

# Al Gore's war on Iraq

KELLY McPARLAND

From Tuesday's National Post,  
December 23, 2008

Current wisdom has it that if there had been a few less hanging chads in Florida in November 2000, the world would be a different place.

Al Gore would have won the presidency, the Iraq war wouldn't have happened, and several hundred thousand people who perished in that war would be alive today. That conclusion is based on the generally unchallenged belief that Iraq is George W. Bush's war: that he and a cabal of like-minded right-wingers conceived and executed the invasion for their own ideological motives. Or, as Frank Harvey, a research professor of international relations at Dalhousie University, puts it: "A few powerful ideologues exploited public fears (and international goodwill) in the aftermath of 9/11 to amplify Iraq's WMD threat as a primary justification for an unnecessary, preventive invasion."

That view, notes Harvey, "has emerged as the dominant narrative for explaining the U.S. attack. It represents the prevailing consensus running through dozens of the most popular books on the Bush administration, and hundreds of frequently cited (and widely circulated) scholarly articles, media reports and blog entries on the invasion. In fact, casual observers engaged in a cursory review of the literature will find the same thesis repeated (and usually defended) by prominent scholars, journalists and Washington 'insiders' on the left and right of the political spectrum."

Harvey believes the conclusion is dead wrong. In a new paper for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, he deconstructs the thesis and finds it "overlooks almost all of the relevant historical facts." More than that, he asks a simple question: Had he been elected, would Al Gore have taken the same path as George Bush? He concludes, overwhelmingly, that he would have.

Given the prevailing mood in the aftermath of 9/11, the institutional structures that surround the president, the political and social pressures of the time, the accepted wisdom regarding Saddam Hussein and the international factors at work, says Harvey, Gore "[would have been] compelled ... to make many of the same interim (generally praised) decisions for many of the same reasons. Momentum would have done the rest."

There are several threads to Harvey's argument, which you can read in its entirety here. At the risk of oversimplifying a very detailed examination, here are a few of the arguments he makes:

Despite its universal acceptance, the prevailing theory of the war, which Harvey calls "neoconism" "remains an unsubstantiated assertion, a 'theory' without theoretical content, an argument devoid of logic or perspective ... Even the most superficial review of its central tenets reveals serious logical, empirical and theoretical flaws."

For instance, he notes, it presumes that Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and a few like-minded ideologues "had the intellectual prowess and political skills to manipulate the preferences, perceptions and priorities" of non-neocons such as Tony Blair and Colin Powell; the majority of both parties in both houses of Congress; the leadership of foreign policy and intelligence committees in the House and Senate -- including every senior Democrat; most European leaders; "every member of the UN Security Council (including France, Russia and China) who unanimously endorsed UN Security Council Resolution 1441; and 60%-70% of the American people at the time.

The "neocon" argument presumes Gore, in the same circumstances, would not have been presented with similar advice or faced pressures to act in a similar way. Harvey suggests this is wishful thinking. "In fact, all of the relevant evidence from Gore's entire political career – his speeches on Iraq, contributions to the 2000 campaign debates on foreign affairs, policy announcements and interviews" argue Gore would have been at least as aggressive as Bush. As Harvey points out:

"Gore was a foreign policy hawk. He consistently opposed efforts to cut defense spending, supported Reagan's decisions to bomb Libya, invade Grenada, aid the Contras in the 80s, and fund the B-1 and B-2 bomber and MX missile programs." Gore and his running mate, Senator Joe Lieberman, both backed the 1991 Gulf War. As Vice President, Gore supported military actions in Bosnia and Kosovo, and "consistently adopted the hardest line in the Clinton administration when dealing with Saddam Hussein." When President Clinton decided to abort his four-day bombing of Iraq in 1998, Gore opposed backing down "despite the absence of UN Security Council endorsement."

Gore was surrounded by advisers who shared his hawkish views, whose speeches, statements and policy positions at the time give no hint they were reluctant to use force to bring Saddam Hussein into line.

Bush did not invent the conditions or attitudes at the time. Gore would have been presented with the same flawed intelligence on Iraq's weapons capabilities, faced the same public fears and pressures and the same international concerns. "Every member of the UN Security Council (including the war's strongest critics, France and Russia)" unanimously endorsed the belief that Saddam had maintained proscribed weapons and was actively frustrating UN efforts to find them, Harvey writes.

"Anyone looking for reasons to be worried about Iraq could easily ignore speeches by Bush, Cheney or Rumsfeld and focus instead on those delivered by Clinton (Bill or Hillary), Gore and Kerry; they could ignore the 2002 [National Intelligence Estimate] and read the NIEs published over the previous five years; or they could simply read the reports by UNMOVIC's chief weapons inspector Hans Blix, or UNSCOM's inspector Scott Ritter (one of the war's strongest critics)."

The faulty intelligence was backed up by Saddam's bizarre efforts to encourage such beliefs, in hopes it would reduce the danger of a second conflict with Iran. There is no reason to believe Saddam would have acted differently under a Gore administration.

Harvey notes that the decision to invade was not made overnight but culminated from a series of escalating steps involving the UN and a host of international leaders, both friendly and otherwise. "President Gore would have been compelled to make all of the same rational moves to get inspectors back into Iraq," he concludes. "Strategically, the only way to accomplish this goal through multilateral diplomacy would have been to follow the same basic strategy. The competing counterfactual claim that none of these decisions would have been taken is simply not credible."

He adds: "The only significant difference would have been the size of the invading force – Gore would probably have recommended a much larger troop deployment in line with General Anthony Zinni's plan under the Clinton administration (OPPLAN 1003-98, originally approved in 1996 and updated in 1998, called for 400,000 troops). Boosted by the confidence of deploying this many troops, and concerned about the cost of sustaining such a large force through prolonged (and unsuccessful) inspections, Gore would have been more, not less inclined to accept the risks of war. It is highly unlikely that a sitting Democratic President would have survived the 2004 election if he decided against enforcing "all necessary means" or "serious consequences" in favour of the French-Russian position.