

# Memories

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“Looking back on the Iraq War, I would say that those lessons did not inform the decision-making process that got the United States into that conflict,” Lofthus continued. “The soldiers who fought there deserve our respect — they did not choose the war — but it is likely that future generations will conclude that the benefits were not worth the cost.”

Lofthus noted that he is currently teaching a class on the Vietnam War, an event for which the nation now has considerable historical perspective.

“It will be my students’ responsibility to teach about the Iraq War,” he stated. “It appears that Plato was right when he said ‘only the dead have seen the last war.’”

### A CONCISE HISTORY OF WAR

In the year before the American-led coalition invaded Iraq, the administration of President George W. Bush delivered grave warnings to the public about Saddam Hussein.

“There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction,” Vice President Dick Cheney stated on Aug. 26, 2002. “There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends ... and against us.”

It would later be revealed that these claims were built on faulty or exaggerated intelligence, as were administration attempts to tie Hussein to al Qaeda.

Nevertheless, the war in Iraq began March 19, 2003. Combat operations proceeded after Bush gave Saddam Hussein and his sons 48 hours to leave the country.

The U.S.-led invasion quickly ousted Hussein’s government, which then set off years of violent conflict as various groups competed for power in Iraq.

Bush would declare in his May 1, 2003, speech — during which a “Mission Accomplished” banner hung in the background — that major combat operations had ended in Iraq. The event would become controversial and derided by some as violence later escalated in the country and U.S. efforts to rebuild the nation were largely unsuccessful.

Hussein’s sons, Uday and Qusay, were killed in a July 2003 gun battle. Saddam himself was eventually caught in December of that year and later executed.

It was early 2004 that the torture and abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib facility in Iraq was revealed and unleashed harsh criticism of the United States in how it was managing the war.

Iraqis approved a constitution aimed at creating an Islamic federal democracy in October 2005. That December, they voted for the first full-term government and parliament since being invaded.

The Parliament ratified a security pact in November 2008 with the United States stipulating that U.S. troops would leave the country by the end of 2011.

Shortly after President Barack Obama took office, he announced the withdrawal of most U.S. troops by the end of August 2010. While some military officials stayed on to advise Iraqi forces and protect U.S. interests, they would also leave by the close of 2011.

### SENATORS LOOK BACK ON IRAQ DECISIONS

Looking back on the conflict this week and his vote for the Iraq War Resolution in 2002, which gave Bush the authority to use military force, Sen. Tim Johnson (D-S.D.) said the decision was a product of the information he had at the time.

“The information I had at the time was false,” he stated. “At the time, my son (Brooks) was due to go to Iraq and Afghanistan, so it was no small decision.

“It took about 10 years to complete this war, and it started under the false pretenses of the Iraqis having weapons of mass destruction,” the senator continued. “I’m glad the war is completed now, and I’m glad that Afghanistan is on its way to be completed.”

Then-Rep. John Thune also voted in favor of the resolution to authorize military force.

“Conditions at the time seemed to suggest that if we didn’t, we were running the risk of having someone in the Middle East with access to weapons of mass destruction,” said now-Sen. Thune (R-S.D.), who added he didn’t feel he had any choice but to support the resolution. “There is still going to be a debate about that, I’m sure, well into the future. I think as we look back on it now, 10 years on from the time we started our presence there, the jury is still out with regard to how that whole engagement played out.”

He said historians will debate the conflict for years to come and that the final chapter has yet to be written.

“It’s still a very fluid situation there in Iraq,” Thune stated. “I think it was probably a mistake not to come up with a status-of-forces agreement with the Iraqis that allowed at least some U.S. presence there to maintain stability. What you see there now is what you’d expect. All the various competing factions are fighting again. They are trying to maintain a democracy in that region of the world. I think being able to be a part of bringing about democratic reforms in Iraq was a good result of the war. But there are going to be questions raised about the American commitment of blood and treasure there. Over a long period of time, I think history will tell with regard to the good and the bad in terms of that military engagement.”

As disagreements between the U.S. and Iran continue to evolve, Thune said he is not sure how the recent history with Iraq will affect decisions related to the current situation.

“Your future is always shaped to some degree by your past,” he stated.

However, Iran is different from Iraq, Thune added.

“What we know today, for sure, is that Iran is enriching uranium,” he said. “Iran is taking all the steps that are necessary to acquire nuclear capability. The leadership in that country has made it abundantly clear that they think neighbors like Israel should be wiped off the map. Israel, of course, is an important

ally to the United States. I think we have to look at each of these situations somewhat differently. I think the decisions made in regard to Iran are going to be independent of what happened in Iraq and based upon what we believe is in the national security interests of the United States and some of our allies in the region.”

With the Iraq anniversary in mind, Schorn encouraged American leaders to show restraint when it comes to Iran.

“We need to be very cautious about jumping to conclusions on Iran and make sure we have a clear understanding of what can go wrong if we support Israel or take military action ourselves sometime in the not-so-distant future,” he said.

Despite the hard lessons learned in Iraq, Schorn expressed skepticism that those lessons will be remembered by Americans and their leaders in the future.

“The American leadership manipulated informa-

tion to fit a pre-ordained plan and policy outcome (in Iraq),” he said. “And we, the American people, are by and large disengaged from the process. We tend to buy what we’re sold. We accepted that Iraq still had an active weapons of mass destruction program, which was untrue. We continued to buy into the notion that there was some kind of relationship between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, which was untrue. We tend to believe what we want to believe, so any lessons that should have been learned probably weren’t.

“The Iraq of today is certainly not what we envisioned 10 years ago, but that’s because we had a poor understanding of Iraq before the invasion and failed to plan what was necessary after the invasion.”

You can follow Nathan Johnson on Twitter at [Twitter.com/AnInlandVoyage](https://twitter.com/AnInlandVoyage)

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