The 2003 invasion of Iraq (March 19–May 1, 2003), was the start of the conflict known as the Iraq War or Operation Iraqi Freedom in which a combined force of troops from the United States, the United Kingdom and smaller contingents from Australia and Poland invaded Iraq and toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in 21 days of major combat operations. This phase (March–April 2003) consisted of a conventionally fought war which concluded with the fall of the Iraq capital Baghdad. This was considered a continuation of the Gulf War of 1991, prior to which Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait, and after defeat by Coalition Forces had agreed to surrender and/or destroy several types of weapons, including SCUD missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Since the Persian Gulf War in 1991 the U.S. and Britain had been keeping a tight rein on Saddam Hussein, waging an undeclared conflict against Iraq for twelve years. U.S. President Bill Clinton had maintained sanctions and ordered air strikes in the "Iraqi no-fly zones" with Operation Desert Fox, in the hope that Saddam would be overthrown by political enemies inside Iraq, and had signed into law H.R. 4655, the Iraq Liberation Act,[19] which appropriated funds to Iraqi opposition groups. Four countries participated with troops during the initial invasion phase, which lasted from March 19 to April 9, 2003. These were the United States (148,000), United Kingdom (45,000), Australia (2,000), and Poland (194). 36 other countries were involved in its aftermath. In preparation for the invasion, 100,000 U.S. troops were assembled in Kuwait by February 18.[20] The United States supplied the majority of the invading forces, but also received support from Kurdish irregulars in Iraqi Kurdistan.

According to U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the reasons for the invasion were "to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein's alleged support for terrorism, and to free the Iraqi people."[21] However, former chief counter-terrorism adviser on the National Security Council Richard A. Clarke believes Mr. Bush came into office with a plan to invade Iraq.[22] According to Blair, the trigger was Iraq's failure to take a "final opportunity" to disarm itself of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons that U.S. and British officials called an immediate and intolerable threat to world peace.[23] There also have been charges that the war was waged in order to take oil from Iraq.[24][25][26] In 2005, the Central Intelligence Agency released a report saying that no weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq.[27]

There was increasingly strong pressure among U.S. policy influencers, from the mid-1990s on, that regime change in Iraq was important to the overall goals of U.S. foreign policy. In 2001, within two weeks after the September 11 attacks, Bush ordered that plans for the invasion be drawn up.[28] In a January 2003 CBS poll 64% of U.S. nationals had approved of military action against Iraq, however 63% wanted Bush to find a diplomatic solution rather than go to war, and
62% believed the threat of terrorism directed against the U.S. would increase due to war.[29] The invasion of Iraq was strongly opposed by some traditional U.S. allies, including the governments of France, Germany, New Zealand, and Canada.[30][31][32] Their leaders argued that there was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that invading the country was not justified in the context of UNMOVIC's February 12, 2003 report. On February 15, 2003, a month before the invasion, there were worldwide protests against the Iraq war, including a rally of three million people in Rome, which is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the largest ever anti-war rally.[33] According to the French academic Dominique Reynié, between January 3 and April 12, 2003, 36 million people across the globe took part in almost 3,000 protests against the Iraq war.[34]

The invasion was preceded by an air strike on the Presidential Palace in Baghdad on March 19, 2003. The following day coalition forces launched an incursion into Basra Province from their massing point close to the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border. While the special forces launched an amphibious assault from the Persian Gulf to secure Basra and the surrounding petroleum fields, the main invasion army moved into southern Iraq, occupying the region and engaging in the Battle of Nasiriyah on March 23. Massive air strikes across the country and against Iraqi command and control threw the defending army into chaos and prevented an effective resistance. On March 26 the 173rd Airborne Brigade was airdropped near the northern city of Kirkuk where they joined forces with Kurdish rebels and fought several actions against the Iraqi army to secure the northern part of the country.

The main body of coalition forces continued their drive into the heart of Iraq and met with little resistance. Most of the Iraqi military was quickly defeated and Baghdad was occupied on April 9. Other operations occurred against pockets of the Iraqi army including the capture and occupation of Kirkuk on April 10, and the attack and capture of Tikrit on April 15. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the central leadership went into hiding as the coalition forces completed the occupation of the country. On May 1 an end of major combat operations was declared, ending the invasion period and beginning the military occupation period.

Prelude to the invasion

The Gulf War ended on February 28, 1991 with a cease-fire negotiated between the UN Coalition and Iraq.[35] The U.S. and its allies tried to keep Saddam in check with military actions such as Operation Southern Watch which was an conducted by Joint Task Force Southwest Asia (JTF-SWA) with the mission of monitoring and controlling airspace south of the 32nd Parallel (extended to the 33rd Parallel in 1996) as well as using economic sanctions. It was revealed the extent of biological weapons (BW) program in Iraq begun in the early 1980s with
help from the United States and Britain, in violation of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) of 1972. Details of the BW program—along with a chemical weapons program—surfaced in the wake of the Gulf War (1990–91) following investigations conducted by the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) which had been charged with the post-war disarmament of Saddam's Iraq. The investigation concluded that there was no evidence the program had continued after the war. The U.S. and its allies then maintained a policy of "containment" towards Iraq. This policy involved numerous economic sanctions by the UN Security Council, U.S. and UK enforcement of Iraqi no-fly zones declared by the U.S. and the UK to protect Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan and Shias in the south from aerial attacks by Iraqi government during the 1991 uprisings, and ongoing inspections to prevent Iraqi development of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. Iraqi military helicopters and planes regularly contested the no-fly zones.[36][37]

In October 1998, removing the Hussein regime became official U.S. foreign policy with enactment of the Iraq Liberation Act. Enacted following the expulsion of UN weapons inspectors the preceding August after some had been accused of spying for the U.S. the act provided $97 million for Iraqi "democratic opposition organizations" to "establish a program to support a transition to democracy in Iraq."[38] This legislation contrasted with the terms set out in United Nations Security Council Resolution 687, which focused on weapons and weapons programs and made no mention of regime change.[39] One month after the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act, the U.S. and UK launched a bombardment campaign of Iraq called Operation Desert Fox. The campaign's express rationale was to hamper the Hussein government's ability to produce chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, but U.S. intelligence personnel also hoped it would help weaken Hussein's grip on power.[40]

With the election of George W. Bush as president in 2000, the U.S. moved towards a more aggressive policy toward Iraq. The Republican Party’s campaign platform in the 2000 election called for "full implementation" of the Iraq Liberation Act and removal of Hussein. Key Bush advisors, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, had long desired to invade Iraq.[41] After leaving the George W. Bush administration, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill said that an attack on Iraq had been planned since Bush's inauguration, and that the first United States National Security Council meeting involved discussion of an invasion. O'Neill later backtracked, saying that these discussions were part of a continuation of foreign policy first put into place by the Clinton administration.[42]

Despite the Bush administration's stated interest in liberating Iraq, little formal movement towards an invasion occurred until the September 11, 2001 attacks. For example, the administration prepared Operation Desert Badger to respond aggressively if any Air Force pilot was shot down while flying over Iraq, but this did not happen. Rumsfeld dismissed National
Security Agency (NSA) intercept data available by midday of the 11th. that pointed to al-Qaeda's culpability, and by mid-afternoon ordered the Pentagon to prepare plans for attacking Iraq.[43] According to aides who were with him in the National Military Command Center on that day, Rumsfeld asked for: "best info fast. Judge whether good enough hit Saddam Hussein at same time. Not only Osama bin Laden."[44] The rationale for invading Iraq as a response to 9/11 has been widely questioned, as there was no cooperation between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda.[45]

Shortly after September 11, 2001 (on September 20), Bush addressed a joint session of Congress (simulcast live to the world), and announced his new "War on Terrorism". This announcement was accompanied by the doctrine of "pre-emptive" military action, later termed the Bush Doctrine. Allegations of a connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda were made by some U.S. Government officials who asserted that a highly secretive relationship existed between Saddam and the radical Islamist militant organization al-Qaeda from 1992 to 2003, specifically through a series of meetings reportedly involving the Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS). Some Bush advisers favored an immediate invasion of Iraq, while others advocated building an international coalition and obtaining United Nations authorization. Bush eventually decided to seek UN authorization, while still reserving the option of invading without it.

Preparations for war

While there had been some earlier talk of action against Iraq, the Bush administration waited until September 2002 to call for action, with White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card saying, "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August."[47] Bush began formally making his case to the international community for an invasion of Iraq in his September 12, 2002 address to the UN Security Council.[48]

Key U.S. allies in NATO, such as the United Kingdom, agreed with the U.S. actions, while France and Germany were critical of plans to invade Iraq, arguing instead for continued diplomacy and weapons inspections. After considerable debate, the UN Security Council adopted a compromise resolution, UN Security Council Resolution 1441, which authorized the resumption of weapons inspections and promised "serious consequences" for non-compliance. Security Council members France and Russia made clear that they did not consider these consequences to include the use of force to overthrow the Iraqi government.[49] Both the U.S. ambassador to the UN, John Negroponte, and the UK ambassador, Jeremy Greenstock, publicly confirmed this reading of the resolution, assuring that Resolution 1441 provided no "automaticity" or "hidden triggers" for an invasion without further consultation of the Security Council.
Resolution 1441

gave Iraq "a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations" and set up inspections by the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Hussein accepted the resolution on November 13 and inspectors returned to Iraq under the direction of UNMOVIC chairman Hans Blix and IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei. As of February 2003, the IAEA "found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq"; the IAEA concluded that certain items which could have been used in nuclear enrichment centrifuges, such as aluminum tubes, were in fact intended for other uses. UNMOVIC "did not find evidence of the continuation or resumption of programs of weapons of mass destruction" or significant quantities of proscribed items. UNMOVIC did supervise the destruction of a small number of empty chemical rocket warheads, 50 liters of mustard gas that had been declared by Iraq and sealed by UNSCOM in 1998, and laboratory quantities of a mustard gas precursor, along with about 50 Al-Samoud missiles of a design that Iraq stated did not exceed the permitted 150 km range, but which had travelled up to 183 km in tests. Shortly before the invasion, UNMOVIC stated that it would take "months" to verify Iraqi compliance with resolution 1441. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_invasion_of_Iraq