

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONFLICT AND THE IRAQ WAR

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Abstract: This article examines the choice of the United States to invade Iraq from a variety of analytical angles, including realism, liberalism, elite interests, ideological influences, as well as personal and social psychology. The objective is to acquire a more in-depth understanding of the factors that led to the invasion, as well as to investigate the ways in which this particular case study might add to broader ideas about the factors that lead to war. The analysis distinguishes between a wide variety of different types of causative elements and makes linkages between the various analytical perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

The 2003 invasion of Iraq stands as the United States' most extensive, protracted, and expensive deployment of military power since the Vietnam conflict. This is the first significant military operation undertaken by the United States after the Cold War, independent of any international body. Additionally, it represents the first instance of the United States assuming the role of an occupying force in a Middle Eastern nation. While the decision to invade Iraq may be considered unique in certain aspects, especially due to the significant involvement of the United States military in an Arab or Muslim nation, the argument here is that the Iraq invasion is not entirely one-of-a-kind and can be better comprehended by examining established theories on the causes of war. This article examines how views on the origins of war might provide insight into the choice made by the United States. This study examines how conflicting interpretations of this specific war might contribute to a broader understanding of the causes of war in general. It also investigates the connections between different theoretical viewpoints[1].

PRACTICALITY

Realism provides a framework for understanding enduring elements of foreign policy. From a realist standpoint, governments' choices to engage in warfare stem from the inherent drive of all nations to attain power and security. This drive is fueled by an international political landscape where each state harbors concerns about the hostility of other states, whether actual or prospective. Leaders systematically assess the potential advantages and disadvantages of engaging in war based on their state's strength and security. The international conduct of states is influenced by the limitations put on their acts due to their relative power position. The transition from a bipolar

distribution of power during the Cold War, with two superpowers, to a unipolar situation where the U.S. holds military dominance, led to a change in U.S. strategy. Instead of focusing on deterring or containing threats, the U.S. shifted towards policies of preventive warfare against "rogue" states that posed a threat. (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002, 20-23). The demise of the Soviet Union resulted in a situation where the United States had a dominant position. This led to the United States reducing the importance of collective security and increasing its reliance on its own military. According to realist theory, due to the unmatched dominance of the United States, any U.S. leader would see multilateral institutions as more of a burden than a source of assistance. The validity of realism's focus on the continuous nature of military rivalry and conflict between independent nations is supported by the fact that the United States did not reduce its military expenditure after the Cold conflict, despite changes in leadership and the fall of its primary adversary. Instead, the Clinton administration actively pushed a military expansion to ensure that the United States outspent any possible adversaries. Furthermore, they conducted airstrikes on Serbia without obtaining permission from the United Nations. The Bush administration has openly expressed its objective of achieving global hegemony, which refers to an unparalleled level of authority that is almost unimaginable to challenge. In his 2002a West Point address, Bush said that America has and plans to maintain military capabilities that are unparalleled. In light of this strategic purpose, the destruction of Saddam Hussein's administration might be seen as a deliberate attempt to strengthen the United States' image and symbolic influence, especially in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks that may have exposed the vulnerability of the U.S.[1][2].

Furthermore, after Bush made a public statement that the United States saw the removal of the Iraqi government as a top priority, it would have seemed feeble if the U.S. had agreed to any compromise that allowed the Baathist regime to remain in power. By placing the U.S. reputation for being ready to use force in order to bring about a change in government at risk, Bush made it very likely that war would occur, given the importance of safeguarding national security interests.

The Bush administration's decision to target Iraq instead of North Korea, Iran, or Libya, despite the latter countries having more advanced and potentially threatening weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs at the time, can be explained by a symbolic or reputational motive. If the main motivation for engaging in war was to showcase determination to adversaries and friends, it would be much more challenging to achieve this objective against North Korea or Iran. This is mostly owing to their possession of more sophisticated weapons, which renders them far more formidable as potential targets for a military assault. According to this reasoning, Iraq was a more convincing choice as a target, partly because it offered a lesser danger. The decision by the United States to deny ongoing United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq, despite Iraq's agreement to allow foreign inspectors in 2002, might also be attributed to the reputational incentive. If the main objective of the Bush administration was to uncover dangerous weapons or weapons programs, then its refusal to cooperate with U.N. inspectors' requests for additional time to complete the extensive inspection process (and the resulting loss of opportunities for a broader U.N.-authorized coalition against Iraq) would appear to be counterproductive. If the main objective of the United States was to improve its reputation for being willing to use force alone, especially considering the concerns about U.S. vulnerability after the 9/11 attacks, then the

decision to prevent the completion of U.N. inspections and form a war coalition led by the U.S. rather than the U.N. can be seen as a strategic move to protect its security interests.

To understand why Iraq was specifically chosen as a target, a realist perspective would consider Iraq's strategic position, which posed many security threats to the United States, as well as its huge oil reserves that might be used against American interests. The establishment of military bases in Iraq would allow the United States to extend its influence throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. These sites might serve as more secure alternatives to the bases that were set up in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf war in 1999. Therefore, from a realist perspective, the invasion was a logical strategy for the U.S. to accomplish its main objective of showcasing its might to both friends and rivals, while also avoiding the perception of a fall after the events of 9/11. Additionally, the purpose was to deter Iraq from using or possessing weapons of mass destruction and oil reserves as a means to pose a danger to the United States or its allies, and to prohibit any possible cooperation between Iraq and anti-American terrorist organizations. The United States has a vested interest in ensuring its oil supply, especially as domestic reserves decline and global demand rises. One way to achieve this is through military control of Iraq's petroleum reserves. If Iraq were under Baathist control, these reserves would likely be exploited by America's competitors instead.

CONSEQUENCES FROM A REALIST VIEWPOINT

The rational-choice approach of realism, which posits that leaders choose for war when they see it as essential for safeguarding national security, has significant explanatory capacity. However, this perspective is hampered by the Bush administration's tendency to overstate the immediacy and severity of the security threat presented by Iraq. The administration's public statements regarding the potential threat of Iraq's nuclear capabilities, including the mention of a "mushroom cloud" and the alleged acquisition of uranium and aluminum tubes for weapons, raise concerns about the justification for invading Iraq. This is particularly troubling considering that a former administration policymaker later acknowledged the absence of any evidence indicating an imminent hostile attack by Iraq (Haass, 2005, 94). The administration's claims that Iraq could not be stopped from attacking the U.S. or its allies lacked evidence, unless one believed that Iraq's leaders were completely insane. The immense retaliatory capabilities of the U.S. would have rendered any such strike self-destructive. Furthermore, the administration's warnings on Iraq's capacity and inclination to provide anti-U.S. terrorists with weapons of mass destruction were not grounded in logical analysis, but rather in baseless speculation or fantasy. Nevertheless, it is plausible that members of the administration really held the belief that the security of the United States relied on a triumphant invasion of Iraq, both for the sake of its image and tangible benefits. They may have intentionally overstated the alleged danger in order to garner support from both domestic and international sources. Although this interpretation aligns with realism, the assertion that U.S. leaders were persuaded by ideological and psychological factors of an imminent threat, even when there was none, contradicts realism. Similarly, explanations that attribute a causal role to the interests of influential domestic groups are also inconsistent with realism[3].

The realist perspective suggests that as long as the United States seeks to achieve dominant power and perceives

its own security to rely on displaying superior military force, it will be obligated to react to any actual or potential assault on itself or its allies as if it posed a significant threat to its essential national security interests. The United States is now less limited in its actions compared to the Cold War era, when the major nations had a shared goal of avoiding direct conflict. As a result, the U.S. has progressively embraced a strategy of preemptive warfare. Nevertheless, the implementation of a preventive war strategy is likely to unintentionally stimulate acts by rival nations that pose a danger to the aspiring dominant power. Specifically, possible targets in the United States will see the development and deployment of nuclear weapons as a logical and essential reaction to the uncertainty caused by the United States' actions to safeguard its own security (referred to as the "security dilemma" in realist theory).

LIBERAL IDEAS

Liberal views believe that judgments about war are influenced by a state's internal qualities, including its form of government, as well as the impact of international law. The proliferation of democracy and commerce, as well as the conflict-resolution capabilities of international institutions, are crucial for ensuring global security and prosperity. Similar to realism, liberalism encompasses several interconnected theories of international affairs. Kantian/Wilsonian idealism posits that an increase in democracy leads to a corresponding increase in peace. This theory is strongly linked to the notion of democratic (or liberal) peace, which says that democracies do not engage in conflicts with one another. From a prescriptive standpoint, "crusading liberals" advocate for the use of force to replace dictatorships with democracies, as long as promoting democracy and human rights improves the national security of the United States and other democratic nations[4].

However, the liberal motives and the administration's adoption of universal principles of freedom and democracy do not provide a clear explanation for why Iraq was specifically targeted instead of another anti-democratic regime in the region. Additionally, it does not account for the fact that certain members of the administration were advocating for a change in the regime in Baghdad even before the events of 9/11. Interpretations that prioritize liberal ideology are further hampered by the fact that the invasion's objective of regime change is considered unlawful under international law. The administration violated liberal principles by circumventing the U.N. on the matter (and by conducting electronic surveillance on Security Council member nations and the Secretariat)[5]. One of the main reasons the U.S. gave for eliminating Hussein's oppressive regime was to safeguard human rights and relieve the suffering of the Iraqi people. According to accounts, Bush gained knowledge of human-rights atrocities in Iraq, and these reports provided him with the requisite moral clarity to make the choice to invade (Schweizer and Schweizer, 2004, 540). Nevertheless, there were no significant instances of widespread human rights abuses occurring during the invasion, and the administration did not indicate that human rights considerations were a primary factor in the decision to invade, as stated by the United States Department of Defense in 2003.

Liberal interpretations pose a difficulty since U.S. administrations often use liberal values as justifications for war in their public statements. Given that America operates as a liberal democracy, policymakers often find it

advantageous to garner popular support for conflicts by framing them in liberal terms, even if these motivations are really of little significance. It is conceivable, nonetheless, that decision-makers were really driven by liberal objectives, which they deemed justified the use of illiberal methods[6].

PRIME PREFERENCES

Analyses that concentrate on the interests of smaller units inside a state examine how the activities of internal groups, especially influential individuals in politics and the economy, influence choices related to the military and warfare. Instead of seeing conflict as externally forced by the international system, several viewpoints emphasize the role of institutions and interest groups that originate from inside the state. From a Marxist viewpoint, foreign conflicts are instigated by the bourgeoisie in order to secure new markets and maintain their class supremacy by diverting socioeconomic tensions originating from the proletariat. Based on the diversionary theory of war, an illegitimate or revolutionary government strategically identifies foreign opponents to gain political advantage. It may engage in warfare to establish its legitimacy, generate widespread support for its programs, and repress internal divisions and opposition. From this standpoint, Bush, who did not have the credibility of a clean electoral win, took advantage of the political opportunity created by the 9/11 attacks to position himself as a "war president" during the short conflict in Afghanistan. Subsequently, he invaded Iraq to extend the politically advantageous atmosphere that the war had created domestically. Based on the premise that leaders prioritize their own political survival above the abstract concept of the "national interest," Bueno de Mesquita (2002) asserts that "international relations is, in essence, a platform for politicians to either gain or lose domestic political benefits." The people's dedication to the welfare of the state is strengthened by their patriotic reactions to perceived dangers. As a result, the ruling party benefits from nationalist feelings during times of conflict, since the state is represented by the current government. Leaders in democracies are likely to avoid participating in lengthy, expensive, and losing conflicts due to the fear of political consequences. They tend to opt for war only when they perceive their opponents to be much weaker. The war was a result of the administration officials' anticipation that the Republican party would gain an advantage from a "rally-'round-the-flag" effect during a conflict with Iraq, similar to what happened during Bush's father's administration in 1991. They also expected that the U.S. military would once again win a relatively easy victory[7].

CONSEQUENCES OF LIBERAL AND ELITE-INTEREST MODELS

Interpretations emphasizing the manipulation of war by political elites for their own political and financial gain suggest that weaknesses in the system of oversight on the executive branch of government allowed the Bush administration to engage in war in order to further its partisan political objectives. According to liberal ideology, the ability of the public to vote its leaders out of office serves as a deterrent for leaders to engage in unnecessary wars, since the public is responsible for the financial burden of war. The executive's war-making powers were not effectively limited due to the mainstream media's failure to act as a watchdog, Congress's lack of scrutiny regarding the executive's claim of a serious threat from Iraq, and the administration's use of deficit spending and

avoidance of universal conscription, which led the majority of the public to believe that they would not bear the financial burden of the war[8].

Consequently, when the mechanisms of democratic democracy are weakened, they may no longer be effective in restraining leaders who initiate needless conflicts. Sub-state analyses that ascribe causality to the expected political advantages of war suggest that conflicts that are not necessary will only come to an end when the loss of public support leads Congress and the Executive to change their evaluations of the political advantages and disadvantages of the war.

Liberal ideas suggest that the United States would maintain its focus on toppling non-democratic governments that it perceives as being unfriendly. If the predictive elements of liberal theories are accurate, then the successful process of democracy in Iraq may have a spill-over effect, leading to pressures and incentives for democratization in nearby countries. If the U.S. occupation of Iraq does not succeed in establishing a government that is both legal and stable, it might potentially lead to a negative response towards democracy in the region and other parts of the world. Liberal principles lose credibility when they seem to have been undermined by the acts of the United States, such as when the people in the area believe that the invasion and occupation have caused many civilian fatalities and suffering.

Liberal theories do not provide a prediction on whether democracies would engage in military regime change against dictatorships that have weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as a deterrent. Under these circumstances, it is probable that democracies would adopt defensive policies aimed at containing the threat. Democracies are unlikely to initiate a nuclear war with non-democracies, unless they are attacked first or face a more immediate and direct danger compared to the situation with Iraq[9][10].

IMPACTS OF IDEOLOGY AND IRRATIONALITY

The administration's decision-making on Iraq has been highlighted for its ideological and irrational nature by prominent figures like as Colin Powell, the Secretary of State under President Bush, and Richard Clarke, the administration's Counterterrorism Coordinator. These approaches suggest that the reasons for conflict might arise from the irrational psychological processes of individual decision-makers and core decision-making groups, as well as from the ideologically created attitudes of political elites.

One way to evaluate the causative impact of a leader's psychology is to consider whether another leader, under comparable circumstances, would have shown similar behavior: If either Democrat Al Gore or Republican John McCain had won the president in 2000, would they have chosen to initiate the invasion of Iraq? Regarding the first option, the Clinton-Gore administration openly expressed its commitment to overthrowing the Iraqi government. It provided financial support to an anti-Hussein exile organization and conducted airstrikes on Iraqi air defenses to safeguard U.S. patrols in no-fly zones. However, would a theoretical President Gore have chosen to initiate a military intervention in Iraq? If we question this assumption, as well as the possibility that a hypothetical Republican President McCain would have taken the same action (although the disparities between McCain's foreign policy stances and Bush's may not have been significant), then it seems that the reasons for the

decision can be primarily attributed to Bush's individual psychology or the ideological influences of both him and his key advisors. Historically, American presidents have been successful in obtaining support for their national security policies. However, the intricate decision-making processes regarding war and peace indicate that these decisions are not solely influenced by one person's personality. When examining the impact of decision-makers and advisors surrounding President Bush, it is important to consider how their shared ideologies, particularly neoconservatism, anti-Communist beliefs, and Zionist ideologies, as well as vengeful and defensive nationalist sentiments among politicians and the public, influenced the decision to invade[11][12].

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE EFFECTS OF IRRATIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL FACTORS

Theories are only considered to address causation at a basic level if they explain the underlying reasons for considering the invasion strategy in the first place. Although President Bush had personal motivations for toppling Saddam Hussein, it is important to note that personality attributes should not be automatically regarded as the cause. While Bush's religious convictions and cognitive simplicity may be pertinent, the link with Iraq is vague. While these characteristics may have helped gain support for the invasion program, they were not the cause of its development and notoriety. Bush's personal antipathy for Iraq's ruler might be seen as an additional influential aspect that made the invasion strategy more appealing[13].

If American culture consistently demonstrates a long-lasting need for an external adversary, partially influenced by prevalent nationalist beliefs, then the combination of Christian evangelical and Zionist ideologies in the United States may clarify the decision to attack Iraq instead of an alternative objective. At the cultural and political elite level, the United States may be more inclined to engage in conflict in the Middle East owing to a belief in national exceptionalism and superiority, as well as racism. This inclination is influenced by the evangelical community's ideas about the Holy Land and the domestic political motivations to support Israel. The ideological beliefs of U.S. leaders may have made them more vulnerable to manipulation by individuals like Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi or the Israeli government under Ariel Sharon. These individuals may have provided the U.S. with false intelligence reports about Iraqi weapons to further their own political goals, potentially influencing the U.S. to invade Iraq (Bamford, 2005)[14][15].

CONCLUSIONS

Realism, liberalism, elite interests, ideological influences, and personal and societal psychology might explain major parts of the Iraq war, making the choice look "overdetermined." Differentiating causation may help reduce the retroactive tendency toward interpreting past occurrences as inevitable. Considering the invasion decision in light of other explanations helps find relationships.

The 9/11 events offered the government a chance. Rumsfeld suggested the U.S. "Go massive" against Saddam

Hussein and Osama Bin Laden on the afternoon of the attacks. Grab it all. Things linked and not (Martin, 2002; Woodward, 2004, 26-27; Clarke, 2004, 30). Post-Cold War unipolarity also allowed. The intelligence agencies' bureaucratic politics, war cabinet groupthink, and Bush's natural tendency toward certainty and unwillingness to analyze policy helped the administration make its choice. These considerations did not cause the invasion to become a dominant policy choice, but they helped choose it.

Neoconservative ideology combines realism's desire for hegemonic aspirations with liberal values of opposing dictatorships and promoting democracy. The U.S. is the only nation with the reasons and resources to employ force to promote global democracy, which also enhances its position as a benign hegemon. Realist views of international relations lead to conservative advice against funding utopian and abstract universalist projects. Realism suggests that the U.S. should maintain the status quo as a hegemon or the most powerful nation rather than change the globe.

Political ideologies and the material benefits they provide to their promoters and adherents may be mutually reinforcing, and Bush's first administration's key decisionmakers were likely motivated by ideological, personal, political, and security concerns. Key government figures hold neoconservative views, which connect domestic and foreign issues. Neocons believe in the unilateral use of American might to solve complicated issues and have high danger perception internationally. This ideology rejects complexity and embraces an idealist worldview, departing from realism and liberalism by pursuing it without respect for international law and institutions. Neoconservatives' Middle East aims, inspired by Zionist ideology, emotional views toward Israel, and a confidence in the advantages of the informal military alliance with Israel, may have impacted their choice of Iraq.

When and why democratic governments start wars is also raised by the Iraq invasion. Realism implies leaders may start wars if they fear losing hegemony. Liberalism implies that presidents may start wars to advance democracy if it's in the national interest and international order. In the absence of a clear and impending danger to fundamental national interests, leaders may go to war because they see a low-cost, low-risk chance to win party political gains or because they feel going to war undermines their domestic political status.

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