The Iraq War: 10 Years Later

Peter Katel

A decade after the United States invaded Iraq, American combat troops are gone from the country, and Iraq no longer dominates U.S. public life as it did for much of the 2000s. Yet fiery debates over the war and its aftermath continue to smolder: Was the war worth the deaths of 4,475 U.S. troops and more than $800 billion — so far — in American resources? And did President Obama make the right call by not pressing harder to keep U.S. troops in Iraq?

Backers of the war, launched by the George W. Bush administration 10 years ago this month, insist it was necessary. “I am not apologetic about my advocacy for the war,” says Michael Rubin, a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute who worked in the Pentagon and Baghdad as a member of the Bush administration during the war. Rubin casts Iraq favorably as moving toward a state of “messy democracy” after decades of repression under former dictator Saddam Hussein.

But others see today’s Iraq in a far dimmer light. Paul Pillar, who emerged as a war critic after retiring as a senior Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst, says Iraq’s elected government is “moving quite a bit toward authoritarianism.” And he contends the war brought about one of the very dangers the Bush administration said it was trying to eradicate: the presence of al Qaeda terrorists in Iraq. “There was no al Qaeda in Iraq” before the war, Pillar says, “and now there is.”

Although debates that dominated the buildup and early days of the war were resolved when Iraq was found not to possess weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), current debate over the war focuses...
Iraq and Iran Share a Common Religious View

Iraq and neighboring Iran are the only Muslim countries with predominately Shiite populations led by Shiites, who represent 15 percent of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims. The tiny Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain — the only other Muslim country with a majority-Shiite population — is ruled by Sunni sheiks. Lebanon and Yemen have mixed Sunni-Shiite populations. In majority-Sunni Syria, Sunni insurgents have been waging a two-year civil war against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiism. Islam's Sunni-Shiite split developed in the 7th century over who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis believed the best qualified leader should succeed him, while Shiites believed Muhammad's blood descendants were his rightful successors.

However, some critics say toppling the Hussein dictatorship has altered the balance of power among the region's rival Sunni- and Shiite-dominated nations and driven Iraq — formerly led by Sunnis — into the arms of neighboring Iran, a Shiite-run theocracy that its mostly Sunni neighbors and the international community want to keep from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Iran and the United States have been at odds since 1979, and Obama has led an international campaign to toughen trade sanctions against Iran. He vowed in February to “do what is necessary to prevent them from getting a nuclear weapon,” indicating that military action is not off the table. But some critics say Obama gave up the chance to blunt Iran's power in the region by failing to convince the new Iraqi government to accept a continuing U.S. military presence in Iraq after 2011.

“We failed to take advantage of the surge,” says Peter Mansoor, a retired Army colonel. Mansoor served as executive officer to Gen. David Petraeus, commander of U.S. and allied forces in Iraq during the so-called surge — when Bush controversially boosted U.S. troop levels in Iraq by 20,000. “I get the sense we don’t have any leverage,” says Mansoor.

As a result, Obama may have made it harder to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, critics say, and given Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki more reason to rely on a country ruled by fellow conservative Shiites. “I think Maliki would say, “I’m going to put my bets on my Iranian neighbor,” says Mansoor, now a professor of military history at Ohio State University's Mershon Center for International Security Studies.

Al-Maliki has reason to feel comforted by the presence of a friendly neighbor. Iraq is suffering a continuing

on Obama's handling of the conflict's end. When the last U.S. combat troops left Iraq in December 2011, Obama, who won the White House as the anti-Iraq War candidate when the conflict was a hot political issue, said he had fulfilled his pledge to end the war, “responsibly” and that “a new day is upon us.”

plague of suicide and vehicle bomb attacks — al Qaeda trademarks. At least 150 people died in such attacks so far this year, either individually or in groups targeted by bombers. Individual victims included a member of Iraq's parliament.⁴

Optimists point out that the violence, though persistent, remains at a level far below what it was in 2007, when the surge began. The move was aimed at suppressing escalating violence and preparing the government to assume responsibility for the country's security. For the United States, the surge sharply reduced American casualties in Iraq and paved the way for the withdrawal of U.S. forces.⁵

Some experts say Obama was correct in ending the military presence because the surge succeeded. Douglas Ollivant, an Army veteran of the war who also served as Iraq director on the National Security Council during the Bush and Obama administrations, says, “When you overthrow a state and start to rebuild, it’s going to be a job of decades.” Ollivant, currently a senior national security fellow at the New American Foundation think tank, says Iraq today “is what victory in one of these operations looks like — and it’s not very pretty.”

But others, including some who share Ollivant’s on-the-ground experience, see the picture getting uglier. “The war is not over,” says Lt. Col. Joel Rayburn, an Army intelligence officer who served in Iraq and is now a research associate at the National Defense University’s Institute for National Strategic Studies in Washington.

Last year, he notes, about 4,500 civilians died violently in Iraq, 400 more than the year before.⁶ That is a far cry from the nearly 27,000 civilians who died violently at the peak of the war — the 12 months that ended in March 2007.⁷ But Rayburn still argues that today’s level of violence “meets the textbook definition of civil war.” And, he adds, “It will be higher this year, mark my words.”

Even at its lower level, the violence reflects the religious and ethnic divisions that marked the Iraq War and continue to fester. Victims of the mass-casualty suicide bombings this year largely fell into three categories: civilian Shiites; police officers of the Shiite-dominated government; and Sunni militia who had once fought the U.S. occupation and Iraqi government but gave up their insurgency and turned against al Qaeda.⁸

In pre-invasion Iraq, Shiites were relegated to second-class status. Iraq’s ruling Baath Party, along with top military and security officials, was dominated by members of the Sunni branch of Islam, Hussein among them. (Hussein’s regime was secular. The new Iraq is non-sectarian in principle, with freedom of religion and women’s equal rights guaranteed, but Shiite religious leaders have powerful though informal influence on government).⁹

When American military officers realized that some Sunni insurgents were growing hostile to al Qaeda, the United States adopted a counterinsurgency strategy aimed at turning the Sunni fighters into U.S. allies and full-fledged participants in building the new Iraq.

Whether that realignment survives the U.S. withdrawal is not clear. American officials poured enormous effort into persuading Iraqis to make their new
Civilian Deaths Track Course of War

Estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths vary widely, depending on the organization collecting the data and the nature and circumstances of the fatalities. Iraq Body Count, a British organization that cross-checks media reports with hospital and morgue records, government reports and other information, estimates that 122,000 Iraqi civilians have died since 2003 as a result of the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq. Some deaths stemmed from direct military action, while others were the result of terror attacks or sectarian violence. Deaths peaked in 2006 as violence between Sunni and Shiite factions escalated, then declined sharply after additional U.S. troops were deployed in what was called the “surge.” Civilian deaths have edged up during the past two years but remain far below the 2006 peak.

Iraqi Civilian Deaths related to the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq, 2003-present

![Graph showing civilian deaths in Iraq](Image)

*Through Jan. 31

government represent the country’s religious and ethnic diversity. Accordingly, Prime Minister al-Maliki is Shiite, Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi is Sunni and President Jalal Talabani is a Kurd (a Muslim people for whom their non-Arab ethnicity is more key to their identity than religious affiliation).

Talabani suffered a stroke in December and is being treated in Germany. Al-Hashimi fled the country in 2011 after al-Maliki accused him of commanding a death squad that assassinated government officials and police officers. Al-Hashimi was later sentenced to death in absentia and now lives in Turkey, a majority-Sunni country that has refused to extradite him. In Iraq, Sunnis saw the case as part of an anti-Sunni campaign by al-Maliki.

In another reflection of ethno-religious tensions, al-Hashimi had earlier taken up refuge in a semi-autonomous northern region that is home to the country’s Kurdish minority, who had also refused to turn him over.

Though tensions and conflicts between and within the country’s sects and ethnic groups (which include small populations of Turkmen and Christians) loom large in Iraq, they had gotten little official notice during the U.S. buildup to war.

Instead, debate centered on intelligence reports that Iraq was storing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), attempting to acquire nuclear arms and, in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, possibly harboring links to al Qaeda. “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,” National Security Adviser (later Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice said in 2002, representing the Bush administration doctrine that the post-9/11 world didn’t allow the United States to require 100 percent certainty before taking military action against a potential threat.

But even before the Iraq invasion’s one-year anniversary, exhaustive on-the-ground searches discredited the information about WMDs and nuclear weapons. And Pillar — the intelligence community’s top Middle East analyst in 2000-2005 — rocked Washington after retiring in 2006 when he said that spy agencies’ WMD information had not been as definitive as the administration claimed when it launched the war.

“Intelligence was misused publicly to justify decisions already made,” Pillar wrote.

Specifically, some CIA analysts had expressed considerable skepticism about Hussein’s alleged al Qaeda links — skepticism later validated by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence — but Bush administration officials had declared the connections a reality that added to the Iraq regime’s perceived danger to Americans.

Once U.S. troops, with some help from Britain and other allies, had toppled the dictatorship, post-invasion problems upended Bush administration forecasts of a quick war and a peaceful transition to democracy. “There
is no plan for an extended occupation in Iraq.” Richard N. Perle, a longtime invasion advocate who chaired the advisory Defense Policy Board, said shortly before the war began. He predicted a warm welcome from Iraqis grateful for the toppling of the dictator.\(^{15}\)

As policymakers, military planners and national security officials look back on the war and ponder Iraq’s future, here are some of the questions they are debating:

**Did the mission succeed?**

Forty-two days after the invasion of Iraq, President Bush stood on the deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* beneath an enormous banner reading “Mission Accomplished.” Bush never uttered those words. But what he did say to the assembled aircraft carrier crew and to the military in general delivered the same message: “In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed... Because of you, our nation is more secure. Because of you, the tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free.”\(^{16}\)

Only months later, combat was intensifying for U.S. troops, and the war’s original main objective — securing Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction — had proved groundless. In response, the Bush administration said the war’s major goal was to build democracy in a country emerging from decades of vicious dictatorship rooted in deep ethnic and religious divides.

“Let freedom reign!” Bush wrote on the note informing him, in June 2004, that the United States had formally passed sovereignty to a newly formed Iraqi interim government.\(^{17}\)

The remodeling of the U.S. campaign in Iraq came on the heels of conclusive evidence that Iraq didn’t have WMDs or factories to make them. Vice President Richard B. Cheney also had insisted that the Hussein regime had colluded with the 9/11 plotters, but CIA and FBI analysts disputed that conclusion and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence upheld the analysts in a massive 2004 report on pre-war intelligence.\(^{18}\)

Bush insisted that he had made the right decision based on intelligence reports he had before the war. But even as he and his administration shifted their focus to instilling democracy in Iraq, a Sunni insurgency against both U.S. forces and Shiites, aided by al Qaeda, was already under way. Meanwhile, Shiite militias, aided by Iran, were organizing to fight the occupation and the Sunnis, and the Kurdish population was solidifying control of an autonomous region in northern Iraq.\(^{19}\)

During the ensuing years — which were marked by the surge, parliamentary elections and the 2011 U.S. troop withdrawal — the American public’s focus on Iraq gradually receded. But among those with military connections or special interests in foreign affairs, the debate over the war’s mission has never ended.

The consensus is that Iraq is not a democracy today, though there is disagreement as to whether it is heading in a democratic or dictatorial direction. Freedom House, a nonpartisan U.S. nonprofit that evaluates the state of democracy around the world, classifies Iraq as “not free.” Elections were honest, the organization said, but “political participation and decision-making... remain seriously impaired by sectarian and insurgent violence, widespread corruption and the influence of foreign powers.”\(^{20}\)

Pillar, the retired CIA analyst, argues that the U.S. campaign was close to a complete failure. “There is no
Iraq War Tab Approaches $1 Trillion — At Least

The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service (CRS) estimated the cost of the Iraq War through March 2011 at $806 billion. The Obama administration withdrew remaining U.S. troops from Iraq in December 2011, but a small contingent of U.S. advisers remained to train Iraqi forces. The war’s costs grew sharply from 2006 through 2008 as sectarian violence in Iraq peaked. Some experts say the war’s total cost may exceed $1 trillion as veterans require future medical care. Others say the conflict’s impact on the U.S. economy could drive the total cost to $3 trillion or higher.

Estimates for U.S. Funding for Iraq War, FY2003-FY2013

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* Budget request


conceivable way in which a balance sheet on the Iraq War can consider it a net plus,” he says. Noting Iran’s growing influence in Iraq, he says, “We achieved nothing and in some ways hurt ourselves.”

The one concession that Pillar makes to the pro-war argument centers on the brutality of Hussein’s regime, which was notorious for atrocities such as 1974 and 1987-88 massacres of Kurds, which included the use of napalm and poison gas. At least 50,000 people, and perhaps as many as 150,000, died in the second of these campaigns.21 “The current Iraq regime isn’t as brutal as Saddam was,” he says.

But Rubin, of the American Enterprise Institute, argues that “we were somewhat successful in building democracy” in Iraq. “Iraqi democracy ain’t pretty but it’s certainly better than Syria’s or Egypt’s.”

He maintains that Hussein was planning to rebuild Iraq’s stock of WMD’s, such as the gases used on the Kurds, when pre-war international economic sanctions against the regime collapsed. Hussein, in Rubin’s view, remained a regional and global security threat as long as he remained in power.

Rubin echoes the consensus that planning for a post-Hussein Iraq suffered from a fundamental flaw: “No one had an idea of what the U.S. goal would be until after war began,” he says. Even so, the Bush administration from the beginning acted with the intention of planting a democratic government in Iraq, he contends. The administration, he says, had answered a resounding “no” to a crucial pre-war question: “If you remove Saddam Hussein, do you just replace him with his sons or another general?”

Yet James F. Jeffrey, U.S. ambassador to Iraq in 2010-12 and a senior diplomat in Baghdad during the Bush administration, says the Bush administration was overly optimistic that it could transform Iraq into an egalitarian state. “The theory that we could create Norway or Poland in the Middle East and [that] the region would become pro-Western or democratic — it didn’t turn out that way.”

Jeffrey, now a distinguished visiting fellow at the Washington Institute, a think tank on Middle Eastern affairs, rejects the view that the United States exacerbated Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian problems. The Sunni-Shiite divide existed long before the invasion, he notes. And armed jihadists are active throughout the region. Still, he says, “It might have made more sense to look for an option where we would have toppled Saddam and asked the U.N. to come in and try to set up a process but not overthrow the entire political structure.”

But Iraqi-American Zainab al-Suwajj views the U.S. approach as a success, especially given the contrast between the Hussein era and the present. “People are not afraid any more to speak out about things they don’t like,” says al-Suwajj, executive director of the American Islamic Congress, which is teaching peaceful conflict
resolution in Iraq under a State Department contract. “Before, you cannot even mention Saddam’s name and cannot express your feelings and your religious identity.”

Al-Suwajj, who travels to Iraq every six weeks and fought in a 1991 Shiite uprising in southern Iraq that followed the defeat of Iraq in the brief Persian Gulf War, acknowledges that conditions remain difficult.

“People talk about corruption and say that basic services are not there,” she says. “But at the end of the day, we know that Saddam is not there. They don’t want to go back to Saddam’s time.”

**Did the war boost Iran’s regional and global power?**

An irony of the Iraq War was that it was launched by an administration that viewed Iran as part of a so-called axis of evil. Yet the war changed Iraq and Iran from hostile to friendly neighbors, if not allies.

That change stems above all from the toppling of Hussein, a sworn enemy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hussein, who after the 1979 Iranian revolution saw the newly established Shiite regime as a mortal threat to his rule, launched a bloody, eight-year war against Iran in 1980. An estimated 1.5 million people on both sides were killed or wounded.22

The war, which involved the use of chemical weapons by both sides, and the hostility that persisted afterward had elements of religious conflict, deeply rooted historical enmity between Arab Iraqis and Persian Iranians and geopolitical rivalry between the two oil powers.23

Notably, Prime Minister al-Maliki’s career demonstrates the complexities of ties between Iran, whose theocratic government is overseen by conservative Shiite religious authorities, and the Shites who make up the dominant political force in Iraq, which has a secular government.

Al-Maliki, a member of the Dawa Shiite party that was outlawed during the Hussein dictatorship, dodged arrest by fleeing to Iran in 1979. He helped direct clandestine operations against Hussein’s regime from there, but clashed with Iranian officials whom he considered too meddling. By one account, he refused orders to work against Iraq on behalf of an enemy country during the Iran-Iraq War and departed Iran for Syria.24

For all its complications, the new Iran-Iraq relationship has given Iran considerable military as well as political influence in Iraq. During U.S. military involvement in Iraq, American officials tracked a deadly form of improvised explosive device (IED) — one to which even tanks were vulnerable — to factories in Iran. The Americans also found a series of political and military connections between Iran and Iraqi militia and political leaders.25

Today, although Iran’s influence on Iraq is evident, experts disagree on how deep it runs.

Not surprisingly, some of the gloomiest views come from Iraqi Sunnis. “In the United States, if you ask anyone, they say, ‘We did not give Iraq to Iran,’” says Najim Abed al-Jabouri, a research fellow at the National Defense University’s Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies in Washington. “But the truth is that the United States gave Iraq to Iran. All the Arab countries now do not like Iraq because they think Iraq is part of Iran.”
Iran exerts influence within Iraq's security forces and in the economies of Shiite cities in southern Iraq, says al-Jabouri, a former mayor of the Iraqi city of Tal Afar who was granted refuge in the United States after his close cooperation with the U.S. military during the war's counterinsurgency phase. Ordinary Iraqis, Shiites as well as Sunnis, are alarmed, al-Jabouri says. “The Sunni people hate Iran so much — you cannot imagine,” he says, “but I have many friends in the Shia area who do not like the influence of Iran in those cities. We know they [Iranians] hate the Arabs.”

Nevertheless, given the centuries of rivalry between Arab and Persian empires in the Middle East, some non-Iraqi experts question the extent of Iranian authority in Arab Iraq, despite the shared religious affiliation of the country’s majority populations. “I do not believe that the Iranians are suddenly super-powerful,” says Joost Hiltermann, former Middle East program director of the International Crisis Group, a conflict-resolution advocacy group based in Brussels. “They have influence. When it comes to the prime minister, they may not be able to say who it should be, but they can say who it shouldn’t be.”

At the same time, says Hiltermann, now the Crisis Group’s chief operating officer, the United States has maintained some level of influence as well. “Iraqis are balancing between Iran and the United States and even Turkey,” he says. “Their loyalty is not to anyone. I like that; they ought to be independent and not have terms dictated by anyone.”

Nevertheless, says Rayburn of the National War College, Iran — though it doesn’t enjoy undisputed power in Iraq — has a vested interest in keeping its neighbor politically divided. “For the Iranians, the best outcome is an Iraqi government that is friendly, weak and divided among factions over whom the Iranians have some influence or control,” he says.

In that state of affairs, Rayburn says, Iran becomes the deciding voice when disputes arise within the Iraqi political class. Iranian officials, he says, ensured that al-Maliki retained the post of prime minister only with the support of Shiite political parties, despite his earlier attempt to put some distance between himself and those groups. “It was an Iranian victory to force him to go to the other Shia parties,” Rayburn says.

But some Middle East experts argue that Iran’s gain from the Iraq War shouldn’t be seen as permanent. For now, says Ollivant, the former National Security Council Iraq director, Iran “absolutely” gained from Iraqi regime change. “Saddam Hussein was part of the league of Sunni states aligned against Iran,” he says.

Iraq’s elected secular government, he points out, challenges the Iranian regime in a way that Hussein did not. “The existence of the Iraqi state is an existential challenge to Iranian government legitimacy,” he says. “Iranian [citizens] can look across the border and say, ‘It doesn’t have to be this way. [The Iraqis] are not under sanctions, the people vote and their government is not run by clerics.”

**Did the war weaken the U.S. economy?**

As soon as the first signs of the U.S. economic crisis appeared in 2008, economists and others began debating what role the costly Iraq War, along with the war in Afghanistan — which began in 2001 — might have played in damaging the American economy. Since then, the debate has broadened to include the overall effects of the two wars — such as long term health care for thousands of injured veterans along with related security and military costs — on U.S. economic health.

As of the end of fiscal 2011, according to the most recent detailed accounting by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, since Sept. 11, 2001, the United States has spent $1.28 trillion on the so-called war on terror. That includes $806 billion for the Iraq War, plus the cost of the war in Afghanistan and $29 billion for security upgrades at military bases around the world and $6 billion in unallocated funds.

But some experts say other spending on war-related programs significantly raised the overall cost. Another part of the war-funding picture is the fact that the Bush administration had won a major tax cut from Congress in 2001, two years before the war began, reducing federal revenues by $1.6 trillion over 10 years. There was no effort to raise taxes to fight the war.

For the same 10-year period, the Eisenhower Study Group at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies arrived at a total of at least $3.2 trillion, which includes not just the cost of the war but war-related spending by the State Department and the
U.S. Agency for International Development, which oversee nation-building programs in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as domestic anti-terrorism costs. By 2013, estimates Linda J. Bilmes, a senior lecturer in public policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government who was part of the Eisenhower Study Group, spending on the wars has reached $2 trillion in direct expenses. But the economic effects of the conflicts will be felt for decades, she says.

“What is certainly true is that the United States has much less wiggle room in terms of spending on other things because of legacy costs of the wars,” says Bilmes, who was assistant secretary of commerce in the Clinton administration. Those costs include a soaring budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (from $50 billion in 2001 to $140 billion requested this year). The costs also include maintenance of the $750 million U.S. embassy in Baghdad, the world’s biggest diplomatic outpost.

Bilmes, who has been collaborating on studies of war costs with Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University, also argues that the Iraq War helped set the stage for the housing market crash that set off the 2007-2008 recession, spurred in part by a huge increase in oil prices. Petroleum prices skyrocketed from $25-$30 a barrel in 2003 to as much as $150 a barrel in 2008. Oil-producing Iraq is located in a region that’s central to world petroleum shipping, so war there typically triggers fears of supply disruption. Bilmes says when the Federal Reserve sought to keep interest rates low to compensate for the oil-price spike, the low rates led to rampant speculation in housing, creating a bubble that helped spark the economic crisis.

But some Iraq War critics as well as supporters take issue with that idea.

Another Nobel laureate economist, Paul Krugman, wrote that higher oil prices caused by the war did slow down the economy. “Overall, though,” the Princeton professor and New York Times columnist added, “the story of America’s economic difficulties is about the bursting housing bubble, not the war.”

And some war supporters view economy-based critiques as attempts to devise new reasons to oppose the invasion. “You can’t have an à la carte menu of every-thing you’re blaming on it,” says Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute. “If it’s a mortgage crisis, it’s a mortgage crisis.”

Rubin acknowledges that war costs added to the federal deficit. “That is something we will pay for down the line in debt payments, but it was not the immediate cause of the recession.”

Sterling Jensen, a senior research associate at the Near East South Asia Center and a former interpreter and analyst in Iraq, also disputes the view that war spending helped bring on the recession. On the contrary, he says, the war may have delayed the crash, via government spending that benefited government contractors, including himself. “What got us in the recession was mortgages,” he says.

Jensen advances another economics-based argument — that the war in time will prove to have been worth the spending. The "Arab Spring" uprisings in the Middle East, a revolutionary series of popular protests in the region that began in December 2010, promise to provide political stability that could reduce U.S. security spending, he contends.

And, Jensen adds, “If Iraq is able in five years to produce 5 million barrels a day, that will lower world oil prices, with the net effect that the U.S. economy will be doing better. And that buys time for the United States for renewable energy.”

But if the region remains tumultuous, even increased oil output may not lower oil prices. Jeffrey, of the
Washington Institute, argues that the hopes for a political transformation of the Middle East weren’t substantial enough to have justified a debt-financed war. “If you are allowed to fund a war on debt,” he says, “then you can fund other things on debt. The war was a bad symbol of that kind of thinking.”

As for hopes for a more stable and peaceful Middle East — as important as oil output is in keeping oil prices low — Jeffrey says, “The war was seen by some . . . as a good thing — that we would be able to transform a region that badly needs transformation. I don’t think we can affect the region, and I don’t think we did affect it by invading Iraq.”

BACKGROUND

The Buildup

The idea of toppling Hussein by invading Iraq had been circulating in Washington since the end of the 42-day Persian Gulf War. In that conflict, President George H. W. Bush — father of President George W. Bush — assembled a massive, U.S.-led international military force to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait, which Iraq had invaded and occupied.

Bush decided against extending the war to force Hussein from power, fearing the regional effects of a U.S.-led regime change. He hoped the Persian Gulf War would encourage the Iraqi military to do the job.

But when, in the immediate aftermath of the war, Shiites in southern Iraq and Kurds in northern Iraq rose up against Hussein, the United States withheld aid to the rebels, in part because the administration feared that the Shiites would secede from Iraq, which would benefit Iran. Hussein’s forces crushed the Iraqi rebels.

In response, the United Nations in March 1991 authorized a “no-fly zone” for Iraqi warplanes in the north and south, enforced by the United States and its allies. Meanwhile, trade sanctions against Iraq on oil exports and imports of militarily useful goods, authorized by the U.N. after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, remained in place.

These measures did not prevent Hussein from amassing WMDs, argued Washington conservatives who wanted the Clinton administration to do more than try to slowly erode Hussein’s rule by maintaining the no-fly zones and sanctions.

The call for toppling Hussein enjoyed a far more sympathetic reception in the George W. Bush administration, which began in early 2001. Bush already saw Hussein as a long-range threat. And his deputy defense secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, was one of the leading advocates of toppling Hussein.

Still, the Bush administration had no immediate plans to invade Iraq. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States immediately changed things. In its aftermath, questions arose (later confirmed) about whether the administration had downplayed accurate warnings that al Qaeda was planning an attack within the United States. After the 9/11 attacks, officials depicted Hussein as a danger that the United States could not ignore.

Nearly a year after 9/11, the invasion plan surfaced in a Sept. 8, 2002, article in The New York Times. It cited unnamed Bush administration officials as saying Iraq was searching for nuclear bomb materials. Iraq had had a nuclear weapons program before the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but it was dismantled after discovery by international nonproliferation inspectors.

A series of other episodes in 2002 made clear that the administration was planning war. In his State of the Union address that year, Bush declared that Iraq, together with Iran and North Korea, formed an “axis of evil.”

In June 2002, Bush told the graduating class at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point: “If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.”

And in August, Vice President Cheney declared that Hussein was on the verge of obtaining nuclear weapons. “The risks of inaction,” he said, “are greater than the risks of action.”

By October, Congress had authorized the president to “use the armed forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate . . . against the continuing threat posed by Iraq.” Intelligence agencies supported the belief that Hussein had non-nuclear chemical and biological WMDs, but they debated whether Iraq was trying to acquire nuclear weapons. Intelligence analysts were even more skeptical that the Iraqi dictatorship had ties to al Qaeda and the Sept. 11 plot.

Skeptics attempted their own public and private information campaign against an Iraq War. Heavyweight Republican foreign policy establishment figures including Brent Scowcroft, a former national security adviser in the