



THE IRAQ WAR – ONE YEAR LATER

March 22, 2004

March 19 marked the first anniversary of the start of the U.S. war in Iraq, a war that toppled what many considered to be the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, but also appears to have put a rift between the United States and many of its allies as the United States for the first time launched a major military offensive against a country without being attacked first.

As part of the anniversary, President Bush spoke to a delegation of international leaders whose countries supported the U.S. by sending troops to Iraq.

The president used the anniversary to comment on international efforts to combat terrorism, saying the former Iraq regime provided an environment for harboring and aiding terrorists. He called on countries to continue supporting Iraq's reconstruction and the fight against terror.

“Any sign of weakness or retreat simply validates terrorist violence and invites more violence for all nations. The only certain way to protect our people is by united and decisive action,” he said.

The anniversary has also been an opportunity for Americans and the international community to reflect on whether the war was a success or failure. U.S. officials say they consider the war a success – Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz on Thursday called it a “victory.” However, the administration’s critics have said the fact that investigators have not found weapons of mass destruction -- one of the main reasons given for launching the invasion -- has made other countries lose trust in the United States.

Current security conditions in Iraq, where deadly attacks on Iraqi civilians and U.S. troops continue, have also led to charges that coalition leaders underestimated the task of rebuilding the war-torn country and created a more dangerous situation.

“Terrorism didn’t exist in Iraq before,” said French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, whose government was one of the most vocal critics in the months leading up to the war. “Today, it is one of the world's principal sources of world terrorism.”

Reasons for going to war

In February 2003 Secretary of State Colin Powell made the case for war with Iraq at a special presentation to the U.N. Security Council, the United Nations' peacekeeping body. Powell told member nations that Iraq was in violation of U.N. Resolution 1441, which was designed to disarm Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction.

Powell's presentation was the culmination of President Bush's case against the Iraqi leader. President Bush argued that Saddam was a cruel dictator who tortured and killed thousands of his own people and who had launched chemical attacks on Iranians and ethnic Kurds. Saddam's presence in the region, he argued, posed a risk to the world.

"The risk of doing nothing, the risk of hoping that Saddam Hussein changes his mind and becomes a gentle soul, the risk that somehow, that inaction will make the world safer is a risk I'm not willing to take for the American people," Mr. Bush said at the time.

The United States tried to pass another U.N. resolution authorizing force against Iraq, but it was blocked by France, Germany and Russia, which wanted to try to disarm Saddam peacefully.

So, on March 19, 2003, after giving Hussein multiple chances to step down, President Bush ordered the invasion of Baghdad. Joining American troops was a coalition of British and Spanish soldiers.

The war

Active fighting lasted six weeks. During that time more than 100 U.S. soldiers died and many more Iraqis. The Pentagon has refused to divulge its estimates of how many Iraqi civilians died during the bombing, but unofficial estimates from Human Rights Watch, an international human rights organization, stand at over 1,000.

One of the key days of the war was April 9 when U.S. soldiers, surrounded by hundreds of Iraqis, toppled a 40-foot statue of the former dictator, an image seen around the world.

President Bush announced the end of major combat operations on May 1, but warned that challenges lay ahead. Areas of Baghdad lay in ruins because of the bombings, the country had no electricity and little running water, oil fields were destroyed and no leadership existed.

"We have difficult work to do in Iraq. We are bringing order to parts of that country that remain dangerous. We are pursuing and finding leaders of the old regime, who will be held to account for their crimes," the president said.

Rebuilding Iraq

Since the end of the major combat, there have been many successes in the effort to rebuild Iraq.

The coalition has restored many of the country's services including water and electricity, according to U.S. administrator in Iraq Paul Bremer, and has reopened schools and clinics and begun building an Iraqi police force.

U.S. officials have also formed the Iraqi Governing Council, a group of Iraqi leaders who will oversee the creation of a new constitution and democratically elected government.

And in December, American soldiers captured Saddam Hussein hiding near his hometown of Tikrit.

But along with the successes have come major challenges. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, 277 U.S. soldiers have been killed in attacks on coalition forces since the war ended, and nearly 3,000 have been wounded since it began.

Bombings -- including one at the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad -- have left hundreds of civilians dead and have led to questions about the coalition's ability to provide security for Iraqis.

Most controversially, the failure of U.S. inspectors to find weapons of mass destruction has caused critics to question whether President Bush misled the American public by purposely using faulty weapons intelligence to justify going to war. A congressional committee has been formed to investigate the charge.

President Bush's Democratic rival for president, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, also criticized the handling of the conflict in a statement released Friday. The failure to find biological and chemical weapons in Iraq shows the president "misled" Congress and the nation about the reason for invading Iraq, Kerry said.

Going forward

Administration officials are seeking to turn over leadership to the Iraqi people by July 1. Elections have been scheduled for December.

According to Gen. John Abizaid, head of military operations in Iraq, the United States will stay in Iraq until Iraqi security forces are capable of defending themselves against terrorist attacks. About 130,000 coalition troops remain in Iraq.

By Kristina Nwazota, Online NewsHour

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