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Introduction by **Joshua Rovner**, American University

Few issues arouse as much debate as the Iraq War. The decision to invade in 2003 was a milestone for U.S. foreign policy and Middle Eastern politics. Advocates of the war believed that the prior status quo was unsustainable, and that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime was a ruthless anachronism. The fact that Saddam had not abandoned his interest in so-called weapons of mass destruction made his removal all the more necessary. Critics warned, however, that regime change was not in the U.S. national interest, and that by invading the country that U.S. would set in motion events it could not control. Years of grisly civil violence seemed to vindicate their warnings. The critics took their arguments further in the aftermath, casting the war as symptomatic of a deep and enduring interventionist bias in American grand strategy.

Why did the George W. Bush administration make the decision to invade? Was the war inevitable, given overwhelming U.S. power in the post-Cold War years? Was it necessary to protect the free flow of oil? Was it necessary to make the world safe from dictators with nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons? Was it the product of a specific ideology? Should we explore the psychology of key leaders to understand their preferences? Or are there other, as of yet unexplored explanations?

According to Ahsan I. Butt, the war was as a performance piece. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration needed a devastating show of force in order to dissuade any challengers from the notion that they could take advantage of a wounded great power. A war, according to this logic, would bolster American security by serving as a reminder of U.S. power and prestige. Butt's thesis challenges a number of other explanations, and is likely to stimulate more analysis of the way in which traditional security concerns and intangible factors like prestige conspire to motivate decisions about the use of force.

The two reviewers in this forum both applaud Butt for offering a plausible and powerful argument. The article usefully brings together different strands of international relations theory, and offers an explanation

that in some ways outperforms alternative claims. But neither one finds the argument fully convincing. Richard Hanania notes that there is no “smoking gun” evidence in the article, and criticizes Butt for downplaying the “ideological and personal dispositions” of various officials in the Bush administration. Jeremy Pressman argues that Butt overlooks the importance of domestic politics, and in so doing misses something potentially important about the interplay between foreign and domestic affairs.

Pressman ends with an interesting proposition about the Iraq War as an example of “neoclassical realism in reverse.” That is, preexisting domestic political pressures were pushing the United States towards war long before 2003, but it took an international event to set them in motion. The fact that Butt’s argument provoked this kind of insight is a testament to the importance of the piece, and the enduring value of re-examining the causes of the Iraq War.

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Jeremy Pressman, Ph.D., is an associate professor of political science and director of Middle East Studies at the University of Connecticut. He is also co-director, with Professor Erica Chenoweth, of the Crowd Counting Consortium at crowdcounting.org where data on protests and rallies in the United States is available in open access format. Pressman’s most recent articles include “Foreign Cues and Public Views on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” at *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21:1 (February 2019), 169-188 (co-authored with Matthew Leep) and “Horizontal Inequality and Violent Unrest in Jerusalem” in *Terrorism and Political Violence*. In spring 2019, he will be a Fulbright scholar at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo.

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It is rare that the immediate cause of a major war is in doubt. The United States invaded Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks, launched the First Gulf War in 1991 in order to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, and went to war against Japan after Pearl Harbor. The 2003 invasion of Iraq is different because there are so many plausible causes. The George W. Bush administration characterized the war as a response to the dual threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Others claimed the real cause was something else: neoconservative ideology, pressure from the Israel lobby, oil interests, or a psychological desire for the president to finish what his father could not.

Ahsan I. Butt makes a strong case that Iraq was a “performative war,” a military intervention undertaken primarily for status after the U.S. had been humiliated on 9/11 (19-23). The logic of Butt’s argument has been largely overlooked by scholars, in part because it implies that the United States did not behave rationally, at least not in the way the term is used in international relations theory. The author dismisses the argument that American leaders were hypersensitive to risk in the aftermath of 9/11 and genuinely worried about Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s WMD program. Hawks within the Bush administration did not act as if they were primarily interested in disarming Saddam. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials, some of them interviewed by Butt, stress the Iraqi regime’s willing cooperation, while expressing frustration at how little help they received from the American government in making inspections more effective. Saddam reportedly even tried, through intermediaries, to cut a deal that would have allowed thousands of American soldiers or FBI agents to search his country. In contrast, Butt argues that the performative war thesis fits better with the underlying evidence. When a hegemonic state is humiliated, it sometimes feels the need to act in order to regain its status. While the bargaining framework for understanding war suggests that rational states should be expected to strike a deal when possible, in this case only an overwhelming military victory can remove the shame felt by a chastened superpower.

Unfortunately, Butt lacks smoking gun evidence for his theory. The closest thing he has is a journalistic account about what Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney believed.¹ There is also a November 2001 memo from U.S. Central Command suggesting that the decision for war had already been made, although the bullet point format of the document does not lend itself to conclusive analysis.² Finally, the author cites quotations from *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman and Henry Kissinger, individuals who were not members of the Bush administration. This lack of supporting evidence may not rule out the performative war theory, as a small cabal of top decision-makers who wanted to trick a country into war should not be expected to have left behind much of a clear paper trail. While more documentation may always become available in the future, there is also the possibility that we may never know for certain exactly why the U.S. invaded Iraq. Butt’s argument may remain the best one simply because other potential motivations seem less credible given the behavior of the administration.

¹ Ron Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies*, (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2006).

² CENTCOM Memo, 27 November 2001, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB326/doc08.pdf>.

Another potential criticism of Butt's theory is that in order to understand the causes of the Iraq War we must put ourselves in the post 9/11 mindset, when many Americans believed the worst was yet to come.³ Still, while the 9/11 attacks caused heightened paranoia and should have led administration officials to update their 'priors' with regards to the dangers of terrorism, it is difficult to see why that should have made them more afraid of Iraq in particular. In fact, one could have expected the opposite effect, as Saddam himself apparently believed that 9/11 would lead the U.S. to recognize that it could use him as an ally against Islamic extremism.⁴ The administration went in the opposite direction, and a general concern about potential terrorists with WMDs cannot clearly explain why.

Butt's paper would nonetheless have benefited from a discussion about the degree to which the desire for a performative war was conscious among officials. While the author argues that it was, the alternative is not seriously considered despite the fact that people are not always fully aware of the desires that drive their actions. For example, a wife might pick a fight with her husband because she is angry over some unrelated issue, yet at the moment believe that the fight is truly about what immediately triggered the argument. It is plausible that the Bush administration wanted a performative war but had convinced itself that it was making a rational calculation based on national interest. This would explain both behavior that was inconsistent with a desire to disarm Iraq and the lack of smoking-gun evidence. The President's vulgar bravado about what he was going to do to Saddam paints a vivid picture of a desire for action that we might not expect leaders to be honest about, even to themselves.

Whether the ultimate motivations were conscious or not, the performative war theory helps explain some outstanding puzzles with regards to the run up to war. For example, in a memo Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld sent to President Bush soon after the 9/11 attacks, he said that the fact that the world expected America to go into Afghanistan "argues for the initial strike to be directed some place else and preferably someplace like South America or Southeast Asia."⁵ Recounting this in his memoirs, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith defends his boss's suggestion, arguing that

We felt compelled to choose a more ambitious strategic goal—to prevent further attacks that would kill Americans and compromise our security... We had little faith—and not enough high-quality evidence—that even successful attacks on the few targets we could identify in Afghanistan would seriously obstruct terrorist operations in the near term.

The reasoning about tactics does not follow from the stated goal. If hitting Afghanistan would not "seriously obstruct terrorist operations," how would striking Hezbollah in Brazil do so? And what kind of incentives would it create if a group like al-Qaeda, which had just hit the United States, was treated as no more or less of a target than other groups that were not seeking to inflict mass casualties on American soil? In retrospect, administration officials argued that they were trying to create a general deterrent effect, yet there was never

³ I would like to thank Robert Jervis for emphasizing this point to me.

⁴ John Nixon, *Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein* (New York: Random House, 2017), 112.

⁵ See Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terror*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 67-68.

any evidence that Saddam or Hezbollah were seeking to replicate what happened on 9/11. In this light, Feith's justification seems to be an attempt to explain away a policy that was driven more by an emotional reaction to the 9/11 attacks than any kind of strategic logic.

Butt's theory also explains the lack of attention paid to postwar planning. It is often claimed that neo-conservatives wanted the Iraq War in order to spread democracy in the Middle East. There is little in the documentary evidence before the war that fits this theory, as Bush only began to heavily emphasize democracy after the war had already started and the original justification of WMDs had fallen apart.⁶ Furthermore, if this were the goal, top administration officials would have been at least as interested in the aftermath of the war as they were in the initial invasion. This is not what we find. Zalmay Khalilzad, who until then had been the administration's main representative in Iraq, writes that "[i]n retrospect, it seems that the principals disengaged from close oversight of Iraq policy" after the appointment of Paul Bremer as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in May 2003.⁷ Besides the CPA administrator himself, Khalilzad reports that none of the other top officials can even recall a meeting where they decided to disband the Iraqi Army, which was perhaps the most consequential decision taken in the immediate aftermath of Saddam's overthrow. While it has been argued that neo-conservatives thought that democracy would spring up naturally and we therefore might not expect them to have seen the need for much post-war planning, this kind of argument becomes less convincing the closer one gets to ultimate decision-making power, as nothing in Vice President Cheney or Secretary Rumsfeld's history indicates that they ever held such naïve views about society or human nature.⁸ The performative war theory explains why the same administration that had worked so hard to bring the country into war showed relatively little interest in what would come after.

Finally, Butt goes too far in downplaying the ideological and personal dispositions of Bush administration officials. His claim rests on the idea that if Democratic Party nominee Al Gore had been elected in 2000, he would also have felt pressure to launch a performative war. Butt argues that "there were no significant partisan splits on the advisability of the Iraq war," (35) pointing to the fact that many prominent Democrats supported the invasion. Yet this ignores the actual vote on the Iraq Resolution. Across both houses of Congress, approximately 97% of Republicans voted in favor compared to only 43% of Democrats. Moreover, the vote was the culmination of a long campaign during which a President with record high approval ratings and his administration went to great lengths to convince Congress and the public that there was a connection between Iraq and terrorism. All of this suggests that, at least after Afghanistan, there was no overwhelming grass-roots desire for a performative war that existed independently of what American leaders were telling the public. The Iraq War is therefore less an example of how democracies may be susceptible to engaging in performative wars and more a case study of how the leadership of a democratic state can use the conditions created by a crisis to drive foreign policy into a direction in which it would not otherwise go.

⁶ Babak Bahador, Jeremy Moses, and William Lafi Youmans. "Rhetoric and Recollection: Recounting the George W. Bush Administration's Case for War in Iraq," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48:1 (2018): 4-26.

⁷ Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House: My Journey Through a Turbulent World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), chap. 16.

⁸ For an argument along these lines, see Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 111-129.

The Iraqi-U.S. war of 2003 and its aftermath remains an important historical episode that has been subjected to intense scrutiny over the years by policymakers, pundits, politicians, and professors. In 2007, one scholar called the invasion “the most controversial and momentous foreign policy decision in recent memory.”⁹ Ahsan Butt’s comprehensive article adds to a growing literature on the U.S. decision to go to war.¹⁰

Butt argues that the war was a performative one. In order to rectify a post-9/11 mismatch between the material capabilities and ‘social rank’ (which were high) of the United States and its prestige and credibility as a global superpower (which were low as a result of the attack), U.S. decision-makers had to go to war against Iraq to elevate the United States’ prestige or risk facing a slew of challenges from countries around the world. In Butt’s words, “the United States felt the need to regain status and establish itself as an aggressive global power. To do so, it had to fight and win a war” (2). Prior to 9/11, Butt argues, the capabilities and prestige had been in synch, but the 2001 attack led to the pivotal drop in U.S. prestige that paved the way to war. Thus, the United States needed “wars fought to establish tough reputations” (34). To put it another way, “the United States was compelled to burnish its reputation for toughness and establish a generalized *deterrence* against challenges to its hegemony” (emphasis added) (33).

Butt also offers evidence to discredit rival explanations for why the Bush administration went to war: to control Iraqi oil; to stop Iraq’s development of weapons of mass destruction; to democratize Iraq and the region; or to placate Israel’s domestic supporters. On the basis of documents, memoirs, interviews, and secondary sources, as well as relevant scholarly theories, Butt finds each alternative lacking.

⁹ Raymond Hinnebusch, “The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16:3 (2007): 209-228, at 209.

¹⁰ Examples include Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton, “Axis of Evil or Access to Diesel? Spaces of New Imperialism and the Iraq War,” *Historical Materialism* 23:2 (2015): 94-130; Alex Callinicos “Iraq: Fulcrum of World Politics,” *Third World Quarterly* 26:4-5 (2005): 593-608; Vivek Chibber, “American Militarism and the US Political Establishment: The Real Lessons of the Invasion of Iraq,” in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (eds.), *Violence Today: Actually Existing Barbarism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5895/2791>: 23-53; Louis Fisher, “Deciding on War against Iraq: Institutional Failures,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118:3 (2003): 389-410; Lawrence Freedman, “War in Iraq: Selling the Threat,” *Survival* 46:2 (Summer 2004): 7-50; Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 184-240; Raymond Hinnebusch, “The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16:3 (2007): 209-228; Nayna J. Jhaveri, “Petroimperialism: US Oil Interests and the Iraq War,” *Antipode* 36:1 (2004): 2-11; Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security* 29:1 (Summer 2004): 5-48; Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz, “Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq,” *Security Studies* 16:3 (2007): 409-451; David A. Lake, “Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War,” *International Security* 35:3 (2010-2011): 7-52; David Mitchell and Tansa George Massoud, “Anatomy of Failure: Bush’s Decision-Making Process and the Iraq War,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5:3 (July 2009): 265-286; John Mueller, “Simplicity and Spook: Terrorism and the Dynamics of Threat Exaggeration,” *International Studies Perspectives* 6:2 (May 2005): 208-234; Darel E. Paul, “The Siren Song of Geopolitics: Towards a Gramscian Account of the Iraq War,” *Millennium* 36:1 (2007): 51-76.

Even if it has not used the term “performative war,” previous scholarship has made a similar argument (2). Interestingly, we see such explanations related to the first U.S. war against Iraq in 1991. What if the United States had not confronted Iraq over its invasion and occupation of Kuwait? Key American policymakers worried, Barry Posen argued, that “US credibility would suffer, perhaps enough to set off a wave of challenges.”¹¹ President George H. W. Bush later said that if Saddam had been “permitted to get away with that, heaven knows where the world would have gone and what forces would have been unleashed.”¹²

Just before the 2003 war, Robert Jervis pointed toward the same factor that Butt highlights, a demonstration effect: “It also appears that at least some American leaders believe that overthrowing [Iraqi President] Saddam [Hussein] will establish a reputation for taking bold moves, and that this will have a favorable impact on the behavior of many other leaders.”¹³ Tariq Ali pointed out that “a blitzkrieg rolling swiftly across Iraq would serve to show the world at large, and perhaps states in the Far East—China, North Korea, even Japan—in particular, that if the chips are down, the United States has, in the last resort, the means to enforce its will.”¹⁴ Writing in 2010, Gregory Gause highlighted a handful of main causes, including the belief among U.S. leaders that “such a victory [over Iraq] would warn other potential American foes of the consequences of their actions.”¹⁵ Taken together, these explanations mirror those of Butt.

The performative may encompass two similar but distinguishable components. On the one hand, it is a traditional deterrence argument, harkening back to Jervis’s deterrence model.¹⁶ The United States, drawing on its material capabilities, is muscular and scary in a way that causes other states to back down and back off. On the other hand, it is also a constructivist argument about prestige and standing among the world’s powers. By invading Iraq, the United States tried to reinforce its social rank. It sent a social message meant to bolster its image, not just a signal of its military capabilities.

Many of the previous explanations are consistent with the deterrence argument. Butt’s insight forces us to imagine a more complex story about Iraq. In addition, it might open up historical cases where a state was more concerned with one element than the other. Or, it might lead us to again consider the long-running question of the exact relationship between social and material factors. Are they co-equal in our causal vision or is one really driving the other? Is the mere possession of overwhelming capabilities insufficient without the proper social framing?

¹¹ Barry Posen, “US Security Policy in a Nuclear-Armed World, Or: What if Iraq Had Had Nuclear Weapons?” *Security Studies* 6:3 (1997): 1-31 at 14. See also Hinnebusch, 217.

¹² Posen, 15.

¹³ Robert Jervis, “The Confrontation between Iraq and the US: Implications for the Theory and Practice of Deterrence,” *European Journal of International Relations* 9:2 (2003): 315-337 at 327.

¹⁴ Tariq Ali, “Recolonizing Iraq,” *New Left Review* 21 (May-June 2003): 5-19.

¹⁵ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 239. See also Hinnebusch, 222.

¹⁶ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 58-113.

Butt argues that the September 11 attacks compelled the Bush administration to engage in a performative military act. “Before 9/11,” he writes, “American prestige was not in question and was commensurate with its hegemonic role. For more than a decade, it had been the world’s unrivalled unipolar power” (20). He adds, “US hegemony may not have been popular, but neither was it challenged; a generalized deterrence held” (20).

But many of the most important decision-makers in the Bush administration felt that U.S. primacy and prestige had been under threat since the 1990s.¹⁷ On 3 June 1997, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) explicitly argued that the United States was not spending nearly enough on defense, and that the United States needed to “challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values.”¹⁸ The signatories were a who’s who of the future White House under George W. Bush: Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Zalmay Khalilzad, and I. Lewis Libby. All wanted a renewed push for U.S. global primacy or preeminence.¹⁹ All were ready to pivot to talk about attacking Iraq as the president jumped on board. They hit the ground running.

Butt is correct that other officials, and the president himself, were not necessarily supportive of an attack on Iraq prior to September 11. In a sense, the 9/11 attack acted as an opportunity for some (e.g. Cheney, Rumsfeld), but a revelation for others (e.g. Bush). For the former group of Bush policymakers, 9/11 was an opportunity that confirmed prior views.²⁰

Telling the story this way has two important implications. First, it should make us more skeptical of Butt’s claim that Al Gore, had he been elected to the presidency in 2000 instead of Bush, would have invaded Iraq. A Gore administration likely would have lacked that sense that Clinton foreign policy was too soft, a crucial pre-existing idea that shaped how the Bush administration reacted to September 11.

Second, it tells us about the internal risks for more cautious presidents when they pursue diplomacy. Hardliners will pressure them on conciliatory gestures and, if given the chance, may seek to un-do, neglect, or hide diplomatic efforts. The effects of well-meaning diplomacy have a depressingly short shelf life, while the effects of military action are enduring, for better or worse. Hawkish reluctance to embrace negotiated

¹⁷ Hinnebusch, 219.

¹⁸ “Statement of Principles,” 3 June 1997, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>.

¹⁹ See also Ali, “Recolonizing Iraq;” Colin Dueck, “Ideas and Alternatives in American Grand Strategy, 2000-2004,” *Review of International Studies* 30:4 (October 2004): 511-535; Andrew Flibert, “The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War,” *Security Studies* 15:2 (April-June 2006): 310-352; and Jervis, “The Confrontation between Iraq and the US,” 331.

²⁰ Chibber differs, arguing that Clinton too embraced an aggressive, militaristic approach toward Saddam’s Iraq, especially in his second term (1997-2001), an approach that was premised upon US primacy in the global order.

solutions, and antagonism toward those who pursue diplomatic settlements instead of military action, are an enduring feature of many foreign policy debates.²¹

In this case, the groundswell of opposition to anything less than war suggests the primacy of domestic differences, not outside events. Contra Butt, the invasion of Iraq stemmed *first* from a domestic source—the claim that Clinton foreign policy was weak and invited challenges—and *second* from the response to September 11. Interestingly, this logic is a kind of neoclassical realism in reverse. For neoclassical realists, domestic-level factors filter and mediate international pressures. When we open the aperture on the Iraq War, we see a domestic environment primed for action, waiting for an international trigger.

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²¹ I discuss this US domestic dynamic in a crisis situation in Jeremy Pressman, “September Statements, October Missiles, November Elections: Domestic Politics, Foreign-Policy Making, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Security Studies* 10.3 (Spring, 2001): 80-114.