

President George W. Bush's March 17 Address Preparing the Nation for War

Stephen Zunes | March 2003

(Editors' Note: Below is a transcript of President George W. Bush's address to the nation on Monday, March 17, announcing his readiness to order a U.S. invasion of Iraq followed by an analysis highlighting some of the lies and misleading statements in the speech. Such an overview is necessary since the Democratic Party leadership in Congress, which has pledged to support the president in the event of war, declined to take their traditional opportunity to offer a formal response. The Green Party, which opposes the war, was not given the opportunity by the networks to respond.)

"My fellow citizens, events in Iraq have now reached the final days of decision. For more than a decade, the United States and other nations have pursued patient and honorable efforts to disarm the Iraqi regime without war."

This is patently false. In 1998, President Bill Clinton successfully pressured UNSCOM director Richard Butler to withdraw inspectors without authorization from the Secretary General or the Security Council—before their mission was complete—in order to engage in a four-day heavy bombing campaign against Iraq. As predicted at the time, this illegal use of military force—combined with revelations that the United States had abused the inspections process for espionage purposes—resulted in the Iraqi government barring the inspectors' return until a reorganized inspections commission known as UNMOVIC commenced inspections last year. UNMOVIC chairman Hans Blix and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan explicitly called upon the United States and the international community to give the inspectors more time to do their job, noting that it would take a number of months before their mission could be completed.

"That regime pledged to reveal and destroy all its weapons of mass destruction as a condition for ending the Persian Gulf War in 1991."

Iraq was presented with this demand as part of UN Security Council resolution 687, which mandated Iraqi disarmament of its weapons of mass destruction

and related delivery systems. **This was a unilateral decree from the Security Council which—while nominally part of the ceasefire agreement—was void of any explicit threat to continue prosecuting the war if Iraq did not agree to the disarmament provisions.** It is noteworthy that the demand for Iraqi disarmament in the resolution was put forward within the context of a call for regional disarmament. The United States has refused to encourage any regional disarmament initiative, however, and remains a strong supporter of the Israeli and Pakistani governments, which have advanced nuclear arsenals among other weapons of mass destruction.

"Since then, the world has engaged in 12 years of diplomacy. We have passed more than a dozen resolutions in the United Nations Security Council. We have sent hundreds of weapons inspectors to oversee the disarmament of Iraq. Our good faith has not been returned. The Iraqi regime has used diplomacy as a ploy to gain time and advantage. It has uniformly defied Security Council resolutions demanding full disarmament."

Iraq's cooperation has indeed been less than total, but most independent reports—even during UNSCOM's inspections regime between 1991 and 1998—conclude that cooperation was close to 90%. **According to UNMOVIC, Iraq's cooperation since inspections resumed last year has been far better.**



“Over the years, UN weapon inspectors have been threatened by Iraqi officials, electronically bugged, and systematically deceived.”

This was not an uncommon practice during the UNSCOM era, but there have been no reports from UNMOVIC of such harassment subsequently.

“Peaceful efforts to disarm the Iraqi regime have failed again and again—because we are not dealing with peaceful men.”

Peaceful efforts at disarming Iraq have succeeded in eliminating somewhere between 95% and 100% of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and related materiel and delivery systems as a result of UN Security Council resolution 687 and subsequent resolutions. The determination to go to war despite such success raises serious questions as to whether the United States is governed by peaceful men.

“Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.”

If the United States really has evidence that the Iraqi government continues to possess and conceal weapons of mass destruction, **why has the Bush administration refused to make such evidence public or pass such intelligence on to United Nations inspectors**, who have the authority to destroy them?

“This regime has already used weapons of mass destruction against Iraq’s neighbors and against Iraq’s people.”

Iraq did use chemical weapons against Iranian troops and Kurdish civilians back in the 1980s when Saddam Hussein’s regime was being supported by the United States. The Reagan administration covered up for the Halabja massacre and similar attacks against Kurdish civilians by falsely claiming that it was the Iranians—then the preferred enemy—who were responsible. In addition, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency provided Iraq with U.S. satellite data to help Saddam Hussein’s forces locate Iranian troop concentrations in the full knowledge that they were using chemical weapons. **Many of the key components of Iraq’s chemical weapons program came from the United States**, ostensibly for pesticides as part of taxpayer-funded agricultural subsidies, despite evidence that these U.S.-manufactured chemicals

were probably being diverted for use in illegal chemical weapons.

“The regime has a history of reckless aggression in the Middle East.”

This is true, though Iraq’s invasion of Iran in 1980 was quietly supported by the U.S. government and ambivalent signals by the U.S. ambassador to Iraq immediately prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait may have emboldened Saddam Hussein to conquer the sheikdom in 1990. Now, with Iraq’s offensive military capability just a fraction of what it was during that period and an unambiguous resolve by the international community to thwart such future aggression, there is little chance of Iraq invading another country again.

“It has a deep hatred of America and our friends.”

Iraq willingly accepted U.S. support during the 1980s. The more belligerent posture of recent years is largely a result of the U.S. destruction of much of the country’s military and civilian infrastructure in the 1991 Gulf War, which was supported by a number of other Middle Eastern states with which Iraq had also once collaborated and been on friendly terms. Subsequent U.S.-led sanctions, periodic bombing raids, and invasion threats have resulted in widespread suffering of the population that has intensified anti-American sentiment. Had the United States adopted a more enlightened policy, such deep hatred would likely have not developed.

“And it has aided, trained, and harbored terrorists, including operatives of al Qaeda.”

Every independent investigation of every Bush administration claim of a connection between the secular Iraqi government and the Islamist al Qaeda network has found no evidence of any Iraqi aid, training, or harboring of al Qaeda terrorists. According to both published U.S. government reports and independent analyses, Iraq’s support for international terrorism—which has always been restricted to secular nationalists like the radical Palestinian Abu Nidal faction—peaked in the 1980s.

“The danger is clear: using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons, obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country, or any other. The United States and other nations did nothing to deserve or invite this threat. But we will do everything to defeat it. Instead of drifting along toward tragedy, we will set a course toward safety. Before the day of horror can come, before it is too late to act, this danger will be removed.”

The Bush administration has failed to present any evidence that Iraq has the intention to pass on weapons of mass destruction to terrorists, an act that would inevitably lead to a U.S.-led invasion, only in this case with the support of the international community. This is the essence of deterrence, which protected the United States and its allies from Josef Stalin, Mao Zedung, and other leaders as tyrannical and far more powerful militarily than Saddam Hussein. And no country has the right to invade another on some far-fetched scenario that they might do something someday. Ironically, as the CIA has noted in a report released this past October, Saddam Hussein would not likely use WMDs as a first strike, but in the case of a U.S. invasion—with nothing to lose and the logic of deterrence no longer in effect—would be far more likely to use whatever WMDs he may possess. In other words, a U.S. invasion, rather than preventing the use of weapons of mass destruction, would be the most likely—and the only realistic—scenario that such horrible weapons would be utilized.

“The United States of America has the sovereign authority to use force in assuring its own national security. That duty falls to me, as Commander-in-Chief, by the oath I have sworn, by the oath I will keep.”

The oath of office also demands that the president uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States, which forbids such an illegal use of force. **Virtually no international legal authority recognizes such an invasion as an act of assuring legitimate national security interests.**

“Recognizing the threat to our country, the United States Congress voted overwhelmingly last year to support the use of force against Iraq.”

The U.S. Congress—with the support of both the Republican and Democratic leadership—did authorize

the use of force against Iraq. However, the resolution violates Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution which does not allow Congress to grant such open-ended warmaking authority to the president for an offensive military action. **Only a formal declaration of war in such a situation can be considered legitimate.** Furthermore, Article VI of the Constitution declares that international treaties to which the United States is a party are to be treated as supreme law, thereby proscribing Congress from passing any resolution that violates the UN Charter, such as supporting an invasion of a sovereign nation. As a result, this resolution is unconstitutional and thereby invalid.

“America tried to work with the United Nations to address this threat because we wanted to resolve the issue peacefully. We believe in the mission of the United Nations.”

Then why is the United States violating the UN Charter, which forbids the use of military force unless a country finds itself under armed attack or it is explicitly authorized by the UN Security Council? **The mission of the United Nations is to preserve international peace and security, not to approve the invasion of one country by another.**

“One reason the UN was founded after the Second World War was to confront aggressive dictators, actively and early, before they can attack the innocent and destroy the peace.”

The United States refused to confront Saddam Hussein active and early when he was committing acts of aggression against Iranians and Kurds and opposed decisive action by the United Nations. **Iraq’s ability to attack the innocent and destroy the peace has already been reduced dramatically through a series of actions by the United Nations**, including authorizing the use of force to remove Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait, placing strict military sanctions against the dictatorship, and overseeing the most aggressive unilateral disarmament effort and inspections regime in history.

“In the case of Iraq, the Security Council did act, in the early 1990s. Under Resolutions 678 and 687—both still in effect—the United States and our allies are authorized to use force in ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. This is not a question of authority, it is a question of will.”

The assertion that resolutions 678 and 687 give the United States the right to invade Iraq is patently

false. Resolution 678 authorized the use of force to enforce prior UN Security Council resolutions demanding that Iraq remove its occupation forces from Kuwait. Once that was accomplished in late February 1991, the resolution became moot. Resolution 687 called for Iraqi disarmament of weapons of mass destruction and related delivery systems, but—even though it was the most detailed resolution in the history of the United Nations—no enforcement mechanism was specified. According to United Nations Charter, such resolutions can be enforced militarily only if the Security Council as a whole recognizes that a country is in material breach, determines that all non-military means have been exhausted, and specifically authorizes the use of force. The Security Council has not done so subsequent to the passage of resolution 678 in late November 1990.

“Last September, I went to the UN General Assembly and urged the nations of the world to unite and bring an end to this danger. On November 8th, the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1441, finding Iraq in material breach of its obligations, and vowing serious consequences if Iraq did not fully and immediately disarm.”

True, but it did not authorize the use of force. Article 14 of that resolution specifically noted that the Security Council would “remain seized of the matter,” reiterating that only the Security Council as a whole—not any one member state—has the power to determine whether military force can be legitimately utilized to enforce its resolution.

“Today, no nation can possibly claim that Iraq has disarmed.”

There actually are some nations that believe that Iraq has disarmed under the resolutions. Though this is not likely the case, **the Bush administration has been unable to present clear evidence to the contrary.**

“And it will not disarm so long as Saddam Hussein holds power.”

This is sheer speculation. **As a dictator who has proven his desire to ruthlessly hold on to power at all costs, he very well could disarm to save his regime.** However, the Bush administration has made clear its intention to invade anyway, thereby providing little incentive for Saddam Hussein to do so.

“For the last four-and-a-half months, the United States and our allies have worked within the Security Council to enforce that Council’s long-standing demands. Yet, some permanent members of the Security Council have publicly announced they will veto any resolution that compels the disarmament of Iraq. These governments share our assessment of the danger, but not our resolve to meet it.”

Actually, most Security Council members do not believe that Iraq is the imminent threat that the United States claims it to be, though, if convincing evidence were presented that Iraq indeed posed a threat to international peace and security, a clear majority of the Security Council—including France—have indicated their willingness to authorize the use of force. A veto of the proposed U.S.-sponsored resolution by France, Russia, and China would probably not have been necessary since the United States was unable—despite enormous pressure, including promises of increased foreign aid, trade preferences, and other incentives—to convince a simple majority of nations on the Council that it was necessary to take the unprecedented step of authorizing the United States to invade Iraq, overthrow the government, and replace it with one more to its liking.

“Many nations, however, do have the resolve and fortitude to act against this threat to peace, and a broad coalition is now gathering to enforce the just demands of the world.”

There is nothing close to the broad coalition such as that which joined the United States in ridding Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait in 1991, when Iraq clearly did constitute a threat to peace. **As of this writing, only one major power (Great Britain) and two minor powers (Spain and Australia) have offered to send troops.** All three of these governments are doing so contrary to the sentiments of the vast majority of their population and their combined participation still leaves the United States contributing at least 85% of combat forces. As columnist Maureen Dowd noted, since the Bush administration has driven virtually everyone from the schoolyard, it now has to rely on imaginary friends.

“The United Nations Security Council has not lived up to its responsibilities, so we will rise to ours.”

In reality, the United Nations Security Council has gone to extraordinary efforts to minimize any threat to peace from Iraq, including authorizing the use of

force in 1990 to enforce resolutions requiring an Iraqi withdrawal from occupied Kuwait, the imposition of strict sanctions against Iraq, and the creation of an inspections regime that has been largely—if not 100%—effective. By contrast, **it is not the responsibility of the United States or any country to invade a sovereign nation when it feels like it.**

“In recent days, some governments in the Middle East have been doing their part. They have delivered public and private messages urging the dictator to leave Iraq, so that disarmament can proceed peacefully. He has thus far refused. All the decades of deceit and cruelty have now reached an end. Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours. Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict, commenced at a time of our choosing. For their own safety, all foreign nationals—including journalists and inspectors—should leave Iraq immediately.”

President Bush has no authorization to demand that United Nations inspectors or foreign nationals leave Iraq. Nor does he have the right to demand that Saddam Hussein and his sons leave their country. No Security Council resolutions require that Saddam Hussein resign or that he and any other member of his family go into exile. And **neither the United States nor any other country has the right to commence an invasion of another country at the time of its choosing.**

“Many Iraqis can hear me tonight in a translated radio broadcast, and I have a message for them. If we must begin a military campaign, it will be directed against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you.”

It is highly likely that a major U.S. military campaign—particularly one with such a heavy reliance on air power and the determination to seize by force a capital city of over five million people—**will result in the deaths of thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians.**

“As our coalition takes away their power, we will deliver the food and medicine you need.”

In large part as a result of the U.S.-led sanctions, **there are already severe shortages of food and medicines in Iraq.** Strict and mostly equitable rationing have left few Iraqi families with more than a couple of days’ worth of food in storage. It is unlikely that the United States will be able to supply most Iraqis with the food and medicine they need in any timely manner.

“We will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free. In a free Iraq, there will be no more wars of aggression against your neighbors, no more poison factories, no more executions of dissidents, no more torture chambers and rape rooms.”

The fact that the United States has supported scores of regimes—including a number in the Middle East—that have tortured, raped, and murdered dissidents raises serious questions as to whether the Bush administration really supports a free Iraq. The Bush administration’s ongoing support of Moroccan occupation forces in Western Sahara, Turkish occupation forces in northern Cyprus, and Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights raises serious questions as to whether the United States is actually bothered by countries that commit acts of aggression against neighbors. The United States also supports a number of Middle Eastern countries that are believed to have developed chemical weapons, similarly raising questions as to whether the Bush administration is really worried about “poison factories.”

“The tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near.”

Most Iraqis would certainly welcome the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime. But it is highly questionable whether a Western nation that has already wrought enormous suffering for the Iraqi people, invades the country, and installs one of its own generals as a provisional military governor will be seen as **an act of liberation or a foreign occupation.**

“It is too late for Saddam Hussein to remain in power. It is not too late for the Iraqi military to act with honor and protect your country by permitting the peaceful entry of coalition forces to eliminate weapons of mass destruction.”

First, it is hard to imagine any national army—even under the most ruthless of dictators—that would not resist a foreign invasion. Second, **if the United States knows where these alleged weapons of mass destruction are located, why haven’t U.S. government officials informed UNMOVIC inspectors, who have the authority to destroy them?**

“Our forces will give Iraqi military units clear instructions on actions they can take to avoid being attacked and destroyed. I urge every member of the Iraqi military and intelligence services, if war comes, do not fight for a dying regime that is not worth your own life. And all Iraqi military and civilian personnel should listen carefully to this warning. In any conflict, your fate will depend on your action. Do not destroy oil wells, a source of wealth that belongs to the Iraqi people. Do not obey any command to use weapons of mass destruction against anyone, including the Iraqi people. War crimes will be prosecuted. War criminals will be punished. And it will be no defense to say, “I was just following orders”.”

The United States has actively undermined and refused to participate in the International Criminal Court, which was designed to try and punish war criminals like Saddam Hussein. As a result, **any such trials will likely be under the tutelage of an occupying American army, which will be seen by the vast majority of the international community as illegitimate.** For a foreign occupation army to try and punish leaders of an internationally recognized government—however reprehensible they may be—is in itself a war crime and would make these thugs martyrs in the eyes of much of the world.

“Should Saddam Hussein choose confrontation, the American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war, and every measure will be taken to win it.”

Refusing an illegitimate order by a foreign government to surrender power is not choosing confrontation. And, **clearly, the Bush administration has not taken “every measure to avoid war.”**

“Americans understand the costs of conflict because we have paid them in the past. War has no certainty, except the certainty of sacrifice. Yet, the only way to reduce the harm and duration of war is to apply the full force and might of our military, and we are prepared to do so. If Saddam Hussein attempts to cling to power, he will remain a deadly foe until the end. In desperation, he and terrorists groups might try to conduct terrorist operations against the American people and our friends. These attacks are not inevitable. They are, however, possible.”

Then why prosecute an unnecessary and illegal war?

“And this very fact underscores the reason we cannot live under the threat of blackmail. The terrorist threat to America and the world will be diminished the moment that Saddam Hussein is disarmed.”

According to the CIA and other estimates, Iraq has not engaged in any anti-American terrorism since the alleged 1993 assassination attempt against former President George Bush and has already dramatically reduced its support for international terrorism since the 1980s, when the United States was supporting his government. By contrast, **most intelligence analyses predict an increase in the terrorist threat** to America and its allies should the United States invade Iraq.

“Our government is on heightened watch against these dangers. Just as we are preparing to ensure victory in Iraq, we are taking further actions to protect our homeland. In recent days, American authorities have expelled from the country certain individuals with ties to Iraqi intelligence services. Among other measures, I have directed additional security of our airports, and increased Coast Guard patrols of major seaports. The Department of Homeland Security is working closely with the nation’s governors to increase armed security at critical facilities across America. Should enemies strike our country, they would be attempting to shift our attention with panic and weaken our morale with fear. In this, they would fail. No act of theirs can alter the course or shake the resolve of this country. We are a peaceful people—yet we’re not a fragile people, and we will not be intimidated by thugs and killers. If our enemies dare to strike us, they and all who have aided them, will face fearful consequences.”

The chances of the United States being attacked will be greatly increased if the U.S. attacks first. Indeed, if there was any logic behind the madness of 9/11, it was Osama bin Laden’s hope that the United States would react in such a way that would only increase the popularity of anti-American extremists. **History has shown that the more the United States has militarized the Middle East, the less secure we have become.**

"We are now acting because the risks of inaction would be far greater. In one year, or five years, the power of Iraq to inflict harm on all free nations would be multiplied many times over. With these capabilities, Saddam Hussein and his terrorist allies could choose the moment of deadly conflict when they are strongest. We choose to meet that threat now, where it arises, before it can appear suddenly in our skies and cities."

Iraq has never threatened to attack the United States nor does it have the ability to attack the United States. That country became a formidable military threat back in the 1980s as a result of support from industrialized nations like the U.S., Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. With a strict military embargo imposed upon the country since 1990, it will be extremely difficult for Iraq to become a military threat to the United States or any other country.

"The cause of peace requires all free nations to recognize new and undeniable realities. In the 20th century, some chose to appease murderous dictators, whose threats were allowed to grow into genocide and global war. In this century, when evil men plot chemical, biological and nuclear terror, a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this earth."

The analogy with Hitler's Germany and other Axis powers is spurious. Germany was the most powerful industrialized country in the world in the 1930s. Iraq, by contrast, is a poor, third-world country that has had most of its military infrastructure destroyed and has been under the strictest military and economic sanctions in world history. The current UN policy of inspections, sanctions, and the threat of UN-sanctioned war if Iraq again threatens its neighbors can hardly be considered "appeasement." None of the Axis powers of the 1930s were ever subjected to such international pressure until they had invaded and occupied dozens of nations in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Iraq has not invaded and occupied any countries since its six-month occupation of Kuwait in 1990-91.

"Terrorists and terror states do not reveal these threats with fair notice, in formal declarations—and responding to such enemies only after they have struck first is not self-defense, it is suicide. The security of the world requires disarming Saddam Hussein now."

Essentially, President Bush is saying that a country has the right to invade and occupy another country without any evidence that the targeted country has the intention, willingness, or ability to strike first. This would give virtually any country the right to invade any other. **Most of Iraq's neighbors do not consider Iraq to be a threat, either now or in the perceivable future.**

"As we enforce the just demands of the world, we will also honor the deepest commitments of our country."

Violating the U.S. Constitution and international legal covenants to which the U.S. government is legally bound is, in reality, **a dishonor to the deepest commitments of the United States.**

"Unlike Saddam Hussein, we believe the Iraqi people are deserving and capable of human liberty. And when the dictator has departed, they can set an example to all the Middle East of a vital and peaceful and self-governing nation."

If the United States really believes the Iraqi people are deserving and capable of human liberty, then why did the U.S. support Saddam Hussein during the height of his terror? **And why are the leading candidates the United States hopes to install in Baghdad to replace the current dictatorship lacking anything remotely resembling democratic credentials?**

"The United States, with other countries, will work to advance liberty and peace in that region."

Then why does the United States support dictatorships in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and other autocratic regimes? And why does the United States support Moroccan, Israeli, and Turkish occupation forces? **Such policies belie any claim of support for liberty and peace.**

"Our goal will not be achieved overnight, but it can come over time. The power and appeal of human liberty is felt in every life and every land. And the greatest power of freedom is to overcome hatred and violence, and turn the creative gifts of men and women to the pursuits of peace."

To unleash bombs and missiles on cities, to engage in war-mongering, and to lie to the American people and the world in order **to rationalize such an invasion is itself a form of hatred and violence.**

“That is the future we choose. Free nations have a duty to defend our people by uniting against the violent. And tonight, as we have done before, America and our allies accept that responsibility. Good night, and may God continue to bless America.”

And may God forgive President Bush and the congressional leaders of both parties who are responsible for unleashing such horrific violence against the people of Iraq.

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