

Special Report:

The Iraq War at Six Years: A Look Back at What Went Wrong

Exactly six years ago last Thursday night, President George W. Bush -- under the direction of then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon -- unleashed "shock and awe" on Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Americans have since come to see the Iraq War through a dual lens -- that of an overwhelming sense of admiration for the heroic sacrifice of our men and women on the battlefield, coupled with a feeling of anger and betrayal at the small group of officials that fabricated a cause for aggression and then horribly mismanaged the resultant conflict.

This sentiment was perhaps most clearly evidenced by the election in November of Barack Obama -- whose end-the-war campaign platform helped propel him to the White House. On February 27, Obama announced the first concrete steps for ending the conflict; but the plan, like most everything else involving Iraq, remains somewhat tenuous.

Operation Iraqi Freedom has been a costly undertaking, both financially and in terms of human life. As of March 17, a total of 4,260 U.S. soldiers had lost their lives and 31,131 had been wounded, according to official military statistics; estimates of the number of Iraqi dead fluctuate widely, ranging from several hundred thousand to over a million.

Monetarily, the Iraq War now seconds only World War II in the size of the financial burden it has levied on the American taxpayer.

How the withdrawal from Iraq will finally play out remains to be seen. But what is certain is that the U.S. is well past the point of victory in any traditional sense and must now be content with finding an "acceptable resolution" to the conflict.

Perhaps the most we can hope for is that America will collectively draw from the experience the resolve to prevent a repeat performance.

As Senator Bob Casey (D-Pa.) explains it: "One of the real lessons I hope we've learned as a country...is that we've got to extend any intelligence that we get to really significant and extensive scrutiny...Because what happened last time is not just that you had intelligence that was questionable...but you also had people in power who, in my judgment, were misusing or exaggerating that intelligence for political purposes. We can't have that again."

In this first installment of a special two-part series on the sixth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, The Tribune asked politicians, veterans, activists and analysts to reflect on how things went so wrong.

Laying the Groundwork for War

By now it's part of the historical record that the Bush administration overstated the threat of weapons of mass destruction and manipulated intelligence on Iraq's al-Qaida connection through then-undersecretary of defense for policy Douglas Feith's Office of Special Plans (OSP). The OSP filtered raw intelligence -- much of it already discredited by other agencies -- into neatly packaged reports for Bush's inner circle. Many of the claims that the U.S. would use to make a case for war -- for instance, that industrial-strength aluminum tubing ordered by Iraq was part of a nuclear weapons program -- came out of the OSP.

"If you make a list of things we were told about Iraq, and then cross out those since discovered to have been total crap, you will have a far shorter list," said Edward Peck, who served as the Iraq Chief of Mission during the Carter administration.

Peck, who also served as deputy director of the White House Task Force on Terrorism under Ronald Reagan, watched the run up to the war with skepticism and what followed with dismay. As a career diplomat, what troubled him even more than the lies was the misguided agenda that seemed to dictate the mission -- that of creating a U.S.-style republic in the heart of the Middle East.

"By definition, you cannot impose democracy; you cannot force people to make a free choice," he said. "The essential ingredient in a functioning democracy is a willingness to accept the possibility of losing."

Professor Andrew Bacevich, a retired colonel who spent 23 years in the U.S. Army and now teaches international relations at Boston University, thinks that plan was the first step in a much broader strategy.

"The larger purpose of the war was to serve as a catalyst for widespread change that would transform the greater Middle East," he said. "It seems preposterous but they genuinely expected, I think, that a demonstration of American will and power would put the United States in a position where others in the region would thereafter defer to our requirements. They were going to pacify the region."

If strategically the invasion and occupation of Iraq sounded like a pipedream, operationally it would prove an exercise in naiveté. From the beginning the war's planners operated with two diverging sets of opinions -- one ideological and the other practical. The debates that followed

involved nearly every aspect of the war, from the size of the force and the manner of its deployment, to the structure of the occupation.

In the end, the ideologues won out. The coalition ground force that invaded Iraq was only half the size of the force that had ejected Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait in 1991, and significantly smaller than that recommended by senior military leaders including then-Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki -- who countered administration troop estimates in testimony before Congress prior to the invasion.

"I think from an Army perspective, the concern was the troop levels after the war," said Thomas White, secretary of the Army from 2001-2003, in a 2004 interview. "Our concern ...[was] that there wouldn't be sufficient boots on the ground after the operation to provide for security and get on with the stabilization activities." His assessment could not have been more accurate.

Congressman Joe Sestak (D-Pa.), a retired Navy Vice Admiral and the highest-ranking military veteran in Congress, thinks military leadership should have been more vocal in its criticism of the invasion plan, though he admits it may not have made much of a difference.

"I think it is a personal responsibility as a senior military leader to do what General Shinseki did and I think we needed more of that," Rep. Sestak said. "Did they listen? No. But did others stand up and force their opinions to be heard? I would argue not."

A Recipe for Failure

If there is a singular conclusion about why the U.S. failed to pacify Iraq early in the occupation, it was the complete absence of a "phase-four" plan for the country post-invasion. In short, nobody -- from civilian leaders in Washington to the U.S. soldiers and marines amassing on the Kuwaiti border in March 2003 -- knew exactly what we would do once Baghdad fell. At least part of that failing stems from the fact that the Bush administration apparently didn't plan to be in Iraq that long. One early assessment had a residual force of just 30,000-50,000 troops in-country by the end of the summer of 2003, the remainder having been redeployed.

"This war was conceived of as a decapitation war, where really they defined the center of gravity... as Baghdad," explained *Washington Post* journalist Thomas Ricks, interviewed on *Frontline* in Jan. 2004. "Going in and toppling the regime, for them, equaled victory."

According to Bacevich: "They had a plan for getting ready to invade, they had a plan to invade, they had plan to topple Saddam Hussein, [but] they didn't have a plan for what was going to happen next, and the absence of a plan, I think, contributed to the fact that there was a vacuum, which ended up being filled by this insurgency."

Bacevich, a self-described conservative who lost his only son in Iraq in 2007 to an IED, has been a vocal critic of the conduct of the war. He says too much weight was given to certain "false assumptions" about how the war would play out -- all of which proved false.

Most dooming, he says, was the belief -- encouraged by Iraqi exiles like Ahmed Chalabi -- that once the Iraqi army was defeated, the task would be all but complete and that everything else would take care of itself.

"There was no appreciation of how toppling the regime would set in motion a whole variety of other actions that would make for a very complicated and problematic occupation," said Bacevich.

Baghdad or Bust

On March 20, 2003, following a night of heavy U.S. bombing of the capitol, roughly 145,000 coalition troops breached the Iraqi border from Kuwait, signaling the start of the invasion.

Deploying with the invading force was Sgt. John Bruhns, then a 25-year old Specialist in the Army's 1-41 Infantry battalion of the 1st Armored Division's 3d Brigade. A Philadelphia native and former reservist, Bruhns reenlisted after 9/11 hoping to defend his country against terrorism. Instead he found himself in the Iraqi desert facing a populace that didn't want him there.

John Grant, the Philadelphia representative of the group Veterans for Peace, says this was a common theme.

"A lot of people saw what happened to the towers [on 9/11] and they wanted to serve their country. But when they got to Iraq, they realized 'wait a minute that's not why I'm here. This has absolutely nothing to do with 9/11.' That's one of the fundamental bait and switches that the Bush administration pulled on the American people," he said.

By April 9, U.S. and coalition forces had entered the center of Baghdad. Video shot later that day of a crowd of Iraqis toppling a large statue of their former dictator was beamed around the world, forever enshrining the early euphoria many Iraqis felt. But that elation would prove transitory.

"After the invasion there as a short-lived period of calm," Bruhns recalled. "I think the Iraqis, once they realized we were not leaving, that's when the resistance started. I felt the entire time I was there that I was fighting the people who lived there."

Bruhns and his unit spent the rest of the summer in Baghdad conducting so-called "cordon and capture" operations.

"We would do these missions two or three times a week where -- if there was a high level of insurgent activity in a particular area, we would basically sneak in there late at night or early in the morning and quarantine the area and just surround it and go house-to-house. We were looking for anything we could find," Bruhns said, adding that the missions usually turned up little of value.

What they did produce was a growing number of Iraqi civilians in U.S. custody. It's been reported that in the 18 months immediately following the invasion, as many as 40,000 Iraqis passed through hastily organized U.S. detention facilities, the most infamous being Abu Ghraib prison.

"We went to Iraq to end the reign of terror and suffering under Saddam," said Peck. "We said 'it's all over; you are free; everything is different now.' So where did we put our headquarters? In his palace. Where did we put our prison? His prison. That's change? It was straight downhill from there."

A Readymade Insurgency

In his first two weeks as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in charge of rebuilding Iraq, L. Paul Bremer -- a career Washington technocrat with no military experience -- made two decisions that would lay the groundwork for the coming insurgency. First he instituted a top-down de-Ba'athification program, purging as many as 50,000 members of the civil service and intelligentsia.

The next and most damaging move was Bremer's decision to disband the Iraqi Army. Over objections from military leaders, Bremer issued CPA Order Number 2, canceling all military ranks and titles and releasing all conscripts and professional soldiers from their duties.

In a country of rival ethnicities, the Iraqi military, for all its deficits as a fighting force, constituted the only truly cohesive national institution; and now it was gone. With the stroke of a pen, Bremer crippled the bureaucratic structure of Iraq and disaffected hundreds of thousands of armed soldiers and government workers.

That summer, the first coordinated attacks on coalition forces began, signaling the start of a brutal and long insurgency. Meanwhile, the ethnic tensions that had quietly seethed for years under Saddam Hussein's rule boiled to the surface.

"From the beginning, no one on our side, at least no one who mattered, had any understanding of -- or, evidently, any interest in -- the possibility of major differences in the culture and subcultures in Iraq," said Peck, explaining the genesis of the ethnic violence.

Grant, who traveled twice to Iraq in the early stages of the occupation, said the U.S. "whacked a hornet's nest" in dislodging the long oppressed Shi'a majority of Iraq. The U.S. "changed the whole equation in the area," he said, and did nothing to fill the void left by the removal of the Ba'athist regime.

At the peak of the ethnic violence, in 2006, as many as a hundred bodies a day were turning up on the streets of Baghdad, while near daily attacks on U.S. forces continued.

Bruhns left Iraq in February 2004 and was honorably discharged from the Army in 2005. Since then has worked to oppose the war -- first as legislative representative of Americans Against Escalation in Iraq, and later in a similar capacity with United For Peace & Justice. Looking back, he thinks it was a grave mistake for the U.S. to believe it could create a democracy in Iraq, and he has little optimism that the country will continue to bend to America's will once we leave.

"People in America assume that the Iraqis want what we want, that they want to live like we live, that there is an American inside every Iraqi just dying to get out," he said. "Well, I don't think so. The Iraqis and going to be Iraqi; it's their country. They live there, not us."

Part II: The Surge, Stability and the Road Ahead

For many Americans, the six-year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq – which passed uneventfully on March 20 – barely warranted consideration.

With the economic crisis monopolizing the headlines and the focus of the war on terror shifting from the Middle East to Central Asia, it's easy to overlook the fact that 284 American soldiers have died over the past year fighting a war that just about everyone agrees the U.S. can no longer win.

The President's announcement on February 27 that he will draw down combat troops by August 2010 -- with a final U.S. withdrawal scheduled for the end of 2011 – has lent to the perception that Iraq is on its way to being a stable, self-governing, constitutional republic.

It's hard to ignore the progress that's been made. In a press briefing last week from Baghdad, coalition spokesperson Major General David Perkins said attacks against U.S. forces are down 90 percent since June 2007, and U.S. combat deaths are at their lowest point since the start of the war.

Iraqis are once again taking to the streets as life begins to take on a semblance of normalcy that has been glaringly absent for the past five years. Yet this prevailing sentiment belies the tenuous nature of Iraq's relative calm.

Sgt. Casey Porter, of Austin, Texas, who returned this month from his second tour in Iraq with an armored battalion of the 4th Infantry Division, says there was no mistaking he was still in a war zone.

"When we got there we were rocketed and mortared almost every day, multiple times a day; so you wouldn't be able to tell it was peaceful, and it wasn't," said Porter.

"We keep hearing how stable things are but that's because people are comparing it to the absolute worst week of the war," said Phyllis Bennis, a Middle East specialist with the Institute

for Policy Studies (IPS) in Washington, D.C. “If you compare it to any other normal country, Iraq is wracked with violence.”

And that violence is not just directed at U.S. forces. Several high-profile attacks in the weeks following the Obama announcement underscore the fragility of the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

On March 8, the same day Gen. Ray Odierno, commander of multinational forces in Iraq, announced that 16,000 coalition troops will leave the country by September, a suicide bomber killed 28 Iraqi civilians near a police academy in east Baghdad. Two days later a separate bomb struck Sunni leaders touring a Baghdad market, killing as many as 33 people. And as recently as March 23, a suicide bomber killed 23 Kurdish mourners at a funeral northeast of the capitol.

“My fear is that because the American public and the political establishment increasingly feels that Iraq is heading toward victory...we're going to lose sight of the fact that Iraq still is a very troubled country... the situation could still go south very quickly,” said Kenneth M. Pollack, a Mideast expert with the Brookings Institution, in a recent briefing paper.

A New Way Forward

By the fall of 2006, Iraq was, by all accounts, on the brink of chaos; coalition estimates placed the number of Iraqi civilians killed each month at more than 1,500 as ethnic violence between rival Sunni and Shi'a militias reached a pinnacle.

Even the Department of Defense, which for months had downplayed the situation, was beginning to publicly accept the severity of the ethnic conflict.

Meanwhile, in the U.S, a growing base of opposition to the war had given birth to a populist groundswell. Of all the unintended consequences of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the emergence of a multifaceted and vibrant antiwar movement will stand out as one of the most memorable. Where the Vietnam War inspired a backlash among the youth – sparked in large part by resistance to the draft -- the Iraq campaign coalesced all manner of activist.

“I think the huge advance of the antiwar movement is that it managed to transform public opinion in this country into an antiwar majority — an overwhelming majority and near consensus,” said Bennis.

As early as 2002, the lead-up to the invasion had spawned a cornucopia of new antiwar groups; the movement only got stronger as the years went on, eventually attracting a fair number of returning soldiers. Among them was Philadelphia native Sgt. John Bruhns, who returned from Iraq in 2004 and began speaking out against the war. He says what upset him the most upon his return was the number of “young able-bodied Americans” who supported the war but never joined the fight.

“A lot of Iraq vets came home after two or three tours and spoke out but we were countered by this element; and they called us unpatriotic and said we were cut and run, but these people never had the courage to go near it, and I think that was one of the biggest tragedies of the whole war,” he said.

In November 2006, voters took their mounting opposition to the war to the polls and for the first time in more than a decade gave the Democrats control of Congress. To many activists, President Bush’s announcement two months later that he would deploy more than 20,000 additional troops to Iraq as part of a surge strategy seemed like a slap in the face to voter sensibilities.

In a televised address on January 10, the president outlined this “new way forward,” saying a troop increase was necessary to help the Iraqis “put down sectarian violence and bring security to the people of Baghdad.”

Despite Congressional opposition, from January through May 2007, the number of U.S. combat brigades in Iraq grew from 15 to 20, and by June, an additional 28,000 U.S. troops had joined the fight. By October 2007, U.S. troops in Iraq had reached a peak of roughly 168,000.

While initially the surge got off to a rocky start (violence actually increased for a time), by the late fall of 2007 the initiative was beginning to show results. According to a report from the Congressional Research Service, overall attacks, which reached a peak of over 1,500 per week in June and July 2007 as the final surge units arrived in Iraq, declined sharply, and by December 2008 had fallen to close to 200 per week. Meanwhile Iraqi civilian deaths dropped by more than 70 percent between August 2007 and January 2008.

The predominant view among analysts is that while things have definitely gotten better in Iraq, attributing this to the surge alone is overly simplistic. Their conclusion is that the turnaround had less to do with the number of troops than how those troops were employed: notably, making the protection of Iraqi civilians a top priority and engaging “reconcilable” elements of Iraq society and putting them on the American payroll.

“The surge worked tactically — it improved security enormously. But it didn't succeed strategically, politically. And that was its larger goal,” said journalist Thomas Ricks, in a recent interview with National Public Radio. Ricks whose book, “The Gamble,” examines the surge says the strategy failed to resolve important political issues.

Even Gen. David Petraeus, who oversaw the initiative, limits his description of the results as a “military” success.

Col. (Ret.) Andrew Bacevich, professor of International Relations and History at Boston University and author of the book, “The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism,” suspects this was enough for the Bush administration.

“I think by the time we get to the end of Bush’s second term all he’s trying to do in Iraq...is to achieve some semblance of stability,” he said. “As a result of the surge Iraq was pulled back from the brink of complete disintegration and at the time of the handover to Obama, relative stability had been established; not democracy...but at least the place seemed to be stabilized.”

Getting out

While President Obama deserves credit for accelerating the force drawdown, in maintaining a 2011 deadline for U.S. troops to leave Iraq the President is actually honoring a timetable set by his predecessor.

In November 2008, in the waning days of the Bush White House, the administration signed a status of forces agreement (SOFA) with the Iraqi government, which for the first time set a schedule for U.S. withdrawal. As part of the agreement, American combat troops will withdraw from Iraqi cities and begin operating out of military bases by the end of June 2009.

Under the accelerated Obama plan, all “combat brigades” will leave Iraq by the end by August 2010, while up to 50,000 troops, or roughly one-third of the current force, will remain in Iraq until the end of 2011, “to help train Iraqi forces and undertake counterterrorism missions.”

As it stands, little will change for the rest of the year; 128,000 U.S. soldiers will remain in place through Iraqi national elections in December—a reduction of just 12,000 troops from current levels.

Reaction to the Obama plan has been generally positive, drawing praise from everyone from Bush-era architects of the war like Douglas Feith to more moderate Democrats.

Ike Skelton (D-MO), chairman of House Armed Services Committee, called the President’s plan “deliberate and responsible.” Yet others in the President’s party, including both Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), have questioned the size of the force that will remain in Iraq past 2010.

“I had expected that the size of the residual force would have been lower than 35,000-50,000 troops given the limited missions remaining after the brigade combat teams are removed,” said Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI) chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

But Pennsylvania Democratic Sen. Bob Casey says the troops are necessary for ensuring the safety of the withdrawal.

“The residual forces [the President] will leave in Iraq will be for a couple of purposes —one is counterterrorism; obviously training of the Iraqi security forces, and those numbers have gone way up, which allows us to begin redeployment; and protecting our remaining forces,” said Casey. “We don’t want to draw down so quickly that we put our troops at risk.”

Representative Joe Sestak (D-PA), a retired vice admiral who has pushed for a complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq since joining Congress in 2007, says that while he wouldn't have supported a residual force in the past, today he is behind the Obama plan.

"Several years ago...I felt very strongly that we needed to tell [the Iraqis] there was a definitive date that all forces would be gone," he said. "That said, today with the pending stability that appears to be there, I would support leaving behind a force until 2011 as long as it can, and is placed in a position to, protect itself. So their mission will truly be very limited and I can be supportive of that because the dynamics have changed."

Sestak added that, in any case, a complete withdraw of all U.S. forces will take time. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, as of November 2008 there were 286 U.S. installations in Iraq that will need closing, and experts have said shuttering even the smallest of these will take upwards of two months.

"During a redeployment is when the military is most vulnerable," said Sestak. "You can only put about two brigade combat teams per month through Kuwait and there are approximately 50 brigade combat team-equivalents there; so these scenarios that they're portraying sometimes don't take account of the facts on the ground."

Still others have questioned the reality of the President's 2010 deadline for withdrawing "combat brigades." IPS' Bennis, for instance, says this will likely entail a re-missioning in name only.

"It's semantics. They've acknowledged that the stay-behind troops will include counterinsurgency. You can call it what you want, but that's combat. They would walk and talk and bomb and shoot like combat troops, but they wouldn't be called combat troops so they could stay in Iraq," she said.

"The point is as long as you have American troops in Iraq, no matter what you call them, they are going to be fighting and dying," said Ricks.

In light of the troop drawdown, the question of what will happen once American forces are gone from Iraq is now becoming a matter of intense consideration. In an extensive December 2008 backgrounder for Congress on Operation Iraqi Freedom, Catherine Dale, an international security specialist with the Congressional Research Service, outlines a number of "spoilers" – potential issues that could seriously undermine stability in Iraq.

Among her top concerns are addressing the disputed territories along the "Green Line" that divides Kurdistan from Iraq; the disputed political status of the multiethnic and oil-rich city of Kirkuk; and the need to incorporate the Sunni minority "socially, economically and politically into the Iraqi polity."

There's also rampant unemployment: as much as a quarter of Iraqi men under the age of 29 remain jobless, making them easy prey for insurgent recruiters. And by most accounts, though they've made significant progress, the Iraqi security forces are still a long way from being a cohesive, battle-ready fighting force.

While the number of Iraqi army and police forces nearly doubled from about 320,000 in January 2007 to just over 600,000 in October 2008, the number of Iraqi army units capable of conducting operations independently remained at about 10 percent of total units, according to military officials cited by the GAO.

Beyond that, falling oil prices forced the Iraqi government to cut its 2009 budget twice, and Prime Minister Maliki has said this could lead to some hard choices about cutting security spending.

Whatever the outcome, by now it's accepted that "mission success" in Iraq will be a far cry from that originally imagined by the war's architects.

"The President has made clear that we won't leave behind something that is perfect but that we should leave behind an Iraq that can defend itself and more importantly will not be a haven for terrorists," said Casey.

But for the soldiers that fought and died there, that may not be enough. Said Bruhns: "I hope that at least one day something good will happen there – that's my hope – after all the tax dollars spent, all the innocent Iraqis and U.S. soldiers killed, people that are blind or disabled, I just hope that one day something good will come out of it."

Amanda L. Gutshall contributed to the reporting of this article