

## One year later, nation still divided on Iraq war

by William E. Gibson  
South Florida Sun-Sentinel (KRT)

With a fearsome military barrage dubbed "shock and awe," the war in Iraq began one year ago today with a blitz of cruise missiles raining down on Baghdad followed by waves of troops blazing a swift path to victory.

In conventional military terms, the U.S.-led invasion was a stunning success, a showcase for mobile forces brandishing the most technologically advanced weaponry. Americans and many Iraqis celebrated when statues of tyrant Saddam Hussein toppled to the ground a mere four weeks later. American firepower once again had blasted away all obstacles.

Yet today, one year after the first airstrikes, Americans remain divided about the wisdom of launching into a war that never really ended. Frustrated by continuing bursts of violence, burdened by costs reaching beyond \$123 billion and saddened by the ongoing loss of life, many Americans believe their government misled them into fighting a needless war.

Was it worth all the costs and the bloodshed? Polls show that a bare majority of Americans say "yes," and that most people in other nations say "no."

The intensely polarized opinions have divided the nation and set up a major campaign issue in this year's presidential elections between George W. Bush, the commander in chief, and Sen. John Kerry, a veteran of the Vietnam War.

The costs also have contributed to a record federal deficit. The occupation has strained the armed services. And the human toll, marked by almost-daily casualties and prolonged duty in a hostile environment, has undercut the morale of soldiers and their families. Wednesday night, a car bomb killed at

least 28 people in Baghdad. During the past year, 571 U.S. military personnel have been killed and 2,825 have been wounded.

"If we had had some threat coming from Iraq, some kind of terrorism, I could understand that. We have to defend ourselves. But there was no threat," said Myriam Velez, 53, of Cooper City, whose nephew is a reservist serving in Iraq. "So to play with the lives of these people, all the ones who have been killed and lost legs and eyes, why would a president do that to his citizens? Why would he do that to us?"

President Bush is marking the one-year anniversary by stoutly defending his reasons for going to war in speeches and campaign advertisements reaffirming his belief that ousting Hussein was an essential part of the larger war against terrorism. The president plans to renew this argument at a rally in Orlando on Saturday while reaching out to voters at the start of his re-election campaign.

"You have delivered justice to many terrorists, and you're keeping the rest of them on the run," Bush on Thursday told soldiers at Fort Campbell, Ky., who had recently returned from duty in Iraq.

"Because America and our allies acted, a state sponsor of terror was put out of business," Bush told them, setting off cheers and applause. "The Iraqi regime gave cash rewards to the families of suicide bombers and sheltered terrorist groups. But all that's over. When Saddam Hussein went down, the terrorists lost an ally forever."

Bush noted signs of progress in Iraq, including political and religious freedom and initial steps leading to a new democratic government.

At the same time, much of Iraq remains in chaos. Basic services, such

as electricity and water supplies, are only now reaching pre-war levels. And a bloody insurgency puts occupying soldiers, civilians and aid workers in constant peril.

At the outset, Bush persuaded Congress and a majority of the American public that war was necessary for three reasons: to remove the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction believed to be in Hussein's possession; to break Iraq's purported links to al-Qaida and other terrorist groups; and to free the Iraqi people from a brutal dictator.

Since the invasion, American forces have been unable to find clear evidence of weapons of mass destruction, and Iraq's links to terrorist groups remain unproven and debatable. Increasingly, Bush and other supporters of the war are heavily emphasizing the third motive - a war of liberation - as justification for the invasion of Iraq.

Historians and those who take the public pulse say the judgment of history will depend on whether the war ultimately makes America safer, and on whether it leads to a stable and democratic Iraq that does not pose threats leading to yet another war.

"It won't be remembered as a popular war," predicted Jack Tunstall, a military history expert at the University of South Florida. "The American people want instant results, and what did we see? We were told that once we have Hussein, it's all over. It didn't happen. So the question becomes, why did they invade Iraq? And the second question is, why are we still there?"

Opinion polls show slightly more than half of Americans believe the war was worth fighting.

The reaction abroad has been far more critical of the war. A survey released this week by the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that clear

majorities in European and Middle Eastern countries thought the war in Iraq had harmed rather than helped the war on terrorism.

Even in Britain, a close U.S. ally, only 43 percent of those surveyed said their government had made the right decision to join the war effort. And in Spain, another ally, voters last week defeated the government that led them into war, in the wake of a terrorist attack in Madrid that killed 202.

"What the poll shows is that the credibility of the United States is sinking," former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said this week.

"What we are seeing in this poll is that there is a huge chasm between the Muslim world and the rest of us," she said. "And that the major challenge we have is to figure out how to lessen that chasm. And to lessen it, we need the unity of the non-Muslim world. But we don't have that unity, and therefore it is weakening us in terms of dealing with a major challenge, which is the fight against terrorism."

The polls in this country indicate that most people generally support their commander in chief but wish he had allowed more time and debate before setting off on a shocking and awesome plunge into Iraq. Bush elected to move ahead with the invasion without the support of the United Nations Security Council. He also dismissed loud protests from French, German and Russian officials, who favored close surveillance of Iraq by U.N. weapons inspectors over war.

"Because of the process by which the U.S. got into the war, I don't think that it will be judged very positively," said David Painter, a historian and associate professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. "I think it's very important to mobilize consensus, so if things don't work out you will have support for the long haul."

If you don't do that and things turn out badly, you will lose support and get out when you shouldn't get out."

Many Americans were uneasy about the need for war at the start. Swift victory on the battlefield provided reassurance. Hussein's capture in December raised hopes that the violence would cease. But the ongoing costs and violence have renewed the public's doubts.

"We don't need to spend our tax money on wars in some other country and then rebuild that country again until we destroy it," said Chris Diaz, 67, a voter in Ocala, Fla.

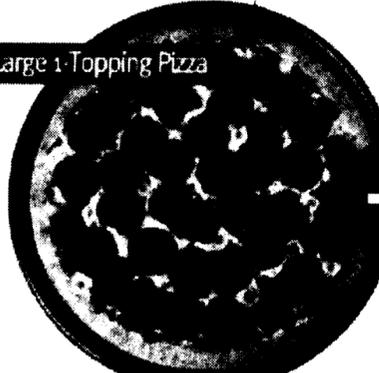
Kerry, the presumptive Democratic nominee who once voted in the Senate to allow Bush to wage war, has since accused the president of rushing into battle based on misleading evidence while alienating much of the rest of the world. Bush, in turn, has accused Kerry of wanting to seek permission from the U.N. to keep America safe.

Faced with an anxious public and an election in November, Bush is counting on a transfer of power to an Iraqi government by June 30, with help from the U.N. The Pentagon, meanwhile, is planning for the gradual withdrawal of 130,000 U.S. forces in Iraq.

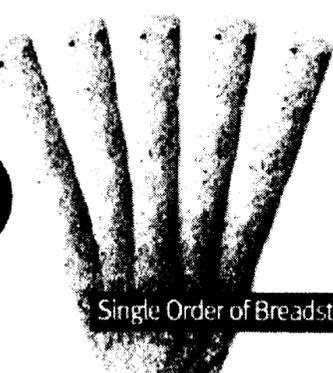
Many experts are skeptical that a fledgling Iraqi government could maintain order and the rule of law. Failure could lead to fragmentation and anarchy, the very conditions that serve as a breeding ground for terrorism.

On the other hand, a longer U.S. occupation could sap American resolve, further strain the federal budget and leave U.S. troops exposed as targets.

The war that began so successfully for U.S. forces remains a major controversy one year later and a continuing test for a nation still yearning for a good way to get out.



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