

House Republicans and Democrats Unite

by Stephen Zunes | October 11, 2004

On the eve of the third anniversary of 9/11, the U.S. House of Representatives—by an overwhelming, bipartisan majority of 406-16—passed a resolution linking Iraq to the al-Qaida attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. This comes despite conclusions reached by the bipartisan 9/11 Commission, a recent CIA report, and the consensus of independent strategic analysis familiar with the region that no such links ever existed.

The resolution contains appropriate and predictable language paying tribute to the rescue workers and victims' families. It also notes actions taken by the U.S. government in response to the attacks, such as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, improvements in intelligence procedures, enhanced coordination between government agencies, and hardening cockpit doors on commercial aircraft. Actions by American allies were noted as well, such as their arrest of key al-Qaida operatives in Europe and elsewhere.

However, the resolution also contains language designed, despite the lack of any credible evidence, to associate the former Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein with the 9/11 attacks.

Al-Qaida = Taliban = Iraq

For example, the resolution states that “since the United States was attacked, it has led an international military coalition in the destruction of two terrorist regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

First of all, there appears to be a calculated ambiguity in the language of that clause through the use of the word “since,” which can mean both “from the time when” as well as “because.”

Secondly, these two military operations were very different:

While there was no evidence that the Taliban regime of Afghanistan was directly involved in international terrorism, they undeniably provided the

most important base of operations for the al-Qaida terrorist network, which shared their extremist Wahhabi-influenced brand of Islamist ideology. In return, al-Qaida provided direct support for the Taliban by contributing fighters to the Afghan government in the face of military challenges by rebels of the Northern Alliance. Despite concerns over the large numbers of civilians killed as a result of the U.S. bombing and missile attacks and other aspects of U.S. military operations, much of the international community supported the legitimacy of the war effort.

By contrast, despite extraordinary efforts by the U.S. government to find some kind of association between the Islamist al-Qaida and the secular Baathists then in power in Iraq, no such links have been found. Relatively few countries have supported the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq outside of poor debtor nations which received enormous pressure from the United States to do so.

Allegations of Iraqi support of other anti-American terrorist groups appear to be groundless as well. Despite backing Abu Nidal and other secular terrorist groups in the 1980s, Iraqi support for international terrorism declined markedly in subsequent years; the last act of anti-American terrorism the U.S. government formally tied to Iraq was back in early 1993. The State Department's annual study *Patterns of Global Terrorism* did not list any acts of international terrorism linked directly to the government of Iraq in subsequent years. The most evidence of indirect Iraqi involvement in terrorism the Bush administration has



been able to come up with was Iraqi financial support of the tiny pro-Saddam Palestinian group known as the Arab Liberation Front, which passed on funds to families of Palestinians who died in the struggle against Israel, including some families of suicide bombers. Such Iraqi support was significantly less than the support many of these same families have received from Saudi Arabia and other U.S.-backed Arab monarchies. In fact, Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups have received extensive direct support from these countries as well, but apparently not from Iraq.

The resolution goes on to note that “United States Armed Forces and Coalition forces have killed or captured 43 of the 55 most wanted criminals of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, including Saddam Hussein himself.” While this statement is in itself true, there is no evidence to suggest that any of these members of the former Iraqi regime had anything to do with 9/11. As a result, it appears that the House decided to include this clause as an attempt to associate Saddam Hussein’s regime, in the eyes of the American people, with the attacks.

The Saddam—al-Zarqawi—bin Laden Connection

The single most misleading clause in the House resolution claims that “the al-Zarqawi terror network used Baghdad as a base of operations to coordinate the movement of people, money, and supplies.” This charge was originally raised by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his February 2003 speech before the United Nations and has long since been discredited. Indeed, a recent CIA report concluded that there was no evidence that Saddam’s regime had in any way harbored, provided aid, or in any other way support al-Zarqawi.

While the Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his followers were indeed located inside Iraq’s borders prior to the U.S. invasion, they were not based in Baghdad, but in the far north of the country inside the Kurdish safe havens the United Nations had established in 1991, well beyond the control of the Saddam’s government.

Indeed, the only evidence the Bush administration has been able to put forward linking the al-Zarqawi terror network to the Iraqi capital was a brief stay that al-Zarqawi had in a Baghdad hospital at the end of 2001, apparently having been smuggled by supporters into the country from Iran and smuggled out days later. The recent CIA report has called even this claim into question, however.

Charges by Powell and other administration officials that al-Zarqawi was affiliated with al-Qaida leader Osama bin

Laden also appears to have little merit. Indeed, there is a fair amount of evidence to suggest that the two see each other as rivals.

This apparently fictional al-Zarqawi connection alleged by Congress is significant in that it was a key component of one of the justifications put forward by the Bush administration for invading Iraq in the weeks leading up to the start of the war in March 2003. For if al-Zarqawi was closely aligned with al-Qaida, and if Saddam Hussein was allowing the al-Zarqawi terror network to use Baghdad as a base of operations, and if Saddam was manufacturing weapons of mass destruction, therefore Saddam could pass these weapons on to al-Zarqawi, who would then pass them on to al-Qaida, which in turn could then use them on the United States. Therefore, according to this argument, the United States had to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam’s government in order to protect our nation from a chemical, biological, or nuclear attack.

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(Ironically, since the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, the al-Zarqawi terror network has established extensive cells in Baghdad and elsewhere in the country, which they were unable to do during Saddam’s regime. They are believed to be responsible for many of the most devastating car bombings and other acts of terrorism which have killed hundreds of civilians and wreaked havoc on Iraq since the U.S. takeover of that country during the spring of 2003.)

Bipartisan Efforts to Hide the Truth

This is not the first time that Republicans and Democrats in the House of Representatives have teamed up to present the invasion of Iraq as a justifiable response to 9/11.

Just days after President Bush forced United Nations weapons inspectors out of Iraq and commenced the U.S. invasion, the House voted 392-11 to express their “unequivocal support and appreciation” to President Bush for leading the nation to war against Iraq “as part of the ongoing Global War on Terrorism.”

Some Democrats have defended that March 2003 vote on the grounds that House members were simply fooled by President Bush and others who insisted Iraq had a close connection with al-Qaida.

However, the fact that Congress would pass another resolution by a similarly one-sided margin long after U.S. military and intelligence officials had gone through many thousands of captured Iraqi documents and had interviewed hundreds of former Iraqi officials and still failed to find any credible evidence of any such ties appears to indicate that there indeed remains a calculated bipartisan attempt to mislead the American people.

Such dishonest rhetoric from the Bush administration has become all too common in the three years since the 9/11 attacks. Why, then, would the Democrats also want to perpetuate such myths that are essentially designed to grant legitimacy to President Bush’s illegal and disastrous invasion of Iraq?

Perhaps, in some cases, they were too busy or too lazy to bother reading the resolution, and just assumed it was a tribute to the 9/11 victims. Perhaps some of them were afraid that the Republicans would accuse them in the fall campaign of “voting against a resolution honoring the brave firefighters” if they did otherwise, and this was just another case of the Democrats wimping out.

However, the real answer may lie in the fact that while a majority of Americans now believe that the United States should have never invaded Iraq, the Democratic leadership of both the Senate and the House of Representatives firmly supported the U.S. invasion of that oil-rich country. More importantly this presidential election year, Democratic nominee John Kerry and his running mate John Edwards both voted in October 2002 to authorize President Bush to launch the war at any time and under any circumstances of his own choosing, a decision that they both defend to this day. As a result, if the American public can be convinced that Iraq somehow had something to do with the 9/11 tragedy, more voters might be willing to see these two Democratic senators not as irresponsible militarists who helped drag the United States into an illegal, unnecessary, and bloody counter-insurgency war, but as bold leaders who acted decisively to defend America from future terrorist attacks.

In short, it appears that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats have any qualms about taking advantage of the anniversary of one of the greatest disasters ever inflicted upon our soil in order to justify the ongoing violence inflicted upon the people of Iraq and upon American soldiers forced to fight there. That these two parties are the only realistic choices we have on a national level this election year is not just a tragedy for the people of

Iraq, but a sad testament to the state of American democracy.

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