

Uncovering the Rationales for the War on Iraq: The Words of the Bush Administration, Congress, and the Media from September 12, 2001 to October 11, 2002

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In the weeks and months that followed the events of September 11, 2001, the nation watched, listened, and read as the Bush administration declared a war on terror and the media began frenzied coverage of the military efforts in Afghanistan and the hunt for Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. But in the midst of all of the chaos, speculation about the suspects at the heart of the attacks started to shift, though ever so slightly, into the direction of a familiar foe to the United States, and particularly to the Bush family: Saddam Hussein. Now, more than two years after the horror of 9-11, a war with Iraq has been fought and, supposedly, won. Saddam's regime has been ousted and a new-found freedom awaits the Iraqi people. But how did we get here, to the point of final confrontation with an enemy once challenged and long despised? This paper charted the rationales for the war on Iraq over the time following 9-11 up until Congress passed the war resolution in October 2002 by examining the statements made by the President and his administration, by Congress, and by the media in three separate phases of time (September 12, 2001 to December 2001, 2002 State of the Union to April 2002, and September 12, 2002 to October 11, 2002).

A number of questions were asked and answered in order to fully develop this topic. When did the focus of the administration, Congress, and the media shift from Osama bin Laden to Saddam Hussein and Iraq? What were the administration and Congress saying about Iraq and Saddam Hussein in the year following the terrorist attacks on the United States? What were the reasons behind the invasion and did they change over time? Adding another dimension to the

paper, how did media coverage affect these rationales and opinions on Iraq? Overall, what was the path to war with Iraq in the earliest phases of the war?

The change of focus from Osama bin Laden to Saddam Hussein came at different times for each source examined here. President Bush began to mention more about Saddam Hussein in April of 2002. The media switched to focusing on Saddam Hussein in July of 2002. And, finally, Congress mentioned Saddam Hussein more in April then switched back to Osama bin Laden and eventually settled into a pattern of discussion on Saddam Hussein in September of 2002. Yet, as much of the research that follows looks at the response to the search term “Iraq,” a comparison was made between the usage of Saddam Hussein and the usage of Iraq by the various people and sources studied here. The results show that, though Iraq appears more frequently, the trends remain the same for President Bush and the media. Yet, these higher numbers do alter the changeover from Osama bin Laden to Iraq. For example, Congress moves to examining the topic of Iraq in greater number by January of 2002, an earlier and more stable change than the change to a focus on Saddam Hussein. Additionally, the change to Iraq from Osama occurs in January of 2002 for the President and in February of 2002 for the media.

The Bush administration, and the President himself, established the majority of the rationales for the war and all of those rationales that make up the most prominent reasons for war. Initially, the media introduced Iraq to officials and they responded accordingly; by Phase Two, the officials were introducing Iraq, and by Phase Three almost all of their public statements were about Iraq. This changing focus of the administration lines up with the statistics cited earlier in the paper that showed February 2002 as the month in which President Bush began addressing Saddam Hussein and Iraq more than Osama bin Laden, at least numerically, with a solid change made by April of 2002. Additionally, much of what the administration said was

covered in the news and quickly appeared in the words of members of Congress and in the Congressional Record. Again, the statistics can be brought to bear on the rationales. The statistics show Congress changing its focus in early 2002, focusing on Iraq by January of 2002, and pretty solidly set on Saddam Hussein and Iraq by the summer. In the rationale analysis, Congressmen and the Congressional Record brought up the war more often and talked more openly about the prospect of war, without prodding from the media, in Phases Two and Three. Looking at the media, in Phase One much of the discussion around Iraq was initiated by questions from reporters, with the exception of Senator John McCain who brought up the topic of Iraq on multiple occasions. Yet, by Phase Two, most of the officials were talking about Iraq without much prodding and certainly by Phase Three there was no need to ask questions and introduce the topic first. Overall, the media highlighted all of the identified main and secondary rationales, meaning that it did follow the lead of the administration.

Moving to those rationales, twenty-seven rationales for the war were used at one time or another, and, of the sixteen rationales that emerged before the final phase of research, thirteen appeared in later phases. Thus, the campaign for the war on Iraq was broad and there seemed to be a great deal of continuity between the phases. To further explain this idea, five rationales were prominent in all three phases: war on terror, prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, lack of inspections, removal of the Hussein regime, and Saddam Hussein is evil. In addition to those five, another rationale was used very prominently throughout the phases: liberation of the Iraqi people. It was a popular rationale for Don Rumsfeld, as he mentioned the reason in all three phases, and eventually appeared in many other officials' statements, as well. Yet, a lot of new ideas arose over time, some of which came to be favored among the sources used here. For example, the broken promises rationale emerged in Phase

Two and was used only by President Bush. Yet, by Phase Three, every member of the administration mentioned in this work, John McCain, the Congressional Record, and the media were using the rationale, too. Another example is the imminent threat rationale, emerging in Phase Three with President Bush's speech to the United Nations. This rationale was then adopted by Powell, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Rice, Daschle, Lott, and the Congressional Record. Interestingly, Daschle was the only official to use the words "imminent threat," though he only used them once; no administration official actually said "imminent threat." The secondary rationales were: because we can, unfinished business, disarmament, connection to al Qaeda, and safety of the world. And the remaining rationales were: revenge, war for oil, threat to the region, for the sake of history, preservation of peace, threat to freedom, the uniqueness of Iraq, the relevance of the U.N., commitment to the children, gaining favor with the Middle East, stimulation of the economy, setting Iraq as an example, because Saddam Hussein hates the U.S., and Iraq's violation of international law.

Finally, the question of the road to war with Iraq has received some answers. The rationales discussed in great detail in the essay provide a sense as to the direction in which the administration, Congress, and the media were headed well before the fighting actually began. Yet, many of these reasons have been questioned in light of the outcome of the war, since nearly one year ago, President Bush declared victory in Iraq while American troops still fight and die there daily, thousands of miles from home. So, where do all of these rationales stand today? Although this paper cannot answer that question definitively, it can provide some insight into the thinking of the powers-that-be during the earliest stages of war preparation and give the American people a chance to answer these questions for themselves.