

Bush defiantly defends war in Iraq



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President Bush defiantly defended the Iraq war Wednesday as U.S. troops began a sixth year of combat in the long and costly conflict that has dominated his presidency. Bush conceded the war has been harder and more expensive than anticipated but insisted it has all been necessary to keep Americans safe.

Protesters marked the anniversary of the U.S. invasion with demonstrations near the White House and in other cities, though they seemed to lack the fervor of those that preceded the war.

Bush, in a speech at the Pentagon, offered some of his boldest assessments of progress and said the war's legacy is absolute: "The world is better, and the United States of America is safer."

A war-weary country isn't nearly so convinced.

The majority of people think the invasion was a mistake, polls show. However, Americans are more split about how the war is going and when U.S. troops should be pulled home, as reduced violence in Iraq has begun to influence the public view.

Almost 4,000 U.S. military members have died, and more than 29,000 have been wounded. The cost is \$500 billion and counting.

"No one would argue that this war has not come at a high cost in lives and treasure," Bush said. "But those costs are necessary when we consider the cost of a strategic victory for our enemies in Iraq."

The U.S. has about 158,000 troops in Iraq, and that number is expected to drop to 140,000 by summer. But Bush signaled anew that he will not pull more troops home as long as his commanders worry that doing so will imperil recently improved conditions in Iraq.

"Having come so far, and achieved so much, we're not going to let this happen," Bush said.

Demonstrators converged in the nation's capital, other big cities like Miami and San Francisco, and in smaller towns in Vermont and Ohio to urge an end to the war. Police arrested more than 30 people who blocked the Internal Revenue Service building in Washington, and protesters blocked downtown intersections several times.

However, the demonstrators numbered in the hundreds rather than the thousands organizers had hoped for.

Even as his time and power wane, Bush made clear he will prosecute the war as he deems fit till the end of his presidency.

In the campaign to replace him, Democratic Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton pledged to end the war, but squabbled Wednesday over who could do it best.

Democrats in Congress assailed Bush for failed, tired leadership and questioned why he did not push Iraq's leaders to live up to promises.

"All the president seems able to offer Americans is more of the same perpetual disregard for the costs and consequences of stubbornly staying the course in Iraq," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.

Bush starkly described the costs of trying to end the war too quickly. From his perspective, retreat would lead to chaos in Iraq, embolden al-Qaida to pursue an attack on America and encourage Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

"To allow this to happen would be to ignore the lessons of September the 11th and make it more likely that America would suffer another attack like the one we experienced that day," Bush said.

Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network orchestrated the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. The bipartisan Sept. 11 commission found no collaborative relationship between al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein, who ruled Iraq at the start of the war and was later captured, tried and hanged.

Al-Qaida in Iraq, an insurgent group, has grown into a more potent, dangerous organization since the start of the war. Bush speaks of undeniable links between that group and the broader al-Qaida network, although experts question that extent of those ties.

Bush praised Sunni tribal leaders for rising up against al-Qaida in Iraq. He said that has led to similar uprising across the country. Bush put the figure at 90,000 local citizens who are protecting their communities against extremists.

All that, combined with a strategic influx of U.S. troops last year, has "opened the door to a major victory in the broader war on terror," Bush said.

"Iraq was supposed to be the place where al-Qaida rallied Arab masses to drive America out," Bush said. "Instead, Iraq has become the place where Arabs joined with Americans to drive al-Qaida out. In Iraq, we are witnessing the first large-scale Arab uprising against Osama bin Laden, his grim ideology."

Bush did not mention that weapons of mass destruction in Iraq — a main justification for the war — were never found.

"This isn't the war we signed up for," said Jon Alterman, head of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. Back in 2003, he said, Americans expected a quick, decisive defeat of Saddam and no lingering presence.

"What we are seeing is a much more difficult, muddled, nuanced presence at a much higher cost and for a longer time than anyone bargained for," he said.

Bush spoke of Saddam's removal as a worthy end in itself, ridding Iraq of death squads, torture chambers and rape rooms.

He also jabbed at political critics who he said "still call for retreat." The message was similar to the "no surrender" theme of Bush's would-be Republican successor, Sen. John McCain, who also warns about pulling troops home too fast.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz and Harvard University public finance expert Linda Bilmes have estimated

the eventual cost of the war could be as much as \$3 trillion when all the expenses are calculated.

Without naming anyone, Bush decried those who he said have exaggerated the expense.

"War critics can no longer credibly argue that we are losing in Iraq," he said, "so now they argue the war costs too much."

In Congress, the leaders of the Joint Economic Committee, Sens. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., and Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., wrote him and asked for full disclosure.

"The American people deserve a full accounting of what the war has cost in terms of lives, our reputation abroad, and our economy," they wrote.

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