



Magic Numbers

A few days ago, on October 26th, the U.S. military death toll in Iraq reached 2000. As far as I know, that number has no mystical significance in and of itself, apart from the fact that it sounds large and ominous. But it's proving to be a rallying point for critics of the U.S. presence in Iraq. More than a few people are using that number as a ramp to escalate their condemnations of President Bush and his policies in the Middle East.

A lot of old criticisms are gaining new strength under the impetus of this magic number. Again we are seeing the President castigated for implementing regime change in a foreign nation. Again we are hearing that the supposed threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq was a fraud perpetrated by President Bush. But critics are tacking a new clause on to the ends of the old arguments — *and now it's cost us 2000 lives.*

I happen to agree that the death of the two-thousandth service member was an incalculable tragedy. The death that came before it was also an incalculable tragedy, as well as the one that came after. Every loss is heartbreaking, and no amount of number-crunching can change that. Nevertheless, there are people who are doing their best to magnify the gravity of this number. So I'd like to try tossing out a few numbers of my own. My magic numbers are 4655, 415, and 650.

Right off the bat you can see that my numbers aren't as compelling as a nice round figure like 2000. Maybe you'll change your mind after you find out what my numbers mean.

Let's start with the big one first. What could 4655 possibly represent? That would be House Resolution 4655, better known as *The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998*. On October 5, 1998, the 105th Congress voted to pass H.R. 4655 by a nearly ten-to-one margin. (The final vote was 360 to 38.) Just two days later, the Senate voted unanimously to approve the bill. On 31 October of that same year, H.R. 4655 was signed by President Clinton, and became Public Law 105-338. If you haven't already read that law, you should. It

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formalized the intentions of the United States to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Here's one of my favorite parts: '*It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime.*' Sounds fairly cut and dried, doesn't it? So is the rest of the text of that law. It unambiguously lays out the goal of bringing down Saddam, and then authorizes the President to draw funds to put the plan into action.

I should point out that the Iraq Liberation Act did *not* authorize direct military action in Iraq. That came later, in House Joint Resolution 114/Public Law 107-243. The initial legislation empowered President Clinton to provide financial and military support to Hussein's adversaries in Iraq, as well as assistance in broadcasting anti-Hussein programming via radio and television to bolster his opposition and inflame his enemies. The hope was to instigate an Iraqi rebellion against the Hussein regime, allowing America to avoid the dirty work. Congress didn't authorize direct military action until it became clear that indirect methods of removing Saddam Hussein from power had failed.

Where was George W. Bush in October of 1998? He was campaigning for re-election as Governor of Texas. Critics of President Bush have created the impression that he formulated the plan to remove Hussein from power. That's simply not true. The decision to bring down the regime of Saddam Hussein was made and signed into law nearly two years before Mr. Bush had even received his party's nomination as a candidate for president. That's not rhetoric or theory. It's a matter of historical fact. The official documents that prove it are public record.

I mentioned some *other* magic numbers: 415 and 650. The first of those figures represents the number of Tomahawk cruise missiles launched against Iraq during *Operation Desert Fox*. The second figure refers to the number of bombing sorties conducted during that same operation.

In December of 1998, President Clinton ordered Operation Desert Fox to 'destroy or degrade Iraq's ability to create Weapons of Mass Destruction.' In a formal statement from the Oval Office, President Clinton said, "*We had to act, and act now. Saddam Hussein must not be allowed to threaten his neighbors with nuclear weapons, poison gas or biological weapons.*"

The operation lasted seventy hours, and over a hundred Iraqi targets were attacked. In a briefing a few hours after the completion of operations, Defense Secretary William Cohen pronounced the mission a success. That raises an interesting question. If President Bush fabricated the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, what were we shooting at with those 415 cruise missiles and 650 bombs?

A couple of days ago, a former Navy Lieutenant who flew strike missions over Iraq during Desert Fox asked me almost that exact same question. If the Weapons of Mass Destruction did not exist, then what were we bombing in 1998, during Desert Fox? And why didn't the press crawl all over President Clinton for authorizing military strikes against imaginary WMDs? On the other hand, if the WMDs *were* real, how can anyone possibly accuse President Bush of having fabricated them?

Is it just me, or is this stuff fairly obvious?



By an overwhelming margin, Congress approved legislation in 1998 designed to bring down the regime of Saddam Hussein. The Senate gave that legislation a *unanimous* stamp of approval two days later. A little more than three weeks after that, President Clinton signed that bill into a law that is still on the books.

Every bit of this happened when George W. Bush was running for a second term as Governor of Texas. Mr. Bush was *not* the architect of the plan to overthrow Saddam. He inherited the mandate from President Clinton, the 105th Congress, and the standing Public Law of the United States.

Two months after that Public Law became official, President Clinton authorized the use of over a thousand missiles and bombs against targets known or believed to be related to Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction. How can President Bush get the blame for inventing those same WMDs? If they existed, they were a legitimate target and the criticism of Bush is unfounded. If they did *not* exist, they were fabricated during the Clinton administration, two years before Bush was a serious player in national politics.

Of course, none of this will slow the juggernaut of public criticism against President Bush's policies in the Middle East. If our hard-digging journalists didn't bother to read the Congressional records yesterday, odds are they won't bother to read them tomorrow either. Besides, these are the kind of inconvenient facts that take all the fun out an otherwise brilliant bit of media circus. More than 2000 America troops dead because the sitting President lied; that's a *great* story. It's not nearly as compelling if those troops died because of decisions made by other politicians two years before the man was even elected.

I know that the magic numbers game will continue unabated, despite anything I've said here. Critics will continue to lay things at the President's feet that he could not possibly be responsible for. But the next time you hear someone toss out the magic number 2000, ask them about 4655, 415, and 650. Those are magic numbers too. They probably won't help you win the lottery, but they might allow you to see past all the political smoke and mirrors to a little piece of the truth.

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