Joe Biden Jumped at the Chance to Help George W. Bush Sell the Invasion of Iraq

After September 11, George W. Bush decided to blaze a path of death and destruction in Iraq by invading. He was given crucial assistance by Joe Biden.

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Contents

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks at a town hall meeting in Sumter, South Carolina, on February 28, 2020. Jim Watson / AFP via Getty

The following is an excerpt from Branko Marcetic's forthcoming book *Yesterday's Man: The Case Against Joe Biden*. You can now order a copy of this important new book direct from *Jacobin* for only $10, with free shipping.

> *In Iraq, we cannot afford to replace one despot with chaos.*
>
> —Joe Biden, December 2002.

It was January 2002, and fate had yet again conspired to let Joe Biden shape the course of history. His initial hesitancy to take the Judiciary Committee chairmanship back in 1987 had been seemingly vindicated by the never-ending gauntlet of intense scrutiny, pressure, and criticism he ran for the next nine years. Fed up with the job by the 1990s, he had gladly relinquished the top spot midway through the decade, leaving him free for other responsibilities. Having sat on the similarly prestigious Foreign Relations Committee since 1975, an investment by the Democratic leadership in the brash, young senator from Delaware, he was about to serve his first full year as its chairman.

Biden was in a thorny position. It was just four months after the September 11 attacks had allowed the previously flailing President George W. Bush to ride a wave

of anger, grief, and militaristic nationalism to soaring poll numbers, fundamentally reorienting US foreign policy toward what nonsensically came to be known as the "war on terror" along the way. Biden, fiercely critical of Bush's foreign policy the previous year, had two choices: he could use his new position to stymie Bush's alarming plans; or, as the *Wilmington News Journal* put it, he could "downplay differences, smooth the way for the president's agenda and cede the foreign policy headlines to the administration." Looking, no doubt, at Bush's triumphant approval ratings and at his own impending reelection, he chose the latter.

"As long as the president continues on the general path that he put himself on after 9/11, I don't think he's going to have anything but an ally in me — and not to sound presumptive, a fairly valuable ally," Biden told the paper. He had been "incredibly supportive" of the president, he insisted, spoke often with the administration's top foreign policy officials, and had "a very open relationship" with Bush.

That general path Bush was on soon turned out to be ruinous. A former Texas governor and pampered son of Biden's would-be 1988 opponent, Bush had already packed his administration with a coterie of neoconservatives — with their glassy-eyed faith in the United States' limitless ability and right to reshape the globe in the image of US-style free-market democracy — and hard-right legal thinkers who believed the office of the presidency gave its occupant powers akin to an emperor.

The September 11 attacks gave this crowd of right-wing radicals the ideal grounds to put their vision into motion, sending the US military careening into two Middle Eastern nations that had little to nothing to do with the atrocity: Afghanistan and then Iraq. The first became the longest war in US history, still going as you read this eighteen years later; the second, an epochal disaster whose ripples will likely be fanning out for decades.

Biden's position as Foreign Relations chairman, his tendency to get swept up in right-wing-engineered panics, his fear of being beaten by a more conservative challenger — all of it meant that when Bush embarked on his destructive path, Biden gave him the crucial assistance he needed to follow it through. His decision to do so would haunt him the rest of his career.

From Vietnam to Iraq

That Biden went all in on what critics warned was a tragic repeat of Vietnam would have surprised Delawareans of the 1970s. Though at first hesitant to make it an issue in his 1972 Senate campaign, Biden swiftly became an out-and-out opponent of the original Vietnam War, calling for its immediate end and assailing his opponent for "clearly contradictory votes on the issue." He remained its ardent foe once in office, voting repeatedly to choke off money and aid to not just the war in Vietnam but the one in Cambodia Nixon had secretly been waging since 1969. Biden at one point

denounced the Senate sending military and economic aid to the country as "damned asinine."

"I have only been here two years, but my little generation, which was the guys you fellows were drafting for [the Southeast Asian] war, is sick and tired of that war," Biden told pro-aid Democrats in a fiery, off-the-cuff tirade behind closed doors in 1975 that shocked the delicate sensibilities of the party caucus. Aware of the stir this had caused, he told the *Wilmington Morning News* the day after that he wasn't a fan of even keeping US troops in countries like Japan and Korea. He lashed out at Henry Kissinger, Nixon's secretary of state who had spearheaded the Cambodian adventure, for being in thrall to outdated foreign policy theories. Declaring himself "unalterably opposed" to US involvement in Angola, he called on Congress to curb the operation.

It was a rebellious time. Though the antiwar movement had crested some years earlier, the war Nixon had promised to end was still the subject of a roiling domestic crisis, and dozens of increasingly militant protest actions to stop it were continuing. A new generation of lawmakers was breaking the rules, liaising with antiwar activists and, in the case of Alaskan Sen. Mike Gravel, flouting Capitol Hill customs and even the law to try to end the war.

It wouldn't last. Even as the antiwar movement petered out in the wake of US withdrawal from Southeast Asia, Biden continued listening to his more dovish instincts. As early as 1977 he voted to lift the embargo on Cuba. Calling US control of the Panama Canal "the last vestige of US imperialism," he weathered tremendous pressure in Delaware for supporting the treaty to finally cede control, albeit with a catch — he only did so after pushing through an amendment that would allow US troops to invade Panama to keep the canal open. And as the sun set on the Carter administration, Biden became the president's point man on the doomed US-Soviet Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II), working tirelessly to bring its opponents and the public around on the deal, urging his colleagues not to let "mindless machismo" jeopardize it, and warning them that "there is no such thing as a winnable nuclear war."

The kind of US meddling in other countries that Biden opposed in the 1970s ramped up once Reagan took power. Reagan's sunny, affable public persona belied a quiet viciousness on the world stage, with his administration backing an assortment of unspeakably brutal dictators and death squads, particularly in Central America, which the US elite traditionally viewed as their "sphere of influence." While Reagan's militant anticommunism had fueled his opposition to run-of-the-mill liberal policies like welfare at home, overseas it led him to try to roll back the left-wing momentum sweeping over Latin America.

Like other leading Democrats, Biden spent much of the 1980s fighting Reagan's attempts to funnel arms and aid to homicidal counterrevolutionary forces south of the border, most notably in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Stressing "the avoidance of war" (as well as, less altruistically, "maintaining our interests"), Biden over and over voted for or put forward measures to block or limit US troops, weapons, and money being sent to aid Reagan's favored sadists or to force negotiations in the ongoing Nicaraguan

civil war. He was often in the congressional minority, sometimes even virtually alone. Reagan's attempts to inch the country deeper into the region was a prelude to all-out war, Biden argued, warning in 1984 that "if he is reelected, we will see American troops fighting in Latin America." "I don't want to let happen in my son's generation what happened in my generation," he said two years later.

But in the gung-ho, conservative political climate of those years, Biden at times painted his opposition to the administration more in practical terms than moral ones. "If we want to overthrow the Sandinistas, let's do it," he said in 1984. "But let's not go through this charade. Let's do it up front and quit kidding the American people that we're doing something else." When Reagan proposed sending $100 million to the Nicaraguan Contras, Biden dismissed the sum as a paltry bluff that would never succeed in overthrowing the country's left-wing government, warning that "our prestige is on the line." At one point, he offered an amendment permitting US attacks on Nicaragua under certain conditions. "In the end Reagan will need US troops or, in his own words, have to 'cut and run,'" he said, playing a game of high-stakes chicken.

The truth was, times had changed. As the 1970s went on, Biden had been further drawn into the fold of the Senate and its buddy-buddy culture. So by 1976, only a year after bad-mouthing the genocidal Kissinger to his local paper, Biden dubbed him "the most brilliant secretary of state the United States has ever seen," voting to confirm Kissinger even as he voted against more than a dozen other appointees, with the explanation that someone else would try "continue Kissinger's policies without half the grace, tact or intelligence."

More importantly, the vibrant, militant antiwar movement had dissipated by the 1980s, due both to the end of the Vietnam War and a decades-long covert government campaign to undermine it and other protest movements. Politicians like Biden no longer had the same grassroots pressure holding them to account. Compounding that were Reagan's two massive electoral victories, leading Biden and the Democratic Party to consider that they might need to change more than just their domestic policies. Voters were "afraid the Republicans are too tough," he said in 1986, "but they think we are not tough enough — and they have tipped the scales in favor of what they perceive as firmer hands."

It was a theme he hit on over and again as he admonished the party to change. As in economic policy, he strove for the middle of two supposed extremes: the overly aggressive Cold War posturing of Reagan and the "post-Vietnam syndrome" that believed "if you're imaginative enough in diplomacy, we could solve all our problems." Gearing up for his presidential run, he promised "an enlightened, tough foreign policy" that wasn't "immobilized by complexity" and wouldn't "cringe at the use of force."

Biden had done a dry run on this new attitude back in 1982 when British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in an act of imperialism that saved her faltering premiership, launched an invasion to take back the Falkland Islands, a tiny British colony off the coast of Argentina. While even Reagan privately urged her to settle things peacefully, Biden, wanting to make it "absolutely clear to the whole world...we stand four-square

with Britain" and warning that "time is running out," put forward a resolution so fervent and broad that one senator compared it to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that had authorized full-scale US entry into Vietnam. The final version was toned down but still let the US military provide Thatcher crucial logistical support to win the war, a triumph from which she pivoted to dismantling her own country's liberal postwar order as Reagan had in his.

In the post-Reagan era, Biden became more inclined than ever to back military adventures abroad. He gave the thumbs-up to Reagan's retaliatory bombing of Libya (death toll: thirty-six civilians, including the dictator's fifteen-month old daughter), said Reagan "did the right thing" by invading Grenada without congressional authorization (twenty-four civilians killed, most of them in a mental hospital), and justified George H. W. Bush's war on Panama as "appropriate and necessary" (as many as 300 civilians killed and stuffed into mass graves, all to depose an ex-CIA asset). And for all his opposition to Reagan's Central American policy — and despite grimly predicting that Reagan's 1984 reelection would mean "American soldiers fighting in El Salvador" — he at various times backed US money and training for the country's death squads, saying there was "a need to send US military equipment to the region."

Biden got his first full taste of the political pitfalls of opposing a war when Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded neighboring Kuwait in 1990. Saddam was another blood-soaked tyrant whom Washington had seen fit to arm and supply when he was slaughtering Iranians before he became a sacrificial lamb for twin projects of American redemption: the long-standing elite campaign to cure the public's so-called "Vietnam syndrome" of aversion to war in the wake of that disaster; and the campaign to shake off Bush Sr.'s public perception as a "wimp."

While war hawks cast Saddam as the next Hitler, Biden was calling on Bush to let an international embargo on the country play out first, charging that Bush hadn't made a persuasive case for war just yet and finally demanding that the president let Congress vote on authorizing war. After Bush agreed and Biden and forty-six other senators failed to stop him, Biden declared he was giving Bush his "total support."

"Bush took a real political chance," Biden said. "This could have been a long war based on what we knew, with 40,000 casualties. But the president said 'I don't think so,' and gambled the whole presidency on his decision. For that he deserves credit. That's leadership," Biden concluded about a war that left 110,000 civilians dead, more than half of them children under fifteen."

Biden wouldn't make the same mistake again of being cast as an opponent of war. Toward the end of Bush's term, the ex-communist Eastern European country of Yugoslavia began disintegrating in a miasma of nationalism and ethnic and religious sectarianism, forces unleashed by a Western-imposed program of economic "shock therapy" that in essence exported Western neoliberal policies to the once prosperous country, running its living standards into the ground. War soon broke out.

A role reversal took place: the lawmakers who had most ardently bayed for war with Iraq, some of them Vietnam veterans, were now the most reluctant to involve the

US in halting atrocities being committed chiefly, though not exclusively, by members of Yugoslavia's Serb population. Meanwhile Biden, the anti-Vietnam senator who had cast a lonely vote against Bush's war against Saddam, became the leading congressional champion of that very idea.

Biden took a page from his formerly prowar foes' book. He drafted a resolution similar to the one used by Bush a year earlier, threw Bush's words about Saddam back at him now that he was reluctant to intervene, and likened the country's civil wars to Hitler's expansion into Europe — true enough when it came to the style of atrocities being committed but, as some pointed out then and since, a vast oversimplification of a far more complicated situation. In the process, Biden engaged in some ethnic chauvinism of his own, calling the Serbs "illiterates and degenerates" on CNN.

Bill Clinton's eventual forceful entry into the war, at Biden's years-long urging, ultimately did succeed in ending it. But it came at a cost: allying with the nationalist-led Republic of Croatia, which had seceded from Yugoslavia four years earlier, advanced the Croats' own program of ethnic cleansing, leading to what one Red Cross official called the largest refugee movement within Europe for decades. Even so, with the inconvenient fact forgotten that Bush's administration had scuttled a 1991 peace deal that could have prevented all this, the episode became the go-to case of successful "humanitarian intervention" that would be used to justify future far more reckless actions.

That included Kosovo, the southern Serbian territory that sought independence in 1998, sparking one more war in now-former Yugoslavia. Biden again served as Congress's most energetic voice in favor of sending US troops and bombing Serbia. Failing to do so, he warned, would cause a chain reaction of conflict through Greece and Turkey that could destabilize all of Europe, an argument some noted was uncomfortably close to the discredited "domino theory" used to justify Vietnam. Challenged on how he could square his position with his vote against the Gulf War, Biden freely conceded he had been wrong then.

While Biden insisted to a skeptical White House and Congress that action was needed "to deal with this genocidal maniac" ("What is the downside of not acting? It is immense," he said), NATO's bombing of Serbia ended up dissolving a burgeoning pro-democracy movement and rallying Serbs around that same "genocidal maniac." The US-led war killed 500 civilians, including more than 150 refugees fleeing the fighting in Kosovo. In its aftermath, the US helped negotiate a demilitarization plan signed by all parties that was swiftly violated, with the US allowing the abusive paramilitary Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) to disband and live on as Kosovo's official security force. The KLA leader who oversaw a brutal program of kidnapping, murder, and organ-harvesting during the fighting would later be dubbed by Biden "the George Washington of Kosovo."

Biden had taken away an important lesson from the preceding decades: if you cared about political survival, it was safer to err on the side of war. There couldn't have been a worse one to learn as the calendar ticked over to the next millennium.

Civil Liberties Wacko

For most of George W. Bush's first year in office, Biden was focused on criticizing the hawkish young president's missile defense system proposal, a revival of Reagan's infamous "Star Wars" fiasco, which Biden warned would "begin a new arms race." Then September 11, 2001, happened.

The terrorist attacks and the thousands they killed sparked another wave of panic and hysteria that periodically surface throughout US history. Racist, often Islamophobic conspiracy theories spread like a poison around the country, with violence against anyone resembling a Middle Easterner soaring. Lurid rumors abounded about more attacks on the way, and mystery rashes were thought to be the work of bioterrorists. An atmosphere of fear and vengeful patriotism was cultivated by both the Bush administration and a pliant media.

At first Biden appealed to reason. "Part of terror is to get you to change your way of life, both immediately and subsequently," he said in December. "This is not the time to yield to our fears, in terms of calling for limitations on civil liberties, freedom of the press, what can be reported and not reported, the way we treat Muslims."

But as with earlier panics over drugs and crime, he was soon swept up in a hysteria he helped to stoke. "The real threats come into this country in the hold of a ship or the belly of a plane or are smuggled into a city in the middle of the night in a vial in a backpack," he told the press. Without evidence, he warned that American cities' century-old subway tunnels would be the next targets and that terrorists were trying to buy nuclear weapons.

Despite the lofty talk of defending civil liberties, Biden had already voted to weaken them seven weeks after the attacks when he and all but one other senator passed the USA PATRIOT Act. Rushed through with little debate, the law dramatically expanded both the FBI's and the police's spying powers, including allowing the government tap an individual's every device with only a single court approval and search homes and offices without them present or having to inform them beforehand. Most infamous and far-reaching was Section 215, which let agents secretly obtain phone, computer, and medical records, banking and credit history, even library and business records, all with no approval from a judge. Despite assurances to the contrary, the government would use the law to secretly surveil a broad swath of the public in the years ahead, including collecting the phone records of tens of millions of Verizon customers every day — a violation that came to light thanks to whistleblower Edward Snowden (after the leak, Biden would help to successfully threaten dozens of countries not to grant asylum to the fleeing Snowden).

During debate over the Patriot Act, Biden had called it "measured and prudent." In fact, he would have liked it to go further, regretting that measures handing police *more* extreme powers had been removed. He complained that the rest of the country had ignored his warnings about the dire threat of terrorism the previous decade. When Bush floated a review of the centuries-old law against the domestic use of the military

in 2002 — about the same time he had considered sending troops into suburban Buffalo to arrest a group of suspected terrorists — Biden agreed that it was "time to revisit" that ban.

As with war, Biden's betrayal of civil liberties was a 180 degree turn from decades before when one newspaper had dubbed him a "civil liberties activist." He earned this reputation from his time on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence through the 1970s, set up after public exposure of decades-long spying and subversion campaigns against the US public by an increasingly rogue intelligence sector of its own government.

But even then, Biden could be a funny kind of activist. Though he called Carter "wrong" for wanting to loosen some shackles on their spying powers and railed at length against nostalgia for the "good old days" of the CIA, he also publicly lectured the ACLU that people "couldn't care less" about the issue and the group should only focus on the public's highest-ranking concerns. "You keep talking about public concern," he said. "There ain't one."

Biden was furious at the Carter administration's "failure...to take action in leak cases" and held hearings about how to stamp them out. He suggested that agencies penalize both past and present leakers by demoting them or stripping their pensions, something even the CIA director balked at. To combat "graymail" — cases where the government dropped charges against defendants for fear of classified information being revealed — he proposed ideas that departed radically from American legal tradition: closed-door trials for leakers and a separate penal code under which intelligence agents would be tried in a different set of courts. "I may end up being the cause of some fairly repressive legislation," he told a university audience. His "helpful attitude" on the issue was privately praised by William Casey, Reagan's campaign manager-turned-CIA-director, who would go on to threaten six different news outlets with prosecution for publishing government secrets.

Insisting as late as 1994 that he was the "wacko civil liberties guy in the Senate," by the 1990s, Biden was anything but. His anti-drug-and-crime crusade in the 1980s had repeatedly assailed legal protections carefully built up over the course of US history while expanding authorities' power to wreak mayhem on people's lives, both of which bled over into the next decade. Biden tried repeatedly to reform — read: sharply limit — the writ of habeas corpus, or the right to appeal court decisions, first by restricting it to only one round of appeals, then to a six-month time span; one ACLU representative called the latter proposal a "radical and unprecedented prescription." At the time, the American Bar Association estimated that 40 percent of all death penalty appeals had found some error.

By this point, another bogeyman had emerged to drive such "reforms": terrorism. A counterterrorism bill Biden introduced in 1991 was mostly an extension of his tough-on-crime efforts, designating new crimes and mandating harsher punishments. But it did have one feature the FBI reportedly convinced him to slip in: language insisting on "back doors" to encryption, making it easier for authorities to spy on Americans'

electronic communications. So alarmed was one computer scientist by this that he published his encryption software PGP, now the most widely used email encryption in the world, for free for a whole year. Though this effort failed, Biden managed to make the provision a law through a different bill in 1994, laying the basis twelve years later for Bush Jr. to force Internet providers to build centralized surveillance hubs for police to use.

Then came the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Amid a swell of Far-Right, antigovernment organizing, white supremacist and Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh built and detonated a fertilizer bomb packed into a rental truck he parked outside the city's Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, home to an office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), killing 168 people.

Two years earlier, the ATF had carried out the first raid on an apocalyptic religious sect in Waco, Texas, culminating in eighty people, including twenty-one children, being killed. Biden had dragged his feet on convening hearings over the case and defended the authorities, insisting that any inquiry should report only on "mistakes" and not "malevolence," and that there was no evidence of "any improper motive or intent on the part of law enforcement."

In the wake of McVeigh's seemingly retaliatory bombing, Biden and the Democrats handed authorities even greater powers, expanding a counterterrorism bill he had already introduced at Clinton's request as a response to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. The provisions included electronic surveillance of suspected terrorists, automatic detention of those charged with terrorism before trial, and the creation of a special court to deport noncitizens accused of terrorism (ironically, when Bush had proposed a similar measure years before, Biden had denounced it as "the very antithesis of our legal system"). With its mix of "discredited ideas from the Reagan and Bush Administrations" and "provisions eroding constitutional and statutory due process protections," the Center for National Security Studies, a civil liberties advocacy group, called the ultimately unsuccessful bill an "extension of some of the worst elements of crime bills of the recent past."

As the one-year anniversary of the 1993 attack approached, Congress rushed to get the measures passed, many of which had been rolled into a separate bill, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. Griping that it wasn't tough enough, Biden pushed to return a measure struck out because of bipartisan alarm that would allow authorities to wiretap all of a suspect's phones with a single court order, calling this "the single most important issue that we are not putting in this bill." Warning of the "Unabomber wannabes" and "wackos who are teaching our kids how to build bombs," he angrily lectured his colleagues for defeating his amendment to clamp down on the online dissemination of bomb recipes, which were already easily available in public libraries. In the process, he himself shared bomb-making instructions on C-SPAN and entered them into the Congressional Record. While demanding more transparency from the public, he demanded less from authorities, decrying a provision that required an

inquiry into federal law enforcement as "pandering" to "those who believe that federal law enforcement is the enemy of the American people and not the protectors."

At Republicans' request, the final bill at last gutted federal habeas corpus, limiting it to one appeal and a one-year time limit. By 2015, legal scholars estimated this measure had slashed the reversal of state death penalty decisions by 40 percent, prompting one to call it "surely one of the worst statutes ever passed by Congress and signed into law." Though speaking out against the provision, Biden voted for the bill anyway and turned up to the signing ceremony. His regret that Congress was "denying the FBI the necessary tools" wouldn't last long, as the wiretap power he had fought to reinclude found its way into the Patriot Act, which Biden would tell whoever listened that he had practically written.

The Way to Mesopotamia

All of these efforts set the stage for the increasingly authoritarian and militaristic turn US society would take after September 11. Only one day earlier, Biden had called Bush's foreign policy ideas "absolute lunacy." But the atrocity sent Bush's approval rating soaring to an unheard-of 90 percent as a scared nation rallied around their once-floundering president.

"Count me in the 90 percent," Biden said. There was "total cohesion" between both parties for what lay ahead, he assured. "There is no daylight between us."

A virtually unanimous Congress first gave Bush a very broadly worded authorization to go after groups deemed responsible for the attack. "This is nothing like anything else," Biden said. "That's why we gave the president a broader authority than we gave him under the Gulf resolution." Bush initially used it to invade Afghanistan, whose Taliban-controlled government had harbored Osama bin Laden — considered a hero for his role in the resistance to the 1980s Soviet invasion of the country —as he plotted the attack and refused to extradite him without negotiations and seeing proof of his involvement, a condition Bush rejected along with subsequent offers to hand bin Laden over to a neutral third country. Ultimately, Congress's 2001 authorization would be used by three different administrations to send troops to more than a dozen countries, most of them with no connections to September 11, on nearly every continent, as well as to justify the torture and prison camp Bush soon set up in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Biden had to contend with an atmosphere of aggressive jingoism drummed up by Bush. In October, he was vociferously criticized for warning that the United States could be seen as a "high-tech bully" if it only fought the war in Afghanistan by bombing. He complained about being labeled un-American for the comments.

So Biden, then deemed by the *New Republic* the Democrats' "de facto spokesman on the war against terrorism," quickly became the administration's close ally in prosecuting that so-called war. The White House installed a special secure phone line to Biden's home, and he and three other members of Congress met privately with Bush in

October 2001 to plot out a public relations message for the Afghanistan war. But most far-reaching was the crucial assist he gave Bush as he planned another full-fledged war against Iraq.

Rather than being a "madman," as US politicians asserted, Saddam had played what historian Williamson Murray called a "double game," motivated by fear of what he considered his two biggest threats: Israel and, particularly, Iran. Eager to free himself from Western sanctions, but not wanting his weakness exposed to his enemies, he had carefully cultivated the idea that he was secretly harboring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) even as his stockpile was all but eliminated through the 1990s. This gamble created a mutual feedback loop of mistrust and suspicion with Western powers.

During the Clinton years, Biden became the face of a Democratic Party that eventually proved more eager than Republicans for a war with Saddam, using punishing air strikes rather than ground troops. "It is much more dangerous to do nothing than to use air power," he said. "Saddam will assume we've lost our resolve." Starting in 1998, the United States and Britain spent four years bombing Iraq every few days, killing at least 300 civilians by United Nations estimates. By the end of 1998, both Biden and the administration explicitly adopted regime change as a goal, targeting Saddam's personal security force in what Biden explained was a conscious strategy to foment a coup against him. "Better a devil you don't know," he said.

So by the time Bush and his British counterpart decided shortly after September 11 that they would use the attacks to go after Iraq, Biden had already helped lay some of the groundwork for their campaign. And despite batting away suggestions of regime change in Iraq as late as November 2001, he soon went all in.

As with all of Biden's right turns, an impending election loomed over this one too. Biden's 2002 opponent would again be businessman Ray Clatworthy, who made clear that he would attack Biden for failing to be a doormat on military matters. Clatworthy embarked on a fundraising blitz that outdid several sitting senators. While neither the Democratic Party nor political analysts considered Clatworthy a serious threat — the well-respected Charlie Cook predicted his candidacy would "only be a minor annoyance" to Biden, while others declared the race "snoozeville" — Biden clearly took it seriously, launching his campaign two months early in July to match Clatworthy's early start.

"If Saddam Hussein is still there five years from now, we are in big trouble," Biden told an audience of 400 Delaware National Guard officers in February. By midyear, he was telling the public "it would be unrealistic, if not downright foolish, to believe we can claim victory in the war on terrorism if Saddam is still in power." When the neighboring king of Jordan called for talks instead of violence, Biden asserted that "dialogue with Saddam is useless."

Aides told the press that Biden had privately given Bush his approval for regime change, provided the administration met certain conditions like international and congressional backing. When asked if Bush's leaked CIA directive to step up support for Iraqi opposition groups and even possibly capture and kill Hussein gave him any pause, he replied, "Only if it doesn't work." At that point, he said, "we'd better be prepared

to move forward with another action, an overt action." He told TV news anchors that if Bush could "make the case that we're about to be attacked" or prove Saddam was in league with al-Qaeda, he would be justified in invading Iraq — both of these would become key themes of the Bush administration's pro-war case to the public.

In July, Biden used his Foreign Relations chairmanship to hold hearings on a possible invasion. Despite reports that top military brass were uneasy about Bush's push for war, Biden stacked the hearings with prowar voices and opened proceedings by warning that WMDs "must be dislodged from Saddam, or Saddam must be dislodged from power." On the day they began, he coauthored a *New York Times* op-ed suggesting that continued "containment" of Saddam "raises the risk that Mr. Hussein will play cat-and-mouse with inspectors while building more weapons" and that "if we wait for the danger to become clear and present, it may be too late."

None of the eighteen witnesses called objected to the idea that Hussein had WMDs, and all three witnesses who testified on the subject of al-Qaeda falsely claimed it got direct support from Iraq. Of the twelve who discussed an invasion, half were in favor and only two opposed. Experts who had been involved in UN inspections but left off the witness list bitterly criticized the spectacle, with former chief weapons inspector Scott Ritter accusing Biden of having "preordained a conclusion that seeks to remove Saddam Hussein from power regardless of the facts." Former UN assistant secretary general Hans Von Sponeck complained about "the deliberate distortions and misrepresentations" that made it "look to the average person in the US as if Iraq is a threat to their security."

Bush later thanked Biden for the hearings. Meanwhile, Biden did the TV rounds to argue for war, citing the lopsided testimony he had arranged. "We have no choice but to eliminate the threat," he told *Meet the Press*.

After Bush heeded Biden's instructions for how to sell the war, presenting a case for invasion directly to the United Nations in September 2002 that Biden called "brilliant," Congress was finally forced to vote on authorization. Though wavering at the last moment, Biden fell in line, arguing the resolution would "give the president the kind of momentum he needs" to get UN Security Council backing. On October 11, Biden was one of seventy-seven senators who voted to give Bush the authorization to wage war on Iraq, joining fellow Democrats Hillary Clinton, Chuck Schumer, Harry Reid, and Dianne Feinstein. In the House, Rep. Bernie Sanders was one of 133 to vote against it.

"At each pivotal moment, [President Bush] has chosen a course of moderation and deliberation," Biden said on the Senate floor. "I believe he will continue to do so....The president has made it clear that war is neither imminent nor inevitable." A month later, Biden sailed to victory over Clatworthy with 58 percent of the vote, virtually unchanged from the 1996 result. He had won a sixth term, a Delaware record.

With the election behind him, and a different audience in front of him, Biden recalibrated his talking points, as in a November 11 speech to a meeting of the Trotter Group, an organization of African American columnists. Maybe because of overwhelming black opposition to the war, Biden sounded like a different lawmaker, suddenly

denying there was a direct link between Saddam and al-Qaeda ("I don't consider the war on Iraq the war on terror") and striking a less hawkish note ("My hope is that we don't need to go into Iraq"). "The guys who have to fight this war don't think it's a good idea," he told the columnists, calling it "the dumbest thing in the world" and claiming he had only reluctantly backed the war authorization.

Those words were hard to square with what followed. A month later, he traveled to Germany and the Middle East to help cobble together a coalition for the impending conflict, meeting an Iraqi resistance leader in Germany before heading to Jordan to meet with its monarch and stopping in Israel and Qatar. "We wish the senator good luck and hope he continues to support the president on foreign-policy matters," the chairman of the Delaware Republican Party said. Along the way, he spoke to the Kurdish parliament in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, an enclave carved out in the wake of the first Gulf War. Biden made clear to Saddam's longtime opponents that the United States had their backs. "We will stand with you in your effort to build a united Iraq," he told them, adding that "the mountains are not your only friends," playing off a local saying.

As Secretary of State Colin Powell prepared to lay out the supposed proof of Iraq's WMD program to the United Nations in February 2003, Biden hyped it to the press, saying the administration "has evidence now that can change people's minds." "I know there's enough circumstantial evidence that if this were a jury trial, I could convict you," he said. After Powell's address — so factually challenged that Powell would call it a "blot" on his record two years later — Biden called his case "very powerful and I think irrefutable"; he told Powell, "I am proud to be associated with you."

Other than Congress's backing, Bush ultimately failed to meet Biden's preconditions for war. The United Nations refused to authorize it, and the United States and Britain went in essentially alone, with every other major Western country abstaining and millions of people across 650 of the world's cities taking to the streets to make their opposition heard. Yet when Bush issued a March 17 ultimatum to Saddam — leave or be invaded — Biden loyally backed him.

"I support the president," he said. "Diplomacy over avoiding war is dead....I do not see any alternative." He painted himself as having been powerless to stop the conflict. "A lot of Americans, myself included, are really concerned about how we got to this stage and about all the lost opportunities for diplomacy," he said. "But we are where we are....Let loose the dogs of war. I'm confident we will win." He and the rest of the Democrats voted for a Senate resolution supporting Bush and commending the troops that passed 99–0.

Once the war began, any trepidation Biden might have had evaporated. "I, for one, thought we should have gone in Iraq," he told CNN in June 2003. Even as he claimed he had been saying all along that "the administration was exaggerating the threat of weapons of mass destruction" that never materialized, Biden insisted it was a "just war" anyway.

"I voted to go into Iraq, and I'd vote to do it again," Biden said in July. He rebuked the growing opposition to the war within his own party, fueled by rising US casualties and regular reports of terrorist attacks in the country. He told the Brookings Institution that "anyone who can't acknowledge that the world is better off without [Saddam] is out of touch....Contrary to what some in my party might think, Iraq was a problem that had to be dealt with sooner rather than later." Asked if the views of Vermont governor Howard Dean, then surging in popularity among Democrats for his early and steadfast opposition to the war, should be the consensus view of the Democratic Party, Biden flatly replied: "No." By August, he was calling for an infusion of 40,000 to 60,000 more US troops. The next month, he attacked "the knee-jerk multilateralists in my own party who have not yet faced the reality of the post-9/11 world."

Biden had long been talked about as potentially leading that party against Bush in 2004, something that, despite projecting an attitude of indifference toward publicly, he signaled interest in privately. This time, his appeal would rest not on soaring Kennedyesque rhetoric but his foreign policy expertise. But that expertise put him at odds with most of the voters he needed to win over. He dithered until August, long after the other candidates had already spent months building their campaigns, at which point he deemed it "too much of a long shot" to run for the nomination. Biden preferred to use his perch in the Senate and relationship with the administration to shape events. "My goal is to influence the direction of our country," he said, "because I am deeply concerned that we are heading in the wrong direction at home and abroad."

But it was never really clear how *that* wrong direction, which he had helped steer the country toward in the first place, differed from where he now wanted to go. For most of Bush's two terms, Biden's running critique was that Bush was an incompetent, irresponsible manager of the war. "[Invading] was the right thing if it was done in the right way," he insisted; the real problem was "the fundamental mistakes we made in strategy." He hit the administration for not doing a better, more honest job of telling the public "what is expected of them" and selling them on the importance of staying the course in Iraq. He demanded the administration ask him and the rest of Congress to pour more lives and resources into the war, which he duly voted for throughout the decade while charging that Bush's plans to "pull back" in Iraq played "into the hands of the insurgents." It was similar to his stance on the Patriot Act, another Bush measure despised by Democratic voters that Biden strongly supported but now claimed had been badly executed. It was little wonder that Republicans like Trent Lott and former Oregon senator Gordon Smith viewed Biden as the Democrats' best option in 2004.

Instead of challenging Bush himself, Biden hitched himself to a pair of horses who did. One was retired four-star general Wesley Clark, the former NATO supreme commander during the Balkan crisis who Biden counted as a "close friend" and "soulmate." Clark had been removed from his command in 2000 for what his superior called "integrity and character issues." At one point, he ordered NATO forces to confront the Russian troops who had taken an airfield in Pristina, Kosovo, an action stopped only thanks to the reluctance of the lead officer, future pop singer James Blunt, and a British

general who overruled Clark, telling him: "I'm not going to start World War Three for you." Biden persuaded Clark's wife to let him run for president and introduced him to Delaware voters at a February 2004 event.

The other hero was Massachusetts senator and eventual Democratic nominee John Kerry. The next in a long line of "safe," establishment-favored candidates the party turned to after Carter's 1980 thumping, Kerry and Biden shared several similarities. Both were middle-of-the-road Democrats who had moved right with the party's neoliberal turn, and both took contradictory, less-than-forthright stances on the war, perhaps *the* issue of the election. Kerry had voted to go into Iraq, then expressed alarm when it was actually happening before later insisting he would have voted the same way even knowing Saddam has no WMDs; all the while, he limited his criticism to Bush's poor stewardship of the conflict. Despite his role in starting the war, Biden was still considered one of the party's wisest heads on foreign policy and was originally floated as a possible running mate for Kerry. But he ruled himself out and instead became a key foreign policy adviser.

At that year's party convention, Biden attended a breakfast where he warned Democrats not to focus on criticizing Bush, lest they "begin sounding like we're rooting for failure." Tasked with relaying Kerry's foreign policy to delegates and foreign leaders at the event, Biden was given seven minutes of prime speaking time to do the same for audiences at home, penning a speech that neither Kerry nor his advisers edited, explaining he was "not very good at taking orders." Taking the stage on a Friday night, Biden criticized Bush for going into Iraq "virtually alone" and told the 35,000-strong crowd of energized Democrats that it was the Bush administration's judgment, not its motives, that was in question. "History will judge them harshly not for the mistakes made — we all make mistakes — but for the opportunities squandered," he said.

Refracted through Biden, Kerry's foreign policy vision was one degree separated from his opponent's. Kerry would try harder to build international coalitions for war, Biden explained, but he would still maintain the right to attack unilaterally against a "genuine, imminent threat." Kerry would "not hesitate to unleash the unparalleled power of our military — on any nation or group that does us harm — without asking anyone's permission," Biden promised. This was difficult to square with his concluding plea: "Instead of dividing the world, we must unite it. Instead of bullying it, we must build. Instead of walking alone, we must lead."

Though Biden hadn't run, the 2004 election is the closest thing to a simulation of what might have happened if he had. Kerry's incoherence on Iraq let the GOP paint him as an inconsistent "flip-flopper," fatally hobbling his campaign. Voter turnout spiked, but it was Bush who benefited, running a successful campaign to get the Republican base dominated by white evangelicals to the polls. Democratic voters, unhappy with their party's ongoing rightward drift and not particularly enthused by Kerry, couldn't match this surge. The enthusiasm problem wasn't helped by Kerry's program of fiscal conservatism and corporate tax cuts, nor by the decision to present him as a marginally more reasonable version of Bush on foreign policy.

When the dust settled, Bush had *increased* his share of the vote since 2000, even as he gradually lost control of an unpopular war that he had lied to start. Meanwhile, even the larger-than-average turnout meant nearly 40 percent of Americans stayed home on Election Day, many of them poor and less educated, the kinds of voters who used to make up the Democratic base.

Viceroy Biden

Despite winning what seemed like a mandate, Bush's standing and popularity swiftly plummeted in the years that followed. Conditions in Iraq were deteriorating thanks to sectarian conflict and a violent insurgency that took aim at Iraq's occupiers. Meanwhile, a sizable antiwar movement was making its influence felt, both in the halls of power and on the streets, where it attracted hundreds of thousands of protesters. Dissatisfaction with Bush and his party was magnified by his botched response to Hurricane Katrina's leveling of New Orleans and a ceaseless tide of scandals, often involving corruption. It all culminated in a 2006 wave election in which the Democrats took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in twelve years. The political winds had shifted, and Biden took notice.

After getting middling scores from the ACLU for his embrace of Bush's anti-privacy national security program, Biden received a rare 100 percent rating for 2005 and 2006. He voted against Bush's attorney general nominee Alberto Gonzales, one of the men behind the administration's legal rationale for torture, and he pulled out all the stops to keep John Bolton, an ultranationalist fanatic who appeared to want to wage war against seemingly half the world, from the UN ambassador's chair. He started talking about an exit strategy for Iraq, spoke out forcefully against Bush's hint that he might send troops to neighboring Iran and Syria, and opposed Bush's planned "surge" in Iraq, meant to stabilize the country and create a political reconciliation between its feuding religious sects by deploying tens of thousands more US troops.

In 2007, with Democrats back in the driver's seat and Biden back chairing the Foreign Relations Committee, he did what he should have done five years earlier and launched a concerted campaign of opposition to Bush's plans. He wrote an op-ed calling the surge idea a failure, accused the White House of plotting to saddle the next president with an Iraq it knew was lost, and announced weeks of hearings on Bush's Iraq policy to influence GOP lawmakers and the public and create "overwhelming consensus" against the idea. In mid-January, he sponsored an anti-surge resolution meant to show its lack of support in the Senate, later announcing that he would try repeal the 2002 war authorization he'd voted for. "The WMD were not there," he explained.

But this turn only went so far. Biden voted to keep funding the war well into 2007 and refused to set a deadline for withdrawal. He campaigned for Connecticut senator Joe Lieberman, a hawkish Democrat whose steadfast support for Bush in Iraq

earned him a kiss from the president, against his antiwar primary challenger. When Bush's secret program of warrantless surveillance of Americans finally came to light — a scandalous action that the *New York Times* had learned about during the 2004 election but kept secret at the president's request — Biden offered only muted criticism, saying it should not continue "unabated without any review." Defying the lessons of the last three years, he pushed to send US troops to another far-off conflict, this time in Darfur.

As the Bush years drew to a close, and with conditions in Iraq showing little prospect of improving, Biden went for one last Hail Mary. Leslie Gelb, a foreign policy maven who had initially supported the war, he later admitted, because of his need "to retain political and professional credibility" in establishment circles, had spent two years pitching a plan to stabilize the situation in Iraq and facilitate a US exit. In late 2005, he and Biden found themselves sitting next to each other on a jet from New York to Washington that was delayed on the tarmac. "Running into Biden was like a dream," Gelb recalled. By the time the plane landed three hours later, the two had agreed to team up and push Gelb's proposal.

The "Biden exit strategy," as he would later call it, was an attempt to find yet another "third way" between choices he found politically unpalatable — in this case, swift withdrawal from Iraq and indefinite occupation. The plan proposed splitting Iraq into three autonomous regions along ethnoreligious sectarian lines — one each for Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds — with a weak central government responsible only for "common interests" like border security and oil revenue. And like the "third way" approach in economics, its claim to moderation disguised the fact that it actually leaned firmly in one direction, with Biden's plan envisioning a "small residual force" of around 20,000 US troops staying behind.

Just as Biden had tried internationalizing his punitive mindset on crime and drugs, the plan exported another lesson Biden had first wrongly internalized from American apartheid: that people of different backgrounds simply couldn't live together in harmony. "Look I know these people," he later told one Middle East expert who tried explaining that Iraqis wanted to leave behind sectarianism. "My grandfather was Irish and hated the British. It's like in the Balkans. They all grow up hating each other."

This fundamental misreading of history led Biden to explicitly reject a bipartisan study group's conclusion in December 2006 that the United States push for a strong central government in Iraq. This recommendation, Biden charged, would fuel *more* sectarian violence — he said he doubted Iraqis would ever "stand together" under such an arrangement. Calling it "fundamentally and fatally flawed," Biden instead put his faith in solutions that had fueled war and unrest for most of his own country's history: segregation and states' rights.

"You separate the parties," he explained on the Senate floor. "You give them breathing room. Let them control their local police, their education, their religion, their marriage. That's the only possibility."

Then and after, Biden would insist the plan wasn't a "partition" of the country, probably because of the word's colonial overtones. Yet that's certainly how one of his allies in the fight, Republican senator Sam Brownback, saw the proposal, terming it a "three state solution for Iraq" and "soft partition." One later version, endorsed by Biden, even featured something that had never been done in the Balkans: border controls between regions, which would expand checkpoints run by foreign troops and mean "stronger limits on freedom of movement for Iraqis," as its author, Amitai Etzioni, wrote. In fact, wrote Etzioni, by putting most of the responsibility for security and taxes in local hands, the plan went "far beyond what even the most vocal proponents of 'states' rights' find attractive in the American context."

Biden's status in Washington as "one of the pre-eminent thinkers of the Congress on foreign policy" and "best-informed legislators on Iraq" ensured his proposal picked up interest in Congress, with a nonbinding resolution affirming the policy even flying through the Senate in September 2007. Op-ed columnists and luminaries like Kissinger signed on, the Bush administration warmed to it, and the *New York Times* termed it a "coherent proposal."

Outside the establishment bubble, however, Middle East experts and historians were nearly unanimous in their condemnation. One charged it was "completely out of touch with reality." Another called it "sociologically and politically illiterate." The plan, they pointed out, would put families of different religious and tribal backgrounds into impossible situations; ignore the fact that these groups, far from being homogenous, were themselves riven with divisions and conflicts; fuel violence in Iraq's more diverse urban areas ("as if that isn't happening now," scoffed the *Times*); and invite secession and trigger a civil war that would spread beyond Iraq's borders by forcing oil-rich regions to share resources and wealth. The plan's only success was in managing the rare feat of bringing a divided Iraqi political leadership together against it; figures on all sides stressed that Iraq could only survive united.

Biden did not take the criticism well. At least he had a plan, he told the press. What were his critics' ideas? Besides, he said, it was an "inevitability" that Iraq would fall into such divisions naturally anyway. When recently elected Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki predicted the plan would be a "catastrophe," Biden erupted. "For Maliki and Iraqi leaders to suggest we don't have a right to express our opinion, I don't know who in the hell they think they are," he told reporters. "We have a right. The right is that we've expended our blood and treasure in order to back their commitment to their constitution."

The United States had sacrificed much to invade Iraq and take the country to the brink of collapse, Biden was saying. The least Iraqis could do was let it impose an unpopular plan to finish the job.

Owing to its many problems, the Biden plan was ultimately shelved and not heard of again for years. But it served its purpose. Flawed as it was, the plan burnished Biden's credentials as a foreign policy expert, the pitch he would make to voters upon launching his second bid for the Democratic nomination for president.

Though Biden had supported the war to save his political skin, it proved to be an enduring liability. In every political campaign he ran thereafter, including in 2008, Biden's vote for war was recognized as, at the very least, a symbol of poor judgment setting him apart from his rivals. In the medium term, the war destabilized an already volatile region and only fueled anti-American terrorism, hindering any future Democratic administration. In the long term, by extending their embrace of the Republican approach beyond the domestic realm into foreign policy, Biden and the Democrats abandoned another left lane, leaving it wide open for a duplicitous right-wing populist to claim without trouble.

But before that, Biden would spend the next eight years closer to his boyhood dream of the presidency than he had ever been. Despite his leading role in what even then was considered one of the worst foreign policy decisions in US history and authoring a plan for Iraq almost universally derided as simplistic and dangerous, the aura of Biden's expertise stayed bright enough in the insular world of Washington, DC, to grant him the power of helping run the next president's foreign policy. Biden's days of shaping the world were far from over.

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Branko Marcetic

Joe Biden Jumped at the Chance to Help George W. Bush Sell the Invasion of Iraq

After September 11, George W. Bush decided to blaze a path of death and destruction in Iraq by invading. He was given crucial assistance by Joe Biden.

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