

Fact and Fiction in Foreign Policy: Misleading Foreign Policy Statements Made by the Candidates in the Vice Presidential Debate

By Stephen Zunes | October 6, 2004

The list below contains what I consider to be the sixteen most misleading statements made by Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator John Edwards during the foreign policy segment of their debate of October 5, followed by my critiques. This is a resolutely non-partisan analysis: eleven of the misleading statements cited are from Cheney and five are from Edwards. The quotes are listed in the order in which they appear in the transcript.

Iraq

1. **Cheney:** *“Concern about Iraq specifically focused on the fact that Saddam Hussein had been, for years, listed on the state sponsor of terror; that he had established relationships with Abu Nidal, who operated out of Baghdad;...and he had an established relationship with al Qaida.”*

At the height of Iraq’s support for Abu Nidal, during the mid-1980s, the Reagan administration dropped Iraq from its list of states sponsoring terrorism in order to transfer arms and technology to Saddam Hussein’s regime that would have otherwise been illegal. Iraq was put back on the list immediately following its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, despite evidence that Iraq’s support for international terrorism had actually declined. Abu Nidal’s group had been largely moribund for more than a decade when Saddam Hussein had him killed in his Baghdad apartment in 2002.

Despite seemingly desperate efforts by the Bush administration to find a working relationship between the secular Baathist government of Saddam Hussein and the Islamist al-Qaida network of Osama bin Laden, no credible links have been established. Indeed, recent reports from the 9/11 commission, the Central Intelligence Agency and other credible sources have gone on record denying that any evidence of such a relationship exists.

2. **Edwards:** *“Saddam Hussein needed to be confronted. John Kerry and I have consistently said that. That’s why we voted for the resolution.”*

Saddam Hussein’s regime was already being confronted through the United Nations Security Council, which had imposed strict sanctions upon the country and had overseen the disarmament of that country’s chemical weapons; its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs; and its offensive delivery systems. There was no need and no legal right for Kerry and Edwards to authorize President Bush to unilaterally take military action, since the dispute regarding the destruction of proscribed weapons and weapons systems and access for UN inspectors was not between Iraq and the United States but between Iraq and the United Nations. Earlier the same day

that Kerry and Edwards voted to give President Bush such unprecedented authority to unilaterally invade a foreign country, they both voted against a similar resolution granting President Bush the power to use military force if it was authorized by the UN Security Council. This underscores the willingness of the Democratic presidential and vice presidential nominees to defy the United Nations Charter and to project American military power unilaterally regardless of international law.

“Global Tests” for Military Action

3. **Cheney:** *“We heard Senator Kerry say the other night that there ought to be some kind of global test before U.S. troops are deployed preemptively to protect the United States.”*

In reality, during the first presidential debate—as well as on many other occasions—Kerry has made clear that he would not give any foreign government the right to block the United States from moving preemptively against a perceived threat. Kerry has emphasized, however, that he would make a far more serious effort than has the current administration to demonstrate to the international community that such use of force was for a legitimate reason.

Kerry’s Record on Military Spending

4. **Cheney:** *“In the mid-’80s, he [Kerry] ran on the basis of cutting most of our major defense programs.”*

John Kerry’s 1984 race for the U.S. Senate was not based upon “cutting most of our major defense programs.” He did support a bilateral verifiable treaty with the Soviet Union to freeze the testing, development and deployment of new nuclear weapons and delivery systems, a proposal which—according to public opinion polls at that time—was backed by a sizeable majority of Americans. Kerry also opposed some costly weapons programs which independent strategic analysts argued were unnecessary for America’s defense needs while he supported many other weapons programs. In any case, these issues were never the basis of his campaign.

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Afghanistan and El Salvador

5. **Cheney:** *“We’re four days away from a democratic election, the first one in history in Afghanistan. We’ve got 10 million voters who have registered to vote, nearly half of them women. That election will put in place a democratically elected government that will take over next December. We’ve made enormous progress in Afghanistan, in exactly the right direction, in spite of what John Edwards said two and a half years ago. He just got it wrong.”*

In Afghanistan, vote-buying, intimidation, and the enormously disproportionate resources allocated to pro-government candidates raise serious questions as to how democratic these upcoming elections will be. Currently, there are more Afghan males registered to vote than there are eligible Afghan male voters; duplicate voting cards are commonplace and can be sold on the open market. The regime, which lacks solid control of much of the country outside the capital of Kabul, was largely hand-picked by the United States. The ongoing violence and chaos in the country, along with extremely high rates of illiteracy, raise serious questions as to whether the Western-style election the United States is trying to set up will have any credibility among the Afghans themselves. Edwards’ concerns about the growing power of opium magnates and war lords—casually dismissed by Cheney—are actually quite valid.

6. **Cheney:** *“Twenty years ago we had a similar situation in El Salvador. We had—guerrilla insurgency controlled roughly a third of the country, 75,000 people dead, and we held free elections. I was there as an observer on behalf of the Congress. The human drive for freedom, the determination of these people to vote, was unbelievable. And the terrorists would come in and shoot up polling places; as soon as they left, the voters would come back and get in line and would not be denied the right to vote. And today El Salvador is a whale of a lot better because we held free elections.”*

First of all, the United States was not supporting freedom in El Salvador twenty years ago. According to the United Nations Truth Commission and independent human rights organizations, the vast majority of those killed in El Salvador during this period were civilians murdered by the U.S.-backed junta and its allied paramilitary organizations.

Secondly, the Salvadoran elections Cheney observed in the 1980s were not free elections. The leading leftist and left-of-center politicians had been assassinated or driven underground and their newspapers and radio stations suppressed. The election was only between representatives of conservative and right-wing parties.

Thirdly, despite threats from some of the more radical guerrilla factions, there were very few attacks on polling stations.

Fourthly, people repeatedly lined up to vote because they were required to. Failure to get the requisite stamp that validated the fact that you had voted would likely get one labeled as a “subversive” and therefore a potential target for assassination.

Lastly, El Salvador finally did have free elections in 1994, only after Congress cut off aid to the Salvadoran government and the peace plan initiated by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias—which was initially opposed by the Republican administrations then in office in Washington—was finally implemented.

Supporting the Troops?

7. **Cheney:** *“You voted for the war, and then you voted against supporting the troops when they needed the equipment, the fuel, the spare parts and the ammunition and the body armor.”*

Edwards and Kerry have voted on successive administration requests to provide equipment, fuel, spare parts, and ammunition and body armor for U.S. occupation troops in Iraq, rejecting calls by opponents of the U.S. invasion and occupation to cut off funding so the troops can come home. They did vote against a particular funding bill by the administration based primarily on the administration’s insistence that it be funded by increasing the federal deficit. Kerry and Edwards instead voted for an identical measure—which failed to win a majority—that allocated the same amount of money to the occupation but would have funded it by reducing recently-enacted tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans.

Coalitions in Question in Wars Against Iraq in 1991 And 2003

8. **Edwards:** *“What we know is that the president and the vice president have not done the work to build the coalition that we need—dramatically different than the first Gulf War.”*

The senior President Bush was indeed able to build a broader coalition than his son, but that was because the 1991 war against the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was very different than the 2003 war to impose a U.S. occupation of Iraq. While strong arguments can be made against the 1991 Gulf War, the use of forces was legally sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, consistent with the UN Charter and the international legal consensus that supports such collective security against such clear acts of aggression as Iraq’s 1990 invasion, occupation, and annexation of Kuwait. By contrast, the 2003 war against Iraq was an unmitigated act of aggression in direct contravention of the United Nations Charter and basic international legal principles going back for nearly a century. The failure to build a broader coalition, then, was not based upon the Bush administration’s lack of diplomatic acumen; even the more erudite Kerry could not have built such a coalition simply because the international community recognized that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was illegal and unjustified.

9. **Cheney:** *“You made the comment that the Gulf War coalition in ‘91 was far stronger than this. No. We had 34 countries then; we’ve got 30 today.”*

The U.S.-led 1991 Gulf War coalition included more than twice as many non-American troops, all of which were assembled prior to the

launching of the war in January 1991. By contrast, troops from all but four members of the current coalition arrived after U.S. forces had marched on Baghdad, toppled the Iraqi regime and began the occupation. Their role is ostensibly that of peace keepers and the vast majority of these forces serve in non-combat roles.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Saddam Hussein

10. **Cheney:** *“Let’s look at what we know about Mr. Zarqawi... He set up shop in Baghdad, where he oversaw the poisons facility up at Khurmil, where the terrorists were developing ricin and other deadly substances to use.”*

First of all, the Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his followers were not based in Baghdad, but in the far northeastern corner of the country inside the Kurdish safe havens established by the United Nations in 1991, well beyond the control of Saddam’s government. 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.

Secondly, not only was the Khurmil area in Kurdish areas far outside of Saddam’s reach, but journalists who visited the supposed poisons factory within hours of it being identified by Bush administration officials from satellite photos found nothing remotely resembling such a facility. U.S. Special Forces that seized control of the area weeks later came to a similar conclusion.

Finally, Zarqawi and his followers established a presence in Baghdad only after U.S. forces overthrew the Iraqi government in March 2003.

Iraq, Libya, and Iran

11. **Cheney:** *“One of the great by-products, for example, of what we did in Iraq and Afghanistan is that five days after we captured Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi in Libya came forward and announced that he was going to surrender all of his nuclear materials to the United States, which he has done.”*

First of all, in 1998, the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that Iraq’s nuclear program had been completely dismantled. When IAEA inspectors returned in the fall of 2002 as part of UN Security Council resolution 1441, they reported that there were no signs that the program had been revived. Despite this, the United States invaded Iraq and overthrew the Iraqi government. As a result, Qaddafi presumably recognized that unilaterally giving up his nuclear weapons program and allowing in international inspectors to verify it does not necessarily make you any less likely to be invaded by the United States.

Secondly, the agreement had been in the works for a number of years, largely as a result of a British-led diplomatic effort. That the

announcement came five days after Saddam Hussein was arrested was sheer coincidence.

12. **Edwards:** *“The reality about Iran is that Iran has moved forward with their nuclear weapons program on their watch. They ceded responsibility to dealing with it to the Europeans.”*

The United States broke off diplomatic relations with Iran nearly twenty-five years ago and, during the 1990s, unilaterally imposed sanctions on that country, openly called for the government’s overthrow and funded groups dedicated to that purpose. All of these initiatives took place under Democratic administrations. By contrast, the Europeans—despite outspoken criticism of certain Iranian policies and restricting certain arms and technology transfers—have maintained normal diplomatic and trade relations. It should not be surprising, then, that the Europeans have had to take the lead in resolving the current standoff over Iran’s nuclear program.

Israel and Palestine

13. **Edwards:** *“If Gaza’s being used as a platform for attacking the Israeli people, that has to be stopped. And Israel has a right to defend itself.”*

While it is true that some militant Palestinian groups have used the Gaza Strip as a base for lobbing shells into civilian areas of Israel, the Israeli armed forces have similarly used Israel as a platform for attacking civilian areas of the Gaza Strip. Indeed, far more Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip have been killed by attacks launched from Israel than have Israeli civilians in Israel been killed from attacks launched from the Gaza Strip. Does this mean that Palestine therefore also “has a right to defend itself” by launching a major military incursion into nearby Israeli population centers with widespread killings of unarmed civilians and massive destruction of civilian property as Israel has been doing? Apparently not, since Edwards and Kerry clearly have different standards regarding the use of force depending upon a particular government’s relations with the United States. Given that Secretary of State Powell that very afternoon criticized the disproportionate nature of the ongoing Israeli military response, Edwards is clearly placing the Democratic ticket to the right of the Bush administration.

14. **Edwards:** *“They don’t have a partner for peace right now. They certainly don’t have a partner in Arafat, and they need a legitimate partner for peace.”*

Palestinian president Yasir Arafat has repeatedly called for a resumption of substantive peace negotiations, but the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon has refused. Arafat has called for a peace settlement along the lines proposed by President Clinton in 2000, which culminated with the signing of the Geneva Initiative in December 2003 by leading Israelis and Palestinians. The agreement calls for an Israeli withdrawal from the territories it conquered in the 1967 war (with minor and reciprocal border adjustments), a shared Jerusalem as the co-capital of Israel and Palestine, the resettlement of Palestinian refugees from what is now Israel in the new Palestinian

state or other Arab countries, and strict security guarantees for Israel, including the disarming of Palestinian militias. Sharon, by contrast, has categorically rejected such an agreement.

While Arafat's rule has been corrupt and autocratic and he has been ineffective in stopping terrorism by radical Palestinian groups, his positions on the outstanding issues in the peace process is far more moderate than those of the Israeli government. Arafat certainly has blood on his hands, but no more than does Sharon, widely recognized as a war criminal for his role in major atrocities against Lebanese, Jordanian, and Palestinian civilians in previous years. In any case, Arafat is the elected leader of the Palestinians and Sharon is the elected leader of the Israelis. By refusing to include one of the two major parties in the peace process, Edwards and Kerry are effectively foreclosing any realistic prospects for a negotiated peace.

15. **Cheney:** *"In respect to Israel and Palestine, the suicide bombers, in part, were generated by Saddam Hussein, who paid \$25,000 to the families of suicide bombers. I personally think one of the reasons that we don't have as many suicide attacks today in Israel as we've had in the past is because Saddam is no longer in business."*

Saddam Hussein did provide money to a small Palestinian faction known as the Arab Liberation Front which passed it on to some families of terrorists killed in suicide bombings. Money was also given to families of other Palestinians killed in the fight against Israel, such as militiamen shot while defending Palestinian towns under Israeli siege and unarmed teenagers shot during demonstrations. The vast majority of the funding for Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups responsible for suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism in recent years has come from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, governments supported by the United States. In any case, the families of suicide bombers normally have their homes destroyed by Israeli occupation forces in retaliation for the terrorist attacks, and \$25,000 does not come close to recouping their losses.

16. **Cheney:** *"The president stepped forward and put in place a policy basically that said we will support the establishment of two*

states. First president ever to say we'll establish and support a Palestinian state next door to Israelis."

The Bush administration has endorsed Sharon's plan to annex up to half of the West Bank into Israel and leave the remaining Palestinian areas divided into a series of non-contiguous cantons surrounded by Israel. This would give the Palestinians barely 12% of historic Palestine. Furthermore, according to this plan, Israel would have control over all border crossings, the air space, and the water resources, with an unrestricted right to militarily intervene in Palestinian areas at any time. This would no more constitute a viable "state" than did the infamous Bantustans of apartheid South Africa.

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