



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 7, 2011

Iraq War: What Has the Mission Accomplished?

For a few brief, shining moments, it looked like another “splendid little war,” to borrow Secretary of State John Hay’s description of the U.S. triumph over Spain in 1898. Just six weeks after American and allied coalition forces had begun “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” President George W. Bush landed on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln to announce the end of major combat operations. Above and behind the President, a banner announced triumphantly, “Mission Accomplished.”



Saddam Hussein and his lieutenants were now deposed and somewhere in hiding. Iraq’s 26 million people were now free. Soon coalition forces would begin finding and dismantling those “weapons of mass destruction” that had been the central point in the Bush administration’s most persuasive rationale for going to war. The blitz to Baghdad had, indeed, been as close to the predicted “cakewalk” as a military conflict might be. Yet despite the brief and one-sided nature of the conquest and the apparent lack of significant resistance by Iraqi defense forces, President Bush compared the triumph to such epic World War II struggles as the invasion of Normandy and the battle of Iwo Jima.

“Operation Iraqi Freedom was carried out with a combination of precision and speed and boldness the enemy did not expect, and the world had not seen before,” Bush boasted. To be sure, the President did say there was difficult and dangerous work ahead. But he was certain that freedom had arrived in Iraq and that Iraqis were rejoicing over it. “In the images of celebrating Iraqis, we have also seen the ageless appeal of human freedom,” he said. “When freedom takes hold, men and women turn to the peaceful pursuit of a better life.”

Or sometimes they turn to rioting, looting, and tribal and sectarian violence, along with guerrilla warfare against the foreign forces occupying their land. As the glow of victory faded to scenes of government offices, libraries, and museums being looted and vandalized, chaos spread through Iraq, and those reputed weapons of mass destruction were not found. The message on the banner that hung over the President’s triumphant speech was quoted again and again, with more than a hint of irony. “Mission Not Accomplished,” *Time* magazine said on its cover in September 2003. Inside, *Time* noted



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that in the few short months since the official end of combat operations, 170 U.S. soldiers had died in Iraq and two potential Iraqi leaders and a United Nations representative had been killed by terrorists. The magazine quoted Ahmed Chalabi, an Iraqi exile the Bush administration favored as a new leader for the country, observing: "When the U.S. said we are not liberators, we are an occupying force, the views of the people changed."

In May of 2005, Justin Raimondo, editor of [Antiwar.com](#), offered his assessment of what had been achieved in Iraq to that point: "Mission accomplished? If the mission was to create conditions giving rise to sectarian violence, a growing insurgency and all-out civil war, while dragging [the United States] to the brink of bankruptcy, then, yes, you might say that."

Lies and Deception

But what *was* the mission in Iraq? It began as a quest for "regime change" in Baghdad, a goal that became official U.S. policy when Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998. Then came the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the announcement by President Bush of a "war on terrorism." In his State of the Union Address the following January, Bush identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "axis of evil," though 15 of the 19 hijackers who carried out the 9/11 attacks were from Saudi Arabia, a nation counted as an ally in the war against terror. But the "axis" nations either had or were pursuing "weapons of mass destruction," the President said. "I will not wait on events, while dangers gather," Bush warned, to bipartisan applause. "I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons." While America was still at war in Afghanistan and remains so to this day, Iraq, where Americans had fought to liberate Kuwait 11 years earlier, became the new focal point of the "war on terrorism." It was not as though Bush hadn't warned us: "We are at the beginning of our efforts in Afghanistan," he said back on November 8, 2001, "and Afghanistan is only the beginning of our efforts in the world."

If the "Iraqi dictator" Saddam Hussein did not disarm pursuant to UN resolutions, Bush said repeatedly, "We will lead a coalition to disarm him." Yet when the war began, it was "Operation Iraqi Freedom." (It might have been called Operation Iraq Liberation, but the acronym would have been embarrassing to the United States and our allies, who insisted that the invasion of the country with the world's second largest supply of oil reserves had nothing to do with *oil*.) So, was the primary mission to capture and destroy those weapons of mass destruction, or to liberate the Iraqi people from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein? Was it part of the effort to "promote peace and stability in the broader Middle East" that the President described in his State of the Union Address of 2005? Or the latest advance in the "global democratic revolution" that he heralded in November of 2003?

The allegations concerning "weapons of mass destruction" were what "sold" the war to an American public eager to be reassured that our government was taking action to prevent another 9/11. Somehow the dramatic nature of the charges overshadowed the questionable credibility of the sources. There was the aforementioned Ahmed Chalabi, the "George Washington of Iraq," and leader of the Iraqi exile group that called itself the Iraqi National Congress. Born in Baghdad to a prominent Shia family in 1944, Chalabi left Iraq with his family in 1956 and spent most of the years since in the United States and England. His activities in the Middle East included the founding of the Petra Bank in Jordan in 1977 and his conviction in absentia of bank fraud by a Jordanian military tribunal. Chalabi lobbied successfully for the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998, which included a \$97 million earmark for Iraqi opposition groups, with nearly all of it funneled through the Iraqi National Congress.



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With the assistance of the prominent Washington lobbying firm, BKSH & Associates, Chalabi brought allegations of Iraq's biological and chemical weapons and Saddam Hussein's alleged ties to al-Qaeda to the attention of the Bush administration, particularly through Vice President Dick Cheney; Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz; and Richard Perle, former Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration and chairman at the time of the Defense Policy Advisory Board. All three are members of the influential Council on Foreign Relations, as are *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller, who provided frequent front-page coverage of the allegations by Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress, and *Washington Post* columnist Jim Hoagland, who praised Chalabi as an admirable force for Iraqi democracy. Officials in London may have been a bit more skeptical, as a secret document written in 2002 by the British Overseas and Defence Secretariat reportedly referred to Chalabi as "a convicted fraudster popular on Capitol Hill."

Chalabi returned to Iraq following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and was installed on Iraq's interim governing council by the Coalition Provisional Authority. He became President of the council in September 2003 and served as Oil Minister and then Deputy Prime Minister in 2005. But neither Chalabi nor any member of the Iraqi National Congress won a seat in the elections for the newly created parliament in December of 2005. Yet even as his pre-war stories about weapons of mass destruction proved false, the would-be leader retained the high esteem of the Bush administration, appearing at the President's 2004 State of the Union Address as the guest of First Lady Laura Bush. The following month, Chalabi boasted of how the misinformation he and his Iraqi National Congress provided led to the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. "We are heroes in error," he said in a February 2004 interview with the *Telegraph* of London. "That tyrant Saddam is gone and the Americans are in Baghdad. What was said before is not important."

To back up Chalabi's claims, Washington officials utilized a story provided by Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, code-named, appropriately enough, "Curveball." An Iraqi defector living in Germany, "Curveball" was identified as a Baghdad-trained chemical engineer by the German secret service, which questioned him extensively throughout 2000 about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction.

"I had a problem with the Saddam regime," Janabi told the British newspaper the *Guardian* in an interview published this February. "I wanted to get rid of him and now I had the chance." So he provided the intelligence officials the information they were looking for about mobile chemical labs and "blowweapons trucks" to spread chemical poisons through a targeted city.

"They were asking me about pumps for filtration, how to make detergent after the reaction," he told the *Guardian*. "Any engineer who studied in this field can explain or answer any question they asked." But Janabi's lies were exposed that year when German officials found and interviewed another Iraqi émigré, Dr. Basil Latif, who had been Janabi's boss at the Military Industries Commission in Iraq. According to the *Guardian*, British officials were also present when Latif denied claims of blowweapons trucks, as well as Janabi's story that 12 people had died in an accident at a secret blowweapons facility in Baghdad. When confronted with his former boss's denials, Janabi admitted he had been lying.

That should have been the end of the story. But Janabi said the German intelligence officials began questioning him again about the alleged weapons in the spring of 2002, which was, perhaps not coincidentally, around the time Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair were beginning to make the case for military action against Iraq. Janabi claimed his interrogators told him his pregnant Moroccan-born wife, in Spain at the time, would not be allowed to join him in Germany unless he cooperated. "He



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says, you work with us or your wife and child go to Morocco,” Janabi told the *Guardian*.

He was questioned again about blowweapons trucks just a month before U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell presented the case against Iraq to the United Nations in February 2003. Though both the German officials and the CIA expressed doubts about Janabi’s claims, the “intelligence” he provided became a key point in Powell’s speech at the United Nations. “We have firsthand descriptions of biological weapons factories on wheels and rails,” Powell said in a speech carried live on radio and television around the world. “The source was an eyewitness, an Iraqi chemical engineer who supervised one of these facilities. He was present during biological agent production runs. He was also at the site when an accident occurred in 1998. Twelve technicians died.”

After the speech, Janabi told the *Guardian*, he complained to the German officials that they had broken an agreement that they would not share anything he had told them with another country. He said he was told not to speak and was placed in confinement for around 90 days. In other words, until the invasion was complete and the “Mission Accomplished” banner hung over the *USS Abraham Lincoln* as President Bush made his triumphant speech.

With the “intelligence” provided by such reliable sources as the “fraudster” Chalabi and the prevaricating “Curveball,” all that remained was to find some equally reliable confirmation of Saddam’s plans to share his non-existent weapons with al-Qaeda terrorists. That was provided by an al-Qaeda commander named Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, captured by Pakistani authorities and imprisoned at the U.S. Air Base in Bagram, Afghanistan, in November 2001. The CIA took custody of the prisoner and shipped him to Egypt for “enhanced interrogation.” After 80 hours in a tiny cage, followed by about 15 minutes of solid punching by his interrogators, Libi told them what they and officials in Washington wanted to know: Saddam was training al-Qaeda in chemical and biological warfare. That, too, made its way into Powell’s speech: “I can trace the story of a senior terrorist operative telling how Iraq provided training in these weapons to al-Qaeda. Fortunately this operative is now detained, and he has told his story. I will relate it to you now as he himself described it.”

And so he did, though Powell did not say, and quite likely did not know, that the operative told that story in the hope that his interrogators would let him go on living. After the invasion and the fruitless search for those “weapons of mass destruction,” the FBI asked Libi why he lied. As Michael Isikoff and David Corn related in their book, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal and the Selling of the Iraq War*, Libi had a simple explanation: “They were killing me,” he said, “I had to tell them something.”

Thus did the United States, England, Germany, Egypt, and other nations gain the “actionable intelligence” that Bush, Blair, and their coalition allies regarded as a justification for a war that is now in its ninth year — a war that has thus far brought about the death of more than 4,000 American military personnel and, by the most conservative estimates, some 100,000 Iraqis. According to a 2008 Brookings Institution report, 15 to 20 percent of Iraq’s population, about 4.7 million people, had been displaced from their homes by the wars, with 2.7 million still in the country and 2 million having fled, mostly to neighboring lands. The “collateral damage” might also include the harm done to the reputation of the United States and the reliability and credibility of its intelligence gathering and the public statements of our highest-ranking officials. Contrary to one of Ronald Reagan’s favorite one-liners, liberals aren’t the only ones who “know so much that isn’t so.”

The Price We Pay

But is the United States in a stronger military and strategic position today for having eliminated an



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enemy in Baghdad and establishing a government (presumably) friendly to the United States on the border of Iran? On the contrary, Iran, a “rogue nation” believed to be building nuclear weapons and wishing the destruction of Israel, is in a stronger position than ever relative to its neighbor, Iraq, as Peter W. Galbraith described in his 2008 book, *Unintended Consequences: How the Iraq War Strengthened America’s Enemies*.

“Iran is the winner of the war that George W. Bush lost,” Galbraith declared. “Iran’s closest allies in the world are the Shiite parties that, thanks to the American invasion, today run Iraq’s central government. The Badr Organization, a Shiite militia, dominates the upper ranks of the Iraqi Army and effectively controls the police. Iran founded the Badr Organization (the Badr Corps) in Iran in the 1980s, providing funding, training, arms, and officers. Iran’s President Ahmadinejad has said his country will fill the vacuum left by the United States in Iraq, and he is well placed to do so.”

Our all-volunteer armed forces have been stretched exceedingly thin by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with many servicemen doing multiple tours in one or another of those combat zones. And at a combined cost of \$16 billion a month, the wars are stretching our finances even thinner and contributing mightily to a national debt of more than \$14 trillion and rising. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz predicted last fall that the two wars will eventually cost the United States \$4 to \$6 trillion when all expenses, including care for wounded military personnel, are factored in. And, he noted, they are “the first wars in American history financed totally on the credit card.”

The Iraq War also strained relations with longtime allies, including Turkey, cited by the Bush administration as a model Muslim nation. A Pew Charitable Trust poll in 2000 showed 60 percent of Turks had a favorable view of the United States. In the summer of 2007, Pew took another poll and found only 9 percent viewed the United States favorably, while 83 percent had an unfavorable view. Turkish leaders were unimpressed by the case U.S. officials made for the war, and the population was overwhelmingly against it. “Living next to Iraq, they did not see the threat that the Bush administration hyped to the American people, but did foresee the chaos the war would produce,” Galbraith wrote.

The constitutional authority of the U.S. Congress suffered further erosion as Congress once again ducked its responsibility by passing, in October of 2002, an “authorization” for the use of military force that left it up to the President to decide whether or not to undertake a war with Iraq. In it, the Congress referred six times to Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction.” By allowing itself to be duped and manipulated by the executive branch, Congress contributed greatly to the decline of its favorability rating with the American public to somewhere under 10 percent.

When President George H.W. Bush went to war over Iraq’s invasion and occupation of neighboring Kuwait in 1991, he declared it was the beginning of a “new world order.” “When we are successful and we will be,” he promised upon launching that war, “we will have a real chance at this new world order, an order in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfill the promise and vision of the UN’s founders.” George W. Bush did not get the exact United Nations authorization he sought for his Iraq War, but he prosecuted it anyway, thus demonstrating he was more eager to enforce UN resolutions against Iraq than the United Nations was. In the fog of confusion over the Bush administration’s “Heinz 57” variety of reasons for going to war with Iraq, the President himself made emphatically clear that only one thing really mattered. On November 8, 2002, the very day the Security Council of the United Nations passed Resolution 1441 ordering Iraq to eliminate its weapons of mass destruction, President George W. Bush declared: “America will be making only one determination: is Iraq meeting the terms of the Security Council resolution or not?... If Iraq fails to comply, the United



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States and other nations will disarm Saddam Hussein.”

Liberation? What Liberation?

Yet the military mission in Iraq might also be classified as a “humanitarian intervention,” not unlike President Clinton’s air war over Kosovo, or President Obama’s UN-sanctioned air war on Libya. For, as we have noted, it was code-named not “Operation Disarm Iraq,” which might better have reflected the national security concerns the President, Vice President, and other administration officials espoused as the central reason for our war preparations. Instead, it was called “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” suggesting America’s primary motive was to liberate the Iraqi people. So how has that ageless appeal of human freedom fared since the Bush brigades arrived to set it free?

Well, it wasn’t long before the Iraqis learned firsthand that American liberty is not as easily exportable as American military force. What they saw from the earliest days of the occupation was not the coming of a new “sweet land of liberty,” but the same running roughshod over Arab people that has long been seen in other parts of the Middle East. In *Bush in Babylon*, published in the summer of 2003, author Tariq Ali reported: “U.S. soldiers are bulldozing houses to punish whole families whose sons or fathers are suspected of belonging to the resistance. Photographs of young boys, their arms tied behind their backs while being interrogated by U.S. soldiers, are reminiscent of Palestine.”

After the 1991 Gulf War, U.S. and British planes continued to patrol Iraqi skies, enforcing a “no fly zone,” while an American-led economic embargo of Iraq had resulted by 1996 in the death by disease and malnutrition of half a million Iraqi children under the age of five, according to a United Nations report. On the May 12, 1996 edition of CBS’s *60 Minutes*, Lesley Stahl questioned then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright about that:

Stahl: We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean, that’s more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?

Albright: I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it.

Not surprisingly, video clips and printed reports of that interview were widely circulated in the Arab world. When the scandal of abuses at the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq became front-page and ‘round-the-clock TV news in 2004, the late Joseph Sobran was moved to observe: “There goes all the good will we built up through years of bombing Arab cities and starving Arab children.”

Perhaps Iraqis have fared better since then — then again, maybe not. A Human Rights Watch press release in April 2010 described the following: “Detainees in a secret Baghdad detention facility were hung upside-down, deprived of air, kicked, whipped, beaten, given electric shocks, and sodomized.”

It’s almost as though Saddam Hussein had never been deposed, pursued, captured, tried, and hanged. But at least the press has been freed in Iraq to report government abuses — sort of. Sometimes. Restrictions on the press had been loosened somewhat from what have been called the “bad old days” of 2004-2005 when the media were under attack for allegedly aiding the insurgency and the offices of al-Jazeera and other satellite television stations were shut down. But in April of 2009 the Iraqi military put local journalists on notice that their news outlets could be shut down for misquoting government officials.

In November of 2010, according to a [globalpost.com](#) dispatch, Iraqi security forces arrested two employees of Baghdadiya, a major television network, and accused them of working with terrorists to shut down the station’s power. “But media watchdogs said the action was more likely taken in response



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to the station's programming, which had at times been critical, or satirical, of the Iraqi government," the report said. Press freedom, however sporadic, had fared better than other aspects of life in Iraq, according to Ziad al Jillily, head of Iraq's Journalistic Freedom Observatory. Iraqis, he said, "still have no services, no good economy and still don't have the simplest daily needs. The only thing they got was freedom of speech. That's all."

A U.S. State Department report on religious freedom around the world, released last November, named Iraq as one of the worst offenders in failing to punish violence against non-Muslim minorities. A Bloomberg News Service story about the report's release noted: "Attacks against Christians in Iraq have persisted since the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003. Before the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime there were about 1.4 million Christians in Iraq. Since then, about 50 percent have fled, according to the United Nations Human Rights Council."

A statistical report by the Brookings Institution earlier this year puts the number of insurgents killed in Iraq ("Roughly Estimated") at 55,000, and cites a secret U.S. military report, included in the hundreds of thousands of classified documents released by WikiLeaks, that estimates the number of civilian deaths at over 100,000. Other sources have placed the civilian death toll as high as 600,000. Apparently former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had reason to wonder, as he expressed in one of his memos, if we were not creating more terrorists than we were killing, since estimated insurgency strength climbed from 15,000 in November of 2003 to 70,000 in June 2007. The number of displaced people inside Iraq is believed to be 2,225,000, while another 2.1 to 2.25 million Iraqis are refugees in Syria and Jordan.

Roughly 2,000 physicians are among those killed since the 2003 invasion, and another 12,000 have left the country. About 40 percent of those employed in various professions have fled Iraq. Unemployment ranges from 27 percent to as high as 60 percent in some areas, and inflation has increased the cost of goods on the Consumer Price Index by 50 percent. As of June 2007, chronic malnutrition persisted among 28 percent of Iraqi children.

Assuming optimistic American reports on how well things were progressing were available in translation, Iraqis might have had a hard time finding light by which to read them. In July 2007, Ryan Crocker, then the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Baghdad residents could count on only "an hour or two a day" of electricity. Only 22 percent of the water treatment plants damaged during the war had been repaired and 30 percent of Iraqis were without access to adequate water supplies. Were she to visit Iraq, former Alaska Governor and Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin might want to ask people there the question she has been pleased to ask American audiences in the age of Obama: "How's all this hopey-changeey stuff workin' out for ya?"

Apologists for Bush are apt to blame faulty intelligence and bad advice from his subordinates for his ill-fated decision to launch a needless war in Iraq. But the President could have found some better advice close to home. He failed to heed (and possibly even failed to read) his father's purported reasoning for halting the Gulf War once Iraq was driven out of Kuwait. In their 1998 book, *A World Transformed*, the ex-President and his former National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, explained why they resisted the temptation to go "on to Baghdad": "Had we gone the invasion route, the United States could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land. It would have been a dramatically different — and perhaps barren — outcome."

For the outcome of the mission known as Operation Iraqi Freedom, "barren" might be too kind a word.



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