



Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on January 5, 2012

Exiting Iraq

You'd never know that a signature of Obama's 2008 campaign was his assertion that the invasion and occupation of Iraq was a terrible mistake. (Actually, it was a crime, but let that go.) This was the main way he sought to distinguish himself as a candidate from his rival, Hillary Clinton, who had voted to authorize George W. Bush to use force against the Iraqi people on the thinnest of pretexts. True, you didn't have to scratch very deep before discovering a waffle: At one point in 2008, Obama said he didn't know how he would have voted on the authorization of force had he been in the Senate at the time.



Nevertheless, it is remarkable to see Obama talking about an aggressive war this way. It is also remarkable he could praise the troops without acknowledging the mind-numbing mess Iraq has been left in. It is [estimated](#) that over 100,000 Iraqis died direct violent deaths from the war. And *Lancet* has [attributed](#) a million excess deaths to the invasion, war, and occupation. Over four million Iraqis are refugees, about half of whom left the country and have yet to return to their homes.

Obama noted the American casualties but, of course, omitted any mention of Iraqi casualties. They don't matter.

War crimes abounded, like the ones in Fallujah, Haditha, and Abu Ghraib. These horrors will be remembered forever — if not in the United States then certainly throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds — as will the U.S.-supported sectarian cleansing of Baghdad.

Obama concluded his remarks with the standard pablum about sacrifice and American exceptionalism:

You will know that you answered when your country called; you served a cause greater than yourselves; you helped forge a just and lasting peace with Iraq, and among all nations.

Nonsense. The "country" didn't call. It was just a hack politician with an agenda on the line. I'm reminded of a scene in Paddy Chayefsky's antiwar movie, *The Americanization of Emily*, when the protagonist says, "We ... perpetuate war by exalting its sacrifices." Portray war as noble, and many will be eager to be sent — and the country's "misleaders" will be eager to send them.



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There was no great cause: American hegemony is not a great cause. Many people died and otherwise had their lives ruined, and Iraq has been left a shambles; sectarian violence is again erupting. To be sure, Saddam Hussein was a nasty dictator, but left in his place is a state divided by sectarian violence and ruled by an authoritarian prime minister under a constitution that bears little resemblance to any protection of freedom.

Even in the American empire's own terms there's nothing to brag about. Unsurprisingly, the Iraqi government is aligned with Iran. The U.S. military got none of the permanent bases it wanted, and even the American oil companies lost out on the loot.

Obama will campaign on how he ended the war — which began not in 2003 but in 1991; the U.S. government tormented the Iraqi people for 20 years! — and conservatives will attack him for it. Both sides will conveniently forget that (1) the U.S. government was obligated to leave on Dec. 31, 2011, under an agreement signed by Bush, and (2) Obama tried his damndest to get the Iraqi leaders to ask the U.S. military to stay. (Contrary to claims, not all troops have left.)

And let's be clear: An exit from Iraq hardly constitutes an exit from the Middle East. The troops moved down the road to Kuwait, "repostured" for future use.

Meanwhile, sabers are being rattled in the direction of Iran and Syria, where covert warfare is already being waged.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at [The Future of Freedom Foundation](#) and editor of *The Freeman* magazine.



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