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Iraq War's Cost: Loss Of US Power, Prestige And Influence

McClatchy | Warren P. Strobel | March 16, 2008 12:58 PM

It was a decision that only President Bush had the power to make: At about 9 a.m. on March 19, 2003, in the Situation Room in the basement of the West Wing of the White House, he gave the "execute order" to begin Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

Now, five years later, the consequences of that act will soon be beyond Bush's grasp. In 10 months, they'll land on the desk of his successor.

Thanks in part to the Iraq war, the next U.S. president -- Republican or Democrat, black or white, man or woman -- will take office with America's power, prestige and popularity in decline, according to bipartisan reports, polls and foreign observers.

"The winner of the 2008 elections will command U.S. forces still at war in Iraq, Afghanistan and against elusive terrorists with a deadly reach. The U.S. economy will remain burdened. ... America's moral leadership and decision-making competence will continue to be questioned," begins a study of foreign-policy choices for the next president, which a Georgetown University task force released last month.

"Restored respect will come only with fresh demonstrations of competence," the study said.

The numbers don't inspire confidence: Oil prices are at an all-time high, the dollar at new lows against the euro. Surveys find the United States' popularity and respect slipping in every part of the globe except Africa. A poll of 3,400 active and retired U.S. military officers by Foreign Policy magazine found that 88 percent agreed with the statement that "The war in Iraq has stretched the U.S. military dangerously thin."

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