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Iraq War-2003-2011

2003–2011

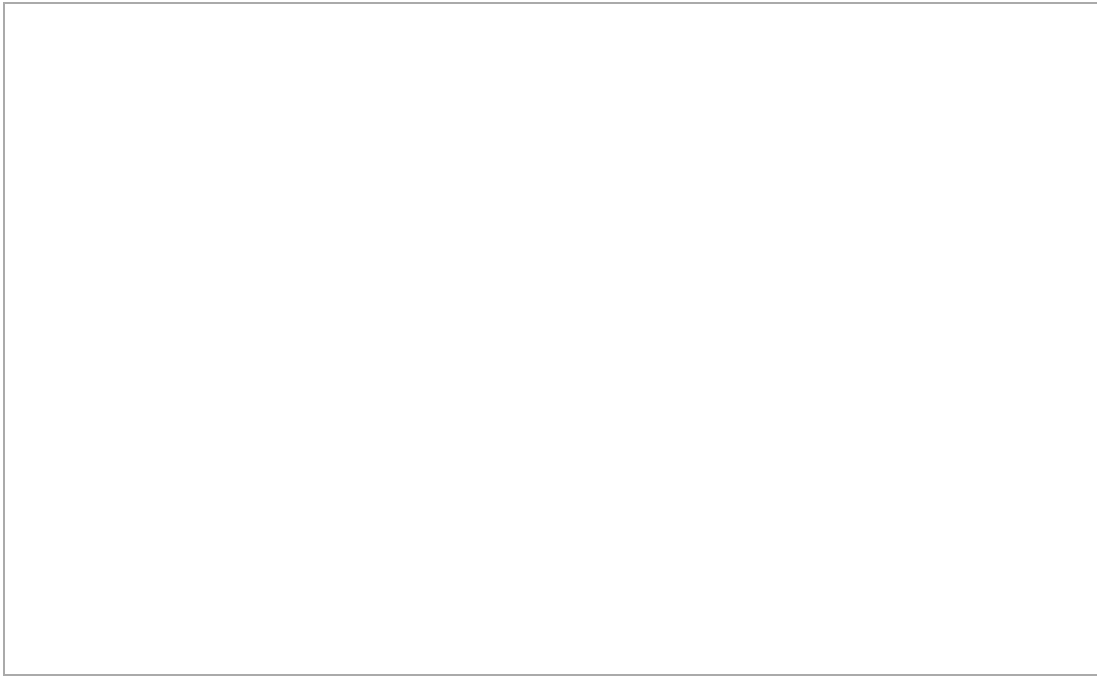
Written by: [The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica](#)

Iraq War, also called **Second Persian Gulf**

War, (2003–11), conflict in [Iraq](#) that consisted of two phases. The first of these was a brief, conventionally fought [war](#) in March–April 2003, in which a combined force of troops from the [United States](#) and [Great Britain](#) (with smaller contingents from several other countries) invaded [Iraq](#) and rapidly defeated Iraqi military and paramilitary forces. It was followed by a longer second phase in which a U.S.-led occupation of Iraq was opposed by an insurgency. After violence began to decline in 2007, the United States gradually reduced its military presence in Iraq, formally completing its withdrawal in December 2011.

Prelude to war

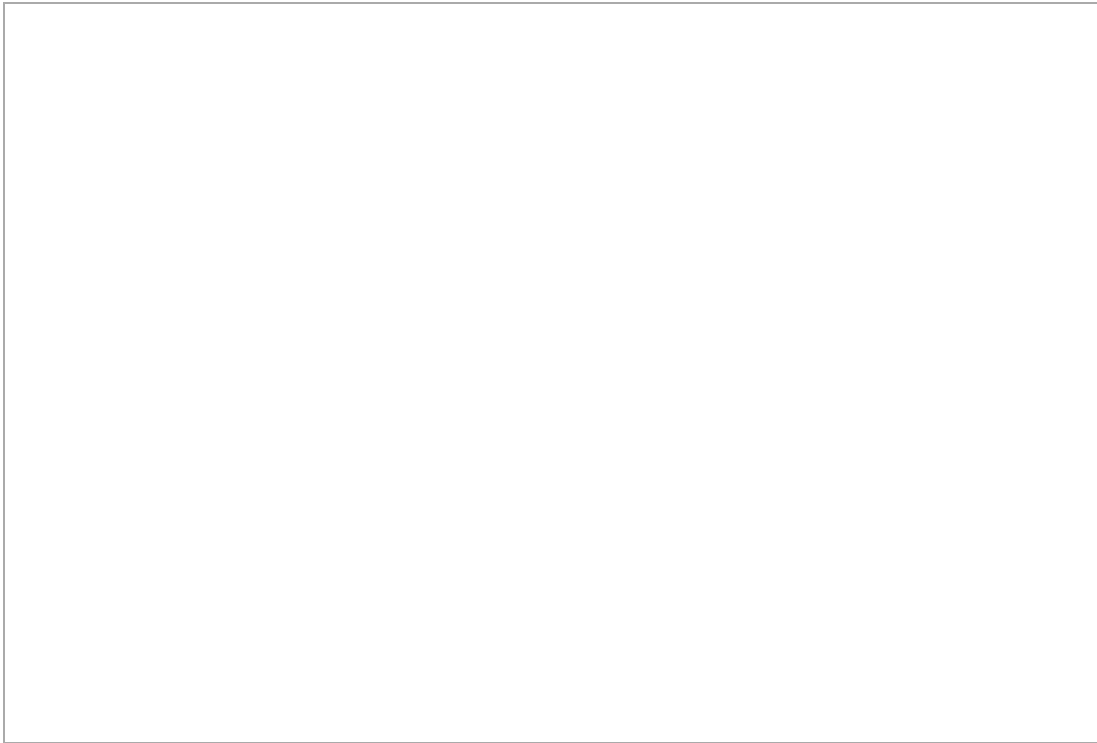
Iraq's invasion of [Kuwait](#) in 1990 ended in Iraq's defeat by a U.S.-led coalition in the [Persian Gulf War](#) (1990–91). However, the Iraqi branch of the [Baʿth Party](#), headed by [Ṣaddām Ḥussein](#), managed to retain power by harshly suppressing uprisings of the country's minority [Kurds](#) and its majority Shīʿite Arabs. To stem the exodus of Kurds from Iraq, the allies established a “safe haven” in northern Iraq's predominantly Kurdish regions, and allied warplanes patrolled “no-fly” zones in northern and southern Iraq that were off-limits to Iraqi aircraft. Moreover, to restrain future Iraqi aggression, the [United Nations](#) (UN) implemented economic [sanctions](#) against Iraq in order to, among other things, hinder the progress of its most lethal arms programs, including those for the development of nuclear, biological, and chemical [weapons](#). (See [weapon of mass destruction](#).) UN inspections during the mid-1990s uncovered a variety of proscribed weapons and prohibited technology throughout Iraq. That country's continued flouting of the UN weapons ban and its repeated interference with the inspections frustrated the international community and led U.S. Pres. [Bill Clinton](#) in 1998 to order the bombing of several Iraqi military installations (code-named Operation Desert Fox). After the bombing, however, Iraq refused to allow inspectors to reenter the country, and during the next several years the economic sanctions slowly began to erode as neighbouring countries sought to reopen trade with Iraq.



In 2002 the new U.S.

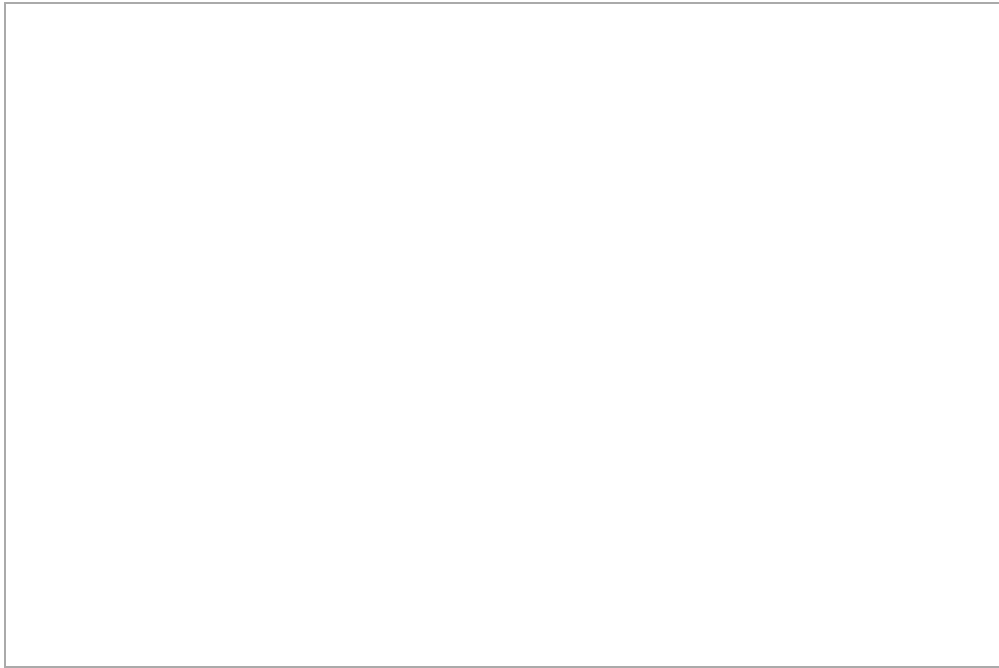
president, [George W. Bush](#), argued that the vulnerability of the United States following the [September 11 attacks](#) of 2001, combined with Iraq's alleged continued possession and manufacture of weapons of mass destruction (an accusation that was later proved erroneous) and its support for terrorist groups—which, according to the Bush administration, included [al-Qaeda](#), the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks—made disarming Iraq a renewed priority. UN [Security Council](#) Resolution 1441, passed on November 8, 2002, demanded that Iraq readmit inspectors and that it comply with all previous resolutions. Iraq appeared to comply with the resolution, but in early 2003 President Bush and British Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) declared that Iraq was actually continuing to hinder UN [inspections](#) and that it still retained proscribed weapons. Other world leaders, such as French Pres. [Jacques Chirac](#) and German Chancellor [Gerhard Schröder](#), citing what they believed to be increased Iraqi cooperation, sought to extend inspections and give Iraq more time to comply with them. However, on March 17, seeking no further UN resolutions and deeming further diplomatic efforts by the Security Council futile, Bush declared an end to diplomacy and issued an ultimatum to Ṣaddām, giving the Iraqi president 48 hours to leave Iraq. The leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and other countries objected to this buildup toward war.

The 2003 conflict



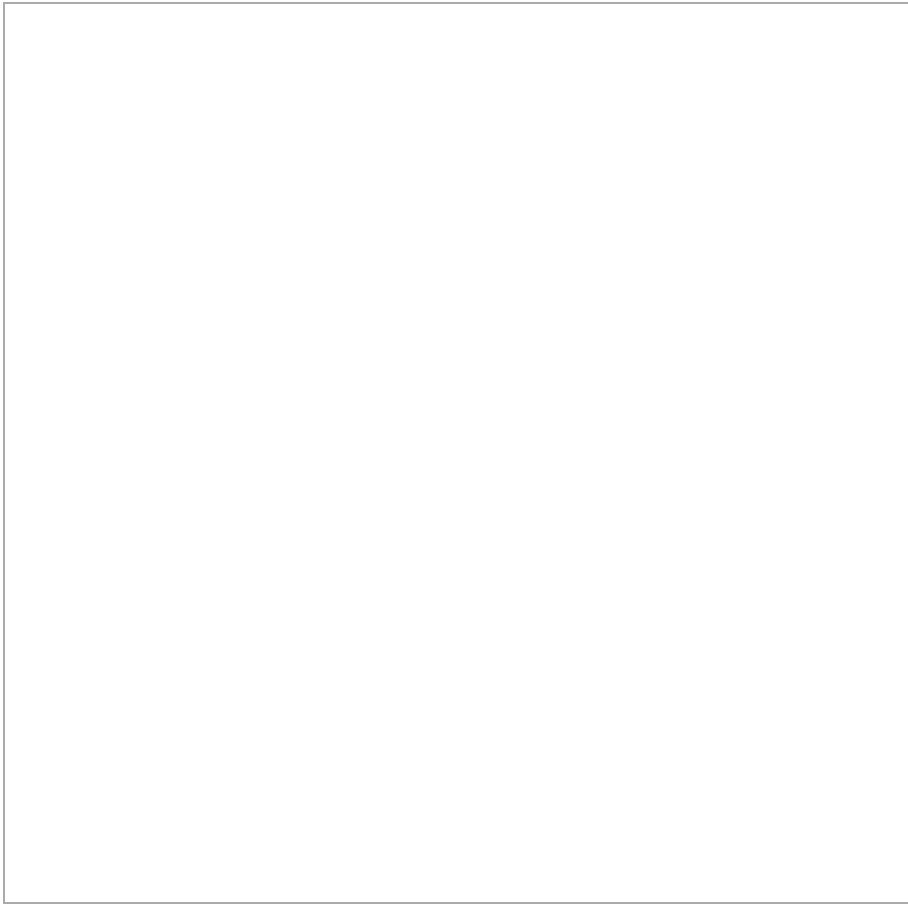
When Ṣaddām refused to leave Iraq, U.S. and allied forces launched an attack on the morning of March 20; it began when U.S. aircraft dropped several precision-guided bombs on a bunker complex in which the Iraqi president was believed to be meeting with senior staff. This was followed by a series of air strikes directed against government and military installations, and within days U.S. forces had invaded Iraq from Kuwait in the south (U.S. Special Forces had previously been deployed to Kurdish-controlled areas in the north). Despite fears that Iraqi forces would engage in a scorched-earth policy—destroying bridges and dams and setting fire to Iraq’s southern oil wells—little damage was done by retreating Iraqi forces; in fact, large numbers of Iraqi troops simply chose not to resist the advance of coalition forces. In southern Iraq the greatest resistance to U.S. forces as they advanced northward was from irregular groups of Ba’th Party supporters, known as Ṣaddām’s Fedayeen. British forces—which had deployed around the southern city of Al-Baṣrah—faced similar resistance from paramilitary and irregular fighters.

In central Iraq units of the Republican Guard—a heavily armed paramilitary group connected with the ruling party—were deployed to defend the capital of Baghdad. As U.S. Army and Marine forces advanced northwestward up the Tigris-Euphrates river valley, they bypassed many populated areas where Fedayeen resistance was strongest and were slowed only on March 25 when inclement weather and an extended supply line briefly forced them to halt their advance within 60 miles (95 km) of Baghdad. During the pause, U.S. aircraft inflicted heavy damage on Republican Guard units around the capital. U.S. forces resumed their advance within a week, and on April 4 they took control of Baghdad’s international airport. Iraqi resistance, though at times vigorous, was highly disorganized, and over the next several days army and Marine Corps units staged raids into the heart of the city. On April 9 resistance in Baghdad collapsed, and U.S. soldiers took control of the city.



On that same day Al-Baṣrah was finally secured by British forces, which had entered the city several days earlier. In the north, however, plans to open up another major front had been frustrated when the Turkish government refused to allow mechanized and armoured U.S. Army units to pass through Turkey to deploy in northern Iraq. Regardless, a regiment of American paratroopers did drop into the area, and U.S. Special Forces soldiers joined with Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters to seize the northern cities of [Kirkuk](#) on April 10 and [Mosul](#) on April 11. Ṣaddām's hometown of [Tikrīt](#), the last major stronghold of the regime, fell with little resistance on April 13. Isolated groups of regime loyalists continued to fight on subsequent days, but the U.S. president declared an end to major combat on May 1. Iraqi leaders fled into hiding and were the object of an intense search by U.S. forces. Ṣaddām Ḥussein was captured on December 13, 2003, and was turned over to Iraqi authorities in June 2004 to stand trial for various crimes; he was subsequently convicted of crimes against humanity and was executed on December 30, 2006.

Occupation and continued warfare



Following the collapse of the Ba‘thist regime, Iraq’s major cities erupted in a wave of looting that was directed mostly at government offices and other public institutions, and there were severe outbreaks of violence—both common criminal violence and acts of reprisal against the former ruling clique. Restoring law and order was one of the most arduous tasks for the occupying forces, one that was exacerbated by continued attacks against occupying troops that soon developed into full-scale [guerrilla warfare](#); increasingly, the conflict came to be identified as a civil war, although the Bush administration generally avoided using that term and instead preferred the label “sectarian violence.” Coalition casualties had been light in the initial 2003 combat, with about 150 deaths by May 1. However, deaths of U.S. troops soared thereafter, reaching some 1,000 by the time of the U.S. presidential election in November 2004 and surpassing 3,000 in early 2007; in addition, several hundred soldiers from other coalition countries have been killed. The number of Iraqis who died during the conflict is uncertain. One estimate made in late 2006 put the total at more than 650,000 between the U.S.-led invasion and October 2006, but many other reported estimates put the figures for the same period at about 40,000 to 50,000.

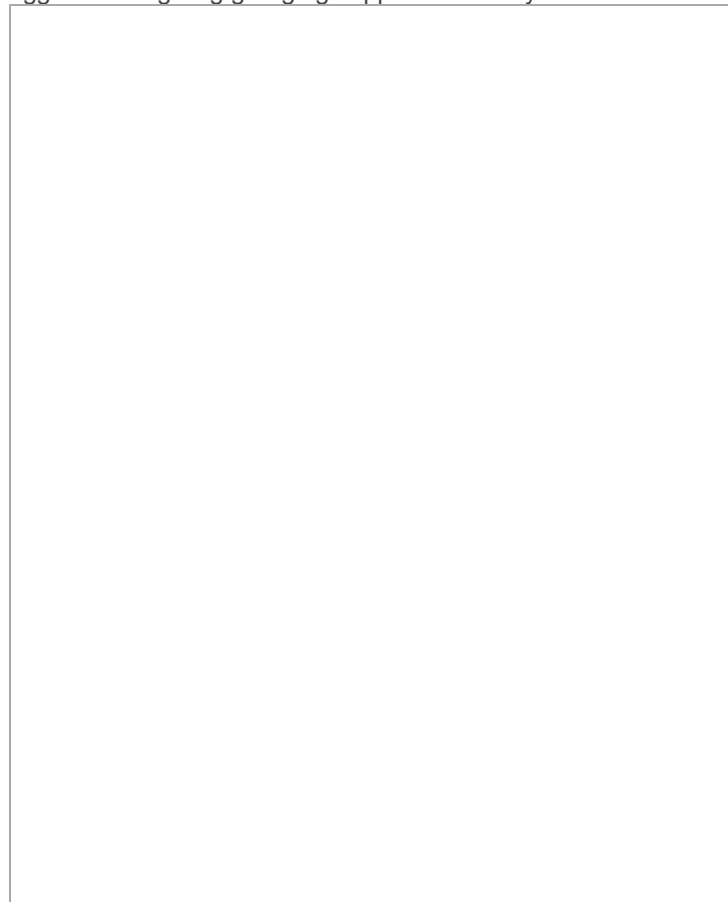
After 35 years of Ba‘thist rule that included three major wars and a dozen years of economic sanctions, the economy was in shambles and only slowly began to recover. Moreover, the country remained saddled with a ponderous debt that vastly exceeded its annual gross domestic product, and oil production—the country’s single greatest source of revenue—was badly hobbled. The continuing guerrilla assaults on occupying forces and leaders of the new Iraqi government in the years after the war only compounded the difficulty of rebuilding Iraq.

In the Shī‘ite regions of southern Iraq, many of the local religious leaders (ayatollahs) who had fled Ṣaddām’s regime returned to the country, and Shī‘ites from throughout the world were able to resume the pilgrimage to the holy cities of Al-Najaf and Karbalā’ that had been banned under Ṣaddām. Throughout the country Iraqis began the painful task of seeking loved ones who

had fallen victim to the former regime; mass graves, the result of numerous government pogroms over the years, yielded thousands of victims. The sectarian violence that engulfed the country caused enormous chaos, with brutal killings by rival Shī'ite and Sunni militias. One such Shī'ite militia group, the [Mahdi Army](#), formed by cleric [Muqtadā al-Ṣadr](#) in the summer of 2003, was particularly deadly in its battle against Sunnis and U.S. and Iraqi forces and was considered a major destabilizing force in the country.

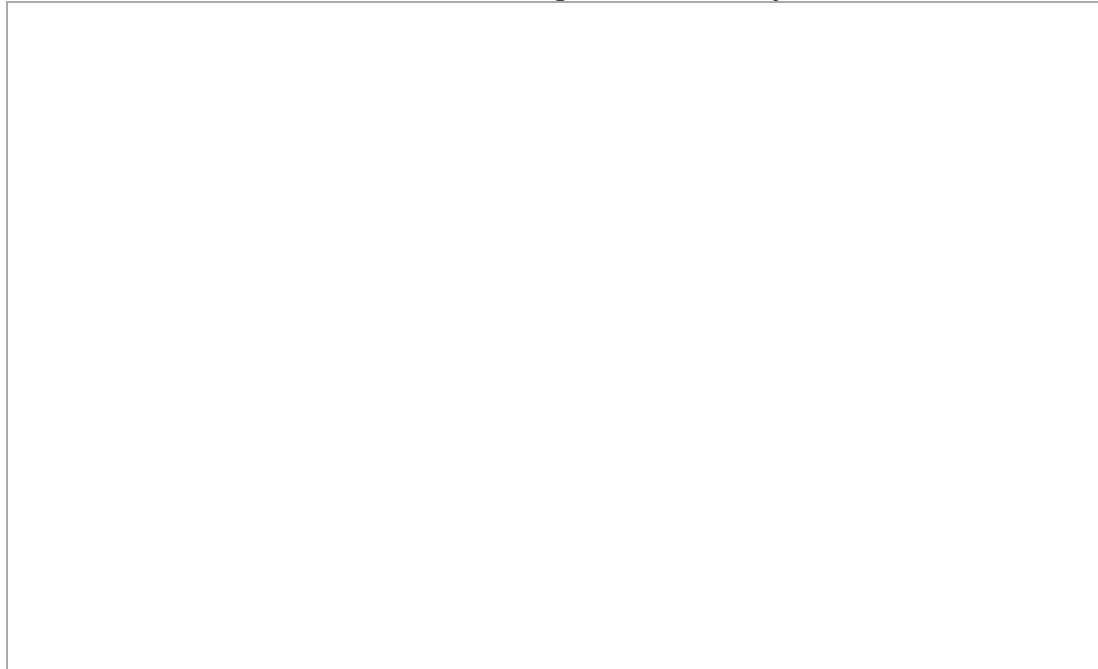
A controversial war

Unlike the common consent reached in the [Persian Gulf War](#), no broad coalition was assembled to remove Ṣaddām and his Ba'ṯh Party from power. Although some European leaders voiced their conditional support for the war and none regretted the end of the violent Ba'ṯhist regime, public opinion in Europe and the [Middle East](#) was overwhelmingly against the war. Many in the Middle East saw it as a new brand of anti-Arab and anti-Islamic imperialism, and most Arab leaders decried the occupation of a fellow Arab country by foreign troops. Reaction to the war was mixed in the United States. Though several antiwar protests occurred in American cities in the lead-up to the invasion, many opinion polls showed considerable support for military action against Iraq before and during the war. Surprisingly, American opinions on the war sometimes crossed traditional party lines and doctrinal affiliation, with many to the right of the avowedly conservative Bush seeing the war as an act of reckless internationalism and some to the political left—appalled by the Ba'ṯhist regime's brutal [human rights](#) violations and its consistent aggression—giving grudging support to military action.

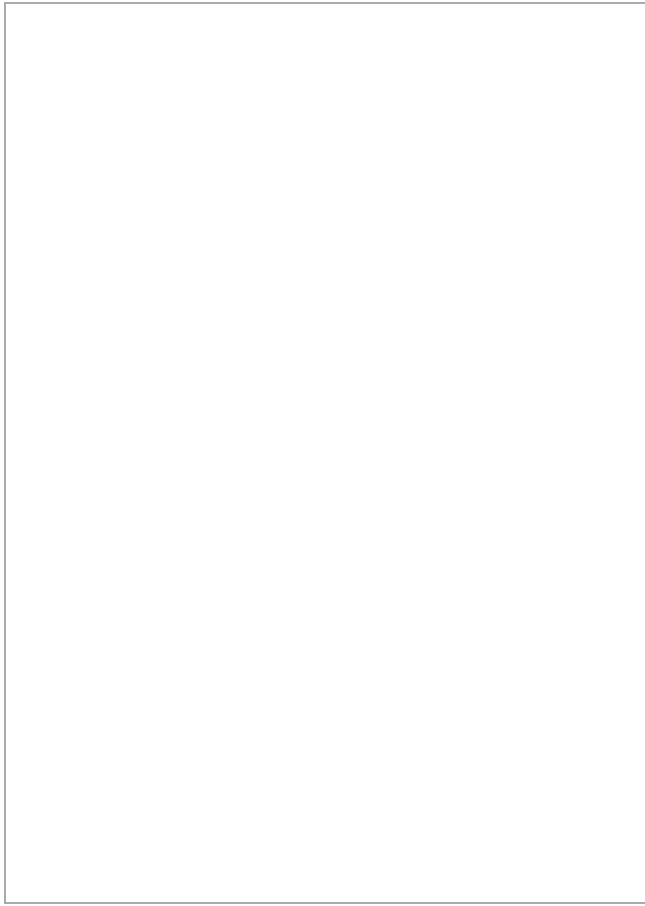


As violence continued and casualties mounted, however, more Americans (including some who had initially supported the war) began to criticize the Bush administration for what they perceived to be the mishandling of the occupation of Iraq. The appearance in the news of photographs of U.S. soldiers abusing Iraqis at [Abu Ghraib prison](#) west of Baghdad—a facility notorious for brutality under the Ba'ṯh regime—further damaged world

opinion of the United States. In addition, a U.S. bipartisan commission formed to investigate the [September 11 attacks](#) reported in July 2004 that there was no evidence of a “collaborative operational relationship” between the Ba’thist government and [al-Qaeda](#)—a direct contradiction to one of the U.S. government’s main justifications for the war.



Bush’s prewar claims, the failure of U.S. intelligence services to correctly gauge Iraq’s weapon-making capacity, and the failure to find any weapons of mass destruction—the Bush administration’s primary rationale for going to war—became major political debating points. The war was a central issue in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, which Bush only narrowly won. Opposition to the war continued to increase over the next several years; soon only a dwindling minority of Americans believed that the initial decision to go to war in 2003 was the right one, and an even smaller number still supported the administration’s handling of the situation in Iraq.



In late 2006 the Iraq Study Group, an independent bipartisan panel cochaired by former U.S. secretary of state [James A. Baker III](#) and former U.S. congressman Lee Hamilton, issued a report that found the situation in Iraq to be “grave and deteriorating.” The report advocated regionwide diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict and called for the U.S. military role to evolve into one that provided diminishing support for an Iraqi government that the report challenged to assume more responsibility for the country’s security.

The lead-up to and conduct of the war were also the subjects of controversy in Britain and the focus of parliamentary inquiries. The so-called Hutton Inquiry of 2003–04 cleared the Blair government of accusations of having “sexed up” intelligence related to the imminent threat posed by Iraq. However, the Butler Review of 2004 was critical of the prewar role of the British intelligence service, especially of unreliable information that was used as a pretext for British involvement. An even more comprehensive inquiry that was launched in late 2009 had by early 2010 come to include allegations that cuts to the military budget prior to the war had left British troops in Iraq vulnerable, setting the stage for testimony by Blair and his successor as prime minister, [Gordon Brown](#).

The surge

Prior to the release of the Iraq Study Group report, there had been considerable debate within the administration over the path forward in Iraq. Although by December 2006 President Bush had indicated his inclination to increase the number of troops in Iraq, questions—in particular, the exact number of troops to be added—remained unsettled. Finally, in January 2007, President Bush announced a controversial plan to temporarily increase the number of U.S. troops there by more than 20,000, an effort that became known as the surge. Despite heavy casualties initially—2007 was the deadliest year for U.S. forces since 2004—the drop in violence that occurred as the year drew on was a source of encouragement, and a number of the additional troops were subsequently withdrawn. The ultimate success of the surge itself remained a source of continuing debate, however, as the

declining levels of violence observed in 2007 were attributed not solely to the surge itself but to a confluence of factors. Among these were a change in tactics that brought U.S. forces already on the ground more in line with classic counterinsurgency strategy; the Sunni Awakening, a movement in which Sunni tribesmen who had formerly fought against U.S. troops eventually realigned themselves to help counter other insurgents, particularly those affiliated with al-Qaeda; and the voluntary peace observed by Ṣadr and his forces beginning in August of that year.

In November 2008 the Iraqi parliament approved a U.S.-Iraqi agreement that redefined the legal framework for U.S. military activity in Iraq and set a timetable for the final withdrawal of U.S. forces. Under the agreement, which was signed during the final months of the Bush administration after nearly a year of negotiation, U.S. troops were scheduled to leave the cities by mid-2009, and withdrawal from the country was set to be completed by December 31, 2011. In February 2009 newly elected U.S. Pres. [Barack Obama](#) announced that U.S. combat forces would be withdrawn from Iraq by August 31, 2010, with the remaining troops due to pull out by the end of 2011. On August 18, 2010—two weeks ahead of schedule—the last combat brigade withdrew from Iraq; 50,000 U.S. soldiers remained in Iraq to act as a transitional force.

In contrast to publicly known U.S. military casualty figures (tracked by the [Pentagon](#) to more than 4,300 in October 2009), for a number of years no comprehensive data on Iraqi mortality was made available by the Iraqi government. In October 2009 the Iraqi government released its estimate of violent deaths for the 2004–08 period (statistics for the earliest portion of the war were far more difficult to obtain, due to the lack of a functioning government at that time). According to the government estimate, more than 85,000 Iraqis—a figure that included both civilians and military personnel—had died violently in the four-year period. In October 2010 the whistle-blowing organization [WikiLeaks](#) published nearly 400,000 secret U.S. military documents from the Iraq War online under the title “Iraq War Log,” following the release of a similar cache of documents related to the [Afghanistan War](#) in July 2010. [WikiLeaks](#) made the documents available to several major news outlets, including [The New York Times](#), [Der Spiegel](#), [Le Monde](#), [The Guardian](#), and Al-Jazeera ahead of the publication date, stipulating that the material had to remain under embargo until the online release. The documents, mostly raw tactical and intelligence reports generated by field units in Iraq between 2004 and 2009, did not radically change the public understanding of the war, but they did reveal detailed information about its day-to-day conduct. They indicated that U.S. forces kept more detailed counts of Iraqi civilian casualties than previously acknowledged and that these counts indicated higher rates of civilian casualties than the military’s public statements, that private military contractors were often involved in incidents of excessive force, that [Iran](#) provided extensive direct military aid to Shīʿite militias participating in Iraq’s sectarian conflict, and that U.S. forces ignored the widespread use of torture by Iraqi security forces. U.S. and Iraqi officials condemned the publication of the documents, saying that the release would set back security efforts and endanger the lives of military personnel and Iraqis who cooperated with the military.

In July 2011, U.S. military officials announced that Iraq and the United States had begun negotiations to keep several thousand U.S. soldiers in Iraq past December 31, 2011, the date for withdrawal set in negotiations in 2008. However, a possible extension of the U.S. presence in Iraq remained unpopular with the Iraq public and with several Iraqi political factions. Negotiations failed when the two sides were unable to reach an agreement over the continuation for U.S. troops of legal immunity from Iraqi law. In October, President Obama announced that the remaining 39,000 soldiers would leave the country at the end of 2011. The U.S. military formally declared the end of its mission in Iraq in a ceremony in Baghdad on December 15, as the final U.S. troops prepared to withdraw from the country.