

Biden, Iraq and Obama's Betrayal

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Incipient Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama's selection of Joseph Biden as his running mate constitutes a stunning betrayal of the anti-war constituency who made possible his hard-fought victory in the Democratic primaries and caucuses.

The veteran Delaware senator has been one the leading congressional supporters of U.S. militarization of the Middle East and Eastern Europe, of strict economic sanctions against Cuba, and of Israeli occupation policies.

Most significantly, however, Biden, who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the lead-up to the Iraq War during the latter half of 2002, was perhaps the single most important congressional backer of the Bush administration's decision to invade that oil-rich country.

Shrinking Gap Between Candidates

One of the most important differences between Obama and the soon-to-be Republican presidential nominee John McCain is that Obama had the wisdom and courage to oppose the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Obama and his supporters had been arguing correctly that judgment in foreign policy is far more important than experience; this was a key and likely decisive argument in the Illinois senator's campaign against Senator Hillary Clinton, who had joined McCain in backing the Iraq war resolution.

However, in choosing Biden who, like the forthcoming Republican nominee, has more experience in international affairs but notoriously poor judgment, Obama is essentially saying that this critical difference between the two prospective presidential candidates doesn't really matter. This decision thereby negates one of his biggest advantages in the general election. Of particular concern is the possibility that the pick of an establishment figure from the hawkish wing of the party indicates the kind of foreign policy appointments Obama will make as president.

Obama's choice of Biden as his running mate will likely have a hugely negative impact on his once-enthusiastic base of supporters. Obama's supporters had greatly appreciated the fact that he did not blindly accept the Bush administration's transparently false claims about Iraq being an imminent danger to U.S. national security interests that required an invasion and occupation of that country. At the same time Biden was joining his Republican colleagues in pushing through a Senate resolution authorizing the invasion, Obama was speaking at a major anti-war rally in Chicago correctly noting that Iraq's war-making ability had been substantially weakened and that the international community could successfully contain Saddam Hussein from any future acts of aggression.

In Washington, by contrast, Biden was insisting that Bush was right and Obama was wrong, falsely claiming that Iraq under Saddam Hussein – severely weakened by UN disarmament efforts and comprehensive international sanctions – somehow constituted both “a long term threat and a short term threat to our national security” and was an “extreme danger to the world.” Despite the absence of any “weapons of mass destruction” or offensive military capabilities, Biden when reminded of those remarks during an interview last year, replied, “That’s right, and I was correct about that.”

Biden Shepherds the War Authorization

It is difficult to over-estimate the critical role Biden played in making the tragedy of the Iraq war possible. More than two months prior to the 2002 war resolution even being introduced, in what was widely interpreted as the first sign that Congress would endorse a U.S. invasion of Iraq, Biden declared on August 4 that the United States was probably going to war. In his powerful position as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he orchestrated a propaganda show designed to sell the war to skeptical colleagues and the America public by ensuring that dissenting voices would not get a fair hearing. As Scott Ritter, the former chief UN weapons inspector, noted at the time, “For Sen. Biden’s Iraq hearings to be anything more than a political sham used to invoke a modern-day Gulf of Tonkin resolution-equivalent for Iraq, his committee will need to ask hard questions – and demand hard facts – concerning the real nature of the weapons threat posed by Iraq.”

It soon became apparent that Biden had no intention of doing so. Biden refused to even allow Ritter himself – who knew more about Iraq’s WMD capabilities than anyone and would have testified that Iraq had achieved at least qualitative disarmament – to testify. Ironically, on Meet the Press last year, Biden defended his false claims about Iraqi WMDs by insisting that “everyone in the world thought he had them. The weapons inspectors said he had them.”

Biden also refused to honor requests by some of his Democratic colleagues to include in the hearings some of the leading anti-war scholars familiar with Iraq and Middle East. These included both those who would have reiterated Ritter’s conclusions about non-existent Iraqi WMD capabilities as well as those prepared to testify that a U.S. invasion of Iraq would likely set back the struggle against al-Qaeda, alienate the United States from much of the world, and precipitate bloody urban counter-insurgency warfare amid rising terrorism, Islamist extremism, and sectarian violence. All of these predictions ended up being exactly what transpired.

Nor did Biden even call some of the dissenting officials in the Pentagon or State Department who were willing to challenge the alarmist claims of their ideologically-driven superiors. He was willing, however, to allow Iraqi defectors of highly dubious credentials to make false testimony about the vast quantities of WMD materiel supposedly in Saddam Hussein’s possession. Ritter has correctly accused Biden of having “preordained a conclusion that seeks to remove Saddam Hussein from power regardless of the facts and . . . using these hearings to provide political cover for a massive military attack on Iraq.”

Supported an Invasion Before Bush Rather than being a hapless victim of the Bush administration’s lies and manipulation, Biden was calling for a U.S. invasion of Iraq and making false statements regarding Saddam Hussein’s supposed possession of “weapons of mass destruction” years before President George W. Bush even came to office. As far back

as 1998, Biden was calling for a U.S. invasion of that oil rich country. Even though UN inspectors and the UN-led disarmament process led to the elimination of Iraq's WMD threat, Biden – in an effort to discredit the world body and make an excuse for war – insisted that UN inspectors could never be trusted to do the job. During Senate hearings on Iraq in September of that year, Biden told Ritter, “As long as Saddam’s at the helm, there is no reasonable prospect you or any other inspector is ever going to be able to guarantee that we have rooted out, root and branch, the entirety of Saddam’s program relative to weapons of mass destruction.”

Calling for military action on the scale of the Gulf War seven years earlier, he continued, “The only way we’re going to get rid of Saddam Hussein is we’re going to end up having to start it alone,” telling the Marine veteran “it’s going to require guys like you in uniform to be back on foot in the desert taking Saddam down.” When Ritter tried to make the case that President Bill Clinton’s proposed large-scale bombing of Iraq could jeopardize the UN inspections process, Biden condescendingly replied that decisions on the use of military force were “beyond your pay grade.” As Ritter predicted, when Clinton ordered UN inspectors out of Iraq in December of that year and followed up with a four-day bombing campaign known as Operation Desert Fox, Saddam was provided with an excuse to refuse to allow the inspectors to return. Biden then conveniently used Saddam’s failure to allow them to return as an excuse for going to war four years later.

Biden’s False Claims to Bolster War

In the face of widespread skepticism over administration claims regarding Iraq’s military capabilities, Biden declared that President Bush was justified in being concerned about Iraq’s alleged pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Even though Iraq had eliminated its chemical weapons arsenal by the mid-1990s, Biden insisted categorically in the weeks leading up to the Iraq war resolution that Saddam Hussein still had chemical weapons. Even though there is no evidence that Iraq had ever developed deployable biological weapons and its biological weapons program had been eliminated some years earlier, Biden insisted that Saddam had biological weapons, including anthrax and that “he may have a strain” of small pox. And, even though the International Atomic Energy Agency had reported as far back as 1998 that there was no evidence whatsoever that Iraq had any ongoing nuclear program, Biden insisted Saddam was “seeking nuclear weapons.” Said Biden, “One thing is clear: These weapons must be dislodged from Saddam, or Saddam must be dislodged from power.” He did not believe proof of the existence of any actual weapons to dislodge was necessary, however, insisting that “If we wait for the danger from Saddam to become clear, it could be too late.” He further defended President Bush by falsely claiming that “He did not snub the U.N. or our allies. He did not dismiss a new inspection regime. He did not ignore the Congress. At each pivotal moment, he has chosen a course of moderation and deliberation.”

In an Orwellian twist of language designed to justify the war resolution, which gave President Bush the unprecedented authority to invade a country on the far side of the world at the time and circumstances of his own choosing, Biden claimed that “I do not believe this is a rush to war. I believe it is a march to peace and security. I believe that failure to overwhelmingly support this resolution is likely to enhance the prospects that war will occur.”

It is also important to note that Biden supported an invasion in the full knowledge that it would not be quick and easy and that the United States would have to occupy Iraq for an

extended period, declaring, “We must be clear with the American people that we are committing to Iraq for the long haul; not just the day after, but the decade after.”

Biden’s Current Position

In response to the tragic consequences of the U.S. invasion and the resulting weakening of popular support for the war, Biden has more recently joined the chorus of Democratic members of Congress criticizing the administration’s handling of the conflict and calling for the withdrawal of most combat forces. He opposed President Bush’s escalation (“surge”) of troop strength early last year and has called for greater involvement by the United Nations and other countries in resolving the ongoing conflicts within Iraq.

However, Biden has been the principal congressional backer of a de facto partition of the country between Kurdish, Sunni Arab, and Shia Arab segments, a proposal opposed by a solid majority of Iraqis and strongly denounced by the leading Sunni, Shia, and secular blocs in the Iraqi parliament. Even the U.S. State Department has criticized Biden’s plan as too extreme. A cynical and dangerous attempt at divide-and-rule, Biden’s ambitious effort to redraw the borders of the Middle East would likely make a violent and tragic situation all the worse.

Yet it is Biden’s key role in making possible the congressional authorization of the 2003 U.S. invasion that elicits the greatest concern among Obama’s supporters. While more recently expressing regrets over his vote, he has not formally apologized and has stressed the Bush administration’s mishandling of the post-invasion occupation rather than the illegitimacy of the invasion itself.

Biden’s support for the resolution was not simply poor judgment, but a calculated rejection of principles codified in the UN Charter and other international legal documents prohibiting aggressive wars. According to Article VI of the Constitution, such a rejection also constitutes a violation of U.S. law as well. Biden even voted against an amendment sponsored by fellow Democratic senator Carl Levin that would have authorized U.S. military action against Iraq if the UN Security Council approved the use of force and instead voted for the Republican-backed resolution authorizing the United States to go to war unilaterally. In effect, Biden has embraced the neo-conservative view that the United States, as the world’s sole remaining superpower, somehow has the right to invade other countries at will, even if they currently pose no strategic threat.

Given the dangerous precedent set by the Iraq war resolution, naming one of its principal supporters as potentially the next vice president of the United States has raised serious questions regarding Senator Obama’s commitment to international law. This comes at a time when the global community is so desperately hoping for a more responsible U.S. foreign policy following eight years of Bush. Early in his presidential campaign, Obama pledged to not only end the war in Iraq, but to challenge the mindset that got the United States into Iraq in the first place. Choosing Biden as his running mate, however, raises doubts regarding Obama’s actual commitment to “change we can believe in.”

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