IRAQ WAR TEN YEARS ON:
AN INITIALLY POPULAR WAR, NOW MUCH DEBATED, MALIGNED AND CONTAMINATED WITH MYTHS

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A Decade Later and the Iraq Debate is Still Contaminated With Myths: Peter Feaver, Foreign Policy, March 17, 2013—Here on the 10-year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, I wonder how long it will be before we can discuss the war free from the contamination of myths. It may be sooner than many myth-purveyors expect.

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WHEN EVERYONE AGREED ABOUT IRAQ
Stephen F. Knott
Wall Street Journal, March 15, 2013

At 5:34 a.m. on March 20, 2003, American, British and other allied forces invaded Iraq. One of the most divisive conflicts in the nation's history would soon be labeled "Bush's War." The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime became official U.S. policy in 1998, when President Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act—a bill passed 360-38 by the House of Representatives and by unanimous consent in the Senate. The law called for training and equipping Iraqi dissidents to overthrow Saddam and suggested that the United Nations establish a war-crimes tribunal for the dictator and his lieutenants.

The legislation was partly the result of frustration over the undeclared and relatively unheralded "No-Fly Zone War" that had been waged since 1991. Saddam's military repeatedly fired on U.S. and allied aircraft
that were attempting to prevent his regime from destroying Iraqi opposition forces in northern and southern Iraq.

According to former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Hugh Shelton, in 1997 a key member of President Bill Clinton's cabinet (thought by most observers to have been Secretary of State Madeleine Albright) asked Gen. Shelton whether he could arrange for a U.S. aircraft to fly slowly and low enough that it would be shot down, thereby paving the way for an American effort to topple Saddam. Kenneth Pollack, a member of Mr. Clinton's National Security Council staff, would later write in 2002 that it was a question of "not whether but when" the U.S. would invade Iraq. He wrote that the threat presented by Saddam was "no less pressing than those we faced in 1941."

Radicalized by the events of 9/11, George W. Bush gradually concluded that a regime that had used chemical weapons against its own people and poison gas against Iran, invaded Iran and Kuwait, harboured some of the world's most notorious terrorists, made lucrative payments to the families of suicide bombers, fired on American aircraft almost daily, and defied years of U.N. resolutions regarding weapons of mass destruction was a problem. The former chief U.N. weapons inspector, an Australian named Richard Butler, testified in July 2002 that "it is essential to recognize that the claim made by Saddam's representatives, that Iraq has no WMD, is false."

In the U.S., there was a bipartisan consensus that Saddam possessed and continued to develop WMD. Former Vice President Al Gore noted in September 2002 that Saddam had "stored secret supplies of biological and chemical weapons throughout his country." Then-Sen. Hillary Clinton observed that Saddam hoped to increase his supply of chemical and biological weapons and to "develop nuclear weapons." Then-Sen. John Kerry claimed that "a deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in his [Saddam's] hands is a real and grave threat to our security."

Even those opposed to using force against Iraq acknowledged that, as then-Sen. Edward Kennedy put it, "we have known for many years that Saddam Hussein is seeking and developing" WMD. When it came time to vote on the authorization for the use of force against Iraq, 81 Democrats in the House voted yes, joined by 29 Democrats in the Senate, including the party's 2004 standard bearers, John Kerry and John Edwards, plus Majority Leader Tom Daschle, Sen. Joe Biden, Mrs. Clinton, and Sens. Harry Reid, Tom Harkin, Chris Dodd and Jay Rockefeller. The latter, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, claimed that Saddam would "likely have nuclear weapons within the next five years." Support for the war extended far beyond Capitol Hill. In March 2003, a Pew Research Center poll indicated that 72% of the American public supported President Bush's decision to use force.

If Mr. Bush "lied," as the common accusation has it, then so did many prominent Democrats—and so did the French, whose foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, claimed in February 2003 that "regarding the chemical domain, we have evidence of [Iraq's] capacity to produce VX and yperite [mustard gas]; in the biological domain, the evidence suggests the possible possession of significant stocks of anthrax and botulism toxin." Germany's intelligence chief August Hanning noted in March 2002 that "it is our estimate that Iraq will have an atomic bomb in three years." According to interrogations conducted after the invasion, Saddam's own generals believed that he had WMD and expected him to use these weapons as the invasion force neared Baghdad.

The war in Iraq was authorized by a bipartisan congressional coalition, supported by prominent media voices and backed by the public. Yet on its 10th anniversary Americans will be told of the Bush administration's duplicity in leading us into the conflict. Many members of the bipartisan coalition that committed the U.S. to invade Iraq 10 years ago have long since washed their hands of their share of responsibility. We owe it to history—and, more important, to all those who died—to recognize that this wasn't Bush's war, it was America's war.

Mr. Knott, a professor of national security affairs at the United States Naval War College.
Nowadays, few people step forth to speak well of the Iraq War, to own up to the support they gave that American campaign in the Arab world. Yet Operation Iraqi Freedom, launched 10 years ago this week, was once a popular war. We had struck into Afghanistan in 2001 to rout al Qaeda and the terrorists' Taliban hosts—but the 9/11 killers who brought ruin onto American soil were not Afghan. They were young Arabs, forged in the crucible of Arab society, in the dictators' prisons and torture chambers. Arab financiers and preachers gave them the means and the warrant for their horrific deeds.

America's previous venture into Iraq, a dozen years earlier, had been a lightning strike: The Iraqi dictator was evicted from Kuwait and then spared. Saddam Hussein's military machine was all rust and decay by 2003, but he swaggered and let the world believe that he had in his possession a deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. The Arab redeemer, as he had styled himself, lacked the guile that might have saved him. A great military expedition was being readied against him in London and Washington, but he gambled to the bitter end that George W. Bush would not pull the trigger.

On the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom—the first bombs fell on March 19—well over 70% of the American public supported upending the Saddam regime. The temptation to depict the war as George W. Bush's and Dick Cheney's is convenient but utterly false. This was a war waged with congressional authorization, with the endorsement of popular acceptance, and with the sanction of more than a dozen United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for Iraq's disarmament.

Those unburdened by knowledge of the ways of that region would come to insist that there had been no operational links between the Iraqi despot and al Qaeda. These newborn critics would insist on a distinction between secular terrorism and religious terrorism, but it was a distinction without a difference.

The rationale for the war sustained a devastating blow in the autumn of 2004 when Charles Duelfer, the chief U.S. arms inspector for Iraq, issued a definitive report confirming that Saddam had possessed no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. The war now stood on its own—and many of its former supporters claimed that this wasn't what they had signed up for. Yet the "architects" of the war could not pull the plug on it. They soldiered on, offering a new aim: the reform and freedom of Iraq, and the example of a decent Iraq in the "heart of the Arab world."

There were very few takers for the new rationale. In the oddest of twists, American liberalism now mocked the very idea that liberty could put down roots in an Arab-Muslim setting. Nor were there takers, among those watching from lands around Iraq, for the idea of freedom midwifed by American power. To Iraq's east lay the Iranian despotism, eager to thwart and frustrate the American project. To the west in Syria there was the Baath dictatorship of the House of Assad. And beyond there was the Sunni Arab order of power, where America was despised for giving power to Shiites. For a millennium, the Shiite Arabs had not governed, and yet now they ruled in Baghdad, a city that had been the seat of the Islamic caliphate.

A stoical George W. Bush held the line amid American disaffection and amid the resistance of a region invested in the failure of the Iraq campaign. He doubled down with the troop "surge" and remained true to the proposition that liberty could stick on Arab soil.

There is no way of writing a convincing alternative history of the region without this war. That kind of effort is inherently speculative, subject to whim and preference. Perhaps we could have let Saddam be, could have tolerated the misery he inflicted on his people, convinced ourselves that the sanctions imposed on his regime were sufficient to keep him quarantined. But a different history played out. It delivered the Iraqis from a tyranny that they would have never been able to overthrow on their own.
The American disappointment with Iraq helped propel Barack Obama to power. There were strategic gains that the war had secured in Iraq, but Mr. Obama had no interest in them. Iraq was the "war of choice" that had to be brought to a "responsible close," he said. The focus instead would be on that "war of necessity" in Afghanistan.

A skilled politician, Mr. Obama made the Iraqi government an offer meant to be turned down—a residual American force that could hardly defend itself, let alone provide meaningful protection for the fledgling new order in Baghdad. Predictably, Iraq's rulers decided to go it alone as 2011 drew to a close. They had been navigating a difficult course between Iran and the U.S. The choice was made easy for them, the Iranian supreme leader was next door, the liberal superpower was in retreat.

Heading for the exits, Mr. Obama praised Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as "the elected leader of a sovereign, self-reliant and democratic Iraq." The praise came even as Mr. Maliki was beginning to erect a dictatorship bent on marginalizing the country's Kurds and Sunni Arabs and even those among the Shiites who questioned his writ.

Two weeks ago, Stuart W. Bowen Jr., the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, issued his final report, called "Learning from Iraq." The report was methodical and detailed, interspersed with the testimonies of American and Iraqi officials. One testimony, by an Iraqi technocrat, the acting minister of interior, Adnan al-Asadi, offered a compelling image: "With all the money the U.S. has spent, you can go into any city in Iraq and you can't find one building or project built by the U.S. government. You can fly in a helicopter around Baghdad or other cities, but you can't point a finger at a single project that was built and completed by the United States."

It was no fault of the soldiers who fought this war, or of the leaders who launched it, that their successors lacked the patience to stick around Iraq and safe keep what had been gained at an incalculable cost in blood and treasure.

Here on the 10-year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, I wonder how long it will be before we can discuss the war free from the contamination of myths. It may be sooner than many myth-purveyors expect….For my part, the myths that get thrown at me most often have to do with why the war happened in the first place. Here are five of the most pervasive myths:

1. The Bush administration went to war against Iraq because it thought (or claimed to think) Iraq had been behind the 9/11 attacks. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Bush Administration did explore the possibility that Hussein might have collaborated with al Qaeda on the attacks. Vice President Dick Cheney (along with some officials in the secretary of defense's office) in particular believed this hypothesis had some merit, and in the early months gave considerable weight to some tantalizing evidence that seemed to support it. However, by the fall of 2002 when the administration was in fact selling the policy of confronting Hussein, the question of a specific link to 9/11 was abandoned and Cheney instead emphasized the larger possibility of collaboration between Iraq and al Qaeda. We now know that those fears were reasonable and supported by the evidence captured in Iraq after the invasion. This has been documented extensively through the work of the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC), which examined the captured files of the Hussein regime. A 2012 International Studies Association panel sponsored by the CRRC on "Saddam and Terrorism" was devoted to this topic and spent quite a bit of time demonstrating how those who insist that there were no links whatsoever simply rely on a poorly worded sentence referencing "no smoking gun" of a "direct connection" in the executive summary of the 2007
"Iraqi Perspectives Project - Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Documents" report and ignore the evidence of links and attempted connections uncovered in the report itself as well as subsequent work by the project.

2. The Bush administration went to war against Iraq because it wanted to forcibly democratize Iraq. The administration was, in the end, committed to using force to defend the democratization project in Iraq but this myth has the logical sequence out of order. The correct sequence, as Leffler and myriad memoirs and contemporaneous reporting demonstrate, is this: (1) Bush was committed to confronting Iraq because of the changed risk calculus brought about by 9/11, which heightened our sensitivity to the nexus of WMD and terrorism (believing that state sponsors of terrorism who had WMD would be a likely pathway by which terrorist networks like al Qaeda could secure WMD); (2) Bush was also committed not to making the mistake of Desert Storm, namely stopping the war with Hussein still in power and concluded that confronting Hussein must end with either full capitulation by Hussein or regime change through war; (3) given regime change, the best option for the new Iraq was one based on pluralism and representative government rather than a "man on horseback" new dictator to take Hussein's place. To be sure, the Bush administration greatly underestimated the difficulty of the democratization path, but democratization was not the prime motivation -- confronting the WMD threat was. Democratization was the consequence of that prime motivation.

3. The "real" motivation behind the Iraq war was the desire to steal Iraqi oil, or boost Halliburton profits, or divert domestic attention from the Enron scandal, or pay off the Israel lobby, or exact revenge on Hussein for his assassination attempt on President George H. W. Bush. These conspiracy theories are ubiquitous on the far left (and right) fringes, and some of them were endorsed by mainstream figures such as President Obama himself. All of them seem impervious to argument, evidence, and reason. The absence of evidence is taken as proof of the strength of the conspiracy. Contrary evidence -- eg., that Israel was more concerned about the threat from Iran than the threat from Iraq -- is dismissed. Mel Leffler's lecture on Iraq is a bracing tonic of reason that rebuts many of these nutty charges, but I suppose true believers will never be convinced.

4. What Frank Harvey calls the "neoconism" myth -- that the Iraq war was forced upon the country by a cabal of neoconservatives, who by virtue of their political skill and ruthless disregard for truth were able to "manipulate the preferences, perceptions and priorities of so many other intelligent people..." who otherwise would never have supported the Iraq war. Frank Harvey painstakingly reconstructs the decision process in 2002 and documents all of the ways that the Bush administration took steps contrary to the "neoconism" thesis -- eg., working through the United Nations and seeking Congressional authorization rather than adopting the unilateralist/executive-only approach many Iraq hawks were urging. (Leffler makes similar points in his lecture). Harvey goes on to make an intriguing case that had Al Gore won the election in 2000, he would have likely authorized the Iraq war just as Bush did. Harvey has not fully convinced me of the latter, but he usefully rebuts much sloppy mythologizing about Gore's foreign policy views, documenting how Gore was, in fact, the most hawkish of officials on Iraq in the Clinton administration. At a minimum, Harvey proves that the Iraq war owed more to the Clinton perspective than it did to then-candidate George W. Bush's worldview as expressed during the 2000 campaign. The neoconism myth serves a politically useful function of fixing all blame on a specific group of Republicans, but, as Harvey shows, the truth is not quite so simplistic.

5. Bush "lied" in making the case for war. I have addressed this myth before. It is a staple of the anti-Iraq/anti-Bush commentary -- and not just of the pseudonymous trolls in blog comment sections. John Mearsheimer, one of the most influential security studies academics, has written a book built around the claim that leaders regularly lie and that Bush in particular lied about Iraq. Mearsheimer claims "four key lies," each one carefully rebutted by Mel Leffler.

The first is the question of links between Iraq and al Qaeda. As I noted above, while the Iraq files contain no "smoking gun" of an active operational link, the record includes ample evidence of overtures
originating from either side -- each pursuing precisely the kind of enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend alliance of convenience that Bush worried about.

The second is the Bush administration statements of certainty about Iraq's WMD programs. It turns out the Bush administration officials were wrong on many of those particulars and should have been less certain about how they were reading the intelligence, but there is no compelling evidence that they knew they were reading the intelligence incorrectly, which is what is logically required to prove the charge of "lying" rather than being "mistaken."

The third is the charge that Bush claimed Saddam was behind the attacks of 9/11. Here Mearsheimer ignores the explicit and repeated explanation by President Bush (and countless administration figures) about what they meant -- namely that the links they saw were (i) how 9/11 had changed their risk calculus and (ii) how terrorist groups and states sponsors of terror should be treated as part and parcel of the same war. Again, the Bush administration may or may not have been wrong to view things that way but these are disputes of reasoning and policy, not fact.

The fourth is the charge that Bush "lied" about sincerely pursuing a diplomatic solution short of war in 2002-2003. In fact, Bush was committed to a final resolution of WMD issue, which he believed would require either abject capitulation by Hussein or forcible regime change. Bush was not open to a wide range of face-saving and half-way diplomatic measures, but he never claimed to be. In other words, Bush was not willing to accept diplomatic solutions that others might have accepted, but he did go to great lengths to secure the diplomatic solution he was willing to accept but Saddam was not.

When one examines the historical record more fairly, as Leffler does, the "lying" myth collapses. This doesn't absolve the Bush administration of blame, but it does mean that those who allege "lying" are themselves as mistaken as are the targets of their critique.....(click for the full article – Ed.)

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**ON TOPIC**

**The What If's of Iraq:** Max Boot, *LA Times*, Mar. 19, 2013—It is entirely fitting that the invasion of Iraq began, 10 years ago Tuesday [Mar. 19], based on faulty intelligence: Our actions throughout the war were marred by miscalculation and wishful thinking time and again.

**Why We Were in Iraq:** David Horowitz, *Front Page Magazine*, Mar. 21, 2013—Just before American and British troops entered Iraq to remove the regime of Saddam Hussein, a videotape of Osama bin Laden was aired on Al-Jazeera TV. The tape was aired on February 12, 2003, and in it bin Laden said: “The interests of Muslims and the interests of the socialists coincide in the war against the crusaders.”

**Arguing Iraq—Ten Years Later a Symposium:** Anne-Marie Slaughter, Paul Berman, Leon Wieseltier, Michael Ignatieff, David Greenberg, James P. Rubin, David Rieff, And John B. Judis, *The New Republic*, Mar. 20, 2013—Ten years ago this week, the U.S. began its invasion of Iraq, ostensibly in search of "weapons of mass destruction." Today, the American war in Iraq is over, but the argument about it still hovers over our foreign policy. We asked eight writers—some of whom supported the war, others who opposed it—to reflect on what the past decade has meant.

**10 Years on, Paul Wolfowitz Admits U.S. Bungled in Iraq:** Toby Harnden, *Real Clear Politics*, March 18, 2013—The former deputy Pentagon chief, Paul Wolfowitz, a driving force behind the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, has conceded that a series of blunders by George W. Bush’s administration plunged Iraq into a cycle of violence that “spiralled out of control”.

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