

## **THEORIES OF CONFLICT AND THE IRAQ WAR**

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### **Abstract**

The article examines the U.S. decision to invade Iraq from a range of analytic perspectives—realism, liberalism, elite interests, ideological influences, and personal and social psychology—in order to better understand the causes of the invasion decision and implications of the particular case study for general theories of war causes. The analysis distinguishes among different types of causal influences and traces links among the various analytic perspectives.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq has become the largest, longest, and most costly use of armed force by the United States since the Vietnam war. It is the first major post-Cold-war U.S. military action taken apart from an international organization and the first U.S. experience as an occupying power in a Middle Eastern country. Although the invasion decision is in some respects unprecedented, particularly concerning extensive U.S. military involvement in an Arab or Muslim country, the contention here is that the Iraq invasion is not *sui generis* and can be usefully understood with reference to established theories of war causes. This article considers how theories concerning the causes of war can help explain the U.S. decision. It explores how contending interpretations of this particular war can add to understanding of war causes generally, and also traces linkages among the theoretical perspectives.

Table 1 summarizes the theoretical perspectives under discussion, beginning with realism, which, emphasizes motives related to national security, power, and resources. By contrast, liberalism considers differences between democracies and non-democracies to be a fundamental cause of war. Perspectives that emphasize sub-state interests highlight elites' political, bureaucratic, and financial incentives for war. Ideational perspectives consider how ideologies, beliefs, and worldviews contribute to war. This latter perspective overlaps, to an extent, with theories of personality and social psychology, which attribute a causal role in conflict to the attitudes and perceptions of the individuals and groups involved. Each of these broad categories comprises a variety of different theoretical perspectives. The article seeks to analyze a range of interpretations of causality that pertain to the invasion decision, and is not intended to be comprehensive.

Table 1: Summary of Explanatory Perspectives on the Iraq Invasion

Theory	Causal/explanatory focus
Realism	<p>Unipolarity, maintain hegemony and avoid post-9/11 decline by demonstrating U.S. willingness to use force</p> <p>Avoid nuclear proliferation, eliminate Iraqi WMD threat against the U.S. and its allies</p> <p>Gain regional military bases, pressure Syria and Iran, assist Israel</p> <p>Secure U.S. oil supplies, reduce energy vulnerabilities</p> <p>U.N. inspections are unreliable, sanctions policy causes resentment</p>
Liberalism	<p>Democracies' fear that dictatorships will attack them first</p> <p>Security derives from spreading democracy and human rights</p>
Elite interests	<p>War for partisan political gain: Divert public from failure to prevent 9/11 or capture al-Qaeda leaders, and from past ties to Saddam Hussein</p> <p>Vested interests (e.g. energy corporations), war profiteering</p> <p>Interests of the defense bureaucracy and intelligence agencies</p>
Ideological influences	<p>Neoconservative belief in efficacy of unilateral force</p> <p>Orientalist beliefs about Middle Eastern peoples, and evangelical Christian beliefs concerning Israel</p> <p>Vengeful U.S. nationalism after 9/11</p>
Personality and social psychology	<p>Bush's need to surpass father, family vendetta against Saddam Hussein</p> <p>Attractions of applying the "Munich analogy" to Iraq</p> <p>Cognitive inability to adapt to a non-state adversary and reflexive resort to Cold war strategies and weaponry, ignorance of the Middle East</p> <p>Societal need for enemies</p>

### Realism

Realism helps to explain aspects of foreign policy that remain consistent over time. From a realist perspective, decisions by governments (or "states") to go to war are the product of all states' involuntary participation in eternal quests for power and security due to an international political environment in which each state fears the actual or

potential hostility of other states. Leaders rationally calculate war's costs and benefits in terms of their state's power and security. States' international behavior thus reflects the constraints imposed on their actions by their relative power position. In this regard, the shift from a two-superpower (bipolar) distribution of power during the Cold war to unipolar U.S. military dominance caused U.S. strategy to shift from policies of deterrence or containment of threats to policies of preventive warfare against threatening "rogue" states (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002, 20-23). Unipolar dominance after the Soviet Union's collapse created incentives for the U.S. to deemphasize collective security and to rely more heavily on its own military: Given unrivalled U.S. power, realist theory predicts that any U.S. leader would view multilateral institutions as more of a hindrance than a help.

Realism's emphasis on continuity and on the inevitability of military competition and war among sovereign states gains credence from the fact that, despite changes in leadership and despite the collapse of its main rival, the U.S. did not diminish its military spending after the end of the Cold war. Rather, the Clinton administration pursued an arms buildup so that U.S. militarily outspent any combination of potential rivals and, in addition, bombed Serbia without U.N. authorization.

The Bush administration has been forthright about its goal of global hegemony—a power so complete that challenging it becomes nearly inconceivable. Bush's (2002a) West Point speech declared, "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge." Given this strategic objective, overthrowing Saddam Hussein's government can be understood as an effort to enhance U.S. reputational and symbolic power beyond challenge—particularly after the September 11, 2001 attacks that might have made the U.S. appear vulnerable.

Moreover, once Bush publicly declared that regime change in Iraq was a U.S. priority, the U.S. would have seemed weak had it accepted any compromise that left the Baathist regime intact. By staking the U.S. reputation for willingness to use force on achieving regime change, Bush made war nearly inevitable due to the national security interest in protecting that reputation.

This symbolic or reputational motive might also explain why the Bush administration targeted Iraq, rather than North Korea, Iran, or Libya—enemy states whose clandestine weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs were, at the time of the invasion, more advanced and potentially threatening to the U.S. and its allies than Iraq's was known to be: If a primary incentive for war was to demonstrate resolve to enemies and allies, then this could not be as easily done against North Korea or Iran, which, due partly to their more advanced weaponry, were much more difficult targets for an invasion. By this logic Iraq was the more compelling target in part because it actually posed less of a threat.

The reputational motive may also explain U.S. rejection of continuing U.N. weapons inspections in Iraq, after Iraq agreed to admit international inspectors in 2002. Had the Bush administration mainly sought to discover threatening weapons or weapons

programs, then its non-cooperation with U.N. inspectors' requests for more time to finish what was likely the most intrusive inspection regime ever undertaken (and the concomitant forfeiture by the U.S. of possibilities for a more inclusive U.N. authorized coalition against Iraq) would seem counter-productive. However, if the U.S. motive was primarily to enhance its reputation for willingness to use force unilaterally, particularly in light of post-9/11 concerns about the appearance of U.S. vulnerability, then forestalling completion of U.N. inspections, and accepting a less inclusive war coalition under U.S., not U.N., leadership, can be understood in terms of rational calculation of security interests.

In order to address why Iraq in particular was targeted, realism would also point to Iraq's geostrategic location, which impinged on multiple security concerns of the U.S., and to Iraq's nearly unsurpassed oil resources, which it could potentially deploy against U.S. interests. Military bases in Iraq would enable the U.S. to project its power further into the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa, and could replace the less secure bases that the U.S. established in Saudi Arabia after the 1999 Gulf war (United States Department of Defense, 2003).

Thus, in realist terms, the invasion was a rational means for the U.S. to achieve its primary goal of demonstrating its power to allies and competitors alike, and of avoiding the appearance of post-9/11 decline. As well, it was intended to prevent Iraq's actual or potential use of WMD and oil resources to threaten the U.S. or its allies, and to prevent Iraq's potential collaboration with anti-U.S. terrorist groups. The U.S. national interest in guaranteeing its oil supply at a time of diminishing domestic reserves and increased worldwide demand could also be achieved by military control of Iraq's petroleum reserves, which, in a Baathist controlled Iraq, would have been exploited instead by America's competitors (Mayer, 2004; Klare, 2004).

The post-Cold-war shift to a unipolar rather than bipolar distribution of power was a permissive cause of the invasion decision, in that it eliminated a check on U.S. action: The U.S. would not have attacked Iraq had it been a Soviet client state, as in the Cold war. The shift to unipolarity also impelled the U.S. to assert its military-political dominance against any symbolic or material challenges, such as the 9/11 attacks. In this sense, the 9/11 attacks constitute a proximate, near-term cause of the Iraq invasion decision. That the 9/11 attacks were a permissive cause as well is discussed below.

A secondary motive for the overthrow of the Iraqi regime, from a realist perspective, would be to increase the security of Israel, the main U.S. regional ally. In asserting that "the road to Jerusalem goes through Baghdad," Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz (United States Department of Defense, 2003) and other officials assumed that loss of Iraqi patronage would lessen Palestinian militancy in the conflict with Israel and facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian accord on terms acceptable to Israel. The administration also hoped that a U.S. presence in Iraq would put pressure on Syria, which both the U.S. and Israel considered an enemy government. The U.S. military could also use its bases in post-war Iraq, along with existing U.S. bases in Afghanistan, to pressure Iran to end its

nuclear program, or even to help effect regime change in Teheran (Gordon, 2004). In sum, beyond the goal of symbolically establishing or re-establishing hegemony, the invasion would support the projection of U.S. power into southwest Asia and beyond, helping to contain and pressure hostile governments. Viewed thus, the goal of preserving and consolidating U.S. quasi-hegemonic global dominance would be served by undermining states that posed potential or actual challenges, in accord with the administration's policy of preventive war against states thought to be developing WMD.

### **Implications of Realist Perspectives**

Realism's rational-choice perspective—that leaders choose war when they believe it necessary for national security—has considerable explanatory power, but is complicated by the Bush administration's exaggeration of the imminence and magnitude of the security threat that Iraq posed. The administration's public warnings of a "mushroom cloud" that Iraq could unleash and its contentions about Iraq's purported acquisition of uranium and aluminum tubes for nuclear weapons raise the question of how Iraq could have been perceived as sufficiently threatening to warrant invasion, given what one former administration policymaker later admitted was a "complete lack of evidence of any imminence of hostile attack by Iraq" (Haass, 2005, 94). There was no basis for administration assertions that Iraq could not be deterred from attacking the U.S. or its allies, unless one assumed that Iraq's leaders were wholly irrational: Overwhelming U.S. retaliatory capabilities would have made any such attack suicidal. Nor were administration warnings about Iraq's ability or motivation to provide anti-U.S. terrorists with WMD based on rational analysis as much as on unfounded speculation or imagination. However, it is possible that administration officials genuinely believed that U.S. security depended, for reputational and material reasons, on a successful invasion of Iraq, and knowingly exaggerated the purported threat in order to gain domestic and international support. While this interpretation comports with realism, the conclusion that U.S. leaders were convinced by ideological and psychological factors of an imminent threat where none actually existed is inconsistent with realism, as are interpretations attributing a causal role to the interests of elite domestic constituencies.

The realist perspective implies that so long as the U.S. aspires to hegemonic status and understands its own security to depend on demonstrations of overwhelming military strength, it will be compelled to respond to any actual or potential attack on itself or its allies as if its vital national security interests were threatened. The U.S. is less constrained than it was in the Cold war, when the superpowers had a mutual interest in avoiding direct confrontation, and has increasingly adopted a policy of preventive war. However, the policy of preventive war can itself be expected to inadvertently encourage actions by challenger states that threaten the aspiring hegemon. In particular, potential U.S. targets will view their development and deployment of nuclear weapons as a rational

and necessary response to the insecurity engendered by U.S. efforts to ensure its own security (the “security dilemma” in realist theory).

### **Liberalism**

According to liberal theories, decisions on war derive from states’ internal characteristics, particularly their type of government, and from the influence of international law. Global security and prosperity depend on the spread of democracy and trade, and on the conflict-regulation functions of international institutions. As with realism, “liberalism” subsumes several related theories of international relations. Kantian/ Wilsonian idealism is based on the idea that more democracy causes more peace, and the closely related concept of the democratic (or liberal) peace, which asserts that democracies do not fight one another. In prescriptive terms, therefore, “crusading liberals” favor using force to replace dictatorships with democracies, insofar as propagating democracy and human rights enhances U.S. national security and that of other democracies.

While mature democracies do not fight among themselves, they are prone to war with non-democracies. One explanation is that democracies fear that non-democracies, which lack both transparency and governmental checks on the use of force, are thereby able to take advantage of slower mobilizing democratic adversaries by attacking first. Because they anticipate that dictatorships are more able and willing to use deception, democracies become more aggressive and war-prone when they perceive threats from non-democracies (Russett, 1993). In this regard, the decision to invade may be understood in terms of the administration’s fear that Iraq would deceive weapons inspectors and secretly develop or deploy WMD for an attack on the U.S. or its allies. David Kay (2004, 10), chief weapons inspector for the administration’s Iraq Survey Group, recalled U.S. officials’ biased assumptions about Iraqi duplicity:

We discovered after the first Gulf War that we had seriously underestimated Iraq’s nuclear capacity, so no one believed them when they told the truth [that no weapons existed].... We got so used to being deceived by Iraq that it became the only reality we could imagine (See also Powers, 2004, 89).

Some support for the relevance of liberal theory to the invasion decision can be found in the counterfactual question, “Would the U.S. have invaded if Iraq had been a democracy?” The answer is likely not: Not only have mature democracies never fought one another, but it is questionable whether Congress and the public would have supported the attack had Iraq not been a dictatorship. The difference in regime type appears to have been at least a permissive cause of the war.

Assertions of the primacy of liberal motives for the invasion of Iraq are complicated by the administration's pre-9/11 repudiation of liberal priorities, such as nation building, which Bush disparaged during the 2000 presidential debates. However, the administration's apparently radical shift may be partly explained by the 9/11 attacks, which augmented the security rationale for forcibly implanting democracy in the Middle East: From a liberal perspective, the 9/11 attacks, perpetrated by nationals of non-democratic countries in the Middle East, although not Iraq, provided a new and compelling incentive for the U.S. to use its power to foster democracy, with the expectation of a positive spillover effect through the region.

Yet liberal motives, and the administration's conversion to universal principles of freedom and democracy, do not explain either the targeting of Iraq in particular, rather than another of the region's anti-democratic regimes, or key administration members' pre-9/11 advocacy of regime change in Baghdad. Interpretations emphasizing liberal ideology are also complicated by the fact that the invasion's goal of regime change is inadmissible in international law. The administration disregarded liberal precepts by bypassing the U.N. on the issue (and by its electronic spying on Security Council member states and on the Secretariat). A prominent U.S. justification for ending Hussein's repressive dictatorship was to protect human rights and alleviate Iraqis' suffering. Bush reportedly read about Iraqi human-rights abuses and such reports "gave him the sort of moral clarity that was necessary to make the decision [to invade]" (Schweizer and Schweizer, 2004, 540). However, no large-scale human rights violations were ongoing at the time of the invasion, and the administration did not then suggest that human-rights concerns were a main motive for the invasion decision (e.g., United States Department of Defense, 2003).

Liberal interpretations are also problematic insofar as U.S. administrations inevitably cite liberal ideals in their public rationales for war: Since America is a liberal democracy, decisionmakers find it expedient to appeal for public support for wars in liberal terms, even if such motives are actually of little relevance. It is possible, however, that decisionmakers were genuinely motivated by liberal goals, whose achievement they believed justified the use of illiberal means.

### **Elite Interests**

Analyses focused on sub-state interests consider how the actions of domestic constituencies—particularly political and economic elites—affect decisions involving the military and war. Rather than seeing war as imposed exogenously by the international system, a variety of perspectives focus on institutions and interest groups that are endogenous to the state. A Marxist perspective, for example, considers that external wars are fomented by the bourgeoisie to control new markets and to protect its class dominance by deflecting socioeconomic pressures arising from the proletariat.

According to the related diversionary theory of war, an illegitimate or revolutionary regime finds external enemies to be politically useful and may undertake war as a means of self-legitimization and to create mass consent regarding its policies and to suppress domestic divisions and dissent. From this perspective, Bush, lacking the legitimacy of an untainted electoral victory, seized on the political opportunity presented by the 9/11 attacks to wrap himself in the legitimizing mantle of “war president” during the brief conflict in Afghanistan, and then invaded Iraq to prolong the politically favorable domestic climate that war engendered.

Building on the assumption that leaders prize their own political survival more highly than a reified “national interest,” Bueno de Mesquita (2002) concludes, “international relations is, simply put, a venue for politicians to gain or lose domestic political advantage.” Since citizens’ commitment to the well-being of the state is heightened by their nationalistic responses to perceived threats, nationalist sentiments from war redound to the advantage of the party in power insofar as the state is embodied in the sitting administration. Since leaders in democracies presumably fear electoral punishment for engaging in long, costly, and losing wars, they choose war mainly when they believe they face very weak foes. The war was thus the product of administration officials’ expectations that the Republican party would benefit from a “rally-‘round-the-flag” effect during a war against Iraq, as Bush’s father’s administration had in 1991, and that U.S. forces would again achieve a relatively easy victory.

Moreover, war could be expected to deflect public, media, and opposition attention from the administration’s apparent obliviousness to and mishandling of terrorist threats in its first nine months in office and to help evade responsibility for its failure to prevent the 9/11 attacks (e.g., Lichtblau, 2005; Shane, 2005). War would also distract attention from the administration’s inability to find Osama Bin Laden or his senior deputy and its inability to prevent the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The elder Bush, as vice president and then as president, had aided Saddam Hussein’s Iraq with weapons, loans, and military intelligence during the Iran-Iraq war. High-ranking members of the junior Bush’s administration had also lent support to Hussein’s dictatorship through their positions in previous administrations and as private executives. These officials may have considered that overthrowing Hussein would erase or compensate for these morally ambiguous and potentially politically damaging histories. Although starting a war for diversionary purposes may seem unreasonably risky, cognitive biases, discussed below, may have minimized the risks in administration leaders’ minds.

The interests of the state are further disaggregated by bureaucratic-politics explanations that assume that governments consist of factions, one or more of which may promote war in order to advance its interests in the intra-elite competition for power. Such explanations highlight incentives for war stemming from the advantages that the war is expected to confer on bureaucratic and organizational interests.



Such an analysis might note the U.S. military's interest in justifying its budgets, which are even larger than during the Cold war, despite the absence of a threat to the U.S. comparable to that posed by the Soviet Union. In this regard, it is significant that most administration leaders on Iraq policy—Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and several others—spent important parts of their careers in the Pentagon and had long advocated for increased military budgets. The U.S. military is not designed to deploy against an elusive non-state actor like al-Qaeda, which requires a more complicated but much cheaper response than does invading a state such as Iraq. Moreover, as Rumsfeld averred, Iraq presented a target of convenience from the military perspective (Clarke, 2004, 30-31).

Rumsfeld also promoted an agenda of military transformation featuring a smaller fighting force and increased reliance on special operations and high technology, such as precision bombing. From this perspective, part of the incentive for war was to enhance the military's resources and to further the implementation of Rumsfeld's transformational agenda.

Bureaucratic incentives for war may also stem from the preference of military leaders for offensive strategies over defensive ones, and from the rigidity of military planning. During the long lead-up to the Iraq war, and the months-long positioning of U.S. troops in the region, it is possible that "war plans and the process of war planning bec[a]me policy by their own momentum" (Woodward, 2004, 3, 10-11).

The goal of regime change in Iraq also responded to the military's interest in abandoning the containment policy that the first President Bush established toward Iraq. From the U.S. military perspective, containing Iraq was burdensome and dangerous: To enforce the no-fly zones that covered most of the country, U.S. forces had to fly thousands of sorties, continually threatened by Iraqi anti-aircraft guns and missiles and occasionally having to bomb Iraqi artillery. Each of these missions, which had no end-date, ran the risk of having U.S. pilots killed or captured and of losing multimillion-dollar planes.

For their part, U.S. intelligence agencies are charged with alerting political leaders to threats the country's enemies pose. Since the CIA director and other heads of intelligence agencies serve at the president's pleasure, they are subject to pressures to accommodate the president's perceived preferences. These officials, in turn, exercise control over their subordinates' careers. Since intelligence professionals are aware that supporting or challenging the preferred policies of executive branch leaders can affect their own bureaucratic interests, they may have allowed explicit or implicit political pressures to distort the objectivity of policy analysis on Iraq.

The chief of British intelligence was convinced that by mid-2002 the Bush administration had privately committed itself to war with Iraq and that it was mainly concerned with arranging a political rationale or *casus belli* involving WMD and terrorism (see Rycroft, 2005). If, in 2002, some U.S. intelligence analysts also perceived that the president was already determined to invade, and responded to this assumption by

eliminating caveats in their assessments of whether Iraq posed a WMD threat, then their biases should not be considered causal unless the intelligence officials' assumption that the president was already determined to invade Iraq was incorrect. If such assumptions were correct, then the skewed estimates were an effect of the White House's decision, rather than a cause. Such bureaucratic behavior can be considered a permissive cause of war, however, because the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate helped make possible the Congressional vote in November that authorized the invasion.

Theories of vested interests highlight how corporate interests and political corruption motivate politicians to favor military build-ups and wars. From this perspective—exemplified by the role of the “military-industrial-legislative complex” in arms buildups—an incentive for the Iraq invasion stemmed not only from the interests of U.S. energy corporations with political and financial ties to the administration, but also from the tens of billions of dollars that the U.S. would allocate for military and reconstruction expenses in Iraq. Privatization programs favored by the Bush administration entailed that much of this enormous public revenue would be awarded in contracts to private corporations. The corporations that stood to profit most were those whose officers tended to support Bush and other Republicans. For administration officials, then, the expected utility of war was that corporate officials would reward the administration with substantial campaign contributions in return for profit opportunities from taxpayer supported reconstruction aid.

A crude version of interest-group determinism would maintain that corporate interest groups that stood to benefit from the war successfully lobbied the administration to invade Iraq in order to increase their profits. A more nuanced version might assert that the anticipated political and financial benefits of war were a tipping factor. Government decisionmakers convinced themselves that an invasion was essential to national security, while political and financial self-interest actually played a significant, perhaps decisive, motivating role.

Administration officials had personal financial interests in corporations in the energy, construction, and defense sectors that stood to benefit from government contracts in Iraq. Perhaps more analytically significant were the administration's post-invasion revealed preferences: It distributed multi-billion dollar contracts to corporations that had supported the president and vice president and their party with political donations, without subjecting the awards to congressional or international oversight (see Mayer, 2004). While not necessarily indicating causality, the foreseeable and outstandingly large benefits of the invasion and of post-invasion control of Iraq for the profits of corporations to which high administration officials had financial and political ties complicates the national-interest model of decisionmaking in realism.

### **Implications of Liberal and Elite-Interests Perspectives**

Interpretations stressing political elites' manipulation of war for their political and financial benefit imply that flaws in the system of checks on the executive branch of government permitted the Bush administration to go to war for the sake of the administration's partisan political goals. Liberal theory considers that the power of the people to vote their leaders out of office will dissuade leaders from going to war unnecessarily since the public has to bear the costs of war. Structural checks on the executive's war-making powers were ineffective because the mainstream media failed in its watchdog role, because Congress mostly failed to question the executive's claim of a dire threat from Iraq, and because the administration's use of deficit spending and avoidance of universal conscription allowed the majority of the public to believe that they would be shielded from the war's costs.

Thus compromised, the structures of democratic government may no longer suffice to restrain leaders who engage in unnecessary wars. Sub-state analyses that attribute causality to war's anticipated political benefits imply that wars of choice will end only after loss of public support causes Congress and the Executive to reverse their assessments of the war's political costs and benefits.

Liberal theories imply that the U.S. will continue to prioritize the overthrow of non-democracies that it considers hostile. If predictive aspects of liberal theories are correct then the successful democratization of Iraq may spill over and create pressures and incentives for democratization in neighboring states. To the extent that the U.S. occupation fails to produce a legitimate and stable government in Iraq, however, it may cause a backlash against democracy in the region and elsewhere: Liberal values lose legitimacy insofar as they seem to have been discredited by U.S. actions (e.g., insofar as the region's publics consider the invasion and occupation responsible for mass civilian deaths and suffering).

Liberal theories do not predict whether democracies will pursue regime change militarily against dictatorships that possess deterrent WMD. In such cases, it seems likely that democracies would revert to defensive strategies of containment. Democracies would be unlikely to engage in a potentially nuclear war with non-democracies, unless they were attacked first, or were more imminently and directly threatened than was the case with Iraq.

### **Ideological and Non-rational Influences**

The ideological and non-rational character of administration decisionmaking on Iraq has been emphasized by, among others, Bush's Secretary of State, Colin Powell (Woodward, 2004, 175, 292) and by the administration's Counterterrorism Coordinator, Richard Clarke (2004, 30-31). Such perspectives consider that motives for war may

emerge from the non-rational psychological processes of individual decisionmakers and core decisionmaking groups, as well as from the ideologically constructed attitudes of political elites.

A starting point for assessing the causal influence of a leader's psychology might be to ask whether in similar circumstances a different leader would have behaved similarly: Would Democrat Al Gore, or Republican John McCain—Bush's main rivals for the presidency—have decided to invade Iraq had either been elected in 2000? Regarding the former possibility, the Clinton-Gore administration did commit itself rhetorically to regime change in Iraq; it funded an anti-Hussein exile group and it bombed Iraqi air defenses to protect U.S. patrols over no-fly zones. But would a hypothetical President Gore have opted to invade Iraq? If we doubt this, and also doubt that a hypothetical Republican President McCain would have done so (although the differences between McCain's foreign policy positions and Bush's may not have been appreciable), then the causes of the decision appear to be located primarily in Bush's personal psychology, or in his ideological influences and those of his key advisors.

American presidents have traditionally been able to garner support for their national security policies; yet the complexity of U.S. decision processes on war and peace makes it unlikely that such decisions result solely from one individual's personality. In considering the influence of decisionmakers and advisors around President Bush, we may ask how their shared ideologies, particularly neoconservatism and related anti-Communist and Zionist ideologies, along with a vengeful and defensive nationalist sentiments among politicians and the public, affected the invasion decision.

Neoconservatism's ideological roots lie in the crusading liberalism and anti-communism of the Cold war. Neoconservatives—many with ties to lobbying groups such as the Committee on the Present Danger (which warned that the Soviet Union would win the arms race), the Project for a New American Century, and the American Enterprise Institute—are convinced that U.S. security depends on a policy of forward-leaning, anti-isolationist confrontation, rather than containment or accommodation of adversaries, or on multilateral approaches to security. Along with hawkish liberals, they see the War on Terror in the same light as U.S.-led wars against fascism and totalitarianism and envision the U.S. as a benevolent global hegemon that uses its power to promote democracy.

Bush administration neoconservatives and Straussians—students and followers of Leo Strauss, a political philosopher who escaped to the U.S. from Nazi Germany—became conditioned during the Cold war to seeing the world in terms of continual, potentially existential threats. Many of these policymakers shared a record as cold warriors of having misperceived and overestimated the threat posed by the Soviet Union. Given cognitive limitations, policymakers use schemas or historical analogies to “arrive at inferences—about the nature of the problem confronting them, about the stakes of the problem, and about dangers and prospects of alternative solutions” (Khong, 1992, 252).

The distortions that led decisionmakers to overestimate the Iraqi threat may be traced to faulty historical analogies that affected decision processes.

Like many Cold war presidents, Bush invoked the Munich analogy, which labels as “appeasement” policies other than military confrontation, in the lead-up to the invasion. Arguing for Saddam Hussein’s overthrow, Bush (2002b) likened Hussein to Hitler and drew analogies to the 1938 Munich conference, asserting, for example, “The harsh experience of 1938 showed that when great democracies fail to confront danger, greater dangers follow.” While such analogies may indicate a cognitive bias, politicians may also employ them instrumentally, to mobilize support for decisions that actually derive from motives other than analogical reasoning.

Heightened sense of threat perception and the tendency to inflate threats in public statements are hallmarks of prominent neoconservatives in the Pentagon. Some administration policymakers and analysts had ties to Israel’s right-wing Likud party, perceiving an acute sense of threat to Israel as well as to the U.S., and promoting the benefits that a U.S. imposed change of regime in Iraq would confer on Israeli security (Bamford, 2004, 288-292). Neoconservatives’ tendency to see both Israel and the U.S. as continually threatened with destruction predisposes them to advocate preventive attacks on potential enemies.

Bush’s biographers note that he is “deeply devoted to the Israeli cause. An emotional visit to the Holy Land in 1998 linked his Christian faith with the fate of the Israeli people in a deeply personal way” (Schweizer and Schweizer, 538-539), and Bush later described the visit as one of the most meaningful experiences of his life (Kornblut, 2002). Bush’s own born-again Christian ideology and that of other administration officials may have made them more sympathetic to the views of the administration’s pro-Likud Zionists.

The neoconservative affinity to territorially maximalist Likudnik Zionism is also reflected in attitudes that construct Arabs as the binary opposite of the Christian West and democratic Israel. Historically, Western Christians have imagined Arabs as decadent, alien, and inferior, and Western observers of Middle Eastern societies have emphasized their primitiveness, barbarism, ignorance, and backwardness. Such Orientalists (Said, 1979, 38-49, 306-328) believe Middle Eastern peoples to have a surfeit of uncontrolled emotions and a deficit of rationality. A related assumption that characterizes current U.S. policy is “that Arabs respect power and scorn attempts at reason as signs of weakness—and so the way to impress them is to cow them into submission” (Lynch, 2003).

From an Orientalist perspective, “Arab” and “Muslim” denote otherness and barbarism. American Orientalism contrasts Israel with the Arab states, and admires Israel for its democratic and pioneering values that seem to reflect the most admirable qualities of the U.S. itself. Taken together, such stereotypes may have disposed Bush administration policymakers and advisors to underestimate the peoples of the region and to rapidly resort to force to ameliorate U.S. policy dilemmas there. On the other hand, ideological considerations may function as post-hoc justifications for policy preferences

that derive primarily from elites' desire for power, wealth, or reputation (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993, 4) so that negative stereotypes may have merely facilitated policies that were essentially based on rational calculations of national security interests.

Rather than assuming that interests are exogenously determined, as in realism, an ideological perspective considers that interactions between societies produce interests. Like social psychology, ideological analyses focus on how the parties to a conflict construct their subjective realities. The trauma of the 9/11 attacks produced a widely felt sense of vulnerability and victimization and a national desire for revenge and "payback" that may have motivated the U.S. to go to war (e.g., Bush's declaration on walking into a White House meeting on the night of September 11, "We are going to kick some ass," cited in Lemann, 2004, 157). As much as by national-security interests or liberal values, the administration's decision of where to strike back may have been influenced by national identity and culture.

If the impetus for the Iraq invasion stemmed in significant part from a nationalist desire for vengeance following 9/11, then the Orientalist images, attitudes, and beliefs held by U.S. policymakers would have made it more difficult to differentiate among Arab and Muslim countries, or possibly made such distinctions seem unnecessary. Thus, Iraq, which had no proven connection to 9/11, could more easily become the object of post-9/11 vengeful sentiments. With the widely felt psychological need to administer punishment unassuaged by the invasion of Afghanistan, and with Bin Laden still at large, the administration may have seen in Saddam Hussein a scapegoat for the 9/11 attacks: He was, like the perpetrators, an Arab Muslim and could readily fill the role of evildoer. For purposes of vengeance, rationally informed analysis is unnecessary and perhaps undesirable. This perspective would help explain why Bush administration policymakers on Iraq generally excluded State Department personnel with first-hand experience of the region and knowledge of its politics and history.

Regarding personal motives, Bush apparently considered his family to be engaged in a deadly rivalry with Saddam Hussein. Indications that Bush viewed the contest in personal terms include his belief that in 1993 Hussein had tried to assassinate Bush's father in a plot that, had it succeeded, might also have killed his wife, Laura. Possibly illustrative of a vendetta-like motive was Bush's decision to keep Hussein's confiscated pistol in his office and to show it off to visitors after the Iraqi dictator's capture (Bumiller, 2004, A16).

Some observers have also located motives for the invasion decision in Bush's relationship with his father: Given the continual comparisons with his father within the Bush family, and how far he was from being a self-made man, Bush junior may have felt compelled to prove himself by surpassing his father and overthrowing Hussein, which his father had rejected doing after the 1991 Gulf war. Moreover, going to war with Iraq may have enhanced the younger Bush's sense of his own virility, given his sensitivity to the fact that his father had been publicly labeled a "wimp" (Schweizer and Schweizer, 2004, 388; see also Woodward, 2004, 421).

Feminist theories of international relations highlight the causal role of gender in war. These theories generally assume that increasing women's roles in governance and public decisionmaking would lessen war and violence. Such theories might account for the invasion decision with reference to key administration members' sense of masculinity and to gendered images of the adversary (see Cohn, 1993), or to the relative absence of women (*pace* Condoleezza Rice) from the highest levels of decision-making authority.

Interpretations stressing motivated biases posit that Bush and his inner circle were genuinely convinced that Iraq was a major threat and that, due to their emotional and cognitive predispositions, they seized on ambiguous intelligence information as confirmation of their biases. Such interpretations stand in contrast to the possibility that the administration deliberately deceived Congress and the public regarding an Iraqi threat that they knew to be minor or non-existent.

The administration's miscalculations—underestimating the al-Qaeda threat before 9/11, overestimating Iraq's weapons capabilities and intentions, underestimating the costs of an invasion and the potential for an anti-U.S. insurgency, as well as overestimating the degree to which other countries would bandwagon with the U.S. in the wake of the invasion—were probably facilitated by conformity of opinion among the inner circle of decisionmakers and the exclusion of outside expert advice. This facilitated a groupthink process (Janis, 1972) in which the members of the tight decisionmaking circle around Bush minimized the risks of an invasion. The absence of genuine debate and the presence of "mindguards" like Cheney who protect leaders from dissenting opinions (see, e.g., Suskind, 2004a, 76) create the conditions for groupthink, in which group members' independent and rational judgment is overridden by pressures to defer to the perceived preferences of a higher-ranking leader. Groupthink typically involves overestimating the group's chances of success and the righteousness of its cause, while neglecting to test assumptions about policy options and, consequently, underestimating their drawbacks and vulnerabilities.

Bush's personality predisposes him toward certainty, rather than nuanced reflection, introspection, or self-criticism (Suskind, 2004b). This trait may have led him to expect an easy victory in Iraq. Bush's faith may have also constituted a motivated bias that led Bush to minimize risks and to favor a policy of confrontation. Bush's lack of cognitive complexity—the capacity to view groups, policies, and ideas in differentiated terms and the disinclination to monolithic views and interpretations (Hermann, 1977, 167)—and his personal history as a former alcoholic turned evangelical, may also have predisposed him to think and behave in ways that enhanced the attractiveness of war as a policy option (Schweizer and Schweizer, 2004, 517).

While the groupthink hypothesis may explain why group members fail to challenge a preferred policy's flawed assumptions, it does not account for the origins of the particular policy whose flaws go unrecognized: In this case groupthink does not explain why administration leaders were considering an invasion option in the first place.

### **Implications of Ideological and Non-rational Influences**

Theories address causality on a fundamental level only if they address why the invasion policy was under consideration in the first place. While President Bush had personal motives for overthrowing Saddam Hussein, personality traits should not necessarily be considered causal. For example, although Bush's religious beliefs and his lack of cognitive complexity may be relevant factors, the connection with Iraq is imprecise. Such traits may have facilitated approval of the invasion policy but were not responsible for its emergence and its prominence. One may with more confidence view Bush's personal animosity toward Iraq's ruler as another tipping factor that made the invasion policy more attractive.

If U.S. society exhibits a perennial need for an external enemy, in part due to widespread nationalist attitudes, then the convergence of Christian evangelical and Zionist ideologies in the U.S. perhaps helps explain the choice of Iraq, rather than a different target. At the societal level, and among political elites, a sense of national chosenness and superiority, as well as racism, may make the U.S. more war-prone in the Middle East, due to evangelicals' beliefs about the Holy Land, and due to domestic political incentives for championing Israel. Ideological beliefs may have rendered U.S. leaders more susceptible to manipulation by those like Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi, or the government of Ariel Sharon in Israel, which may have fed the U.S. false intelligence reports about Iraqi weapons in order to promote a U.S. invasion that served their own political agendas (Bamford, 2005).

### **Conclusions**

Each analytic perspective discussed above—realism, liberalism, elite interests, ideological influences, and personal and social psychology—can account for important aspects of the Iraq invasion, so that, cumulatively, the decision appears “overdetermined.” Distinguishing among different types of causality may help to counter the retrospective bias toward seeing past events as inevitable. Considering the invasion decision in light of a range of theories also provides an opportunity to identify links among them.

The 9/11 attacks provided an enticing opportunity for the administration. On the afternoon of the attacks, Rumsfeld advocated using the military to attack Saddam Hussein as well as Osama Bin Laden, and that the U.S. “Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not” (Martin, 2002; see also Woodward, 2004, 26-27; and Clarke, 2004, 30). The post-Cold war shift to unipolarity was an additional permissive cause. The bureaucratic politics of the intelligence agencies assisted the administration's decision, as did psychological processes of groupthink within the war cabinet and Bush's



personal disposition toward certainty and his characteristic reluctance to engage in the complexities of policy analysis. These factors do not account for the how the invasion became a prominent policy option, but they did facilitate the invasion policy's selection once it came under consideration.

In examining links across the theoretical perspectives, it is notable that neoconservative ideology encompasses the ostensibly contradictory imperatives for the U.S. to protect its hegemonic aspirations, identified by realism, and the liberal imperative of opposing dictatorships and spreading democracy: The U.S. should not hesitate to use force to further the cause of worldwide democratization, the achievement of which also facilitates its role as a benevolent hegemon, since it is the only state with the motives and resources to do so. Traditionally, realist interpretations of international relations lead to conservative prescriptions that caution against expending resources on utopian initiatives and abstract universalist ideals. Similarly, as a hegemon, or at least as the most powerful state, the U.S. should, according to realism, be a status-quo oriented power, rather than a revisionist one with an ambitious program for remaking the world.

The Bush administration's ability to ignore contradictions in neoconservatism—notably between supporting democracy and using foreign military bases and alliances with militarist regimes abroad to achieve hegemony, and between the assumption that Arabs mainly respond to shows of force and the assumption that they are ripe for democracy, or that democracy can be forcefully implanted where it has no previous history—was abetted by administration members' elevated sense of threat perception, aggrieved nationalism, religious mission, and personal vendetta. Contradictions such as the role of anti-democratic states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan as key allies in a U.S.-led War on Terror, can be understood as a prioritization of the strategic ends of liberalism over whatever realist means are required to achieve them. The same interpretive logic could be applied to anti-democratic practices and human-rights abuses promulgated within the U.S. itself or at its foreign bases in service of proclaimed liberal goals.

The global strategic objectives of hegemony and democratization are linked to bureaucratic politics, particularly Rumsfeld and Cheney's initiatives to assert civilian control of the military and transform its doctrines, particularly the Powell Doctrine that sought to keep the military from fighting unwinnable wars. Along with the bureaucratic appeal of Iraq as a military target, the hegemonic and democratic imperatives described by realism and liberalism provide answers to the question, "why Iraq and not some other potentially threatening dictatorship?" In particular, Iraq's military weakness relative to other hostile dictatorships like North Korea and Iran made it a more attractive target, given U.S. expectations of an easy victory that would repair or even enhance its post-9/11 reputation as a hegemon. As well, administration policymakers considered that an invasion would secure preferential access to Iraq's vast petroleum reserves and to military-basing and power-projection opportunities in regions that U.S. policymakers considered vital to national security, and would also benefit Israel and pressure its

enemies, Syria and Iran. The anticipated partisan political and personal financial benefits of a successful invasion and multi-billion dollar government contracts to follow, as well as the personal vendetta motive, were additional enticements that can be considered tipping factors in the choice of Iraq as a target.

In an alternative set of theoretical linkages, such tipping factors may have motivated the invasion policy in a more fundamentally causal manner: The anticipated domestic political benefits to the incumbent party may have driven policy, along the lines of the diversionary theory of war, while threats to national security and liberal goals may have been less important, except as political rationales. Explanations that consider decisions on international relations to be primarily responsive to politicians' domestic political concerns would link sub-state politics with policies toward Iraq that advantaged particular interest groups (e.g., corporations in the energy and reconstruction related sectors) with whom administration members had political or personal financial ties. The critical difference between these broad perspectives is whether policymakers actually believed that invading Iraq was necessary and desirable in order to eliminate a substantial threat to U.S. national security, either at a reputational level or a material one, or, alternatively, that officials deliberately manufactured public perceptions of such a threat in service of their own domestic political standing and for the benefit of favored constituents.

The relationship between political ideologies and the material benefits that actually or potentially accrue to their promoters and adherents may be a mutually reinforcing one, and it appears likely that some combination of ideological, personal, political, and security concerns motivated key decisionmakers in Bush's first administration. The neoconservative ideology shared by its most influential members links the administration's domestic and international politics. Internationally, neoconservatism is characterized by high levels of threat perception and a belief in the efficacy of the unilateral use of American power to solve complex problems. With its penchant for simple solutions and rejection of complexity, this ideology departs from realism by embracing an idealist vision of the world, and departs from liberalism by aspiring to achieve it without regard for international law and organizations. Neoconservatives' goals toward the Middle East, which are influenced by Zionist ideology and sentimental attitudes toward Israel, as well as by a belief in benefits for U.S. interests of the informal military alliance with Israel, appear likely to have influenced the choice of Iraq as a target.

The aspiring international hegemon's interest in appearing unchallengeable was reflected in the Republican leaders' interest in being perceived as so dominant that domestic rivals can conceive of no effective challenge. The administration's characteristic disinclination toward multilateralism abroad was reflected in its characteristically partisan approaches to domestic policymaking, and by its disinterest, relative to other administrations, in consensus and compromise. The analysis of the invasion decision raises questions of whether a regime's foreign and domestic policies

are normally ideologically consistent and how its ideological influences, particularly as they affect perceptions of domestic and international threats, help explain its policy choices in war and peace.

The Iraq invasion decision also raises the question of when and why democratic governments decide to initiate wars. Realism suggests that leaders may initiate wars if they perceive their country's hegemonic status to be at risk. Liberalism suggests that leaders may also initiate wars to promote democracy if they consider this essential to the national interest and international order. In the absence of a clear and imminent threat to core national interests, leaders may also go to war because they perceive a low-cost, low-risk opportunity to make partisan political gains or if they believe that refraining from war threatens their domestic political standing.

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