

How Not to Memorialize the Iraq War

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President Trump's plan to construct a 250-foot-tall triumphal arch in the nation's capital has received widespread attention and criticism. But there is another monumental project underway that has received less coverage and deserves public discussion.

This week, the planners of the Global War on Terrorism Memorial publicly [released](#) their design for a permanent monument on the National Mall. Congress approved the general project in 2017 and approved its location in 2021.

The design is appropriately solemn and, like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, largely abstract rather than didactic. If it helps to bring peace to the families of the over 7,000 servicemembers who have died in America's post-9/11 wars, it will serve a great purpose.

But the monument is also a missed opportunity.

Above all, the name of the monument is misleading. A majority of the American servicemembers that the monument will memorialize died in the Iraq War, which lasted from 2003 to 2011. By treating the Iraq War as part of a "Global War on Terrorism," the monument will permanently enshrine and promote the false arguments made by the administration of President George W. Bush to justify the war.

President Bush, who is also the honorary chairman of the memorial foundation, popularized the idea of a "war on terrorism" in public speeches shortly after Al Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. The term was immediately criticized for lacking clear limits: how can a nation wage war against a tactic? But few Americans had trouble understanding the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 as a war against terrorists. The Taliban government in Afghanistan was protecting and supporting the leader of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden.

Then, in 2002, the Bush administration turned its attention away from Afghanistan and toward Iraq. The connection between Iraq and terrorism was far less clear. President Bush and multiple members of his administration attempted to create a connection by insinuating and sometimes flatly stating that Saddam Hussein's regime was cooperating with Al Qaeda. Much of the American public was persuaded. Multiple polls around the start of the Iraq War found that roughly half of Americans believed Saddam Hussein was involved in the September 11 attacks.

In fact, Iraq was not allied with Al Qaeda and played no role in the attacks. Iraq possessed no weapons of mass destruction, contrary to the administration's claims. Iraq did not pose an imminent threat to the United States. The Bush administration had promoted the war based on false premises, including unreliable intelligence from a defector codenamed "Curveball."

In the end, rather than protecting the United States, the Iraq War made the United States and the world less safe. Rather than eliminating a threat, it created new threats. The war led to the rise of

ISIS. As the Army's own Iraq War study found, "the only victor" of the war was Iran. The harm that the war caused to Iraq was incalculable, but likely resulted in the violent deaths of over a hundred thousand Iraqi civilians.

As the planned monument will memorialize, the Iraq War also resulted in the death of over 4,000 American servicemembers.

All of this was the result of choices made by George W. Bush and his appointees. They defended their choices by describing the Iraq War as part of a "Global War on Terrorism." Unfortunately, through its name, the Global War on Terrorism Memorial echoes the Bush administration's discredited justifications for the war.

Those who served in the Iraq War were not responsible for creating the war. They deserve a memorial where their sacrifices can be mourned. But the memorial should not obscure the tragedy of the war. It should not present the war, falsely, as a justified act of self-defense against terrorism. A memorial based on falsehoods does not honor the memories of those Americans who lost their lives in Iraq. If anything, such a memorial would only help reproduce illusions that make future wars, future sacrifices, and future memorials more likely.

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