

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?

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