

Operation Iraqi Freedom at 20: Americans and the Iraq War

For the 20-year Anniversary of the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, More in Common, through its Veterans and Citizens Initiative, sought to understand Americans' memories and attitudes towards the Iraq War. We also explored feelings towards Iraq War veterans and about war and American society more generally. We surveyed a representative sample of 2,000 American adults from Feb. 7-14, 2023.

Below are some key points from the report:

Salience of the Iraq War

The Iraq War is largely invisible and out-of-mind for most Americans.

Only 4 percent of Americans say they “often” think about the Iraq War.

Only 21 percent of Americans feel the Iraq War changed their lives.

Younger Americans and those with family in the military are more likely to say it changed their lives.

Views towards the Iraq War

Americans are mixed in their views of whether the Iraq War succeeded or failed:

- 39 percent said it had a mix of successes and failures
- 29 percent said it was a failure
- 14 percent said it was a success

Outside of success or failure, most Americans view the Iraq War relatively negatively:

- 52 percent feel it was a mistake to send troops to fight the war
- 60 percent of Americans feel political leaders lied to justify the war

Most Americans who were at least 18 years old in 2003 say their views on the war have not changed since 2003

- For those Americans who said their views changed, the overwhelming majority say they view the war more negatively now than they did in 2003.



Credit and Blame with the Iraq War

Americans are united in saying that the military deserves most of the credit for aspects of the Iraq War that went well

- 42 percent of Americans say military service members deserve most of the credit.

Americans are split along party lines on who deserves blame for aspects of the war that went poorly for America:

- 53 percent of Democrats versus 21 percent of Republicans say President George W. Bush deserves most of the blame.
- 38 percent of Republicans versus 6 percent of Democrats say President Barack Obama.
- 31 percent of Democrats versus 12 percent of Republicans say Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.
- 18 percent of Republicans versus 6 percent of Democrats say American journalists.

Familiarity with the War

Most Americans' level of familiarity with the war's major events is limited.

Americans remember the invasion, the capture of Saddam Hussein, and the withdrawal in 2011, but memories of other significant events are more muted.

- 79 percent of Americans say they are familiar with the capture of Saddam Hussein.
- Only 43 percent self-report to be familiar with Colin Powell's 2003 speech to the UN and only 36 percent say they are familiar with the 2007 Surge.
- Americans' sources of information on the Iraq War vary significantly by age. 72 percent of Baby Boomers versus 37 percent of Gen Z cite the news as a source; whereas Gen Z cites social media (36 percent) and K-12 school (34 percent) as sources.

Learning from the Iraq War

Americans want to learn about the war as individuals but hold mixed views on whether the country needs to do more to publicly learn from the war.

- 77 percent of Americans say it is important for Americans, as individuals, to learn about the Iraq War.
- Only 41 percent agree with the statement, "America needs to do more to publicly learn from the Iraq War"; 32 percent agree "It's best for America to put the Iraq War behind us and move on", and 26 percent are unsure.
- Americans who know or have talked with veterans of the Iraq War are more likely to say that America needs to do more to publicly learn from the war.
- 69% of Americans across the board support the idea of their states adopting a "Military History Month" where schools and communities are encouraged to learn about military history.

Veterans and Citizens

Americans are not talking with Iraq War veterans about the war.

- 49 percent of Americans say they don't know anyone who served in the war and a majority, 63 percent, say they have not talked with an Iraq War veteran about his or her service.
- Americans have complex views towards Iraq War veterans. They are likely to see them as patriotic and disciplined, but also as feeling alone and suffering from mental health issues.

American Society & War

Americans are unsure whether all Americans should be required to sacrifice in some form when the country is at war.

- 46 percent say yes, 32 percent say no, and 22 percent are not sure.
- 57 percent of Republicans versus 46 percent of Democrats feel all Americans should sacrifice when we are at war.



Major Events from the Iraq War

% of Americans familiar with event

2003

February – Colin Powell’s speech to the UN 43%

In his speech to the UN Security Council Secretary of State Powell claimed that Saddam Hussein was intent on producing weapons of mass destruction, which was widely seen as a critical and persuasive endorsement of military action against Iraq and has since then been shown to have relied on faulty intelligence.

March – US Invasion of Iraq 63%

U.S. and Coalition forces invaded Iraq, 5 months after Congress authorized President George W. Bush to use force, if necessary, against Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq.

December – Capture of Saddam Hussein 79%

American soldiers captured Saddam Hussein.

2004

Battles for Fallujah in 2004 43%

An effort led by the U.S. Marine Corps, the U.S.-led coalition fought two battles in 2004 to secure the city of Fallujah, the bloodiest battle of the Iraq War.

Prisoner Abuse at Abu Ghraib 50%

The news coverage of U.S. soldiers abusing detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq broke out, receiving widespread media coverage and public outrage.

2006

Bombing of the al-Askari mosque 29%

The al-Askari mosque – one of Shi’a Islam’s four holiest shrines – was bombed by al-Qaeda in Iraq, which set off a wave of sectarian violence that claimed the lives of thousands in Iraq.

2007

The Sunni Awakening 28%

The violence on the part of al-Qaeda in Iraq led large segments of the Sunni community in Iraq to side with U.S. and Coalition forces and fight against the insurgency, a development referred to as the Sunni Awakening.

The Surge 36%

The U.S. military deployed a surge of U.S. troops (30,000 additional troops to complement 130,000 troops already deployed) into Iraq in the hopes of dismantling al-Qaeda in Iraq, defeating the insurgency, and ending the war.

2011

US Withdrawal from Iraq 66%

The final U.S. troops left Iraq on December 18, 2011, ending a war that began in 2003 that cost \$800 billion from the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the lives of nearly 4,500 Americans.