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10 years after the Iraq War authorization, what have we accomplished?

Stephen Zunes | Oct. 15, 2012
Viewpoint

Tuesday marks the 10th anniversary of the fateful vote by Congress to authorize the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The Bush administration, which was ultimately responsible for the illegal and unnecessary war, is no longer in office. However, there are leading members of Congress -- as well as prominent Obama administration officials who were in Congress at the time -- who also share responsibility for the war because of their vote to authorize it. The Democratic Party controlled the Senate at the time and could have stopped it. Yet despite strong pressure from their anti-war constituents, a sizable number of their representatives in Congress chose to support Bush instead.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops came out strongly against the war, yet the majority of Catholic members of Congress voted in favor. Similarly, virtually every mainline Protestant denomination also went on record in opposition, but the majority of Protestant members of Congress similarly voted their approval.

While some of these House and Senate members have subsequently admitted to having made a "mistake" in voting for the authorization, most knew full well beforehand about the likely absence of the dangerous weapons and weapons systems the Bush administration alleged the Iraqi regime had somehow procured, and about the disastrous consequences from a U.S. invasion. In scores of policy reports, newspaper articles, academic journals and other sources, the tragic results of war and a refutation of falsehoods being put forward by the Bush administration to justify it were available to every member of the House and Senate.

Large numbers of scholars of the Middle East, Middle Eastern political leaders, former State Department and intelligence officials and others alerted members of Congress to the fact that a U.S. invasion would likely result in a bloody insurgency, a rise in Islamist extremism and terrorism, increased sectarian and ethnic conflict, and related problems. Few people familiar with Iraq were at all surprised that the U.S. invasion resulted in such tragedy.

The 2002 vote authorizing the invasion was not like the vote on the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing military action in Vietnam, in which Congress had no time for hearings or debate and where members naively believed they were simply authorizing limited short-term retaliatory strikes in response to a specific series of alleged incidents. Congress had many months to investigate and debate the administration's claims regarding the alleged Iraqi threat as well as the likely implications of the war, which they knew entailed a full-scale invasion of a sovereign nation and a subsequent military occupation of an indefinite period.

Indeed, despite being the most critical foreign policy legislation of a generation, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Joe Biden provided only two days of hearings and refused to allow virtually any opponents of the war to testify.

There was never any credible evidence that Iraq possessed chemical or biological weapons, offensive delivery systems, a nuclear program, or ties to al-Qaida. Indeed, former U.N. weapons inspectors and scores of other independent strategic analysts shared with congressional offices an abundance of evidence suggested that the Bush administration was lying about so-called "weapons of mass destruction," Iraqi links to al-Qaida and other rationalizations for the war.

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 had not (which, as it ends up, had also been destroyed) had long since expired and was therefore no longer of weapons grade. There was no evidence that Iraq had any delivery systems for such weapons, either. The strict international embargo, in effect since 1990, against imports of any additional materials needed for the manufacture of WMDs, combined with Iraq's inability to manufacture such weapons or delivery systems themselves without detection, made any claims that Iraq possessed "significant chemical and biological weapons capability" transparently false to anyone who cared to investigate the matter.

Until public opinion came out decisively against the war in 2005, most pro-war members of Congress -- including Democratic Sens. John Kerry, John Edwards, Hillary Clinton, Dianne Feinstein and Joe Biden -- continued to defend the vote even after acknowledging the absence of WMDs or al-Qaida ties, thereby effectively admitting that their vote was not about defending the United States against a foreign threat, but ultimately about oil and empire.

Given the tragic consequences of the war, one would have thought it would have seriously damaged their political careers. Instead, many of them were rewarded.

Though only a minority of congressional Democrats voted to authorize the war in 2002 and a large majority of Democrats nationally opposed the invasion, the Democratic Party chose two unrepentant war supporters -- Kerry and Edwards -- as their 2004 nominees for president and vice president.

Four years later, Sen. Barack Obama defeated pro-war challengers for both the Democratic presidential nomination and the general election on his promise to not just end the Iraq War, but to "end the mindset that got us into war in the first place." However, he ended up choosing supporters of the Iraq War for most of his administration's key foreign policy and national security positions, including secretary of state, secretary of defense, secretary of Homeland Security, chief of staff, and vice president.

Meanwhile, congressional Democrats who voted to authorize the war hold such key positions as Senate majority leader, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, assistant House minority leader, and ranking members of key House committees. Similarly, Republicans who backed the invasion not only head the important House committees but also make up the entire Republican leadership in both houses.

The willingness of both Democratic and Republican voters to continue to re-elect those who, in that fateful vote 10 years ago, made possible the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq sends a dangerous message that members of Congress need not worry about the political consequences of authorizing an illegal and immoral war.

[Stephen Zunes is professor of politics and chair of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of San Francisco.]

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