Making Sense of Iraq:

Debunking the Conventional Wisdom by Looking at the Iraq War from Three Angles

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Introduction

Motivation for the Project

The Iraq war and 9/11 are easily the two most talked-about events in the American public discourse on foreign policy over the past six years. A possible war with Iran is a rising star in this discourse. To many, the Iraq war is inextricably linked to 9/11, the former being the response to the latter. To some, growing U.S. hostility toward Iran is linked to these two events. To a few, an eventual war of sorts between the U.S. and Iran, with the U.S. as aggressor, is a logical continuation of a direction in U.S. foreign policy that began after the terrorist attacks 11 and led to the Iraq war. With war in Iraq ongoing, and war with Iran seemingly imminent, it is paramount for any student of America and the world to know something about the two past events, before one can know anything about future events.

Everyone should be concerned about Iraq, and how the U.S. could get itself enmeshed in what increasingly looks like another quagmire. Unfortunately, much of the discussion on the subject is apt to confuse more than enlighten the public. The discourse, as I see it, is contaminated by a myth or story that has more to do with conspiratorial thinking than with any factual explanation of the events leading up to the war. My thesis bears the title “Making Sense of Iraq” precisely because its main objective is to debunk what I see as a common misreading in the public discourse, propagated by otherwise respectable media. The thesis that the war in Iraq was undertaken for questionable both contradictory and lacks factual basis. In short, it does not make sense, and I hope to bring some sense back to the discussion surrounding the war.

A Preliminary Research Objective

From the outset of this project, what I wished to do was to find out what were the determining factors that went into the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq. I foresaw the writing of an ‘instant history’, followed by the application of some general theory, as a good way of doing this. My original ideas was to locate readily available information, other instant histories of the war such as Bob Woodward’s Plan of Attack or Seymour Hersh’s Chain of Command, and then “rewrite” the narrative I found in these sources, with an emphasis on the
salient episodes and characteristics of that decision-making process. This would have been a synthesis of the available histories of the war.

**PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

What I found was that explanations for the war policy varied greatly in focus: the great divide is between events, ideas and ideologies on the one hand, and “interests” on the other. Explanations that emphasize interest groups often single out one interest, e.g., oil, empire, or the security of Israel. The interest that was given by the administration as the main justification for war, the need to remove Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) because they were a direct threat to America, has largely been left behind in the public discourse. There is, however, still an enormous focus on the administration’s own case for the war based on the WMD threat; the interest from the public is in tearing the administration’s case apart and proving that the public was lied to by either the president or the vice president. An alternate explanation was that a small group of lower-ranking officials lied to their superiors, who in turn disseminated factually incorrect information about Iraq’s WMD capabilities.

The administration’s WMD case has now in the public imagination become a front for a conspiracy to unseat Saddam for some other, less politically salable reason. Explanations vary from narrow interests such as oil, huge federal contracts for Halliburton, and President Bush’s personal interest in taking revenge on the man who plotted to kill his father, to broader ideas such as democracy promotion or the easing of Israel’s security worries in a tense region. Both of these latter causes are held to be central to neoconservatism, ostensibly an ideology that is shared by a number of the afore-mentioned lower-ranking officials or in some accounts, by the president himself.

**HONING THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Considering the weaknesses in the public discourse, I have shifted my focus to precisely the same areas that, in my view, popular commentators get wrong. The repeated assertion that the war was undertaken for predominantly ideological reasons, neoconservative or otherwise, forced me to more thoroughly map out what the ideology of the Bush administration is, and to isolate exactly what about this ideology compelled the administration to go to war. Since I did not find a coherent ideology underlying their policies, nor a clear set of ideological preferences on the part of the administration compelling them into the war, I decided to revisit the WMD case and determine to what extent WMD actually was the ‘prime mover’ to war. The
administration’s WMD case is no longer being taken seriously, but that does not mean they themselves did not take it very seriously back in 2002. Also, by examining the decision-making process, I identified patterns and significant events that sustained my analysis.

A DISCUSSION OF SOURCES
In justification of my choice of source material, I should stress that I have sought, all the way, to use publicly available sources to the greatest extent possible. Bob Woodward and Seymour Hersh write their books from hundreds of hours of interviews with shadowy public servant-types; I write mine from the New York Times and the Washington Post (who, admittedly, use shadowy public servant-types as sources). The availability of sources has shaped my approach immeasurably; had I had the access to officials that Woodward enjoyed, I would have focused on other aspects altogether. Bob Woodward had the chance, when he wrote Plan of Attack, to really expose the ideological divisions within this administration—i.e., the Bush administration as it was from 2001 to mid-2003—but he chose to give that short shrift and instead focused on the inane details of the Op Plan, and highly quotable but ultimately unhelpful anecdotes about the infighting that surrounded it. The sources available to me forced me to abandon a focus on interdepartmental infighting and character portrayal—just the account of the Iraq war I myself would like to read—and instead concentrate on assembling an explanation for the war that was comprehensive even if it could not account for that dimension.

PLAN OF THE WORK
The first chapter is an exercise in assembling a fairly large volume of data, then streaming those data into a narrative.

Chapter 2, which became a discussion of the ideology of neoconservatism and whether or not it makes sense to apply it to the Bush administration, relies on articles from different kinds of journals: journals of opinion, magazines, and scholarly journals. A number of opinion pieces reflect the common account of neoconservatism that prevails in the media, and I believe it is important to know the common account because it has the greatest influence on public perceptions and misperceptions of current affairs. The chapter also draws on newspaper sources as far back as the New York Times online archives go, to illustrate an ideological debate within American conservatism. As a counterweight to the neoconservative argument, I found Walter Russell Mead’s book Special Providence to provide a useful
framework for thinking about the American foreign-policy tradition and the political support system for American foreign policy, and I have attempted to locate the presidency of George W. Bush within the tradition rather than the current debate. The third and final substantive chapter challenges the premise, prevailing in much of the current debate, that the administration’s pre-war assessments of Iraq’s WMD capabilities were somehow twisted, “cooked,” or manipulated to provide a public front for the president’s ulterior motives, whatever they might be. This provided an extra challenge in finding and analyzing sources of a type they do not teach in this school.
Chapter 1:

Incremental Decision

TIM RUSSERT: Saddam Hussein, your old friend, his government had this to say: “The American cowboy is rearing the fruits of crime against humanity.” If we determine that Saddam Hussein is also harboring terrorists, and there’s a track record there, would we have any reluctance of going after Saddam Hussein?

VICE PRES. CHENEY: No.

RUSSERT: Do we have any evidence linking Saddam Hussein or Iraqis to this operation?

CHENEY: No.

—Dick Cheney on NBC “Meet the Press,” Sept. 16, 2001

IT WAS A SPECTACULAR RUN. From the first Tomahawks struck Afghan soil on October 7, 2001, right up until the U.S. Marines crossed the line of demarcation on the eve of the Second Battle of Fallujah on November 7, 2004—just two days after the elections—George Walker Bush reveled in his role as Leader of the Free World. It was during those thirty-seven months that Bush carried out the policies that were the greatest accomplishments of his presidency. It was during that time that the president won his single biggest victory, the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. To this author, the Second Battle of Fallujah marks the definitive turning of the tide for President Bush, and the Iraq War, still raging as these words are being written, has now become the defining event for which his presidency will be remembered. This chapter examines how the Bush administration went gradually from advocating a “humble” foreign policy to advocating “shock and awe.”

Before the Attacks

IRAQ POLICY BEFORE GEORGE W. BUSH

For almost 10 years prior to George W. Bush’s inauguration, the interaction between America and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq had been taken the form of a low-intensity, mostly one-sided war.
Since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the U.S. had contained Saddam Hussein and his ambition of becoming a regional hegemon. The containment was carried out as a strict trade embargo enforced by the United Nations, and as a constant military engagement, enforced by the U.S. Navy and Air Force who had total control of Iraqi air space. During this period, the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) carried out inspections of Iraq’s unconventional weapons programs.¹ In 1995, the UNSCOM made breakthrough discoveries of Saddam’s theretofore undeclared biological weapons programs, beginning a three-year period of strained relations between Iraq and the Commission. The UNSCOM left Iraq in late 1998, citing concerns for the safety of Commission members after the Iraqis had ceased cooperating earlier that year. It might be useful to note that the UNSCOM were not “kicked out,” as President Bush has later stated; they left on their own accord, albeit under pressure. Immediately after UNSCOM left the country, U.S. and U.K. forces launch Operation Desert Fox, a four-day bombing campaign on suspected Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) installations. President Clinton stated that the purpose was to “degrade Saddam’s capacity to develop and deliver weapons of mass destruction, and to degrade his ability to threaten his neighbors.”²

That same year, between the cessation of cooperation and the departure of the UNSCOM, President Clinton signed into law the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, stating,

> It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime.³

The Act appropriated military aid of up to $97 million to Iraqi “democratic opposition organizations,” to be provided over the Defense budget. The Iraqi National Congress (INC) was one of seven groups found to be eligible for this aid.

The Iraq Liberation Act was the beginning of the official U.S. policy of ‘regime change’ in Iraq, the policy that George W. Bush inherited.⁴ But more important to Clinton

¹ UNSCOM was established under U.N. Security Council Res. 687 (1991), to monitor and supervise the dismantlement of Iraq’s chemical weapons and biological weapons (CW and BW) programs. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was to do the same for Iraq’s nuclear program.


⁴ Colin Powell got the opportunity, in his confirmation hearings for Secretary of State, to make a first in extensio statement of U.S. foreign policy. In the hearings, he was asked specifically what he wanted to do about the Iraq
than regime change in Iraq was a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he and others saw as fuelling instability in the entire Middle East region. Clinton spent his last months in office in a determined push towards a settlement, but did not quite make it.\(^5\)

**BUSH’S POLICY PRIOR TO 9/11**

George W. Bush was inexperienced in foreign policy before he announced his candidacy for the presidency. He was reportedly introduced to Condoleezza Rice in 1998, at his father’s initiative, and sat for sessions on foreign policy with Rice, Paul Wolfowitz and others during the two years before inauguration. His campaign platform was non-interventionist; he said the U.S. should be “humble abroad” and not “engage in nation-building,” and that the U.S. should not commit itself to things like Clinton’s Bosnia and especially the disastrous Somalia mission.\(^6\)

Nevertheless, after Bush’s inauguration, wheels were set in motion on developing “options” for dealing with Iraq. The first two National Security Council (NSC) meetings in the new administration dealt with “Mideast Policy” and Iraq, respectively. On “Mideast Policy,” Bush had decided that he wanted the U.S. to disengage from the Israel-Palestine conflict and let the parties work it out between themselves, in other words not pursue further the negotiations that Clinton had made the focus of his last months in office. Secretary of State Colin Powell is reported to have been “startled” at this decision.\(^7\) On Iraq, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice expressed her view that Iraq was “destabilizing” the Middle East, and that Saddam’s rogue state might be key to reshaping the entire region. Secretary of State Colin Powell pushed for modifying the sanctions regime that was in place, so it would go easier on the Iraqi civilian population but at the same time more ably target Saddam’s military capabilities. Powell also wanted to reinstate weapons inspections. Secretary of Defense

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\(^5\) For the claim that Clinton saw the Israel-Palestine conflict as key to resolving the greater Middle East problem, and curbing global terrorism, see e.g., Sandy Berger, “A Foreign Policy for the Global Age,” *Foreign Affairs* 79, No. 6 (2000): 22-39.


\(^7\) Suskind, *Price of Loyalty*, 71-72.
Donald Rumsfeld supported Rice’s notion of reshaping the region, and reportedly said, “Sanctions are fine, but what we really want to think about is going after Saddam.” But getting Iraqi WMD was a greater concern for Rumsfeld than creating a model Arab democracy.\(^8\)

Of course, quips like Rumsfeld’s about “going after Saddam,” while highly quotable, did not in fact represent a radical shift in U.S. policy, since regime change was also the policy of the previous administration—although it had been pursued less than vigorously. The significance of these early meetings is rather this: that Iraq was now becoming the focal point of U.S. Middle East policy, demoting the Israel-Palestine conflict to second priority.

After the initial NSC meetings in February of 2001, work on Iraq moved to the deputies committee, chaired by Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley. Among the deputies, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was a forceful voice in support of arming the Iraqi opposition groups, in the hope of creating a successful insurgency, a feat he suggested would be relatively easy.\(^9\) This was the policy that was most in line with the Iraq Liberation Act, which had indeed appropriated funds toward that end. But in August of 2001, the CIA Iraqi Operations Group made an assessment of the viability of covert action in Iraq, and concluded that a coup or other covert action would likely be unsuccessful. “Covert action is not going to remove Saddam Hussein,” concluded the Group Chief. Thus, covert action as a standalone measure was off the table.\(^10\)

The first eight months of Bush’s first term did not produce a specific approach to Iraq, and the administration was still looking at “options” when disaster struck on 9/11.

**From 9/11 to Authorization**

The terrorist attacks on September 11 overturned every assumption on threats to national security that the administration was working under. Prior to that date, there had been no sense of urgency about the situation in Iraq; after, there was a sense of urgency about every hotspot

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10 Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 71
in the world from which the attacks could have been launched. The terrorist attacks were hardly discernable from an act of war, and as such demanded a U.S. response in kind. But how? On the evening of September 11, President Bush addressed the nation and said, “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.” He also used the phrase “war against terrorism” in his speech, already signalling the larger war on terrorism that was to come.\footnote{George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks,” September 11, 2001.}

**FORMULATING THE RESPONSE**

Within a week of the attacks, the president had decided on the appropriate response. The U.S. was to strike at those responsible for the acts, terrorist financier Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda global terrorist network. In keeping with Bush’s first statement, on the evening following the attacks, this would also entail dislodging the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. At an NSC meeting at Camp David on the first weekend after the attacks, some within the administration, certainly including Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld, raised the possibility of going after Saddam Hussein at the same time as the Taliban, or even before. But that option was ruled out by all the principals, on the grounds that striking at Iraq would blow the goodwill the U.S. enjoyed in the international community at that moment. Instead, the U.S. would focus on what was to become the Global War on Terror (GWOT), in which Afghanistan was first on the list.\footnote{Suskind, *Price of Loyalty*, 186-8; Jane Perlez, David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, “From Many Voices, One Battle Strategy,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2001, Section 1A, 1.}

George W. Bush had declared war on terror, or against terror, in the aftermath of the attacks. He explained the new U.S. stance on terrorism, and the huge implications it would have, to Congress and to the American people on September 20:

> Our war on terror begins with Al Qaida [sic], but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.

> …

> Americans are asking, how will we fight and win this war? We will direct every resource at our command … to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network.

> …

> Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to
harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.\(^\text{13}\)

The speech was unequivocally a declaration of war and a revision of the national agenda. President Bush’s assertive words promised the country a redressing of the wrongs that had been inflicted upon it, through war. But he went further: The speech clearly said that all terrorists that have the means—‘global reach’—would be enemies of America in the GWOT; a motive or a stated intent to strike at the U.S. did not have to be present. This presents us with a commitment that goes far beyond retaliation for 9/11—it is an open-ended commitment, to last until the world is “rid of evildoers,” which could possibly be forever.

There were both benefits and drawbacks to Bush’s approach. The short-term benefits were: a reassurance to the country that the executive was “doing something”; a promise of the righteous revenge that the people surely needed to see exacted on the evildoers; and most importantly to the situation at that time, a reassurance that the U.S. would not be intimidated and that life would return to normal. The latter of course was imperative; the country needed to maintain economic activity in order not to slip into recession. For Bush personally, taking this approach gave him a mission, an opportunity to focus his administration around a set of issues to a far greater extent than he had been able to thus far. It has been widely reported that Bush himself saw 9/11 as something of a revelation which gave him a sense of purpose he had not always had. In short, it eliminated “drift” in the administration’s day-to-day grind of policymaking. Politically, it was also a boon; the people rally to their leaders in wartime, and wartime it surely must have been since a war had been declared.

But there were also problems inherent in this approach. First, when the public has been promised a war, a public war they will have. People would be expecting to see results, to pass milestones in the GWOT. Bush’s statement of policy had bound him to keep pointing to these milestones, which he did in his Radio Addresses for quite some time after 9/11.\(^\text{14}\) Second, he had set such a wide scope for the GWOT that it would in time exacerbate the first problem of keeping tabs on war progress. Had he limited the scope of retaliation to just Al Qaeda and the Taliban in his address to the public, he would have had only Al Qaeda and Taliban to answer for, but would still have been free to wage a covert war of the scope he had just overtly


\(^{14}\) The president mentioned terrorism or the GWOT in every Saturday Radio Address from 9/11 until January 19, 2002, and in more than half of all Saturday Radio Addresses given from January 2002 and up until the war started in Iraq. Of these, about a third can be said to contain a substantive “report on progress.”
declared. There is no reason why a covert war would not be just as effective as a public one, or even more effective. So now President Bush had made an open-ended commitment to fighting terrorism, the progress of which commitment he would be accountable for to the public, indefinitely.

WAITING FOR ‘PHASE TWO’

In the meantime, focus within the administration on Iraq had been put on the back burner, but did not quite go away. The New York Times had reported early on that officials including Wolfowitz and I. Lewis Libby, Cheney’s chief of staff, were “seeking to include Iraq on the target list with the aim of toppling President Saddam Hussein, a step long advocated by conservatives who support Mr. Bush.” Bush had not mentioned Iraq in his Address, and Iraq indeed was not on the CIA’s immediate hit list for the GWOT.15

But the President had introduced the notion of “phases” in the war on terror, and had said that toppling the Taliban would only be Phase One.16 A month into the Afghanistan war, this talk of phases started to resurface in the press. Bush had not articulated what the next phase would be, and speculation was widespread that Iraq would be it. This would be an opportune moment for outsiders to influence the administration. William Safire wrote in the New York Times that Iraq was “now the world center of state terrorism,” and suggested that Bush use the political momentum he was enjoying from the Afghanistan war to rebuild a coalition to oust Saddam. Newspaper articles kept appearing that reported internal discussion in the top levels of government on what direction to take. Clearly, the media were anticipating a statement on how the U.S. would proceed in the GWOT.17

Whether in response to media pressure or just because it was the right time, in late November President Bush took steps to pressure Iraq to come clean with its WMD programs. On November 19, Under Secretary of State John R. Bolton publicly accused Iraq of violating the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, to which they were party. Bolton made clear that the U.S. would be more vigilant in enforcing the convention.18

16 The notion of “phases” first appears in an article on the Camp David sessions on the weekend after 9/11. Jane Perlez, David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, “From Many Voices, One Battle Strategy.”
18 Judith Miller, “U.S. Publicly Accusing 5 Countries of Violating Germ-Weapons Treaty,” New York Times, November 19, 2001, B1. Iraq was cited as the biggest threat. The other four were North Korea, Iran, Libya and Syria, in that order of priority.
The president followed suit. In a Q&A session a week later, he told the press that Saddam Hussein “ought to let the [UNSCOM] inspectors back in,” but declined to name the consequences of not complying. The New York Times wrote that the president “seemed to broaden the definition of terrorism” to include development of WMD, and that this would be “a significant departure” from the definition he had given Congress. The president rejected that notion. The Bush administration was still dealing with defining the war on terror, while at the same time beginning to put pressure on Iraq over the WMD issue. The administration at this time was cautious about linking Iraq to world terrorism, and they also did nothing to portray the Baghdad regime as an urgent or threat.19

Steps were also taken on the operational level. On November 21, the President ordered Secretary Rumsfeld to start reviewing the Op Plan—the total mobilization and war plan—for Iraq, and Rumsfeld delegated the review to Gen. Tommy Franks of CENTCOM, the military “jurisdiction” that covers Iraq. Things were kept highly secret, which was probably wise enough, inasmuch as the administration had not yet fully formulated its policy either on Iraq or on how to proceed in the GWOT. Also, Iraq could not unequivocally be tied to Al Qaeda and thus fall under the existing mandate Bush had carved out for himself on September 20.

This period in late 2001 is most interesting in terms of the order in which things happened. After having initially declared a “phased” strategy in the war on terror, the administration had stayed quiet on their phases since the beginning of Phase One, the ground war in Afghanistan. When it became obvious that the Americans were winning that war, the press turned its interest on Phase Two. What would it entail? Iraq had been mentioned immediately after 9/11; it quickly arose as a seemingly logical next step. And sure enough, the U.S. issued statements indicating that it would now make a more concerted push for a new inspections regime, along with an improved, “targeted” sanctions regime. But was this new policy statement a case of the media predicting the administration’s direction, or was it the administration reacting to pressure from the press—the need to have a policy on Iraq because the press was asking about one? If the latter is true, then the elevated focus on Iraq was the product of a ‘feedback loop’. The administration had served a general statement as part of a public diplomacy effort, which later came back thru the media, demanding action on the part

of the administration. This was the first manifestation of such a loop, and there were more to come in the following year.

**STATE OF THE UNION: BROADENING THE DEFINITION**

On January 3, 2002, the CIA Iraqi Operations Group briefed Vice President Cheney and his Chief of Staff, I. Lewis Libby, on Iraq. The Group had surveyed covert options on Iraq, what Paul Wolfowitz had been proposing before 9/11, and concluded that “[c]overt action is not going to remove Saddam Hussein,” and that “[i]t was going to take the concentration of the entire U.S. government to remove him,” including a full military invasion. They so concluded on a background of their understanding of Saddam’s internal security apparatus, which was impressive and in which he had managed to achieve total loyalty to his person by making everyone an accomplice in some dirty work. The Group’s assessment also stemmed from the realities of the CIA’s position in Iraq: that they had no position inside Iraq. The CIA had no ‘human intelligence’ sources within Iraq that were reporting on WMD.20

Still, either because there were no other pressing hotspots in the world, because of perceived pressure from the general public, or because it had been the main target all along, Iraq was fast becoming the next big confrontation. All inside accounts of the administration stress that Iraq was their main focus for all of 2002. This does not mean that attention was not given to other “fronts” in the GWOT, however—after all, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet had meant for the CIA to carry out the war according to its own schedule, and with its vastly expanded powers—but these virtual fronts were delegated to the lower levels of government, to the agencies outside of the White House.21

The U.S. proceeded along two tracks: one was the practicalities of running existing operations and planning new ones, carried out by the Department of Defense and the CIA; the other was a political effort to reframe the war on terror, merge it into foreign policy and consolidate the two into a cohesive entity. The next big statement of foreign policy, and the best indication on what lay ahead in the GWOT, was Bush’s first State of the Union Address.

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21 It is unknowable to me exactly how the White House envisioned the progression of the GWOT, the focus of the war, after Afghanistan. What is obvious, though, is that the war provided the best opportunity in years to confront Iraq, the best context in which to do it. This is where pundits pick up conspiracy theory that “the whole GWOT was a cover for an Iraq war,” a notion that I challenge in Chapters 2 and 3.
The address took the existing definition of the GWOT and added or at least heightened emphasis on, the element of state terrorism. Comparing the definitions of the “enemy” in the September 20 Address with that of the State of the Union Address, some notable changes occur in the latter. Where the first Address defined as enemy “a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them,” the State of the Union speech adds “regimes who seek chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.” The first speech implies that terrorists like Al Qaeda are essentially non-state actors, and the implication of “regimes” (states) is only that of “supporting” (e.g. by financing or arming) or “harboring” these non-state actors. The second speech establishes a dual “terrorist” role for states:

States like [North Korea, Iran and Iraq] and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.

... The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.

This is an escalation of threat: state actors could, with or without their non-state allies, attack allies and blackmail the U.S. and its allies.22

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had been prescient about the threat posed by hostile regimes armed with WMD. He had submitted a “Talking Points” memo to the first NSC meeting of the Bush administration that listed threats to the U.S. in the post-Cold War world. One threat was “regional powers … arming to deter us” from intervening in regional crises. A related threat was “the poorest nations on earth [can now] rapidly acquire the most destructive military technology including nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and their means of delivery.”23

The U.S. foreign-policy apparatus, like that of any other country, is geared toward dealing with states. A seeming shift in focus back toward state-based threats can be seen as an accommodation to the older way of thinking, or it can be seen as the recognition that terrorist organizations are the most dangerous when aided by states. President Bush’s naming of Iraq as part of an ‘axis of evil’ represented not so much a shift in focus from non-state to state

22 George W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11,” September 20, 2001; George W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 29, 2002; The first Address singles out Al Qaeda, the “radical network of terrorists,” as enemy, but also enemizes a nonspecific “terrorism.”
23 The memo appears as an appendix to Suskind, Price of Loyalty, 355-9.
actors, as it did a focus on getting to the source of a potential WMD proliferation issue. Iraq among the ‘axis’ states was historically the most aggressive, and probably the least rational. Iran had never used its WMD and did not have a nuclear capability. North Korea at the time could not even be confirmed to have nuclear weapons, and was effectively contained and isolated to a much greater extent than Iran or Iraq could ever be. So Iraq was the most obvious source of a WMD threat to the United States.

The State of the Union speech effectively fused a traditional threat from hostile nation-states with the “new” threat of terrorism. Terrorism of course was not exactly a new phenomenon in 2001, nor was its coupling with hostile regimes, but it was presented as such by the President in this 2002 speech. What the speech did was to place the twin threats onto the frontal lobe of public consciousness, where previously they had been subdued, something for experts, NSC principals and intelligence operatives to worry about. It can perhaps be seen as an attempt to revive a public awareness of the existing threats in the world, that slot in the public consciousness previously occupied by the Soviet Union. Or, it could be the beginnings of building public support for a planned war against one or more of the three named menaces.24

Either way, what the speech accomplished was a repeat and amplification of the former speech, creating an expectation in the public that the United States would do something about global threats. Again, it achieved benefits in the political sphere; the speech pokes obliquely at Democrats and Clinton, implying that emerging threats were not dealt with adequately on their watch in the 1990s. The two speeches combined create an awareness on security issues that would permeate a massive amount of other legislative issues; Democrats in Congress were stymied by fear, loath to object to Bush’s policy initiatives—not just on the national security state, but on several policy areas—or generally do anything that would call into question their patriotism.

Again like the first speech, this second statement of the GWOT evokes an expectation in the American public that things will be done. “The United States will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons”—the sentence is unambiguous. It is a furthering of the public image of Bush as a man of action and a strong speaker, in the mold of Teddy Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. This may have won the administration a short-term boost, and solidified the Republican hold of the Senate.

Again, Bush had stated his national security policy *overtly* in saying that dealing with rogue states—now under the label “terrorist states”—was at the top of his agenda. This is ‘public diplomacy’ because it communicates American attitudes to the world; it is sending a political message, through public channels, to an international counterpart. To be fair, this instance of Bush’s public diplomacy is much more defensible and wise than his September statements before Congress. Rogue states can at least be assumed to be susceptible to some public diplomacy; terrorists are by their very nature immune to it. But Bush might still have done better to tone down his message, and reserve policy for traditional diplomatic channels. Overall, I believe he underestimated, or wholly overlooked, the power of his earlier statements to come back and compel him to action.

A NEW NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

For more than a half year following the State of the Union Address, there were no new official declarations of U.S. policy toward Iraq. But Iraq came up at almost all Q&A sessions and interviews where foreign policy questions were raised, and when asked, Bush, Cheney, or Powell often took the opportunity to remind the public that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, that he was resisting pressure to readmit inspectors, and that the standing U.S. policy was regime change. However, they were also very careful to point out that the president was considering all options and had not made any decision on war. A recurring line was that the president “has no plan on his desk” for military action. But there were signs obvious to the press that the U.S. was considering some kind of action against Iraq, if for nothing else, then to force new inspections.\(^{25}\)

In March of 2002, vice president Cheney went on a trip first to the United Kingdom, then to some twelve Middle East countries. During this period, the U.S. was more involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than it had been since Bush became president. Still, the trip was seen by most in the press as Cheney’s attempt to build a regional consensus against Saddam Hussein. Also, Cheney was seeking to gain the U.S. some operational foothold in the region: overflight privileges, basing privileges, intelligence assistance. In short, the U.S. needed to have a staging area ready should they decide on a large-scale attack on Saddam.\(^{26}\)


But the trip was somewhat unsuccessful in terms of consolidating the other Arabs (and Turkey, and Israel) against Saddam; Bob Woodward reported that the Arab leaders were more concerned with resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than they were with ousting Saddam. Furthermore, just a week after Cheney returned to the U.S., Iraq was able to improve its situation at the Arab League summit meeting; in return for recognizing the sovereignty of Kuwait and promising not to invade again, they got a statement by the League that a threat to Iraq or any other Arab state would be considered “a threat to the national security of all the Arab states.”

Over the next months, U.S. officials repeatedly asserted, when questioned on Iraq policy, that Saddam possessed chemical weapons, that he was developing biological weapons and that he was “pursuing” nuclear weapons. But they were less than clear on how the issue should be resolved. Back in December the president had publicly challenged Iraq to readmit U.N. weapons inspectors, but now, in spring, both the vice president and the president were evading a statement that inspections would be enough to forestall action.

The White House had a communication problem: they were communicating their desire for regime change in Iraq, but they were not yet communicating a sense of growing necessity of regime change. Part of the problem was that nothing new had really happened in U.S.-Iraqi relations since the end of inspections in 1999, and that since then, Iraq had not really been considered an immediate threat to national security. Condoleezza Rice had written, in a 2000 Foreign Affairs article in support of the Republican presidential candidate, that “there need be no sense of panic about [Iraq and North Korea]. Rather, the first line of defense should be a clear and classical statement of deterrence—if they do acquire WMD, their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration.”

But the Bush administration was about to update national security strategy to their post-9/11 world view, and their public concerns about Iraq and WMD must be seen as anticipating the new strategy.

The National Security Strategy 2002 did not arrive until September, but the significant new elements of the new strategy were in place before the fall. On June 1, the president held

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one of his most famous speeches, at West Point. It was in this speech that he introduced “pre-emptive” action as an element of American strategy. The speech picked up on the “new” threats to the U.S. evident after 9/11, justifying a new approach to national security that would entail new doctrine:

“Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.

…
We must take the battle to the enemy … and confront the worst threats before they emerge.

… [O]ur security will require all Americans to be … ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.”

The speech naturally elaborates on a theme from Bush’s State of the Union Address: that the nexus (or ‘axis’) of terrorism and rogue states with WMD constitutes a new threat to national security. The remedy to this new threat is the new doctrine of pre-emptive action.

So policy on Iraq was being developed concurrently with the new national security doctrine, and there was perhaps a special relationship between the two works in progress. Developments in Iraq policy were taking place on the ideological or political level; at the same time there was an actual, ongoing military buildup in the Gulf, begun months before the policy was stated or even finished. Policy-making on Iraq was thus ‘dynamic’—i.e., the ‘means’ were co-evolving with ‘ends’, where under normal circumstances the latter would predate the former. The confusion or lack of clear statement on what was U.S. national security doctrine at any given time contributed to confusion in Congress over what the U.S. would do about Iraq.

**Congressional Resolution**

At the height of summer 2002, enough pressure had built on the Iraq issue that Congressional leaders were worried about the administration’s intentions. Congressional leaders feared that the executive branch was excluding the legislative from decision-making and consultation on this key issue, perhaps leading the nation into a war, the possible long-term consequences of

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which had not been properly debated in the public. Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.), then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, scheduled hearings in his committee in an attempt to start the public debate on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East; the hearings were held right before the August recess of Congress.\textsuperscript{31}

Senator Biden co-authored a *New York Times* op-ed with Senator Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, outlining three working questions for the hearings: First, what is the threat from Iraq? Second, what possible responses are there to the threat? And third, what are the U.S. responsibilities once Saddam is gone? This last question was one that the U.S. rarely broached, and with it came additional questions of the cost and duration of the eventual occupation and reconstruction of Iraq. In addition, it addressed the complicated problem of how to achieve a stable, pro-Western regime. The administration itself chose not to send officials to the hearings, on the grounds that they had not yet decided on a policy.\textsuperscript{32}

The hearings were naturally inconclusive, in part because of the no-show administration. What the hearings did show was that there was a broad, bipartisan support among Senators for the goal of removing Saddam Hussein, and agreement that the administration’s rationale for doing so, the WMD threat, if true was a valid one. Significantly, everyone at the hearings agreed that Saddam possessed some quantity of chemical weapons; the debate was over how far he was into development of biological and nuclear weapons, how far off was he from completing those weapons. However, most committee members, both Democrat and Republican, also felt that the administration had not yet made their substantive case that Iraq was an urgent threat.

In other words, the White House could gather from the tone of the hearings that there was support for war: if they could convince Congress that Iraq was an urgent threat, they would almost certainly get a Congressional resolution authorizing the use of military force.

Such a resolution was of course highly desirable to both the White House and to many in Congress, especially to Senate Democrats, who needed such a resolution to legitimize their


existence under a very assertive executive. During the August recess, speculation was high in the press that the executive House might try to move without explicit authorization, either under S. J. Res. 23, or under what Dick Cheney and White House lawyers called the “inherent powers” of the executive to look out for national security. But the White House was wise enough to avoid a confrontation over the 1973 War Powers Resolution, even if some leading ideologues held that War Powers was unconstitutional. Said Senator John McCain (R.-Ariz.): “I believe technically the president is not required to come to Congress; politically, I believe it would be foolish not to.” On September 4, the president announced he would seek authorization from Congress before taking action against Iraq.  

DEADLINE: THE 2002 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

As noted, it was already a given that some sort of authorization would result of the debates. Theoretically, Congress could have spent any amount of time and drafted any number of resolutions and amendments without reaching consensus, but that would not happen. There were pressures on both Democrats and Republicans to pass a resolution before the midterm elections in November, although Republicans also had an incentive to stall debates for awhile. It was eight weeks from Congress reassembled until it would adjourn the second session.

For the Democrats, who held the Senate but not the House, the need to draw attention to issues other than national security created an impetus to close on a resolution. Getting the resolution out of the way would allow Democrats to focus on the declining U.S. economy and corporate crime, issues that would harm Republicans. Democrats also did not need attention drawn to their poor historical and recent record on national security: National security is “owned” by Republicans since the end of the era of Cold War liberalism and the ‘vital center’. For as long as national security was the nation’s focus, Republicans would be playing from strength, in part since the president already had one successfully conducted war on his record. In fall 2002, Democrats were already weakened on national security from holding up the Homeland Security Act since before summer, and were vulnerable to charges that their hesitation was playing into the hands of the enemy—that time was not on the side of America.

As a result, several centrist Democrats signalled early on that they would support the president, almost unconditionally. Several of the likely candidates for the 2004 elections aligned themselves with the president. This included Senator Lieberman (D.-Conn.), Senator Edwards (D.-N.C.), and Representative Gephardt (D.-Mo.), all three of whom would eventually Yea the joint resolution, as would Senator Kerry (D.-Mass.).

For Republicans, rallying behind the president and party leader was default. Very few Republicans had incentives, political or ideological, to do otherwise: Ideologically, Republicans generally take a more permissive view of executive war-making powers than Democrats. Politically, it is a reasonable claim that voting with the wishes of a still-popular president would be safe in all red states; in 2002 this would be true also of ‘swing’ states. Republican voting could be predicted from the outset; still it was the Republicans that had more to gain politically from slow-footing the debates, thereby keeping national attention on an issue that they “owned” rather than the issues that could harm them in the elections. The winning strategy was to spend as much time on Iraq as was possible without being seen as exploiting it for political gain, which each party accused the other of.

The midterm elections affected some Senators more than others: Senate membership is divided into three ‘classes’ of Senators, serving “staggered” six-year terms, meaning only a third of Senators are on reelection every two years. 2002 was the year for Class II elections, of which class fourteen were Democratic Senators. All of these sought reelection. These Senators were the ones most vulnerable to Republican charges of ‘softness’, since their voting on the authorization was likely to be on voters’ minds. As a group, these Senators were predominantly pro-authorization, whereas Senate Democrats as a whole were more closely divided: Of the fourteen, there were ten Yeas and four Nays, whereas the rest of the Democratic caucus (Class I and III Senators, including Independent Jim Jeffords) divided nineteen Yeas to eighteen Nays. This roll call breakdown suggests that Democrats indeed feared that Republicans would use the record against them, although statistically the population is too small to tell.34

34 For the roll call on H. J. Res. 114, “Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002,” see Congressional Record 148, no. 133 (October 10); S10342. Interestingly, of the four Class II Democrats to vote against authorization, three were reelected. The fourth, Sen. Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, died between the time of the vote and the election date.
Before debates began in Congress in September, the White House had used the Congressional recess to further improve its position. Their two main tactics were to play the WMD threat, and to exploit the ambiguities of what had now been named the Bush Doctrine.

Since the West Point speech, the press had been extrapolating doctrine from it and older statements by administration members, with a view to figuring the implications for Iraq. This was in anticipation of the National Security Strategy (NSS) document, which had not yet been published. It had seemed—and this was the basis of Senator Biden’s concerns in July—that the executive branch had decided three things: that there must be a war to disarm Iraq; that the U.S. could “go it alone” and therefore might be inclined to do so; and that “inherent powers” in the constitution’s Commander-in-Chief clause superseded War Powers, and that as a result, the president would not seek Congressional authorization. None of these guesses were winning the executive any votes for war.

In the first two weeks after Congress reassembled, as national debate was gaining volume, the administration made what appeared to be an about-face on all three counts. First, they announced President Bush would seek Congressional authorization. Then the president went before the United Nations General Assembly in what seemed to be a recognition that the U.S. was willing to let the international community defuse Mr. Hussein, or authorize the U.S. to do so. Finally, they published the NSS, thus giving the press and opposition a more authoritative document for journalists to extrapolate from.

The second tactic of the White House was to continue to play the WMD issue. Top officials repeated their claims that Iraq was an immediate national security threat, and also repeated their questioning of the wisdom of inspections in Iraq. The vice president held a particularly harsh speech in Nashville on August 26, at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention, saying, “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction.” He also said, “A return of inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of his compliance with U.N. resolutions. On the contrary, there is a great danger that it would provide false comfort that Saddam was somehow ‘back in his box.’”35

While the White House for months had been speaking with great certitude on Iraq, Senators on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, wanted to see the documentation. Senator Bob Graham was “stunned” to find out that there an updated National Intelligence

35 Dick Cheney, “Remarks by the Vice President to the Veterans of Foreign Wars 103rd National Convention,” August 26, 2002.
Estimate (NIE) on Iraq did not exist. NIEs are produced by the combined intelligence community, i.e., by all fifteen intel agencies, and is supposed to represent their consensus assessment of all vetted intelligence reports on a single subject. Production of a new NIE can be initiated by the executive branch, by members of the Senate or House intelligence committees, or by the CIA, but strangely, in this case Senator Durbin had to request one since no-one else had. Thus, debates on Iraq began before the best intelligence had been made available to legislators.36

**Findings**

BOB WOODWARD: But that speech [to the United Nations] was, whatever, it was really crossing the threshold wasn’t it?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: It was. It was.

WOODWARD: Because it said look, if you guys don’t do it we’re going to, it could not have been plainer. I think you were quoted as saying don’t cock it unless you are willing to use it.

RUMSFELD: That’s always been my motto, you best not do that because you lose your credibility.

—Bob Woodward interviewing Donald Rumsfeld for *Plan of Attack*37

A CREDIBILITY ISSUE

After Congress had passed the Authorization bill, the Bush administration really had no credible way to avoid going to war against Iraq. It was a credibility thing. George W. Bush had gone before the United Nations on September 12 and said, “We will work with the U.N. Security Council for the necessary resolutions. But the purposes of the United States should not be doubted. The Security Council resolutions will be enforced, the just demands of peace and security will be met, or action will be unavoidable.” (Emphasis added.) The administration had started the process toward a U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolution partly to strengthen its vis-à-vis Congress, for the authorization bill that Bush had announced


he would seek. The appearance of seeking international support would go a long way towards gaining domestic support. It was a stratagem; the Congressional authorization would almost certainly be in place long before anything happened at the UNSC, and so it would then in turn be a powerful leverage in those negotiations. With the show of domestic support, the U.S. would be in a position to threaten to marginalize or make “irrelevant” the United Nations.

In the event that the executive not get authorization in Congress, they would also definitively lose their chance of a strong resolution at the UNSC, and with it much of the operational support in the event of war. Tony Blair had signalled the White House that he needed a U.N. process in order to bring his people into the coalition, and the U.K. would undoubtedly be the chief contributor to any eventual U.S.-led coalition. And so it was that the executive could argue to lawmakers that to deny authorization would cause the U.S. to lose leverage with the other UNSC members, forcing the U.S. to take action with a minimal coalition or see its credibility disappear. Senator Joseph Lieberman wrote in an op-ed that “the best way to encourage forceful U.N. action, so that we never have to ‘go it alone,’ is for Congress to unite now in authorizing the president to take military action, if necessary.” Secretary Powell had even argued earlier on that “[a] lukewarm, weak, eviscerated resolution coming out the Congress would not serve my diplomatic purposes.” (Although he was referring to the diplomatic situation vis-à-vis Iraq, not the UNSC.) Hence, it is reasonable to claim that the authorization was passed at such time as it was at least partly motivated by a desire for a strong U.N. resolution to come; however, the text of the resolution itself undermined that goal, as it effectively allowed the president to circumvent this ostensibly very important process.

So the White House had made authorization into an issue of credibility. But with the authorization now in its pocket, could the U.S. have acted differently from then on? The authorization, and the UNSC Resolution (No. 1441) that followed, had moved the confrontation with Iraq into a sort of endgame. In the administration’s view, the only possible outcome of this endgame was that Saddam would be forced to go, although there were several

avenues to the outcome. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer gave a striking example of administration’s thinking:

If Saddam Hussein indicates that he has weapons of mass destruction and that he is violating United Nations resolutions, then we will know that Saddam Hussein again deceived the world. If he said he doesn’t have any, then I think that we will find out whether or not Saddam Hussein is saying something that we believe will be verifiably false.40

Fleischer also said, “If he declares he has none, then we will know that Saddam is once again misleading the world.” This was in reference to a declaration that Iraq was required to give, under 1441, to account for the proscribed arms they had possessed in the 1980s and nineties. It was a Catch-22, because the U.S. would hold Saddam to be in ‘material breach’ whichever way he declared his weapons. As it turned out, the U.S. changed its stance as it received the declaration, and only rebuked Iraq; on December 19, after having analyzed the 12,000+ pages of the document, the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) leader Hans Blix concluded it “left many questions unanswered.” The next day, President Bush described it as “not encouraging,” but did not declare Iraq to be in ‘material breach’. That the U.S. failed to do so, considering Fleischer’s earlier statement, suggests that the U.S. realized it would hurt credibility to go beyond Dr. Blix’ conclusions.41

But this did not change the administration’s attitude. The inspections would seem to outsiders to discredit long-held beliefs on Iraqi WMD, but in the eyes of the U.S., they only discredited the inspections themselves. The U.S. had for months, years, stressed the deceitful, evading nature of the Iraqi regime, and what was now transpiring could just as easily taken as the confirmation thereof. Taking a new view of Saddam would mean overturning a decade of assessments of his character, his alleged zeal for regional hegemony and for using WMD to achieve it. In the short time frame it was allocated—60 days initially under 1441—the inspections could not unequivocally confirm that Saddam did not have the goods, only that he did have them. Confirmation of the opposite was all but impossible given the “apparatus of lies” Saddam supposedly had. Two or three weeks, in time two months, of renewed inspections would not have the power of conviction to overturn more than a decade of

assuming the worst, even if that decade had been something of a dark age in terms of new intelligence.

And even if inspections *had* changed assumptions even within the administration, it would have been untenable to announce so. It is a sad fact that governments tend to only admit their mistakes in the face of incontrovertible evidence; this is because of the crisis in public confidence that would result from such an admission. So the U.S. had painted itself into a corner on Iraq; the best way out was to keep forging ahead.

**IRAQ: INCREMENTAL DECISION**

How did the administration get to this position? The “decision” to go to war in Iraq should not, in my opinion, be understood as a single decision. It is much more fruitful to examine it as “incremental” decision: several small decisions, each contributing to what in the end appears as one big decision. In spring 2001, when the Bush administration was new and untested in foreign policy, the political preconditions for war with Iraq were not there. But gradually over the next two years, they would be. Gradually, the Bush administration announced policy, made decisions and altered the political environment so war with Iraq was made a political possibility. Above, I have chronicled some of the more important episodes in the lead-up period; below, I try to explain how these episodes produced changes that helped set the stage for war. But I am not saying that the administration *purposely* manipulated the political environment to facilitate war; in fact, in many of the decisions involved, it is hard to see how the administration could have credibly acted otherwise.

Beginning with the aftermath of 9/11, it is especially hard to see how the administration could have acted otherwise. From the outset, the acts perpetrated on America were likened to an historic event like Pearl Harbor, somehow spawning expectations of Rooseveltian resolve from the president. But evocations of history give no indication of people’s specific expectations; it was up to the administration to lead, and thereafter gauge the public’s response. It is a reasonable assumption that White House response to 9/11 was driven more by short-term political considerations than by long-term strategic: administering comfort to the people had greater urgency than crafting a policy that would not force one’s hand at a later stage. The pressure to “do something” outweighed prudence and foreign policy continuity in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and this led to overbroad, over-committant policy statements of war on terror. I have already indicated that announcing the GWOT could overcommit the U.S. at a later stage. But *not* announcing the GWOT would have been at the risk of being seen as too hesitant.
Next, as the Afghan campaign unfolded, the media’s attention turned to Phase Two in the terrorism campaign. Picking up on GWOT themes like “harboring terrorists”, media institutions were asking top U.S. officials questions about what specific actions would come of the policy of framing regimes that “harbored” terrorists as hostile. Note that it was always the media who brought up the issue of Iraq, typically in Q&A sessions; the administration hardly ever initiated a public exchange on Iraq and terrorism. For example, when Colin Powell was interviewed by Larry King in late November 2001, it was King who brought up Iraq, in reference to President Bush’s remarks about Iraq earlier that day, also in response to a question. The media’s persistent coupling of Iraq to the GWOT may well have brought the U.S. to develop more specific policy on Iraq, if for no other reason, then to have a sound response to exactly these questions.42

This is a dynamic in which an administration action creates a demand for another action at a later time. When the dynamic is repeated, which I believe can be gleamed above, it forms a pattern. We can attempt to explain it with an analogy: that of the feedback loop. ‘Feedback’ in sound amplification happens when the output signal bleeds into the input device, thereby repeating the signal’s course through the amplification chain. If the output is sufficiently amplified, the signal will be repeated forever: it is ‘looped’.43 A similar pattern is visible in the way governments sometimes make policy: they react to conditions that they have actually created themselves, and these reactions create new conditions to which they again must react.

We can frame policy-making as a “chain” similar to that of audio amplification. An amplification chain has an input device (the microphone), an amplifier or sound processor, and an output device (the speaker). The chain starts by sensing the input (sound), then amplifies or processes the sound, then outputs the end-product sound through the speaker. In a similar fashion, the policy “chain” senses input in the form of “needs”, then processes the needs converting them into a policy that is responsive to those specific needs, then outputs that policy in the form of action or speech (or inaction). The analogy to sound amplification

42 With the exception of John R. Bolton’s statements on November 19; see: Judith Miller, “U.S. Publicly Accusing 5 Countries of Violating Germ-Weapons Treaty,” supra note 18.

43 Feedback loops of course also occur in other systems than audio amplification; it just happens to be something I know a bit about.
works okay if one accepts the premise that policy actually responds to needs or interests, and
that this is the normal mode of policy-making.\footnote{44} But the feedback loop in itself cannot be the original source of policy, because it only
reproduces ideas, “needs”, and pressures that have already once been processed. The concept
is amusing, but for it to have any value, we must find the original “needs” that entered the
loop.

First, there was a historical pressure to go to war with Iraq: the fact of a standing U.S.
policy of ‘regime change’ in Iraq, and the ongoing military containment of the regime. Under
the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 (Pub. L. 105-338), the U.S. should “support efforts to remove
the regime” of Saddam Hussein, and promote democracy in its place. Also since the early
1990s, the U.S. (and Britain) had maintained a sizable force in the region, of air power for
enforcement of the no-fly zones, and ground forces. Senator Lieberman wrote that the
“ongoing force of about 7,500 American men and women in uniform costs our taxpayers
more than $1 billion a year.” His implication was that these operations did not yield
significant deterrence, while still being extremely costly. Iraq was clearly contained as a
deployer of conventional force, but it was impossible to ascertain that the operations deterred
Saddam Hussein from seeking unconventional capabilities. This was the clincher.\footnote{45}

So there clearly was both a desire and an expectation in Washington—in both policy
branches of government—that the U.S. “deal with” Saddam in some way during the decade.
The existence of the Public Law provided a powerful argument for action; evocation of its call
for regime change would be an evocation in the continuity of U.S. foreign-policy across
administrations and party lines.

The second pressure for war against Iraq was the mentality that came about after
9/11—the ‘9/12 mentality’. 9/11 surely changed too many things to be exhaustively discussed
here; the short of it is that 9/11 seemed to reveal a shortfall of U.S. effort against terrorism
and its root causes. That the administration also thought so was clear from Bush’s address to
Congress on September 20, 2001. The creation of an Office, later a full Department, of
Homeland Security, suggests an admission that not enough had been done before the attacks.

\footnote{44} Obviously, this model lacks precise definitions of its terms: ‘policy’, for instance, is used here as a general
term for all governmental actions; the “needs” should also be explicated on but I won’t bother.

\footnote{45} Joseph Lieberman, “Our Resolution.” The ‘containment’ was largely achieved by Operation Southern Watch,
the enforcement of the southern no-fly zone. The U.S. routinely (“every six months”) bombed Iraqi command
and control installations, and frequently bombed Iraqi air defenses. At more than 10,000 sorties a year, the
operation was extremely costly while yielding no visible progress toward the goal of regime change.
‘Doing something’ is the pressure that arises from government’s obligations to serve the public. At a time like in the days following 9/11, the public is bewildered and insecure about the future. People look to their government to reassure them that their futures are secure; if the government does not respond in some way the people might believe that the government is not on top of the situation at hand and that more bad things are to come. The government recognizes that this may have both political and economic consequences: political, as it threatens reelection and continuity in government; and economic, as people may falter in their beliefs in the country’s futures. From the record it is clear that the Bush administration were deeply worried about the U.S. economy after 9/11. A coming recession had been forecast since the early days of the administration, and the terrorist attacks dealt a hard blow to key sectors like air transport (tourism in particular) and finance that were vital to the general well-being of the economy. The greatest fear was that as a secondary effect, the stock market would take a downturn.46

‘Doing something’ in this environment is more a matter of acting boldly within a short period of time than of acting deliberately in the long-term interest, because the short-term political benefits outweigh the long-term benefits to the whole national system. The resultant of the ‘doing something’ pressure may be a stopgap measure; a series of consecutive crises, real or merely perceived, will bring a string of stopgap measures. When these measures are based less on principles in policy than on satisfying the image of a responsive government, this is what is called ‘drift’ in policy.

This is not to say that the Bush administration immediate reactions to 9/11 were frenzied or unwise; the invasion of Afghanistan was then and still is seen as a just response to the attacks. But the Afghanistan invasion was cast as only the beginning of a greater War on Terror, bringing with it expectations of a permanently heightened level of U.S. activism, “for the duration.” When fighting in Afghanistan simmered down, the public would expect the U.S. to move on to the next big front in the war. This we might call the ‘forward logic’ of the war. It is also an iteration of the feedback loop.

DRIFTING INTO THE DESERT?

It is easy to decide, as many have, that members of the Bush administration had their minds set on war from the day they took office. If that was true, then the intervening years are just a

46 For the forecasts and pessimism on the U.S. economy in 2001 and around 9/11, see Suskind, Price of Loyalty, esp. pp. 193-197.
story of implementation. The opposite interpretation is that the decision was taken at the last possible minute, in mid-March of 2003, as the inspections endgame was being played out. My interpretation is that the decision was in the making a long time, but that nobody necessarily realized it. My narrative has the executive ambling from one milestone to another on the road to Baghdad, making their decisions at each point based on something other than ideology or a continuity in foreign policy doctrine. For them, the factors that determined their choices were circumstances such as the 2002 mid-terms.

My narrative suggests that war with Iraq was somehow inevitable, given the political dynamics that were in swing, after 9/11. If President Bush wished to resolve the situation peacefully but still ended up going to war, then maybe it was. In my narrative, the driving factor is not the unbending will and manipulations of the so-called Vulcans—Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, et al.—manipulating the U.S. into a frenzy for war. It is rather the daily grind of decisions that have to meet a short-term political objective. It is the temptation to use the Iraq issue as a diversion from other issues like the economy, to use it as a tool in the domestic political arena, which was clearly what Republicans did before the 2002 midterm elections.

When decisions are made to satisfy immediate political needs with no eye to the long-term consequences—the unintended consequences that the original neoconservatives of the 1960s and Seventies warned of—it is what is called ‘drift’ in policy. The Bush administration consistently miscalculated the long-term effects of their statements and actions, and perhaps failed to recognize the feedback loop that their Global War on Terror would create, with its indefinite mission. They may not have known it, but all along they were drifting into the desert.
Chapter 2:

The Trouble With -isms

What rules the world is ideas, because ideas define the way reality is perceived.

—— Irving Kristol

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter was a narrative history of the run-up to the Iraq War. The emphasis throughout was on the domestic pressures for war after 9/11, i.e., the political pressures. My argument was that an emphasis on the ‘incrementality’ of the foreign-policy process produces a narrative that is fundamentally different from one approaching the policy-making process as mere implementation of an already-made decision to go to war. I find that most of the influential accounts of the origins of the Iraq War are based on an assumption that the decision to go to war was made at an early stage—right after inauguration, right after 9/11, or at the latest, in the summer of 2002—and that the period in between was one of preparing the public for war. Turning the focus to ideology rather than politics, this chapter looks at those accounts which do make that assumption and hence explain the war as a natural product of the administration’s shared ideology. Specifically, I take issue with a widespread belief that the war is essentially the product of a neoconservative foreign policy.

Neoconservatism

THE PREDOMINANT STORY

Reading the editorial pages of the New York Times could convince you that the Iraq war is the product of ‘neoconservatism’, a political ideology with philosophical overtones whose policy centerpiece is the spread of democracy, if necessary through the use of force. Columnists in

the media describe neoconservatives as “hawks,” “ideologues,” “hard-liners,” and “zealots.”

It is now the received wisdom that neoconservatism informed the Bush administration’s foreign policy and the ‘Bush Doctrine’ on national security. This story prevails in the media, but is also embraced by a good number of international relations scholars. The predominant story holds that George W. Bush and more or less his entire cabinet converted to neoconservatism after 9/11. The source of neoconservatism within government was a small group—a ‘cabal’—of second-tier government officials who held key positions in the Office of the Vice President and at the Pentagon, who in the scramble to come up with an answer to the terrorist attacks managed to forge a connection between Iraq and al Qaeda in their superiors’ minds, and who just happened to have the policies in place that would solve America’s security problem in the Middle East in one fell swoop.

Bush had come into office strenuously opposing “nation building,” and in the early months of his presidency the neoconservatives’ interventionist view was by no means dominant. But the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, gave the movement new energy. … [In] early 2002 a vigorous lobbying effort by the neoconservatives, both in public and inside the White House, succeeded in moving the idea of Hussein’s overthrow to the center of the administration’s foreign policy agenda.  

This quote quite nicely sums up the liberal media’s presentation.

There are two versions of the story. In the first version, the president and his key advisers, notably then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, shifted their policy from their previous “humble,” non-interventionist platform to a neoconservative one in response to the events on 9/11, and of their own “volition.” In the other version, the smaller group of officials managed to politicize the intelligence concerning the Iraqi WMD threat to create a perception of the necessity of war against Iraq.  

Interestingly, one or the other of these two accounts is accepted across the political spectrum and even by some self-confessed neoconservatives, which would seem to suggest that they hold some truth. I hope to dispel that notion from the following.

IDEAS OF NEOCONSERVATISM DETAILED

The mainstream media draw up a convincing map to the personal connections between (modern) neoconservatism and the Bush administration, but makes short shrift of what the

49 There are of course myriad variations on who held what ideological positions on Iraq, and how and why they promoted their agenda.
actual ideas are. Ideas are too often reduced to terms like ‘spread of democracy’ or ‘empire’. The scholarly books and articles that take neoconservatism seriously reverse this, emphasizing the neoconservative ideas over the social network that promoted them. I have found three different ideas or principles to be so frequently cited as to be a ‘consensus’ on what modern neoconservatism is. Each of these has its origins in the political environment in which they were born, and each has corollaries that translate into policy.

The neoconservative principle that seems most directly related to the Bush administration’s Iraq policy is that of the righteousness of and need for spreading democracy. The need for democracy promotion really has its roots in several neoconservative assumptions about the world, and about America. Francis Fukuyama, a scholar and a former neoconservative, wrote of the “belief that the internal character of regimes matters and that foreign policy must reflect the deepest values of liberal democratic societies.” This is in opposition to ‘realist’ assumptions that all states pursue power and, hence, will exhibit the same external behavior. It has moral implications for the U.S., as well as a theoretical implication on predictions of hostile states’ actions. G. John Ikenberry offers a slightly different view, that the modern neoconservative interest in democracy promotion is predicated on national security concerns: “If democracy and the rule of law are established in troubled countries around the world, they cease being threats.” This is related to the theory of the ‘democratic peace’—a theory and a “fact” that democratic states do not make war on each other—that is popular in liberal internationalist theories of international relations. This second explanation by Ikenberry leads logically to a corollary of regime change: to further national security, the U.S. should attempt regime change where feasible and where a threat exists or is likely to occur. The problem of course is identifying which countries are “troubled” enough to take seriously.

A second principle of modern neoconservatism is that military power must be at “the centre of American foreign policy.” Neoconservatives oppose foreign-policy Realpolitik, but accept a ‘realist’ conception of the world as an anarchic system of states, each struggling to

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50 Francis Fukuyama, America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 48. Fukuyama traces the focus on regimes to the “early neoconservative anti-Stalinists.” In the landmark article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” George F. Kennan grounded his prescriptions for U.S. posture toward the Soviet Union on the keenest observations of the Soviet regime, but regime “awareness” was more obscure among later Cold War policy-makers, for example in assessments of the Ho regime of North Vietnam.


52 Ibid., and Fukuyama, America at the Crossroads, 48.
maximize its power. In the realist worldview, military power is the foundation of all other types of power, and the *sine qua non* of the state.\(^{53}\) That at least some leading neoconservative thinkers accept the realist view is evident in Charles Krauthammer’s writing about the emergence of a ‘unipolar’ world after the Cold War. The question of polarity in international relations of course is related to the realist discourse on the ‘balance of power’. Alternatives to the unipolar world or system are the *bi*-polar system of two roughly equal competitors, like the U.S. and the Soviet Union, or a *multi*-polar system like the rivalry between the Continental European great powers from the late 19th century until the Great War. Krauthammer’s unipolar “moment” came from his recognition of an American “preeminence … based on the fact that it is the only country with the military, diplomatic, political and economic assets to be a decisive player in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses to involve itself.”\(^{54}\) Krauthammer further proposed, after the Cold War, that the United States should seek to prolong its “moment” of unipolarity for as long as possible, because “[t]he alternative to unipolarity is chaos.” Prominent neoconservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan supported this view, writing in a highly influential *Foreign Affairs* article that

> American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order. The appropriate goal of American foreign policy, therefore, is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible. To achieve this goal, the United States needs a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence.\(^{55}\)

The third position of neoconservatives is on *morality* in foreign policy. The literature on neoconservatives says it is their attitude that “American power has been and could be used for moral purposes,” and that being hegemon, the United States “has special responsibilities in the realm of security.”\(^{56}\) This is also reflected in the belief, above, that foreign policy “must

\(^{53}\) Steven Hurst, “Myths of Neoconservatism: George W. Bush’s ‘Neo-conservative’ Foreign Policy Revisited,” *International Politics* 42 (2005): 75-96. Hurst writes that there is a “consensus” between what he calls “conservative nationalists” and neoconservatives on some principles, and that these two groups are often conflated.

\(^{54}\) Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1991): 23-33. The article predicted a future threat environment in which rogue states (which he dubbed “Weapon States”) with weapons of mass destruction pose the biggest threat to the world. Wrote Krauthammer: “With the rise of the Weapon State, there is no alternative to confronting, deterring and, if necessary, disarming states that brandish and use weapons of mass destruction. And there is no one to do that but the United States, backed by as many allies as will join the endeavor.” This last part foreshadowed the ‘coalitions of the willing’ preferred by George W. Bush.

\(^{55}\) William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (1996): 18-32. This is likely the single most influential article by any third-generation neoconservative, and it is referenced in practically all good accounts, both hostile and friendly, of the Bush administration’s connections with neoconservatism. The article repeats the argument from Krauthammer’s “Unipolar Moment.”

reflect the deepest values of liberal democratic societies.” The proper moral dimension to a neocon foreign policy is troublesome to describe, but the neoconservatives have strong historical precedents to shape their view. First, the neoconservatives as a group crystallized in their strong reaction to the ‘counter-culture’ of the Vietnam era. Jeane Kirkpatrick remembered it thus: “[T]he neoconservative was born from a reaction to the counter-culture that dominated American politics through the sixties and seventies.” This counter-culture, she wrote, “constituted a sweeping rejection of traditional American attitudes, values, and goals.”

The second impetus for a more principled foreign policy is the early neoconservatives’ rejection of a realist foreign policy, as practiced by Henry Kissinger. The early neoconservatives opposed the counter-culture, at the same time as they opposed a relativistic foreign policy that narrowly defined the national interest, and which did not elevate national principles to ‘interest’. The neoconservatives also opposed Kissinger’s wish for détente, which they regarded as “accommodation” of the Soviets. “[Neoconservatives] believe … that man has a moral responsibility to forcibly confront evil,” wrote one neoconservative. Later in the Seventies they criticized President Carter for allowing the Soviet sphere to expand as the U.S. abandoned some of their proxies (viz., Iran and Nicaragua). Irving Kristol wrote the following, in a piece that did not really address foreign policy as such:

> [F]or any imperial policy to work effectively—even if one means by that nothing more than doing the least possible mischief—it needs intellectual and moral guidance. It needs such guidance precisely because, in foreign affairs, one is always forced to compromise one’s values.

> …

> The United States is not going to cease being an imperial power, no matter what happens in Vietnam or elsewhere. … [P]ower begets responsibility—above all, the responsibility to use this power responsibly.

Kristol here offers two of the common arguments for a moral motif in foreign policy. The first is actually pragmatic more than it is moralistic: moral guidance is needed for foreign policy to

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58 Mark Gerson, “Introduction,” in Mark Gerson, ed., The Essential Neoconservative Reader (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996), xiv. The editor acknowledged also the “end of neoconservatism” with the fall of the Soviet Union—in other words, with the fulfillment of their cause.


work “effectively.” This is fully in line with what used to be a main concern of neoconservatives: a fear of unintended consequences. The second argument for ‘moral guidance’ offered is the position that the United States has a responsibility stemming from its status as “imperial power.” This suggests to me that the United States functions as a status quo power and the preserver of the existing world order. Of the two arguments, the second comes closer to being “morality for morality’s sake” rather than for instrumental reasons. But absent from this passage of Kristol’s, as it is absent from all other prominent neoconservatives, is an argument for a theologian foreign policy. Much of the current writing on neoconservatism conflates the neocons’ ostensible morality with George W. Bush’s self-confessed evangelism and the missionary or crusading impulse associated with it. Writer and ex-neocon Michael Lind has written at length (and pitch) about the marriage of convenience between neoconservatives and the Southern evangelicals of the Republican Party, but not even he claims that the neoconservatives were ever much more than secularized Jews.  

These three principles are in what might be called a consensus explanation of (modern) neoconservatism, one that most accounts agree on. In addition to these principles, some writers list other ideas—Manichaeism, imperialism, a concern with the limits of ‘social engineering’—that conflict with the consensus view. Fukuyama, who is reverent of the older generations of neoconservatives, highlights their concern with the limits of social engineering and the risk of unintended (negative) consequences of otherwise principled policy. The original neoconservatives, the “New York intellectuals,” did most of their writing on domestic policy, especially in the decade of Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society. They were concerned that some of the Great Society programs might have such unintended, negative consequences. For example, they highlighted how such entitlements as AFDC could entail ‘perverse incentives’ to undermine the traditional American family.

GEORGE W. BUSH, NEOCON?  

It is possible by utilizing the above criteria to test the claim that the Bush administration leads a neoconservative foreign policy. Prima facie, the administration does seem, in action as well as in rhetoric, to adhere to the same principles that I have detailed above, but upon closer

61 Michael Lind, Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics (New York: Basic, 2003) 114-18. Of the relationship between neoconservatives and the religious Right, Lind wrote, “The neoconservative intellectuals defended their opportunistic alliance with the anti-intellectual Southern fundamentalists with an ingenious rationale. This was the argument that American politics was characterized by a ‘culture war’ between religion and secular humanism ….”
inspection it emerges that the administration deviates from these principles in order to follow its own interpretations of strategic situations. At that point, the principles appear as a rhetorical ploy.

First, spreading democracy and regime change. This administration has become associated with heady ideas of the necessity and feasibility of spreading democracy in the Middle East and other troubled areas. And it is true that members of the administration, especially the president himself, have spoken at length about democracy and the American historic mission to promote it. Before the Iraq war, the president’s clearest enunciation of his thinking on democracy was given at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute, not a month before the invasion:

The nation of Iraq, with its proud heritage, abundant resources, and skilled and educated people, is fully capable of moving toward democracy and living in freedom.

... The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder. They encourage the peaceful pursuit of a better life. And there are hopeful signs of a desire for freedom in the Middle East. ... A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region.

... Success in Iraq could also begin a new stage for Middle Eastern peace and set in motion progress towards a truly democratic Palestinian state. ... And other regimes will be given a clear warning that support for terror will not be tolerated.62

The speech was the only official remark by the president in the pre-war period that seemed to give democratization a higher emphasis than security issues. A clear focus on the security benefits of democratization has become a major theme of presidential speeches only after the war. It is my position that we should separate the pre-war from the post-war rhetoric, and give pre-war statements more weight in determining the motives for war.

Apart from the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the administration does not really have a record of promoting democracy, anywhere. Moreover, neither of the two wars the U.S. has instigated in the past six years was predicated on the spread of democracy. The war in Afghanistan was a direct response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11; the United States gave the Taliban regime in that country an option of extraditing the al Qaeda leadership and

dissociating itself from Islamist terrorism.\textsuperscript{63} When the Taliban did not meet the requirements, the U.S. invaded, because it considered the Taliban a hostile government complicit in terrorism. The change of regimes in Afghanistan was a necessity of the military struggle against al Qaeda, and the United States really had no viable alternatives. Elsewhere in the Afghan conflict, the United States has displayed not an inconsiderable measure of traditional realist cynicism, in supporting, or at least tacitly acknowledging, authoritarian regimes in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.\textsuperscript{64}

On \textit{Iraq}, we reach the central problem of my thesis. What was the real ‘prime mover’, the trigger for war? The war clearly was not “sold” to either the world or the American public on democracy promotion, but could this still have been the motive? As noted above, there is a disconnect between the pre- and post-war justifications that is central to understanding and misunderstanding the administration’s true motivations. My finding is that U.S. security, the concern with Saddam’s WMD, \textit{was} in fact the prime mover to war, and that democracy promotion was merely a “sweetener.” The reason why people \textit{now} assume WMD cannot have been the prime mover or the only mover for war is that the WMD case was wrong. This, however, does not mean the administration did not believe at the time that they were right. These findings come out of a more extensive discussion of misapprehensions in the WMD case, which will be a feature of Chapter 3. For now we may say that for all the talk, the United States under President Bush still has not attacked any nation for democracy’s sake, and has not changed any regimes that were not perceived as grave threats to national security.

On the second neoconservative principle, the \textit{primacy of American power}, and also on the primacy of \textit{military} power over other powers, there can be no doubt that the Bush administration agrees. The \textit{National Security Strategy} of 2002 reads, “It is time to reaffirm the essential role of American military strength. We must build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge.”\textsuperscript{65} President Bush thus affirms that a superior military is the true source of American hegemonic power and influence in the world, perhaps more so than the previous president did. President Clinton’s NSS documents propounded an “integrated approach” to

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national security, meaning that the United States must “closely coordinate” all available foreign policy tools. But Clinton also believed the U.S. “must maintain superior military forces at the level of readiness necessary to effectively deter aggression . . .”66 Before Clinton the question of whether the U.S. should remain No. 1 in military affairs was not an issue, given the confrontation with the U.S.S.R. Hence it is hard to tell whether George W. Bush’s pronouncement of military primacy represents something unique, since he is only the second president not to have experienced a serious contest of power. President Bush may be in line with what scholars agree is a neoconservative belief, but he is probably also in line with all U.S. presidents since World War II that the primary source of American power is military superiority.

To the emphasis on military power comes a corollary for unilateralism. George W. Bush has led the most unilateralist administration in recent times. A disregard for, or at least a call for less reliance on international institutions in foreign policy was held by the administration since before 9/11. Charles Krauthammer wrote, in June of 2001,

After eight years during which foreign policy success was largely measured by the number of treaties the president could sign and the number of summits he could attend, we now have an administration willing to assert American freedom of action and the primacy of American national interests. Rather than contain power within a vast web of constraining international agreements, the new unilateralism seeks to strengthen American power and unashamedly deploy it on behalf of self-defined global ends.

George W. Bush had signalled a tendency toward unilateralism in his campaign. On the issue of international institutions, this administration has led a policy to the liking of neoconservatives.

The moral dimension to George W. Bush’s foreign policy is impossible to test from his record. One might say that a strong rhetorical emphasis on democracy promotion, especially post-Iraq, implies that this president allows more moral “guidance” than most presidents, but this is speculative. Rhetoric should be separated from action in determining the nature or ‘school’ of foreign policy.

What we get from this short “record” in foreign policy—more specifically, security policy—is something close to a mainstream Republican president. President Bush has been significantly more unilateralist and assertive about American exceptionalism than the previous president, which would ostensibly suggest he is influenced by neoconservatism. But

on other indices of neoconservatism in foreign policy, it is hard to measure the administration’s performance. The administration does not have a long enough record (although no president can get more than eight years, and the president is now more than halfway through his second term) to be satisfactorily categorized; either that, or the indices are too weak and nonspecific.

THE TWO NEOCONSERVATISMS AND THE NEOCON NETWORK
A possible reason why it is difficult to determine that the Bush administration’s foreign policy is neoconservative might be that neoconservatism as a ‘school’ or ideology in foreign policy is not productive enough: it does not have enough salient ideas; it has too much overlap with other traditions. Therefore, we should seriously consider scrapping neoconservatism, or at least revisit it.

The trouble with the ‘consensus’ account, in the scholarly journals, on neoconservatism is its coherence. It is not a problem that writers disagree on the relative weight of each idea; the problem is that complicating ideas that contradict the simplistic interpretation of neoconservatism are omitted. This presents a further obstacle to our acceptance of neoconservatism as a coherent ideology that could produce a comprehensive foreign policy. The most serious shortcoming in the simplistic interpretation is a lack of history of the movement, specifically a lack of history of the diverse intellectual currents from which neoconservatives have come.

The original neoconservatives were the so-called “New York intellectuals,” a group of ex-radicals of the Left who entered the New York literary circuit in the early Cold War. Irving Kristol is the chief figure, and his autobiography may serve as a useful arc of the origins of neoconservatism. The short of it is that Kristol and his pals all shared backgrounds in Marxism, or more precisely, Trotskyism, in the 1930s. The New York intellectuals were a tiny and inconsequential element within the Cold War liberal consensus on anticommunism. What these intellectuals brought to the table was a heightened awareness, acquired through their experiences with Trotskyism and Stalinism, of the “limits of social engineering”—a wariness of the unintended consequences of sweeping social reform. Francis Fukuyama wrote, “The danger of good intentions carried to extremes was a theme that would underlie

68 Irving Kristol, “Memoirs of a Trotskyist,” in Kristol, ed., Neoconservatism: Autobiography of an Idea, 469. Irving Kristol was hardly the most foreign-policy-minded of the neoconservatives; this part of their output was administered by Norman Podhoretz, who joined the group in the 1950s as editor of Commentary.
the life work of many members of this group over the next generation.”

In the case of the Soviet Union, of course, Kennan’s seminal “X” article had demonstrated how totalitarianism and the repressive organs of the state were endemic, inherent, to the revolutionary movement, and thus was a prime example of the dangers of radical change.

It was the social reform programs undertaken by Lyndon B. Johnson in the sixties that first estranged the intellectuals from the Democratic party line, and they argued against the programs in The Public Interest, the journal founded by Kristol and sociologist Daniel Bell:

Ambitious efforts to seek social justice, these writers argued, often left societies worse off than before because they either required massive state intervention that disrupted organic social relations (for example, forced busing) or else produced unanticipated consequences (such as an increase in single-parent families as a result of welfare).

As noted above, the rise of the New Left was what triggered the switch to the Republican Party, because it was an attack on the ideals of American society. This, and the intellectuals’ opposition to parts of the Great Society agenda on moral grounds and out of concern with the unintended consequences of sweeping reform, adds up to a conservatism of the liberal order. This group that I have just described was the group that contracted the name ‘new conservatives’ or ‘neoconservatives’ in scorn from the socialist Michael Harrington circa 1972. All in all, the original neoconservatives were, from what I can gather, men of great intellect and very wide-ranging interests. They are not, however, the same people that today are referred to as the “neocons.”

Neoconservatism was then fed by a second stream, a second milieu, after their switch to conservative politics in the 1970s. In that decade the New York intellectuals briefly supported Senator Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson (D.-Wash.) as their presidential candidate for the 1976 election. Jackson represented the remnant of hard-line anticommunists in the party, and was the natural choice—the only choice, all the while Senator Moynihan (D.-N.Y.) would not run—of the anticommunist neoconservatives. The Jackson candidacy never made it through the primaries, but it did bring a new set of connections to the neoconservative movement: Richard Perle, an aide Senator Jackson, had a network of connections within

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71 Fukuyama, America at the Crossroads, 19.
government quite unlike the circles previously associated with the New York milieu. Many were connected with the strategist Albert Wohlstetter, among them names like Francis Fukuyama, Paul D. Wolfowitz, and others. Richard Perle himself had worked with Richard Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, who by the time already had a decade of common history within government.\textsuperscript{72}

The Wohlstetter-Perle circle were as different from the earlier neoconservatives in background as they were in intellectual disposition, and it is a mystery to me how they ever got to be associated with each other under the banner of neoconservatism. What they shared was a tendency toward alarmism about U.S.-Soviet relations and the balance of power. Under President Carter, they all shared the view—fed by the sense of decline that gripped America in the seventies and in no small part aided by the president himself with his “crisis of confidence” speech—that U.S. foreign policy was weak, accommodationist (following Kissinger’s \textit{détente} initiatives) and inconsistent. It was in this environment that Jeane Kirkpatrick published her essay “Dictatorships and Double Standards” in \textit{Commentary}, Norman Podhoretz’s magazine. Kirkpatrick criticized Carter’s failure to stand up for the “friendly” regimes of Mossadegh and Somoza in Iran and Nicaragua, and lambasted Carter for being a hostage of the leftist human rights wing of the Democratic party who mistakenly saw leftist revolutionaries in said countries as being “of the people” and therefore more legitimate and perhaps less likely to violate human rights than the right-authoritarian regimes the U.S. was currently supporting.\textsuperscript{73} Kirkpatrick may of course have been right about the naïveté of the Left, but her criticism should be the strongest indication to anyone claiming that neoconservatives are occupied with moral concerns. The only moral dimension that mattered to the neoconservatives was that of the larger Cold War struggle.

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the neoconservatives finally got direct influence in government, but with it came a change in the movement. Two years after “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” a member of the Wohlstetter-Perle “wing” of the neoconservatives actually attempted to implement a policy focusing on promoting human rights in the Reagan administration, which already in its first year in office was portrayed as

\textsuperscript{72} For an account of Cheney’s and Rumsfeld’s common history in government, see Ron Suskind, \textit{The Price of Loyalty}, 2. For the connections between Perle, Wohlstetter and Wolfowitz, see, e.g., Khurram Husain, “Neocons: The Men Behind the Curtain,” \textit{Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists} 59, no. 6 (2003): 62-71; Packer, \textit{Assassins’ Gate}, 29-30; Paul D. Wolfowitz, “Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Interview with Sam Tannenhaus, Vanity Fair” (transcript), May 9, 2003.

having “betrayed” the ostensibly moralist neocons.74 The official in question was Elliott Abrams, an Assistant Secretary in Alexander Haig’s State Department.75 Abrams was son-in-law to Norman Podhoretz and a neocon powerhouse in the Reagan administration, and was connected to a memo that proposed a new focus on human rights issues. The memo read,

“Human rights” is not something we tack on to our foreign policy but is its very purpose: the defense and promotion of freedom in the world. This is not merely a rhetorical point. We will never maintain wide public support for our foreign policy unless we can relate it to American ideals and to the defense of freedom. … We must continue to draw the central distinction in international politics between free nations and those that are not free. To fail at this will ultimately mean failure in staving off movement toward neutralism in many parts of the West.76

The memo recommended a policy of “hitting hard at abuses of freedom and decency,” departing from the more status quo-oriented position of Kirkpatrick. Abrams later moved to the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Latin Affairs, at which where he became heavily involved in the Iran-contra scandal. His aggressive support for the right-wing contras is indicative of the kind of Cold War strategy the so-called neoconservatives—the term had come into regular use after their ascent to power—wanted: aggressive, rollback-oriented policies with a penchant for proxy wars.77

If we suppose for a moment that Abrams at the State Department, not Jeane Kirkpatrick at the United Nations, was the premier neocon within government in the 1980s, we see easily enough that the younger generation was of a different cloth entirely than the former. From the 1980s, the neoconservative “movement” increasingly comprised two different groups: the newcomers who were government officials, and the old guard intellectuals who kept the journals. The fundamental point about the newer group is that they essentially became part of the Republican foreign policy élite—their connections were in government rather than the intelligentsia, and they would have the quality of those public servants who steadily move up the organizational ladder along with their mentors. This group


included Abrams, Paul Wolfowitz, and Richard Perle as assistant secretaries of State and Defense, and beneath them now-familiar names such as I. Lewis Libby, Francis Fukuyama who left government in the 1990s, and Zalmay Khalilzad, the first American ambassador to Iraq after the war.

**Neo-Reaganism**

When people speak of neoconservatism today, it is ‘neo-Reaganism’ they are actually referring to, not the previous intellectual tradition. In 1996 William Kristol and Robert Kagan wrote a forceful article, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” for *Foreign Affairs*. The timing of the article was right before the 1996 elections and the article was an attempt to stake out a bolder conservative foreign policy than the one Bob Dole had been advocating. Many writers have described this period in the mid-90s as the high point of post-Cold War isolationism in the Republican Party. This was the year after Norman Podhoretz had declared neoconservatism “dead,” and Irving Kristol and others had written of its decline. Neoconservatism’s rally-point had always been anticommunism, and with the Soviet Union gone, the movement seemed to have lost much of its original impetus.

Kristol and Kagan’s essay invoked a tough-minded President Reagan who had taken a clear stance against Soviet communism: “Reagan called for an end to complacency in the face of the Soviet threat, large increases in defense spending, resistance to communist advances in the Third World, and greater moral clarity and purpose in U.S. foreign policy.” The article proposed three fixes to conservative foreign policy. The first proposal was for a permanent $60-$80 billion increase in the defense budget (which at the time was about $260 billion), with a rationale that “[t]he more Washington is able to make clear that it is futile to compete with American power … the less chance there is that countries like China or Iran will entertain ambitions of upsetting the present world order.” The second proposal was a call for greater “citizen involvement” in military affairs, “lower[ing] the barriers between civilian and military life”—in other words, a militarization of the public. The third proposal was for ‘moral clarity’: “Finally, American foreign policy should be informed with a clear moral purpose, based on the understanding that its moral goals and its fundamental national interests are almost always in harmony.” 78 The writers claimed that President Reagan realized this and translated it into “press[ing] for changes in right-wing and left-wing dictatorships alike.” In

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78 William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy.”
the post-Cold War international life, maintaining American hegemony was paramount because it was an agent of American principles both at home and abroad. “Support for American principles around the world,” they wrote, “can be sustained only by the continuing exertion of American influence.” This in turn would help in the “remoralization of America at home.”

The neo-Reaganites were hailing the ‘Reagan Doctrine’ that they saw as having been instrumental in bringing down the “evil empire.” Charles Krauthammer wrote of the Reagan Doctrine in 1985, “The Reagan Doctrine proclaims overt and unashamed American support for anti-Communist revolution. The grounds are justice, necessity and democratic tradition.” Krauthammer welcomed the doctrine’s unstated call for ‘rollback’. But the neoconservatives in the 1980s were not always so convinced of Reagan’s steadfastness as the neo-Reaganites in the 1990s. Just months after Krauthammer’s article, the New York Times wrote of the neocons’ disillusionment. Midge Decter, Norman Podhoretz’ wife and organizer of the Committee for the Free World, voiced her disillusionment: “It’s worse to make thundering speeches and do nothing, like Reagan, then [sic] to be quiet and do nothing. He is substituting words for deeds.” The neoconservatives were angry with Reagan for not having retaliated for the 1983 Beirut embassy and barracks bombings, and were afraid his inaction would hurt American credibility. Norman Podhoretz said, “It’s the latest in a series of episodes demonstrating that Reagan is, in fact, very prudent and cautious about using American power despite his fiery rhetoric.”

THE TRUE REAGAN CONNECTION

Rhetoric is key to understanding why neoconservatism is so frequently held up as the ideological or intellectual foundations of the Iraq war. It is because George W. Bush speaks in the terms that neoconservatives and neo-Reaganites use, because he projects their visions. George W. Bush has a penchant for expressing his policies in moral terms, a strategy which on the whole has served him extremely well with large constituencies in the United States.

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79 Charles Krauthammer, “The Reagan Doctrine,” Time Magazine, April 1, 1985. Krauthammer wrote, “If regional powers prove unstable, and projected American power unreliable, what then? It is a precious irony that the answer to that question has been suggested to Americans by a band of fanatical Islamic warriors in Afghanistan.” The irony, of course, is that sixteen years later, that hardy band of fanatical Islamists had become America’s deadliest enemies.

His father may have lacked the “vision thing”; at least in his speeches, the son lets on that he has it.

This is the essential lesson that George W. Bush has drawn from the neoconservatives and from Ronald Reagan: there is considerable political utility of speaking with great conviction. Employing strong language, easily identifiable categories, a clear distinction between good and evil: these tools are apt to create and keep a majority. After 9/11, George W. Bush needed to quickly shore up public support for his response, and the response needed to be clear and to the point. ‘Moral clarity’ becomes a necessity or perhaps an inevitability in a chaotic situation such as that after 9/11.

George W. Bush has spoken at length about his freedom agenda, his view on the direction of history as moving “toward freedom,” and on the dignity of human life. Since the Iraq war, he has also spoken increasingly about democracy and the U.S. policy of democracy promotion. However, the level of commitment to democracy is not at all clear from the speeches. At West Point, the president said, “We will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.” On other occasions he made similar statements. The point is he never made a specific commitment to regime change in a particular country. In pre-war speeches on Iraq, the WMD case was always the chief concern. In all speeches except the speech at the American Enterprise Institutie in February 2003, the President discussed the WMD threat first, and then offered the spread of freedom and democracy afterwards. For example, in the crucial speech he gave to the United Nations on September 12, 2002, President Bush devoted a full fifteen paragraphs to the continuing Iraqi aggression and violation of UNSC resolutions, while only two paragraphs addressed the prospects for a free and democratic Iraq.

The president employs a rhetoric that seems to reflect an agenda of democracy promotion, the agenda of the neoconservatives. But what the neocons said about President Reagan, above, about “thundering speeches and do[ing] nothing,” could just as easily be said of President Bush. The difference is that President Reagan, although lambasted by the neoconservatives at the time, actually was committed to supporting anti-Communist or non-Communist revolutions, of which Nicaragua is an example. President Bush, if we write Iraq off as primarily a national security concern, has not yet employed any means for support for democracy and freedom that are not well within the tradition since World War II, and at this point, it does not seem likely that he ever will.
Jacksonianism

Francis Fukuyama, the political philosopher and ex-neoconservative, wrote in February 2006 of a backlash against the perceived democracy promotion that the White House was carrying out. “Those whom Walter Russell Mead labels Jacksonian conservatives,” he wrote, “supported the Iraq war because they believed that their children were fighting to defend the United States against nuclear terrorism, not to promote democracy.”81 The ‘Jacksonians’ are at once the practitioners of and the political constituency for the Jacksonian tradition or ‘school’ in foreign policy. This school is one of four identified by Mead as having influenced American foreign policy throughout the Republic’s history; in addition to the Jacksonian, there are also the Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, and Wilsonian traditions.82 We may apply Mead’s schools to bring us closer to the intellectual make-up of the administration, because they provide us with a useful “interface” between the central power and its constituents.

A POPULIST SCHOOL OF FOREIGN POLICY

Jacksonianism is the most populist of the four traditions in American foreign policy, and it is radically different from the three other schools. Whereas the other three traditions are practiced by, and cater to, their respective elites in American society, the Jacksonian tradition emanates from what Mead, in Special Providence, calls the “folk community”: “Jacksonianism is less an intellectual or political movement than it is an expression of the social, cultural, and religious values of a large portion of the American public.”83 Jacksonians in power serve the interests of this American folk community, now mostly of the vast middle class, whose values far more than their intellect dictate their foreign policy views. They are said to adhere to an ‘honor code’ in civil society as well as in war. The folk community is extended to anyone who assimilates its values and code of honor, built on self-reliance, individualism, and above all courage, but the community has no patience for those policies


83 Ibid., 226-30.
which are seen to serve those outside it: “Jacksonian society draws an important distinction between those who belong to the folk community and those who do not. … Jacksonians are bound together in a social compact; outside that compact is chaos and darkness.” This dictates that the Jacksonians are at once the most isolationist, most skeptical of “domestic and foreign do-gooding,” and most unilateralist of the four schools. Finally, the Jacksonian spirit being profoundly populist, it is also fundamentally suspicious of elites.

President George W. Bush campaigned on a platform designed to please Jacksonians in foreign policy, and a good case can be made that he continued to play to his Jacksonian base even after 9/11, notwithstanding all the talk of ‘Wilsonianism’. Mead explains that Jacksonians have special attitudes toward war and its conduct that leaders must play to in order to retain their political support, Jacksonians stand “in opposition to humanitarian interventions or interventions in support of Wilsonian or Hamiltonian world-order initiatives,” and will only fight foreign wars when they can be convinced that vital national interests—more narrowly defined than those of the neo-Reaganites, but broader yet than those of the Jeffersonians—are at stake. The president has actually gone to great lengths to conform to Jacksonian attitudes; indeed, he had in his campaign platform a plank of “no nation-building.” What the then-governor of Texas said, commenting on the failed Somalian mission in 1992-3, was this:

Somalia started off as a humanitarian mission and then changed into a nation-building mission, and that’s where the mission went wrong. … And so I don’t think our troops ought to be used for what’s called nation-building. I think our troops ought to be used to fight and war. I think our troops ought to be used to help overthrow a dictator that’s in our—when it’s in our best interests.84

… I mean, we’re going to have a kind of nation-building corps from America? Absolutely not. Our military is meant to fight and win war; that’s what it’s meant to do. And when it gets overextended, morale drops.

On the presence of U.S. troops in the Balkans after the Kosovo campaign, which Governor Bush had supported, he said, “I hope that [the Europeans] can put troops on the ground, so that we can withdraw our troops and focus our military on fighting and winning war.” This position on the proper uses of the military conforms both to Mead’s Jacksonianism and to what some hold to be a neoconservative position on the “primacy” of military power.

84 Jim Lehrer (“PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer), “Second Presidential Debate” (transcript), October 11, 2000. Governor Bush also referred to East Timor, where the United States had provided Australia with strategic airlift capabilities and logistical support, as a good model. In other words, the candidate was willing to commit (limited) U.S. treasure but no blood to crises that did not threaten vital national interests.
When he was governor, Bush aligned his position on military expeditions with Mead’s Jacksonians: “Either the stakes are important enough to fight for, in which case you should fight with everything you have, or they aren’t important enough to fight for, in which case you should mind your own business and stay home.”

What happened on 9/11 did not change Jacksonian America’s stance. Mead’s book was written before 9/11, but the afterword to the 2002 edition suggests the significance of the GWOT to Jacksonian sentiment in this passage: “As of June 2002, it seemed possible, though by no means certain, that the war on terror would become, like the Cold War, the central organizing idea of American foreign policy for a generation or more.”

In the Cold War, Mead writes, it had been necessary to “persuade Jacksonians that Moscow was engaged in a systematic, far-reaching campaign for world domination, and that this campaign would succeed unless the United States engaged in a long-term defensive effort with the help of allies around the world.”

Once the Jacksonians were persuaded, they were in for the long haul, and were the most consistent supporters of vigilant enforcement of deterrence and containment. While the GWOT or the “long war” now is being gradually downplayed in the face of increasing ridicule, for three or four years after 9/11 it was the central organizing concept. And it was George W. Bush’s powerful and almost immediate enunciation of the war as a generational, defining struggle that enlisted the Jacksonians.

**The Relevance of Jacksonianism**

Jacksonians perceive “national honor” as a vital national interest. This perception has played an important part in the Bush administration. On the eve of the invasion the president spoke to the nation and warned of “appeasement” with Iraq and other enemies:

> In the 20th century, some chose to appease murderous dictators, whose threats were allowed to grow into genocide and global war. In this century, when evil men plot chemical, biological, and nuclear terror, a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this Earth.

Appeasement, obviously a reference to the policy of accommodating Hitler’s Germany in the 1930s, does not sit well with Jacksonians; it looks to them like “pusillanimous weakness.” Senator John McCain, a Jacksonian in Congress, also warned of appeasement on the day of

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86 Ibid., 335.
87 Ibid., 247.
the final vote on the Congressional authorization for war: “I am reminded of Winston Churchill’s characterization of appeasement: continually feeding the alligator in the hope that he will eat you last.”  

“National honor” in foreign policy is two things. It is honor for honors’ sake, but it is also a concern for America’s reputation. This is connected to deterrence: an America that can be counted on to strike down harshly on any threat to its national interest will not be threatened. America will not be intimidated. The president has spoken out against “intimidation” far more than he has about appeasement. “We are a peaceful people. Yet we’re not a fragile people, and we will not be intimidated by thugs and killers. If our enemies dare to strike us, they and all who have aided them will face fearful consequences.” The United States must remain strong, and above all appear strong and vigilant, to deter any threat. A Saddam Hussein left to his own devices in Iraq was untenable on the belief that he had weapons of mass destruction. But it would also be untenable if he was seen to play cat and mouse with the international community or the United States; if he was allowed to act with impunity, the example would be a dangerous one. If, on the other hand, the United States acted decisively to end the threat, it would be a powerful example and demonstration of United States resolve and warrior spirit.

Is the president a Jacksonian? George W. Bush skillfully managed to enlist the Jacksonians in his domestic coalition on the War on Terror. For the consensus to be as broad as possible, he included in addition to the military agenda a humanitarian agenda, a freedom agenda, that would permanently enlist the less militaristic constituencies. As we have seen in this chapter, there is no necessary correlation between the terms in which government actions are framed and the real thrust of the actions themselves. But it does not matter much if the president himself is a Jacksonian, i.e., a member of the ‘folk community’. Once he had enlisted the Jacksonians in a war coalition, he would be forced to follow through with war.

I have included this discussion of Jacksonianism because it grounds current U.S. foreign policy in tradition rather than in a “new” concept like neoconservatism. I do not feel I need to “defend” my choice to include it any further, as I only venture it as an alternative to the neoconservatism that I have found to lack the power to explain the war.

89 Congressional Record 148, no. 133 (October 10, 2002): S10237.

90 George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Iraq.”

91 Although his excessive cowboy swagger would seem to suggest so. George W. Bush is a rich kid from New England, but he cultivated his politics in Texas.
Chapter 3:

The Intelligence Failure

The American people know the difference between responsible and irresponsible debate when they see it. They know the difference between honest critics who question the way the war is being prosecuted and partisan critics who claim that we acted in Iraq because of oil or because of Israel or because we misled the American people.

—George W. Bush, January 10, 2006

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 was a narrative history that sought to explain the ‘incrementality’ or cumulative process of decision-making and how the administration operated in a high-pressured political climate surrounding the decision-making process. It touched on the media environment and on public demands and sentiments for and against war. Specifically, I made the case that the administration’s strategies for dealing with Congress and the United Nations Security Council may have locked them in their policy of regime change. The chapter does not fully explain why Congress granted full executive discretion in the Iraq question, considering the fact that alternative propositions were circulated that could have bound the administration to a United Nations process that required a final UNSC resolution. My treatment of the Congressional debates suggests that Congress only granted the executive maximum authority because it was widely perceived that a decision needed to be made soon. This chapter further explains why the Congress acted as it did.

Chapter 2 looked at the possibility for an alternative explanation for these events by examining the ideological background. I found that a focus on ideologies may explain the administration’s thinking, in terms of the categories they employ in speeches and legislation. However, I also found that the administration cannot easily be pigeon-holed under a single ‘ideology’, much less under the problematic label ‘neoconservatism’. A focus on the foreign-policy record reveals that the administration conceived as neoconservative monolith is all talk and little action, and the two wars that the world has seen are as easily explicable in terms of

traditional security concerns. I did not argue that neoconservatism is totally irrelevant; my findings so far suggest that the term neoconservative is most useful when applied strictly to describe a network of hawks in the Pentagon and in right-wing pressure groups, and that the term should not be used because it evokes an ideologically-driven and ideologically uniform group—a ‘monolith’—and downplays the problem of the ‘prime mover’ in the Iraq decision. The prime mover that most high-ranking administration officials still cite is the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

**Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction**

It has long been evident that President Bush decided to invade Iraq first, and constructed his ramshackle case for the war after the fact.

—recent editorial in the *New York Times)*

WE NOW TURN TO THE CRUX of my thesis: making sense of the controversy surrounding the administration’s case for war. As we saw in Chapter 1, the president went to the United Nations to get a resolution concerning Saddam Hussein’s alleged weapons of mass destruction, and he went to Congress for authorization to employ any means “appropriate and necessary” to disarm Hussein, at his own discretion. The whole legal basis for the war was that Iraq was posing an urgent threat—the authorization wording was “continuing threat”—and although it has since been justified partly on other grounds, it is clear that the invasion could not have been undertaken without this legal basis.

The controversy springs from several discoveries, beginning shortly before the war, that the administration was acting on erroneous assessments of Iraq’s WMD capabilities. Eventually of course it became clear that Iraq had no proscribed weapons whatsoever; in addition, it has turned out that top officials had made numerous statements that went beyond

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94 H. J. Res. 114 “Authorization for Use of Military Force.” Of course, the president could in theory have invaded Iraq without authorization, challenging the War Powers Resolution of 1973 (Pub. L. 93-148). But after having gone to both the United Nations and Congress for legitimization and authorization, thereby signalling a certain deference to the War Powers Resolution in this given situation, it is doubtful that the executive could have changed course and invaded unauthorized without a serious loss of credibility.
even the erroneous assessments the intelligence community made before the war. This has called into question the administration’s rationale for war, and has given credence among reporters and academics to the idea that the WMD case was a front for the “real” rationale for the war, democracy promotion.

Further aggravating the sense that the administration had purposely misled the nation were reports from various sources within government and the intelligence community that the Office of the Vice President circumvented the normal intelligence review process and set up an “alternative” intel analysis cell to draw the most alarmist conclusions from the underlying data.

THE FLAWED NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

The U.S. Intelligence Community (IC), consisting of the fifteen intelligence agencies, made the consensus judgment in October 2002 that Iraq possessed some forms of WMD, and intended to expand its capabilities. I have determined that it was these assessments that were most relevant in convincing Congress in October to authorize the war. The debate over authorization at the U.N. was largely irrelevant to the American process, except as a token to Congress that the executive would be working with the international community in resolving the perceived crisis. The inspections process, which raised doubts about the U.S. case against Iraq, was also irrelevant since it only began to influence world opinion after the Congressional authorization had been given; after October 10th, the United States was locked in an almost irreversible march to war.

The final assessment of the intelligence community before authorization was the much-debated National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq. The document made assessments on the quantities and nature of Iraq’s WMD stockpiles, the state of Iraq’s weapons programs, the Iraqi regime’s likelihood of using their weapons inside or outside of armed conflict, and the possibility of providing global terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda with these

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95 “Iraq on the Record: The Bush Administration’s Public Statements on Iraq.” Report prepared by United States House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform—Minority Staff, March 16, 2004. The report, prepared for then ranking minority member Henry A. Waxman (D.-Calif.), counts 237 public statements, on 125 different occasions, by the top five administration officials that were not founded on the intelligence community’s assessments at the time they were made.

96 This conspiracy theory also works perfectly for those who believe the war was undertaken for some other cause, be it empire, oil, or Israeli security.
weapons.\(^97\) In the declassified “Key Judgments” section, the authors concluded that “Iraq has continued its [WMD] programs in defiance of U.N. resolutions and restrictions.” More specifically, “Baghdad has chemical and biological weapons as well as missiles with ranges in excess of U.N. restrictions; if left unchecked, it probably will have a nuclear weapon during this decade.” Further, the authors “judge that we are seeing only a portion of Iraq’s WMD efforts, owing to Baghdad’s vigorous denial and deception efforts.” The estimate also speculated, with “low confidence,” that “Saddam, if sufficiently desperate, might decide that only an organization such as al-Qa’ida [sic]—with worldwide reach and extensive terrorist infrastructure, and already engaged in a life-or-death struggle against the United States—could perpetrate the type of terrorist attack that he would hope to conduct.”\(^98\)

The judgments were, as we now know, all wrong. However, they were the consensus judgments of the entire intel community, and as such the most authoritative basis on which to make policy. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) has produced the most comprehensive report on the prewar intelligence effort. It concludes that “Most of the major key judgments in the Intelligence Community’s October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate … either overstated, or were not supported by, the underlying intelligence reporting.” Evidently a series of failures, “particularly in analytic tradecraft, led to the mischaracterization of the intelligence.”\(^99\)

Several newspaper items have surfaced that top administration officials pressured lower-ranking intelligence officers to “skew their analysis,” i.e., to come up with the harshest possible assessments of the Iraqi regime’s intents and capabilities.\(^100\) After extensive

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\(^97\) Director of Central Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate, *Iraq’s Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction*, October 2002. (Hereinafter referred to as 2002 National Intelligence Estimate) The document is ninety-six pages, of which about eight substantive pages have been declassified. For the authorship of the document, see pages 3 and 92. The National Intelligence Council is a review board reporting to the Director of Central Intelligence (now the Director of National Intelligence). It consists of the National Intelligence Officers (NIO) for various areas of expertise. The primary author appears to have been Robert D. Walpole, then NIO for Strategic and Nuclear Programs.


\(^99\) United States Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community’s Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, S. Rpt. 108-301, 4 July 2004, 14. (Hereinafter referred to as SSCI Phase I Report) The report was conducted in two phases: the first phase, simply reconstructed the assessments made by the IC that led to the overblown “Key Judgments” in the 2002 NIE; the second phase resulted in another two documents, *Report on Postwar Findings About Iraq’s WMD Programs and How They Compare With Prewar Assessments*, September 8, 2006 (hereinafter referred to as SSCI Phase II Report); and *Report on the Use by the Intelligence Community of Information Provided by the Iraqi National Congress*, September 8, 2006 (hereinafter referred to as Phase II Report—INC).

\(^100\) SSCI Phase I Report, 272. See also Douglas Jehl, “Bolton’s Pressure on C.I.A. Analyst Angered Colleagues,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2005, A7; Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu
interviews the SSCI “did not find any evidence that Administration officials attempted to coerce, influence or pressure analysts to change their judgments related to Iraq’s weapons of mass destructions,” and further, that the vice president’s repeated visits to the CIA were taken by intelligence officers as constituting “pressure.”101

Another reason that has been cited for the NIE’s shortcomings is the pressure of time. The entire NIE was put together in just three weeks, whereas typically such reports require months of preparation. Several of the analysts interviewed by the SSCI felt that “if they had more time, they would have been able to more carefully consider how the language in the document portrayed their analysis,” but that their “bottom line” judgments would have remained the same. The Committee concluded that more time would not have corrected the “fundamental analytical flaws.”102

If the flaws in the NIE were not caused by the short timeframe or by inappropriate pressure from top officials, there must have been deeper, structural problems. The key reason is that the United States did not have an intelligence collection “presence” within Iraq after the UNSCOM left the country in 1998—in other words, there were no U.S. spies in Iraq. The bulk of ‘human intelligence’, i.e., information drawn from interviews, coming out of Iraq was obtained from defectors from Iraq, not from sources inside the regime. Some of the human intelligence-based intelligence reporting that the IC used in preparing the NIE was only available through liaison; the prime example of this is the Iraqi defector who was codenamed CURVE BALL, who was believed to have been an engineer working on Iraq’s biological weapons (BW) programs. This source had defected to a Western European country—later reporting suggests it was Germany103—where he was debriefed by that country’s intelligence service. A total of 112 reports from the debriefings were handed to the CIA, and these reports were the foundations of much of the U.S. case against Saddam regarding BW, specifically the claims, voiced in Secretary Powell’s speech before the U.N., that Iraq had mobile BW laboratories. Only one American, an intelligence official from one of the Pentagon’s intelligence services, ever got to meet this defector in person before the war; all of the

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101 SSCI Phase I Report, 284-5. This section of the report is still classified except for the conclusions.
102 Ibid., 298-302. That it normally takes “months” to assemble an NIE is according to the then NIO for Strategic and Nuclear Programs, Robert D. Walpole.
reporting was done by this Western European intelligence service, and so the IC could never “vet” the source and determine his reliability as a source—but they still decided to use the information provided by him as the “backbone” of their BW case. It later turned out that CURVE BALL was totally unreliable, a fraud. In addition, the reports from his debriefings were third-generation copies by the time the IC used them, having been translated first from English and Arabic into “a Western European language,” then back to English for IC use.104

Another major related to human intelligence was the IC’s reliance on sources connected to the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the group of Iraqi exiles headed by Ahmad Chalabi, who was once the designee for prime minister of postwar Iraq. The SSCI devoted a separate report to the IC’s use of intelligence provided by INC-affiliated sources.105 The SSCI concluded that “The Iraqi National Congress (INC) attempted to influence United States policy on Iraq by providing false information through defectors directed at convincing the United States that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and had links to terrorists.”106 The INC and Ahmad Chalabi had strong ties to several high-officials in the Bush administration, including the so-called neocons and especially Paul Wolfowitz, but from the Committee’s conclusion that intelligence officers were not unduly pressured by higher-ranking officials, we cannot reasonably say that neocons in office were responsible for this bias in the IC’s data. In addition, only two of the INC-affiliated sources were used in the NIE, and neither of them provided the “primary basis” for any key judgment.

WHY THE ESTIMATE FAILED

There were three reasons why the intelligence community’s reporting on Iraq became so deeply flawed. The first reason was that the intelligence community, and especially the CIA which was in charge of human intelligence, did not possess any usable sources inside Iraq. The CIA’s position in Iraq had deteriorated after the exit of UNSCOM in 1998; the CIA had personnel, working for UNSCOM, spy on Iraq’s military communications, overstepping the

104 SSCI Phase I Report, 148-50, 152-7; SSCI Phase II Report—INC, 105-109. The CURVE BALL episode is the most widely published intelligence foul-up to date, see Dana Priest and Dafna Linzer, “Panel Condemns Iraq Prewar Intelligence,” Washington Post, July 10, 2004, A1; Bob Drogin and Greg Miller, “‘Curveball’ Debacle Reignites CIA Feud.” The information provided by CURVE BALL appeared to intelligence analysts be corroborated by satellite imagery and by three other human intelligence sources.

105 SSCI Phase II Report—INC. According to the report, information from two of the affiliated sources went into the NIE (p. 39). CURVE BALL was not one of the two; he could not be determined to be one of the INC-affiliated sources. The INC was one of the seven Iraqi opposition organizations eligible for military aid under the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 (Pub. L. 105-338).

106 Ibid., 113
inspection teams’ mandates.\(^{107}\) One Agency officer told the ssci that as late as 2001, they only had four sources inside Iraq, “reporting on non-WMD topics.”\(^{108}\) The lack of sources close to the regime shifts the focus to lower-“value” sources and an increased reliance on old information, like the inferences made from Iraq’s earlier WMD declarations.

The second reason was a breakdown in analytic “tradecraft” on the part of analysts throughout the intelligence community. Analysts reached conclusions that, in hindsight, do not appear to be supported by the underlying evidence. The ssci Phase I Report is a serious indictment of the intelligence community; the minority view of Democratic Senators John D. Rockefeller IV (D.-W.Va.), Carl Levin (D.-Mich.) and Richard Durbin (D.-Ill.) were that the NIE was a “rushed and sloppy product … replete with factual errors and unsupported judgments.”\(^{109}\)

A third major error by the IC was the publication, concurrently with the NIE, of another document, a Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) white paper on Iraq’s WMD capabilities.\(^{110}\) This white paper made the same key judgments that the classified NIE did, but omitted a great number of the caveats included in the classified document, phrases such as “we judge that,” “in the view of,” and “although we have little specific information … .” Senator Rockefeller and other Democrats wrote in their “Additional Views” to the ssci Phase I Report that the document “communicated to the American public a level of threat against the United States homeland that was inconsistent with the Intelligence Community’s judgment.”\(^{111}\)

Based on the intelligence community’s releases that fall, it seems reasonable for lawmakers and administration officials to have concluded that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was indeed a continuing, even urgent threat to the United States, especially considering the key judgment that the IC was “seeing only a portion of Baghdad’s WMD efforts, owing to Baghdad’s vigorous denial and deception efforts.”


\(^{108}\) SSCI Phase I Report, 260.

\(^{109}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 449-50.


\(^{111}\) SSCI Phase I Report, 456.
There was a second intelligence effort going on in 2002 that ran parallel to, but outside of, the intelligence community’s review. Bob Woodward wrote, in *Plan of Attack*, of an ominous-sounding “Office of Special Plans” that one Douglas J. Feith, the under secretary of defense for policy, had set up to provide alternative intelligence analysis. According to investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the office was set up shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks to provide alternative analysis of the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda. Hersh’s, and much of the media’s, representation of the Office of Special Plans is factually incorrect; the Office of Special Plans, actually only a renaming of the existing Northern Gulf Directorate under Feith’s organization, was set up only in October of 2002, after the most significant “consumption” of intelligence by lawmakers and policy-makers was over with. The analysis or “production” of intelligence was done by another office under Feith, the Policy Counter Terrorism Evaluation Group (PCTEG), which was shut down about the same time that Special Plans was set up. It is this Group that is the real target of those who accuse the Department of Defense of having “skewed” the intelligence on Iraq and al Qaeda. The Group’s role has been so hotly contested that Senator Pat Roberts (R.-Kans.), then Chairman of the SSCI, requested in 2005 a review of whether the Office of Special Plans (even Roberts got the name wrong), “at any time, conducted unauthorized, unlawful or inappropriate intelligence activities.” The Department of Defense’s Deputy Inspector General for Intelligence conducted the review, which was published earlier this year.

The report states that the PCTEG was set up to be a “Team B,” in a weird reprise of the 1970s B Teams whose assessments of the Soviet threat went beyond those of the CIA. The group never quite made the scope of the earlier experiment; the PCTEG never consisted of more than two persons. The group focused its activities on finding connections between

112 Seymour M. Hersh, “Selective Intelligence,” *New Yorker*, May 12, 2003;
Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and al Qaeda. They had access to the same intelligence that Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) analysts had, but came to conclusions that were “decidedly different” from those of the CIA and DIA.\textsuperscript{115} Both the CIA and the DIA had produced reports on the “linkages” between Iraq and al Qaeda since 2001, and had found “no conclusive signs of cooperation.” The PCTEG, however, found that there were “multiple areas of cooperation,” and that intelligence indicated a “mature, symbiotic relationship.”\textsuperscript{116}

The reason for the Group’s alternative findings can be gleaned from one of the slides in their draft report, “Assessing the Relationship Between Iraq and al Qaida [sic].” The slide, carrying the headline, “Fundamental Problems with How Intelligence Community is Assessing Information,” lists among the “problems”:

- Consistent underestimation of importance that would be attached by Iraq and al Qaida to hiding a relationship.
- Especially when operational security is very good, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”

The PCTEG simply believed that the IC’s standards of evidence were too high, and that when those “juridical” standards were applied to each individual piece of evidence, it was obscuring the underlying pattern of cooperation between Iraq and al Qaeda. The PCTEG also questioned the IC’s assumption that the Islamist Osama would not cooperate with the secular Saddam, when they both had a clear common interest in harming the United States.

Douglas J. Feith’s alternative intelligence group appears to only have produced three reports or briefings, of which only one, “Assessing the Relationship,” was disseminated outside Feith’s offices. The group gave the briefing three times, in three slightly different versions. In a briefing for DCI George J. Tenet and the Acting Director of DIA, Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, on August 15, 2002, the slide with the “fundamental problems” of the IC was left out; according to Mr. Feith, this was because of its “critical tone.”\textsuperscript{117} In all only two principals, Secretary Rumsfeld and DCI George J. Tenet, saw the briefing. Tenet and the Director of the DIA appear from the Inspector General’s report not to have liked the briefing, and there is nothing to suggest that this briefing, or any of the other activities of Douglas Feith’s office, was allowed to interfere with the assessments of the real intelligence

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 6-9. The claims were made in the final product of the Group, a draft report, “Assessing the Relationship Between Iraq and al Qaida.”
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 9,
community. Hence, there seems not to be a foundation for saying that these conclusions directly made their way to Senators and Representatives voting on the authorization bill.

**Effects of the Failure**

**WHAT INTELLIGENCE MATTERED?**

National Intelligence Estimates are the most authoritative assessment the United States intelligence agencies can make. And by law, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) is the “principal advisor on substantive intelligence matters to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense...” The consensus assessments of the intelligence community, of which the DIA is part, should form the basis of any decision on national security threats, and by my judgment they did so.

As we have already seen, the NIE’s “Key Judgments” section contained strong language stating that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was continuing to possess and pursue weapons of mass destruction of all kinds. The NIE judged, with “high confidence,” that Iraq actually did possess the proscribed weapons at the time of publication. That in itself would have been a cause for concern in a conventional, state-on-state scenario. With the heightened awareness of the threat of global terrorism following al Qaeda attacks on the American homeland, Iraq’s possession of WMD became untenable. The possibility, however faint, that the secular Iraqi regime could provide al Qaeda with only a small amount of CW or BW agents, demanded vigorous action by the United States. The NIE envisioned that that could come to pass if Saddam Hussein was “sufficiently desperate,” but judged also that he, thus far, had “draw[n] a line short of conducting terrorist attacks … against the United States.”

The U.S. intelligence community was in awe of Saddam Hussein’s internal security apparatus, and for good reason. In March of 1995, Ahmad Chalabi of the INC had tried to enlist the CIA in a plot to detain or assassinate Saddam Hussein, involving elements of the Iraqi Army who would defect and help in the coup. The CIA refused to participate, the plot backfired, and Saddam retained power. A year later, Saddam’s security apparatus exposed a CIA operation against the regime, and executed the children of a CIA asset involved in the

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operation. Before that, the regime’s prowess in “deception and denial” had become evident with the defection of General Hussein Kamel. Kamel had defected in August of 1995 and revealed details of Iraq’s unconventional weapons programs of which United Nations had been unaware. Kamel and his brother were later lured back to Iraq and murdered. The IC was also reeling from their previous failure to predict the attacks on U.S. soil just a year earlier. Paul Wolfowitz concluded, as did the 9/11 Commission, that there had been a “failure of imagination” in the IC, and inability to predict what was about to happen. Besides the failure of imagination, the community had also failed to recognize a pattern of increased activity within the United States of known al Qaeda operatives. This may well have brought the IC in late 2002 to conclusions that were not supported by the underlying evidence; however, ironically, it may also have brought outside “consumers” of intelligence products to fear a repeated failure to grasp the nature of the threat facing the U.S. Something like this fear is represented in the PCTEG report, mentioned above, that read, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” The IC refused to say conclusively that Iraq and al Qaeda had a working relationship; policy-makers feared that the IC might again be overlooking a pattern. On Iraq’s WMD programs, it is now clear that the IC over-emphasized what they saw as a pattern of deception and denial, and attributed the failure to ascertain the existence of weapons to that pattern.

Journalist Ron Suskind has written of the so-called “One Percent Doctrine” or Cheney Doctrine, supposedly formulated by the vice president in late 2001: “Even if there’s just a one percent chance of the unimaginable coming due, act as if it is a certainty.” Earlier, Paul Wolfowitz had written something similar, in a memo on possible Iraqi involvement in the terrorist attacks. An adoption of such a doctrine would move decision-makers to a standard of proof that is far lower than the standards the intelligence community applies to its assessments. The doctrine would clearly necessitate action on Iraq based on the assessments of the Iraqi threat, moderate as they were, that were made in 2002.

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119 SSCI Phase II Report—INC, 11-24. The stories are according to CIA sources cited in the report.
120 Hersh, Chain of Command, 212-13; Woodward, Plan of Attack, 245. Hussein Kamel was Saddam’s son-in-law and head of the secret WMD effort.
I argued in chapter 1 that it was the Congressional authorization for war that irrevocably sealed the decision to invade Iraq, because it would be too politically harmful for either the administration or the United States itself to back away from its international commitment once the domestic opinion had been swayed. I indicated above that Congress was not exposed directly to the alternative intelligence assessments that reflected a “One Percent Doctrine” view.

One can still argue that the “products” of Feith’s subordinates may still have influenced lawmakers in-directly. The briefing was shown to three key deputies, Paul Wolfowitz, Stephen Hadley, and I. Lewis Libby. It is possible that the PCTEG’s views on the connections between Iraq and al Qaeda were adopted by these deputies or their bosses; Vice President Cheney was the principal responsible for most claims about an Iraq-al Qaeda connection. Cheney has been defending his position on Iraq and al Qaeda since the invasion, once referring to a memo from Douglas Feith’s offices as the “best source of information” on the connection.123 Considering what appears to have been both Cheney’s and Wolfowitz’s views on how to manage threats, it is possible that lawmakers were persuaded to think that Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda were either in cahoots, or very likely to develop a cooperation in the near future. Senator John Warner (R.-Va.), in the final Senate debate on authorization cited an authority on Iraq and WMD:

Richard Butler, former head of UNSCOM, was asked how easy it would be for the Iraqis to arm a terrorist group or an individual terrorist with weapons of mass destruction. His response was “Extremely easy. If they decided to do it, piece of cake!”124

My finding is that it was a reasonable conclusion at the time, based on the available assessments, that Iraq was a continuing and rising threat. All assessments agreed that Iraq did possess weapons of mass destruction; this would put it in violation of UNSC resolutions, a cause for authorization to invade. If lawmakers decided, additionally, that there was a real danger that Iraq would provide its WMD—the existence of was agreed upon by everyone—to terrorists with global reach, then that would be a further cause for authorization. If one thought, as Douglas Feith’s subordinates did, that Iraq and al Qaeda already had a “mature,
symbiotic relationship,” then authorization was a given (indeed the authorization to take action against Iraq under that rationale had already been given the previous year, in S. J. Res. 23, “Authorization for Use of Military Force”). The only reasons not to vote “Yes” on the resolution would be either because one did not believe that Iraq was posing a continuing threat to the United States, or because the resolution authorizing the war did not require a clear United Nations authorization. All 100 Senators had the opportunity to read the most authoritative assessments of Iraq’s WMD capabilities, the NIE and the white paper, before the vote; the authorization was given on the best available information.\textsuperscript{125}

\textbf{SADDAM HUSSEIN’S FATAL DECEPTION}

A final factor that contributed greatly to the intelligence failure was their misreading of Saddam Hussein. Iraq’s WMD capabilities had steadily eroded during the 1990s as a result of U.N. inspections. But Saddam had relied on maintaining the image of having these weapons as a deterrent to potential enemies in the region. Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor wrote, in their book \textit{Cobra II}, that Saddam had let even his military believe that he had WMD, long after they were gone. Only in December 2002 had he revealed the secret to the highest officials in his state.\textsuperscript{126} Even after the internal disclosure, Saddam strangely did not play the inspections game with total candor. According to \textit{Cobra II}, “The Iraqi leader stopped short of providing the United Nations with airtight proof that he did not have a hidden cache of WMD.”\textsuperscript{127} He was holding on to the spectre of his weapons as a last deterrent to an invasion. He did not realize that the invasion would take place with or without WMD.

The very late disclosure to anyone outside of his closest circle that there were no WMD meant that it was impossible for the IC, when writing their NIE in September, to ascertain from any source within Iraq that the threat was nonexistant. They were forced to assume that his “apparatus of lies” and his deception efforts were going on at full intensity. This constituted another “failure of immagination”—a failure to question whether Saddam had not employed his elaborate deception and denial efforts as a means to uphold deter regional threats, rather than pose as one.

\textsuperscript{125} Woodward, \textit{Plan of Attack}, 203-4. The passage in Woodward’s book suggests only about two-thirds of Senators bothered to attend White House briefings, including the key judgments of the NIE, on Iraq.


\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Ibid.}, 119.
Conclusions

The coalition did not act in Iraq because we had discovered dramatic new evidence of Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass murder. We acted because we saw the existing evidence in a new light, through the prism of our experience on September 11th. ... That experience changed our appreciation of our vulnerability and the risks the U.S. faces from terrorist states and terrorist networks armed with powerful weapons.

—Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

Introduction

This thesis bears its title, “Making Sense of Iraq,” because it is its goal to arrive at a satisfactory explanation for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Such an explanation should take into account or “make sense of” the multitude of previous explanations. Over three chapters, I have assembled facts, reviewed the arguments of others, and constructed some arguments of my own toward that goal. This concluding section brings together the findings from the body of research that is these chapters.

In constructing an explanation for the war, my primary finding was that the war cannot be fully explained from a single factor or motivation. In the course of my research and writing I have examined three different aspects of the decision to invade Iraq, all of which have or might have been used by others as the single explanation for war. In Chapter 1 I sketched an argument that the administration was operating in a high-pressured domestic political context, and that the pressure may have edged it incrementally closer to war. Chapter 2 moved to the ideological implications of the Iraq war that has received so much attention. I found that the common explanation based on ‘neoconservatism’ is problematic; it loses much of its explanatory power with the discovery that the principal ideas of neoconservatism are not unique to that ideology, or even agreed upon by all. I also found that while President Bush on the surface may appear to be a neoconservative (in a modern understanding of the term), his actual policies are just as easily explainable by more traditional frames of reference. As a remedy, I attempted to re-locate the Bush administration within a more historical ‘tradition’ or

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‘school’ in foreign policy. Finally, in Chapter 3 I reviewed the explanation which administration members themselves consistently cite as their rationale for war and which others have discounted as a likely explanation: the threat from Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and a potential link to global terrorism. My judgment that the Iraqi threat was believed by the Bush administration weakens the explanation based on ideological causes. My finding that it cannot be proved that the administration purposely misrepresented the facts of the Iraqi WMD case discredits the notion that administration officials built that case as a “front” for a hidden neoconservative agenda of democracy promotion.

Rather than identify one of these—domestic politics, ideology, or weapons of mass destruction—as the single factor that explains the Iraq war, I argue that each factor contributes some explanatory power. Furthermore, a number of historical circumstances to each category also contribute. The rest is a matter of piecing together the whole puzzle.

The Finished Narrative

The war in Iraq was undertaken to end for all future the threat to the United States from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. For ten years since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Iraq was assumed to possess weapons of mass destruction, and for that reason the United States, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations had enforced a containment through economic and military means of Saddam Hussein’s regime. The containment was largely successful, and even managed to roll back most of Iraq’s WMD capabilities. But in 1998, United Nations weapons inspectors left Iraq after a period of increased obstruction the Iraqi regime, perhaps due in no small part to U.S. abuse of the inspections process in spying on the Iraqi military. This turn of events was most unfortunate, because it cost the U.S. a steady flow of information on Iraq’s capabilities. The way in which the inspections ended, and the lack of new information, brought the U.S. intelligence community to assume that Iraq were once again pursuing WMD, but for another three years the United States was content with containing Saddam Hussein.

On September 11, 2001, the most important historical circumstance occurred, that would shape U.S. policies and threat perception enough to warrant a war. A band of inconspicuous terrorists revealed to the world America’s vulnerability to unconventional attacks on the homeland. President George W. Bush formulated his response to the heinous acts in the form of a Global War on Terror, a prolonged struggle to wipe out all terrorist groups with ‘global reach’, and to deny them sanctuary in weak, hostile or ‘rogue’ states. The president may have been compelled to this sweeping language either from a fear that the
public would lose confidence in an administration that was less bold, or from a realization that his Jacksonian base would not support a policy that was not cast as a profound struggle on behalf of the American way of life. Both are probably true, but the president’s choice of words locked the administration to an excessively vigilant, global interventionist foreign policy, as seen in Chapter 1.

The circumstance of the terrorist attacks had changed American perceptions of threats to its homeland and interests abroad. The long-held assumption that Iraq had some forms of WMD and sought the ultimate form, a thermonuclear weapon, did not change; rather, it was the acceptability to the United States of the current level of risk that changed. A regime like Saddam’s, with a sophisticated secret service and a history both of state terrorism and of using unconventional weapons, could too easily duplicate the 9/11 attacks. If Iraq itself was deterred from using the weapons, it could provide them to a non-state actor with a shared interest in harming the United States. Al Qaeda was such an actor which in the past had even tried to acquire chemical and biological weapons, but any terrorist organization with ‘global reach’ could potentially become a proxy for the Iraqi regime. A WMD expert and veteran of the 1990s inspections process said on national television that it would be a “piece of cake” for Iraq to provide a terrorist organization with WMD if it so wished.129 This was the ‘nexus’ of rogue states, WMD, and terrorism. I argued in Chapters 2 and 3 that this threat, rather than an ideological rationale, underlay the decision to go to war.

So it was that in the course of 2002, the United States tried to pressure Iraq into giving up its weapons and programs. At the same time, the U.S. began marshalling a new coalition to deal with Iraq in the highly likely event that it would not disarm. The president went first to the United Nations, then to Congress, to get the full discretion to apply the maximum amount of ‘credible threat’ to Iraq.

ACCELERATING THE MARCH TO WAR

The president asked Congress for an authorization for the use of force against Iraq. Having a resolution authorizing force in advance would strengthen his hand with the United Nations and international community, with the coalition—Tony Blair had said a U.N. process was needed for his country’s support—and vis-à-vis Saddam Hussein, who would then know that there was nothing holding the U.S. back. But the request for authorization had also come at an

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129 Congressional Record 148, no. 133 (October 10, 2002): S10237.
opportune time for the Republican party, since it allowed them to turn attention from issues that would hurt them, such as the ailing U.S. economy and corruption scandals like Enron. The authorization bill was expected to pass through Congress before the November Congressional elections, which put the opposition under pressure.

It was here that the shortcomings of the intelligence community in Iraq came into play. Congressmen were expected to make their decision on the best available intelligence, but that intelligence had not yet been compiled in a National Intelligence Estimate as debates began. The National Intelligence Council then compiled an NIE in record time, three weeks, the key judgments of which were made available to at least all Senators, if not all Congressmen. Aided by a fear of underestimating a threat or overlooking a pattern, as had happened before 9/11, the intelligence community drew alarmist conclusions from a body of intelligence that was much smaller and less reliable than it could have been, had it not been for the end of UNSCOM inspections in 1998. Every point of the NIE’s conclusions was exaggerated. The short turnaround on the compilation of the document probably did not further cause estimations to be wrong, but it probably did cause the authors to write a document that did not sufficiently reflect the doubts that were associated with each estimate. The result was that lawmakers made their decision on the basis of a document that stated in a too authoritative manner that Iraq had WMD. Worse still, it is possible that legislators feared the same of the intelligence community as it itself did: that it may be overlooking a pattern, or may be having a failure of imagination. The psychological effect of 9/11 on the intelligence community would thus be “compounded.”

I find that the 2002 midterm elections must be regarded as another historical circumstance that contributed to accelerating the march to war. The elections dictated an early vote on the authorization bill. The process for the authorization resolution in turn was driving the intelligence review process, forcing a National Intelligence Estimate to be made on a weak body of evidence. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that the pressure of time probably did not significantly alter the “bottom line” judgments of the NIE; however, in time enough new intelligence would have been collected to flood out the bad intelligence.

Hence we see that the authorization for use of military force was affected by another unfortunate historical circumstance, that of the weak position of the CIA in Iraq following the Iraq-UNSCOM confrontation in 1998. What might have alleviated this lack would have been a concerted effort to infiltrate the Iraqi regime; however, with the perception of threat as it was before 9/11, it was not deemed necessary. After that date, it was too late; a political dynamic was driving towards war faster than the CIA could replenish its forces. Without the elections, a
U.N. process might still have been set in motion that would in time have provided a better body of evidence. On the other hand, the Congressional authorization contributed greatly to the credibility of George W. Bush’s threat, and Saddam Hussein might not have accepted the renewed inspections without it.

With the authorization for use of military force, the United States had committed itself to war. Any attempt to halt the drive to war at that point would have had serious negative consequences to the administration and to the nation itself. The administration had staked the credibility of the nation, before the international community, on the WMD case. The mindset of the administration, probably reflected in the Congressional vote, at this point would be that the United States must make good on its commitment; anything else would be a national disgrace. The disproval of the WMD case by either Iraq or the United Nations could of course have removed the rationale under which the commitment was made; in that case, the United States would be temporarily disgraced, but the credibility of its threat to rogue nations would not have been lessened. A failure to make good on the promise of war while the Iraqi threat was active, however, would have hurt the United States immeasurably. In the eyes of Jacksonian Americans, the United States would then become a “pusillanimous” superpower that could be taunted by small-time regional powers like Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. It was paramount to strike Iraq decisively, in the interest of deterring similar powers from trying the same. President Bush declared that deterrence and containment did not apply to al Qaeda and Iraq, but he surely still believed that nation-states could still be deterred by the U.S. reputation, once Iraq had been made an example of.

A factor that hurried the war was the Iraqi geography. Iraq is a desert country where the summers are gruelingly hot. By attacking before the end of February (in any given year), the U.S. would accomplish its strategic objective of regime change before the start of summer. General Tommy Franks of CENTCOM rationalized it to President Bush: “I’d rather do it when the weather is more favorable to us than less favorable,” meaning that the agility of U.S. maneuver warfare was greatest before the summer.130 If war did not get started by that time, March, the death toll on U.S. forces could rise. The weather would not be favorable again until November. By November, the political “window of opportunity” might have passed, and U.S. reputation for resolve might have been weakened; the deterrence factor would be diminished. By that time also Saddam Hussein might provide al Qaeda with his feared WMD.

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It may not have been a decisive factor, but the weather did play a role in accelerating the march to war.

And finally, Saddam Hussein was an external factor who, in perpetuating his deception and denial effort even after he had disarmed, sealed his own fate. He deemed that he needed the spectre of possessing WMD to maintain his position in the region, possibly also within his own country as a deterrent to the other ethnic groups. Saddam Hussein frustrated both the intelligence collection effort with his impressive security apparatus and pure paranoia, and the diplomatic and inspections processes in his continued deception.

COULD WAR HAVE BEEN AVOIDED?

The war was the outcome of a massive failure, in the face of pressing historical circumstances, in both the policy-determining branches of U.S. government. The executive must take most of the blame, as it is responsible for the proper function of the bureaucracies, including the intelligence community. The war might have been avoided if the intelligence community had performed better in its “analytic tradecraft,” or if a greater effort had been directed at intelligence collection on Iraq after the departure of UNSCOM in 1998. Reporting after the war has also revealed that the bureaucracies above the intelligence community on occasion failed to make it clear to the executive that the intelligence was not solid, that there were doubts about the reliability of some sources, such as the INC-affiliated defectors or CURVE BALL. These doubts did exist, but they were not communicated upwards in the governmental hierarchy, and it was not sufficiently reflected in the crucial document, the NIE. Furthermore, at the Department of Defense there was carried out an alternative “analysis” of intelligence that may have effectively undermined the credibility of the intelligence community with some officials. The fact that some of the people involved in this effort happen to be associated with the social-professional network of ‘neoconservatives’ in government I judge to be insignificant; I find it much more convincing that these people simply have a history of taking the most alarmist view of threats to the U.S., than that they deliberately twisted their analysis to advance ideological goals. Ultimately I do not find that their views were allowed to significantly “contaminate” the crucial Congressional process, but their effort nevertheless represent a bureaucratic failure.

The legislative branch must also take its share of the blame, as it did possess the power to deny authorization, or more realistically, to hinge authorization on a second Security Council resolution unequivocally approving an invasion. The Levin Amendment proposed such a course, and was circulated shortly before the final vote, but was killed without serious
consideration on the Senate floor. Senators, especially on the Democratic side, must have felt the pressure of the upcoming elections: the possible ramifications of going against the authorization and thus being “soft” on terrorism or rogue states. I do not doubt that these considerations were decisive to at least some Senators, but if they were, it was a gross overappreciation of personal over national interest.

If the intelligence community had acquitted itself perfectly and forcefully argued against the war or cautioned that its judgments were too weak, the war could conceivably have been avoided. But it would have taken an enormous effort to turn around the prevailing assumption, which was almost universally held, that Iraq was hiding WMD. Even UNSCOM leader Hans Blix apparently believed that it did, right up until the eve of the war, but at least he was willing to give Iraq the benefit of the doubt, “innocent until proven guilty,” because he did not see Iraq as an urgent threat to anyone.

The most surprising conclusion I have made from my research, is that it could have happened to almost any administration, Democrat or Republican. This is because the determining factors, as I see them, were largely apolitical factors. The historical circumstance of Saddam’s cat-and-mouse game with the international community does not change with a different administration. Neither, I argue, does the weakness of the intelligence community’s reporting on Iraq. The circumstance of the 2002 Congressional elections, however, is one point on which a different administration might have played its cards differently, and perhaps avoided an acceleration towards war. But what I hold to be the most decisive historical circumstance that “enabled” or accelerated the war was the September 11 terrorist attacks. I find it doubtful that another administration could have prevented them. This factor is also not dependent on political divisions. The tragedy of 9/11 made its mark on all levels of government, from the threat perception in the executive and Congress, to the assumptions made in the intelligence community. This provided the main impetus toward war, at the same time that it would not, had there not been the weapons of mass destruction.

In the end, the war could have been prevented, had cooler heads prevailed. But those cooler heads were not a majority in the White House, in Congress, in the bureaucracies, even in the American public. And for that, the U.S. is now stuck in Iraq, debating whether to prolong the war into another few years of quagmire, or to “cut and run,” a definitive defeat without honor.
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