

Ford Disagreed With Bush About Invading Iraq

By Bob Woodward
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Former president Gerald R. Ford said in an embargoed interview in July 2004 that the Iraq war was not justified. "I don't think I would have gone to war," he said a little more than a year after President Bush launched the invasion advocated and carried out by prominent veterans of Ford's own administration.

In a four-hour conversation at his house in Beaver Creek, Colo., Ford "very strongly" disagreed with the current president's justifications for invading Iraq and said he would have pushed alternatives, such as sanctions, much more vigorously. In the tape-recorded interview, Ford was critical not only of Bush but also of Vice President Cheney -- Ford's White House chief of staff -- and then-Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who served as Ford's chief of staff and then his Pentagon chief.

"Rumsfeld and Cheney and the president made a big mistake in justifying going into the war in Iraq. They put the emphasis on weapons of mass destruction," Ford said. "And now, I've never publicly said I thought they made a mistake, but I felt very strongly it was an error in how they should justify what they were going to do."

In a conversation that veered between the current realities of a war in the Middle East and the old complexities of the war in Vietnam whose bitter end he presided over as president, Ford took issue with the notion of the United States entering a conflict in service of the idea of spreading democracy.

"Well, I can understand the theory of wanting to free people," Ford said, referring to Bush's assertion that the United States has a "duty to free people." But the former president said he was skeptical "whether you can detach that from the obligation number one, of what's in our national interest." He added: "And I just don't think we should go hellfire damnation around the globe freeing people, unless it is directly related to our own national security."

The Ford interview -- and a subsequent lengthy conversation in 2005 -- took place for a future book project, though he said his comments could be published at any time after his death. In the sessions, Ford fondly recalled his close working relationship with key Bush advisers Cheney and Rumsfeld while expressing concern about the policies they pursued in more recent years.

"He was an excellent chief of staff. First class," Ford said. "But I think Cheney has become much more pugnacious" as vice president. He said he agreed with former secretary of state Colin L. Powell's assertion that Cheney developed a "fever" about the threat of terrorism and Iraq. "I think that's probably true."

Describing his own preferred policy toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Ford said he would not have gone to war, based on the publicly available information at the time, and would have worked harder to find an alternative. "I don't think, if I had been president, on the basis of the facts as I saw them publicly," he said, "I don't think I would have ordered the Iraq war. I would have maximized our effort through sanctions, through restrictions, whatever, to find another answer."

Ford had faced his own military crisis -- not a war he started like Bush, but one he had to figure out how to end. In many ways those decisions framed his short presidency -- in the difficult calculations about how to pull out of Vietnam and the challenging players who shaped policy on the war. Most challenging of all, as Ford recalled, was Henry A. Kissinger, who was both secretary of state and national security adviser and had what Ford said was "the thinnest skin of any public figure I ever knew."

"I think he was a super secretary of state," Ford said, "but Henry in his mind never made a mistake, so whatever policies there were that he implemented, in retrospect he would defend."

In 1975, Ford decided to relieve Kissinger of his national security title. "Why Nixon gave Henry both secretary of state and head of the NSC, I never understood," Ford said. "Except he was a great supporter of Kissinger. Period." But Ford viewed Kissinger's dual roles as a conflict of interest that weakened the administration's ability to fully air policy debates. "They were supposed to check on one another."

That same year, Ford also decided to fire Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger and replace him with Rumsfeld, who was then Ford's White House chief of staff. Ford recalled that he then used that decision to go to Kissinger and say, "I'm making a change at the secretary of defense, and I expect you to be a team player and work with me on this" by giving up the post of security adviser.

Kissinger was not happy. "Mr. President, the press will misunderstand this," Ford recalled Kissinger telling him. "They'll write that I'm being demoted by taking away half of my job." But Ford made the changes, elevating the deputy national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, to take Kissinger's White House post.

Throughout this maneuvering, Ford said, he kept his White House chief of staff in the dark. "I didn't consult with Rumsfeld. And knowing Don, he probably resented the fact that I didn't get his advice, which I didn't," Ford said. "I made the decision on my own."

Kissinger remained a challenge for Ford. He regularly threatened to resign, the former president recalled. "Over the weekend, any one of 50 weekends, the press would be all over him, giving him unshirted hell. Monday morning he would come in and say, 'I'm offering my resignation.' Just between Henry and me. And I would literally hold his hand. 'Now, Henry, you've got the nation's future in your hands and you can't leave us now.' Henry publicly was a gruff, hard-nosed, German-born diplomat, but he had the thinnest skin of any public figure I ever knew."

Ford added, "Any criticism in the press drove him crazy." Kissinger would come in and say: "I've got to resign. I can't stand this kind of unfair criticism." Such threats were routine, Ford said. "I often thought, maybe I should say: 'Okay, Henry. Goodbye,' " Ford said, laughing. "But I never got around to that."

At one point, Ford recalled Kissinger, his chief Vietnam policymaker, as "coy." Then he added, Kissinger is a "wonderful person. Dear friend. First-class secretary of state. But Henry always protected his own flanks."

Ford was also critical of his own actions during the interviews. He recalled, for example, his unsuccessful 1976 campaign to remain in office, when he was under enormous pressure to dump Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller from the Republican ticket. Some polls at the time showed that up to 25 percent of Republicans, especially those from the South, would not vote for Ford if Rockefeller, a New Yorker from the liberal wing of the Republican Party, was on the ticket.

When Rockefeller offered to be dropped from the ticket, Ford took him up on it. But he later regretted it. The decision to dump the loyal Rockefeller, he said, was "an act of cowardice on my part."

In the end, though, it was Vietnam and the legacy of the retreat he presided over that troubled Ford. After Saigon fell in 1975 and the United States evacuated from Vietnam, Ford was often labeled the only American president to lose a war. The label always rankled.

"Well," he said, "I was mad as hell, to be honest with you, but I never publicly admitted it."

Christine Parthemore contributed to this report.