

Center for American Progress Action Fund



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Iraq: Five Years after President Bush Declared "Mission Accomplished"

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Five years ago today, President Bush addressed our nation and the world from the USS Abraham Lincoln, only forty-two days after he ordered the invasion of Iraq. He declared "Mission Accomplished."

1,827 days later, the U.S. occupation of Iraq continues, and our "mission" remains undefined and open-ended.

I volunteered to serve in Vietnam. When I left Vietnam in 1967, President Johnson, determined not to be the first American president to lose a war, continued to convey a message of progress and optimism on the ground. I, like most of those who answered the call to service, left Vietnam believing that additional American troops would succeed in defeating the Viet Cong. We believed the President when he told us that we had a plan to win in Vietnam, and I believed at that time that we could win militarily.

In 1982, President Reagan sent U.S. Marines to Lebanon as part of an international force to quell the violence following the Israeli invasion. Speaker O'Neill sent me to Beirut to get a better picture of what was happening on the ground. I found unclear rules-of-engagement, limited patrols, and our Marines based in a fixed defensive position around the airport. Over time, the original humanitarian mission morphed into one where we picked sides with one of the competing forces. Following the barracks bombing, where we lost 241 Marines, President Reagan said that America would not walk away from our desire to produce "a unified democratic Lebanon." Four months later, our Marines left Beirut.

Nearly a decade after Beirut, we found ourselves involved in another military intervention with unclear guidelines and an ill-conceived mission. President Bush dispatched U.S. forces to assist in the delivery of humanitarian aid to the people of Somalia. I told President Bush that while I sympathized with the goals of the deployment, I didn't think it was in our national interest and I was concerned that once American forces were deployed we wouldn't be able to get out easily. He assured me personally that the mission was limited to humanitarian aid, and that all U.S. personnel would be out of Somalia by Inauguration Day 1993. As everyone knows, the mission changed and suddenly we became 'nation builders' in a country ruled by warlords and paramilitary groups. We were forced out after the "Blackhawk Down" incident, and 430 days after inauguration day, the last American troops were withdrawn.

A decade after Somalia began the quagmire we are in today.

President Bush went to war on a flawed rationale without a well-defined strategy or clear-cut and achievable goals. I was skeptical about giving the President authorization to go to war in 2003, but I gave this President the benefit of the doubt. That decision was a mistake.

In Vietnam, we never had a strategy to win. In Iraq, we have never had a strategy.

On November 17, 2005, I said that the President's war in Iraq is a "flawed policy wrapped in illusion." What this Administration does not understand is that there is a limitation to military power. We learned throughout the last century that political, economic and diplomatic challenges are equally, if not more, important to achieving stability on the ground. And as we've learned over the past five years, we must ultimately win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people.

Let me discuss with you some of the facts on the ground.

To date, there have been over 4,050 Americans killed in Iraq; over 3,900 since President Bush declared "Mission Accomplished." We've had 30,000 casualties. I visit our military hospitals frequently. I've seen horrific burn injuries, amputations, and blindness. These are injuries that our men and women will have to live with for the rest of their lives.

I'm particularly concerned about Traumatic Brain Injury and PTSD. Just two weeks ago, a Rand study concluded that nearly 320,000 U.S. military personnel who have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan reported a probable traumatic brain injury during deployment.

In Iraq, the government is riddled with corruption and paralyzed by incompetence. The Bush Administration said originally that we could turn over security responsibilities of the 18 Iraqi provinces by June 2006. Then Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Maliki said that his country's forces would be able to take full control of security in Iraq by June 2007. It's now May 2008 and the Administration is applauding the fact that eight out of 18 Iraqi provinces have been transferred to Iraqi control. And while they call this "progress being made," they leave out the fact that these eight provinces have a combined population of roughly 6.5 million people. In a country of 27.5 million Iraqis, less than 25 percent of the population is under Iraqi control.

Sectarian strife is still rampant. Not only do we have Sunnis fighting Shias but we now have Shias fighting Shias, as evident in the recent Basra military campaign. In Basra, the Iraqi government dismissed 1,300 soldiers and policemen last month who deserted or refused to fight against Moktada al-Sadr's popular and well-armed Mahdi Army. President Bush said back in 2005 that "Iraqi forces have made real progress." Our goal then was to train 350,000 Iraqi security forces. We reached that goal in June of last year, yet today we have more American troops on the ground than we did two years ago. What has decreased is the number of allied forces. Since I spoke out in 2005, allied troop levels have decreased by 60 percent while American troop levels have increased.

The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates more than 4.7 million Iraqis have left their homes. Of these, more than 2.7 million have been displaced internally, and more than 2 million have fled Iraq for neighboring states. Within Iraq itself, the U.S. military has created ethnic zones, dividing neighborhoods into jig-saw puzzles of 10-foot high concrete barriers that separate Sunnis from Shias. For the past two weeks, the U.S. military has been actively cordoning off sections of Sadr City, home to 2.5 million Iraqis. Residents interviewed said the U.S. barriers were creating city-like prisons.

Unemployment is as high as 50 percent in certain areas, and electricity production remains widely unreliable. Baghdad receives less than nine hours of electricity per day, and just seven of the 18 provinces receive more than 12 hours of electricity per day.

Oil production remains below pre-war levels, while world crude oil prices have climbed to over \$100 per barrel. Before the invasion you remember the Administration said that the Iraqi oil revenues would pay for the reconstruction. American taxpayers have spent approximately \$47 billion on Iraqi reconstruction while Iraqi oil revenues are expected to now reach \$70 billion in 2008. Because there are no reliable figures, we don't know how much the Iraqis have spent on reconstruction, but we do know that American taxpayers are picking up most of the tab.

We're going to change that in this next war supplemental spending bill. If the United States has a \$410 billion budget deficit, why should we be paying out of our pocket to rebuild a country with a significant budget surplus? For the past six years, this country has funded the President's war on credit, and every day American taxpayers borrow \$343 million to pay for the war in Iraq.

You have heard me discuss the issue of military readiness. In 2001, all active Army divisions were rated at the highest readiness levels. They were fully manned, equipped, and trained. Since the beginning of the Iraq war, the readiness of our forces, both active and reserves has plummeted. Today, there is not one brigade in the United States that is rated at the highest level of readiness. In fact just this week, I was informed that an active duty artillery battalion at Fort Riley, Kansas has only 100 personnel assigned of the approximately 500 required to perform its artillery mission. That's unacceptable.

Before I discuss the supplemental with you, let me again reflect on the President's declaration of "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq.

Even today, five years later, this Administration refuses to provide us with reasonable answers to two very reasonable questions. First, what are we trying to accomplish in Iraq? And second, what is the United States' "mission" there? Some in Washington have said that they support staying in Iraq for a hundred years, regardless of the human and financial costs.

I disagree.

Last week a USA Today/Gallop Poll indicated that 63 percent of the American people now think that "the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq." When is enough, enough?

We must begin a redeployment from Iraq, and we must refocus our attention to the threats down the road. The longer our military remains in Iraq, policing their streets, providing weapons, training and funds to whoever our alliances are for the moment, the longer and bloodier their war will be. If security and stability is our new "mission accomplished," then it will never happen under a continued U.S. occupation or the continued propping up of a paralyzed Iraqi government.

Last week, in a lecture at West Point, Secretary Gates mentioned the three war principles of Major General Fox Conner. The mentor to both General Eisenhower and Marshall, Conner's three principles were:

- Never fight unless you have to;
- Never fight alone;
- And never fight for long.

Instead of heeding these principles, like we did during the first Gulf War, we chose to ignore them. And by ignoring them, we created an undefined and open-ended war.

Before I open up for questions, let me leave you with one last thought:

Since becoming Chairman of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee again last year, I have asked our members and staff to "look beyond the war in Iraq." We've spent so many resources and so much attention on Iraq that we've lost sight of what's to come down the road.

We need a national strategy to identify both the near-term and long-term threats to this country. Right now we are so entangled with Iraq that we've become distracted from the bigger picture worldwide. Look at what's happening around us because of Iraq – a faltering economy, skyrocketing energy prices, rising food costs, a significantly weakened dollar, and a considerable rise in the influence of both Russia and China.

This country needs a national security strategy, one that focuses our attention on the future. This must be our "mission," and this is something that our nation's next President and Congress must "accomplish."

Thank you for having me.

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