

EDITORIAL

## Bush and Iraq

A poll of Americans taken in March of this year found that 57 percent of those polled believed that Iraq under Saddam Hussein substantially supported al-Qaeda or was directly involved in the Sept. 11 attacks.

Where did they get that misguided idea? Why, it was from their president, their vice president, their defense secretary, their national security adviser and other key players in the war on terror, of course.

Through assertion, implication and innuendo, the Bush administration—backed by an amen chorus of talk-show babblers and oped writers who filled in the blanks that White House rhetoric artfully left—has labored to plant the notion that invading Iraq was a logical, urgent response to Sept. 11.

What other impressions did the Bush team work to insinuate into public opinion, before and after its preemptive strike at Hussein?

- That Iraq had a robust weapons program and was ready and willing to hand off biological or chemical weapons to a terrorist group; and that it would soon have a nuclear bomb.
- That the bulk of the Iraqi people would greet Americans as liberators, with cheers and flowers.
- That the Bush Doctrine of unilateral and preemptive military action against suspected enemies would make the United States safer and more respected.
- That the Abu Ghraib prison abuses were a surprising, inexplicable outburst of evil by a small set of reservists from rural Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia.

Let's review how those claims are faring in the court of reality:

**Iraq and al-Qaeda:** The Sept. 11 Commission, evenly split by party and led by a Republican, issued this conclusion last week: "We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al-Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States. . . . There is no convincing evidence that any government financially supported al-Qaeda before 11 September."

**Weapons of mass destruction:** As you may recall, the top American WMD hunter, David Kay, told Congress in January: "We were almost all wrong" about Hussein's WMD capability at the time of the March 2003 invasion. (That "we" includes this Editorial Board.)

The post-invasion hunt for WMD has produced two finds: one old artillery shell with the nerve agent sarin, another with mustard gas. The President has conceded that the main evidence he cited for Hussein's nuclear program was a forgery.

They love us, they really love us: The appallingly bloody insurgency in Iraq is now more than a year old. At least 70 people died in a wave of car bombings in Iraq last week. The Associated Press reported last week that a poll taken by the Coalition Provisional Authority found that 92 percent of Iraqis polled considered Americans "occupiers." A whopping 2 percent thought of us as "liberators."

**The Bush Doctrine:** A new group of 27 former military leaders and diplomats, including many Republicans appointed or promoted by President Bush's father, issued a blistering critique of the Bush foreign policy last week.

Calling his policies “overbearing,” “insensitive” and “disdainful,” the group said, as a result: “Our security has been weakened. . . . Never in the two and a quarter centuries of our history has the United States been so isolated among the nations, so broadly feared and distrusted.”

**Abu Ghraib:** The administration’s attempt to defuse the Abu Ghraib furor by blaming it all on a few low-level miscreants has triggered a flood of contrary evidence. It’s clear now that the military and administration had been warned early and often, by multiple sources, about abuses. It’s clear that dubious practices at prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan had been debated at high levels in the Pentagon and White House, and that military attorneys of high integrity had opposed efforts to treat the Geneva Conventions as a dead letter in the war on terror.

Ed Koch, when he was the voluble mayor of New York City, used to love to ask, “How’m I doin’?”

Given this sorry roster of fibs, flubs and fantasies, the Bush White House ought to be afraid to ask the American public the same question.

Instead, it has entered full-tilt spin mode. To counter the Sept. 11 panel’s flat rejection of its implicit rationale for the Iraq invasion, the President, vice president and their surrogates have split semantic hairs like finicky medieval theologians.

It is true, as the President stressed last week, that he never flat-out said Saddam Hussein helped plan the Sept. 11 attacks.

It is also beside the point.

He said many other things, misleading things, to plant the idea that invading Iraq was a logical extension of—rather than a fatal distraction from—the effort to dismantle al-Qaeda.

In a nationally televised address in October 2002, just days before Congress passed a resolution authorizing force against Iraq, he said: “Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists. An alliance with terrorists could allow the Iraqi regime to attack America without leaving any fingerprints.”

In the letter the President sent Congress explaining his decision to invade, he wrote: “The use of armed force against Iraq is consistent with the United States and other countries continuing to take the necessary actions against international terrorists and terrorist organizations, including those nations, organizations, or persons who planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.”

What impression was he trying to leave there? We report, you decide.

Much of the evidence that administration officials cited to back up the claims in that speech and that letter have since been debunked or called into serious question. The Sept. 11 panel said flatly that the plot leader, Mohamed Atta, did not meet in Prague with an Iraqi agent, a favorite canard of Vice President Cheney. The CIA never confirmed Bush’s repeated claim that Iraqis trained al-Qaeda members in bomb-making.

Yes, there were contacts between Osama bin Laden and ranking Iraqis a dozen or so years ago.

And the United States helped arm bin Laden to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s; the Sept. 11 hijackers were trained at American flight schools. Does that mean the U.S. government was in league with al-Qaeda? That, of course, is preposterous.

There may well have been, as the Weekly Standard magazine has reported, a “non-aggression pact” between Osama and Saddam. Those who harp on that never answer an obvious question: Why would close collaborators need to be prodded by a third party (Sudan) to agree to a “non-aggression” pact?

The evidence cited of Iraqi-Osama collaboration was always, at its strongest, tissue thin. Now, pieces of it appear to have been, like many of the wilder WMD claims, churned up by the Iraqi National Congress exile group to give the Bush White House the terrifying tales it needed to sell regime change (the INC's goal) to the American public.

Did the President and his top advisers lie to the American people? Or were they themselves deceived, by the INC, faulty intelligence and their own tendency to hear what they wanted to hear?

For now, those questions are unanswerable and essentially besides the point.

What matters is that Americans grasp a central point: The multipronged rationale behind this rushed invasion has been revealed as a house of cards.

(Deposing Hussein always was a legitimate strategic goal, given his history as an aggressor and butcher—but not in this reckless way, with these wrongful justifications.)

Consider the house of cards, and two other glaring facts:

1. Preparation for the invasion's aftermath was tragically inept. That easily predictable failure has cost many Iraqis, Americans and others their lives.
2. The prison abuses, which stem from poor planning for occupation and a bid to place U.S. behavior above international law, have lost America the moral high ground it rightfully occupied on Sept. 12, 2001.

Now, ask yourself, along with those 27 American diplomats and warriors: Have the last two years made America more secure, more respected?

The answer is obvious and appalling. The answer is no.