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Political Leadership

Hillary Clinton's Decision to Vote in Favor of the Iraq War Resolution of 2002

Hillary Clinton served as Senator of New York between 2001 and 2009. During her tenure as Senator she faced many decisions about how to vote on bills, acts and resolutions. However, soon after she became a Senator, the first public office she held, the September 11th attacks occurred and that event changed the nature of the political environment in the United States. After the government staged a military intervention in Afghanistan to combat terrorism and the Taliban, the widely shared belief that Saddam Hussein, leader of Iraq, was building weapons of mass destruction, continued to grow. This was a powerful contributing factor in how every decision-maker at the time perceived the situation, and as it turned out it was based on false intelligence.

Under this understanding, her decision was to vote in favor of the Iraq War Resolution in 2002. The resolution went on to pass by a large margin and led to the invasion of Iraq which had an immense impact on the future of our country and the future of her political career. Hillary has since publicly stated that she regrets her decision of voting in favor of the Iraq War Resolution. This was an important decision in her career as a Senator and it helped to shape the politician she became and the political climate she would work in.

To understand why Hillary chose to vote in favor of the Iraq War Resolution it is important to look at who else was involved in helping her make the decision. Who did she consult with on the decision, what information did she have and what were her options? We must look at her level of involvement in the issue, the experience she possessed on the topic and

the nature of her decision-making process based on her background and personality. Finally, we must address how the decision to invade Iraq had serious consequences for the United States, as well as Hillary Clinton's own career.

Different Senators have different influencers who are involved in helping them in their decision making process on votes. For Hillary, the people who were most involved in helping her to come to a decision were the then President of the United States, George W. Bush, her husband and longtime advisor Bill Clinton, other advisors and strategists, American public opinion and groupthink pressure from the Senate coalition in favor of the resolution.

As members of opposite parties, her relationship with President George W. Bush was not one of allies and “[h]er vote was further complicated by her shifting relationship with the sitting commander in chief. She had hoped George W. Bush would continue to pursue diplomacy with Iraq whether or not Congress gave him the power to wage war — indeed, the president pledged to do so days before the vote. If Clinton was going to support Bush, it would mean she would have to extend him the benefit of the doubt” (Gerth & Natta, 2007).

As it turns out, “Bush called Clinton to the White House on Oct. 8, 2002, three days before the vote. His public arguments included a stream of later-discredited claims, including that Hussein had weapons ‘capable of killing millions.’ After Clinton left the White House, she took a call from national security adviser Condoleezza Rice. Clinton later cited this conversation as evidence that the Bush administration ‘misled’ her” (Kranish, 2016). In fact, “[f]or years, Clinton has blamed Bush for misleading her into voting for the resolution. But an examination by The Washington Post found that her decision was based as much on advice from her husband's advisers as from Bush administration officials” (Kranish, 2016).

While making her decision about how to vote, Bill Clinton did “serve[] as her main counsel on the Iraq war vote” and strongly advised her to vote in favor of the resolution. “[W]hile he was president in 1998, the United States, assisted by Britain, launched more than 400 cruise missiles and flew 650 air attacks against suspected weapons-of-mass-destruction sites in Iraq after Saddam Hussein refused to cooperate with U.N. weapons inspectors. ‘Mark my words, he will develop weapons of mass destruction,’ President Clinton had said at the time. ‘He will deploy them, and he will use them’” (Gerth & Natta, 2007). Due to Hillary’s relative inexperience with foreign policy and national security as a newer Senator in 2002, she largely deferred her decision making process to her husband's position and no advisor was more influential in her decision to vote in favor of the resolution.

However, every decision-maker also surrounds themselves with and takes suggestions from multiple advisors. Though the extent and content of their recommendations is kept confidential, it is safe to say that Hillary Clinton, as Senator of New York, was no different in this regard. Andrew Shapiro, then Senator Clinton’s foreign-policy adviser, noted: “‘What I saw was her asking a lot of probing questions, a lot of concern about would this be effective’ ... referring to the days leading up to her decision” (Kranish, 2016). Due to her relative inexperience in national security and foreign relations it is understandable that Hillary would take a collegial approach to working with her advisors on the decision-making process and chose to rely heavily on their opinions to help inform her on what to do.

Later, when she joined the Armed Services Committee in 2003, Andrew Shapiro “called upon 10 experts — including Bill Perry, who was defense secretary under her husband, and Ashton Carter, who would eventually become President Obama’s fourth defense secretary — to

tutor her on everything from grand strategy to defense procurement. She met quietly with Andrew Marshall, an octogenarian strategist at the Pentagon who labored for decades in the blandly named Office of Net Assessment, earning the nickname Yoda for his Delphic insights. She went to every committee meeting, no matter how mundane. Aides recall her on C-SPAN3, sitting alone in the chamber, patiently questioning a lieutenant colonel” (Landler, 2016). Throughout Hillary’s career she would always continue to surround herself with experts who could train her on topics she was less familiar with.

Public opinion also played a role in forming Hillary’s decision on the Iraq War Resolution vote. Hillary had her own political need to display strength and to have an aggressive response to the terrorist attacks against the United States in the American public eye. It was important to her that to advance her own career in a post 9/11 society. To do so there needed to be a public perception of her as more hawkish and capable of aggressively responding to threats to national security. This was a contributing factor in her decision to vote in favor of the Iraq War. “Since the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Hillary Clinton had labored to establish her national-security credentials. The day after the attacks, she vowed that any country that chose to harbor terrorists and ‘those who in any way aid or comfort them whatsoever will now face the wrath of our country.’ Such tough comments reflected the mood of the country — and also dovetailed with her efforts to win over moderate voters” (Gerth & Natta, 2007). “[A]ccording to aides and strategists, her insecurity about her public image and her nascent national-security credentials made it difficult, if not impossible, for her to vote no” (Gerth & Natta, 2007).

Lastly, it is important to note that most of the other Senators, including many of the Senate Democrats, also voted in favor of the Iraq War Resolution. In fact, “[s]eventy-seven

senators voted to give President Bush the authority to use military force in Iraq, including twenty-nine Democrats” (Albayati, 2014). This is significant because the type and structure of the group making the decisions has an impact on how and what decisions are made. Legislatures function by building coalitions among members of opposing parties. Therefore, they are particularly prone to the effects of a plurality—the winner-take-all model of coalition group decision-making. When the established norms favor majority rule, then ultimately one party's position prevails. In the effort to build the coalitions necessary to gain enough support to pass a resolution, the Members of Congress, conferring amongst themselves, are very susceptible to the effects of groupthink.

Groupthink is the process by which dissenting views are suppressed in a natural effort to avoid conflict and establish cohesion. Among the subsets of these coalition groups in Congress, groupthink occurs frequently. This can begin to explain why so many Senate Democrats conformed to the popular view that an aggressive stance against Iraq was necessary. It was widely believed by nearly everyone in Congress that Saddam Hussein had indeed been building weapons of mass destruction. Though this did not turn out to be true, the impetus this perceived threat caused to take an aggressive stance against Iraq had a strong effect on Members of Congress, who all wanted to protect their constituents and stand united in the face of this crisis.

At the time of the vote, Hillary “was among the Senate’s most outspoken Democrats warning of Saddam Hussein’s dangerous arsenal. Unlike nearly all of her fellow Democrats, she even went so far as to argue that Saddam Hussein gave assistance to Al Qaeda members.” (Gerth & Natta, 2007). Although, “Clinton prepared for her decision on the war vote by doing her homework... This included, she said, attending classified briefings on Capitol Hill concerning

intelligence on Iraq...[and] Clinton asked pointed and skeptical questions about how the administration planned to deal with the inevitable challenges of governing Iraq after the invasion... it is not clear whether she actually read ‘the National Intelligence Estimate, the most comprehensive judgment of the intelligence community about Iraq’s W.M.D.’” (Gerth & Natta, 2007).

Later in 2003, Hillary would become a member of the Senate Committee on Armed Services and a member of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities. This experience ultimately gave her the more in-depth background and sense of responsibility in addressing the Iraq War that she really needed. In fact, the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities has jurisdiction over Department of Defense policies and programs to counter emerging threats such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism (Armed Services Senate). Which during the vote, was the biggest factor in her the rationale behind being in favor of giving President Bush the authority to send armed forces into Iraq.

However, during the October 2002 vote, “[a]ccording to Senate aides... Clinton was not yet on the Armed Services Committee [and] she did not have anyone working for her with the security clearances needed to read the entire N.I.E. and the other highly classified reports that pertained to Iraq” (Gerth & Natta, 2007). Had she read the document in full herself, she would have known that intelligence showed no link between Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, which she publicly asserted on the Senate floor and was part of the foundation for her reasoning to support the resolution (Gerth & Natta, 2007). Additionally, there was an amendment to the resolution a year later, proposed by Senator Levin, that would have required a

two-step process for the President to follow before the use of force involving first the UN and then Congress again, which Hillary had gone on record in 2002 as supporting the idea but ultimately voted against in 2003 (Gerth & Nattam 2007)(Broder, 2008).

At first glance, it would seem as though at the time of this vote Hillary was more in favor of a unilateral use of force against Iraq than she would later want to admit and would regret. However, Hillary has stated that: “Before I voted in 2002...the administration publicly and privately assured me that they intended to use their authority to build international support in order to get the U.N. weapons inspectors back into Iraq, as articulated by the president in his Cincinnati speech on Oct. 7, 2002. As I said in my October 2002 floor statement, I took ‘the president at his word that he will try hard to pass a U.N. resolution and will seek to avoid war, if at all possible’” (Gerth & Natta, 2007). Ultimately, Hillary relied too heavily on the confidence she had that President Bush would first try to seek out a diplomatic solution in the United Nations, before resorting to unilateral force against Iraq. Unfortunately, he chose to do the latter.

Hillary has in recent years publicly stated that she does regret her vote in favor of the Iraq War Resolution. She wrote in her 2014 book, *Hard Choices*, that “[m]any senators came to wish they had voted against the resolution. I was one of them” (Siegel, 2014). Hillary’s background and personality played a role in her decision at the time, in that she was still a very new Senator and did not have the national security or foreign policy knowledge or experience that she needed.

On that October 11th, 2002 vote on the Iraq War Resolution, Hillary’s options were a yes or no vote and she weighed the alternatives side by side. “If she voted yes, she would be giving President Bush the authority to launch a pre-emptive war — a concept that must have reminded her of America’s failed war in Vietnam, which she opposed as a student at Wellesley College

and Yale Law School. On the other hand, voting against the resolution could relax the pressure on a brutal dictator whose perceived effort to develop weapons of mass destruction was widely seen as a threat to world peace” (Gerth & Natta, 2007). It was hard for Hillary to go against what her formative years, growing up during the Vietnam War era, had taught her— that engaging in warfare over seas, with little information about the people and place, leads to many mistakes made, unforeseeable diplomatic consequences and countless lives lost.

Nevertheless, she decided to defer to the judgment of her husband, her advisors and her fellow Members of Congress and as a result this vote had very real repercussions that affected her career as well the nation at large. The war the United States fought in Iraq gave politician, Hillary Clinton, the opportunity to become involved in and learn more about national security, foreign policy and warfare, areas in which she was not an expert and knew she needed to learn more about. “[A]fter 9/11, Clinton saw Armed Services as better preparation for her future. For a politician looking to hone hard-power credentials — a woman who aspired to be commander in chief — it was the perfect training ground. She dug in like a grunt at boot camp” (Landler, 2016).

Hillary Clinton has had a long term plan to follow in her husband's footsteps and become the President of the United States. This aspiration to be President has been a part of her personality for a long time and was certainly a contributing factor to her decision making as Senator of New York. Though no one anticipated the attack of 9/11, during her time as a Senator she took advantage of the opportunity this national crisis presented her to tackle the political arenas that she needed to improve in. “Clinton knew she could never advance her career — or win the presidency, especially — if she didn’t prove that she was tough enough to be commander

in chief. Female candidates, it's presumed, have often suffered as a result of the stereotype that they could never be as strong as men. Now the defense of the homeland had become such a paramount issue that Americans insisted their president — man or woman — protect them from another terrorist attack” (Gerth & Natta, 2007).

Hillary Clinton was not well-prepared to make an informed or prophetic decision about the Iraq War. In 2002, she was a two-year junior Senator who did not have the necessary background or experience on the topic. Nevertheless, she went on to learn from the mistake she made and continued to learn from other mistakes made throughout her career as a Senator and Secretary of State. From every threat or crisis she faced she always took advantage of the opportunity it presented her in developing the training and first-hand experience she needed to have a qualified and seasoned approach to foreign policy and national security issues. It is this aspect of her personality and background that has always made her a tireless public servant with an insatiable need to keep learning and never give up on achieving effective governing, laws and politics.

After the vote in 2002, she continued to try to better understand the issue and became a member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee in 2003 (Armed Services Senate). She also joined a delegation that visited Iraq and then voted against the immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2005 but also voted against a troop surge in 2007 (Hillary Clinton Voting Record). Nevertheless, she recognizes that “she placed too much reliance on legislation that was actually designed to *check* a president's war-making ability but instead inadvertently gave that president cover to run roughshod over the interests of both Congress and the public at large” (Marburg-Goodman, 2016). By 2014 and still today, she openly admits that she fully regrets

ever having voted to engage military force in Iraq and having helped to ignite the longest war in American history.

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