of Judaism and an Israeli "national home" are thoroughly intertwined. Their insistent manipulations have resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The consequences of this melding have been horrific. If you want to know just how horrid things have become, there are numerous Palestinian and Jewish human rights groups that are easily found on the web which will document Israeli behavior in all its dehumanizing detail.

For a more personalized assessment of just what this melding means for Judaism as a religion I recommend the recent book by Marc H. Ellis entitled *The Heartbeat of the Prophetic* (New Diaspora Books, 2015). Ellis is a Jewish

theologian who, in the 1970s, was greatly influenced by the work of Roman Catholic priests in Latin America who were promoting “liberation theology.”

That “for the good of the people” interpretation of religion was corrosive of the institutionalized Church, and so the movement was ultimately stifled. However, Ellis thought that the same philosophy could be applied to Judaism – an insight that eventually led him to denounce Zionized Judaism in a manner reminiscent of the prophets of the Old Testament.

For Ellis, institutionalized Judaism has been reduced to an adjunct of an expansionist and racist political ideology. He feels that there is no getting around the inherent evil of this situation. No two-state solution or other “progressive” approach can erase it. As long as Judaism persists in identifying itself in terms of the Israeli state and Zionist ideology, the ethical underpinnings of the religion are left behind in the wreckage of an evolving “Jewish empire.”

Lessons to Be Learned

What have all these historical examples to teach those of religious faith? Some fundamentalists would have us believe the lesson is to remain humble and obedient in the face of an unfathomable deity whose mysterious purposes are simply beyond human comprehension. Yet there is nothing incomprehensible about the repetitive death, destruction and intolerance bred by institutionalized ideologies. And, as the historical examples given above tell us, religious ideology is no exception.

A better lesson learned seems to be: if you want to be religious, keep it personal and tolerant, avoid tendencies toward institutionalization beyond the level of local charity and organized good works, and stay clear of political alliances.

It is said that Jesus told his disciples, “where two or three of you are gathered together there I too will be.” Those are just about the right numbers when it comes to keeping religion safe for the believers and non-believers alike. After all, when you have two or three thousand, or two or three million gathered together, for whatever purpose, then something quite different from a helpful and humane spirit is likely to be present.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.

Lobbying's Mile-High Plateau

Special-interest money in Washington may have peaked but it looks more like it has plateaued at mile-high altitudes, with hundreds of millions of dollars continuing to fill the coffers of lobbying firms each year as they sign up ex-members of Congress and other well-connected “public servants,” as Michael Winship reports.

By Michael Winship

Pity poor Washington. No doubt breaking the hearts of elected and appointed government officials, their staffs and hangers-on, [the *Open Secrets* blog](#) at the Center for Responsive Politics reports that the “influence industry appears to be contracting, and the trend continued in 2015.”

But before you shed a single poignant tear, like Iron Eyes Cody in those old “[Keep America Beautiful](#)” TV spots, kindly note that the money spent on lobbying merely slipped from \$3.24 billion in 2014 to \$3.2 billion. That’s still an awful lot of lettuce, more than enough to spread the corporate love around big time, cash on the barrelhead for votes, deregulation, tax breaks, insider information and other assorted favors. Nor is it even counting campaign contributions.

Those who are wearing their money belts just a teeny bit tighter include [the top 10 spenders of lobbying dollars](#) in our nation’s capital. But again, we’re only talking about a shift from \$323.7 million in 2014 to just under \$282 million.

Coming in at first and second were the US Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Realtors, followed by the American Medical Association, Boeing and General Electric. For many of the top 10, their big push on Capitol Hill last year was for the reauthorization of the Export-Import Bank, which greases the wheels with loans and credit lines for the overseas purchase of US goods and services.

The bank has been a scourge of right-wing members of Congress, who dislike anything that smacks of the foreign. They blocked the renewal of its charter when it ran out at the end of June. But lo and behold, the fix was in. The lobbyists went into hyper-drive, cash flowed and the bank’s charter renewal magically appeared in the highway bill. Abracadabra, money talks.

In Washington, it not only talks, it bellows like a bull. In fact, despite the slight decrease in spending, overall, the “top lobby firms are riding high,” [according to the congressional newspaper *The Hill*](#), even as they “enter an election year where the ‘establishment’ is under attack.

"Most of K Street's 20 largest firms by revenue saw their advocacy fees rise in 2015, with some getting an extra boost from the flurry of legislating at the end of the year."

Biggest of all the influence mills is Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, co-founded back in 1945 by former Democratic National Committee Chair Robert Strauss, the godfather of inside the Beltway wheeler-dealers, and the man who famously explained the boom in the lobbying business to journalist Robert Kaiser with these simple words: "There's just so damn much money in it."

As Bill Moyers and I wrote in September 2014, "Akin Gump handles Beltway business for everyone from Amazon and AT&T to UPS and the US Chamber of Commerce (ah, that champion of the people!), along the way making generous campaign contributions hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth, to candidates of both parties."

The Hill reports Akin Gump earned more than \$39 million last year, "a nearly 11 percent increase over 2014." The newspaper continued, "Akin Gump benefitted from a slate of prominent new hires, most recently bringing on former Sen. Kay Hagan (D-N.C.)."

Yes, feel the gusting breeze and hear the rush of the revolving door, so much a staple of Washington and the lobbying trade they should have them on sale at the local Home Depot. It rotates between public service and private profit, scooping up in its swirl the expertise and influence of former officials and putting them in the lucrative service of big business. Republicans and Democrats alike, few are resistant to its spin.

"Members of Congress now make \$174,000 a year, not a bad living," Lee Drutman writes at Vox. "But usually they can at least quintuple that salary by switching over to lobbying once they retire. And many of them do just that."

Kay Hagan served only a single term in the U.S. Senate but as the Politico Influence blog reported, during that time " She served on the committees for Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP); Banking, Housing & Urban Affairs; Armed Services; and Small Business and Entrepreneurship. She chaired the Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee of the Armed Services Committee." Those assignments made her a prime prospect for recruitment.

Yet as intrepid journalist Lee Fang wrote at The Intercept, Akin Gump is "an odd perch" for the former senator who was defeated for re-election in 2014, and not just because the firm's US Chamber of Commerce client spent millions attacking Hagan and supporting her victorious opponent, Thom Tillis.

"After losing her seat, Hagan said in speeches that the biggest problem in

America today is the dominance of big money, noting that the wealthy and special interests have come to control the political process through lobbyists and Super PACs. 'We have got to get the obscene money out of politics, and I think that would change politics,' Hagan told the Rotary Club of Greensboro last year."

Getting rid of the money certainly would change politics, but apparently the definition of what an obscene amount is depends on who's receiving what from whom and when. "Coming here feels like a very natural fit," Hagan said in an Akin Gump press release.

Other recently defeated Senate Democrats haven't been thrown into any great moral quandary either. As *The Hill* reported, last February, "Arkansas's Mark Pryor landed at Venable while Alaska's Mark Begich went to Brownstein Hyatt Farber & Schreck in April. In May, Louisiana's Mary Landrieu went to Van Ness Feldman and began working for energy clients."

Among Kay Hagan's colleagues at Akin Gump are former Republican Sen. John Sununu and ex-GOP Congressman Bill Paxon. So the lobbying racket is one part of Washington life that continues to pay little heed to party lines or past professions of purity. In other words, like the world's other oldest profession, show me the money and I'm all yours.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*, and a former senior writing fellow at the policy and advocacy group Demos. Follow him on Twitter at @MichaelWinship. This story originally appeared

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