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Ahsan I. Butt. “Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?” *Security Studies* 28:2 (2019): 250-285. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1551567>

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Review by **Jordan Tama**, American University

In this important article, Ahsan Butt advances an innovative argument for why the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Countering other common explanations, Butt argues that the United States was not motivated by a desire to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), promote democracy in the Middle East, or satisfy pro-war domestic interest groups. Instead, he maintains, the U.S.-led overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was a “performative war” carried out to generate “demonstration effects” (263)—in particular, to show adversaries and potential challengers that the United States would act with overwhelming force to counter any threats to its power and standing. Backed up by a compelling array of evidence, this argument represents a major contribution to understanding the origins of the Iraq War.

Butt marshals supporting evidence from a variety of sources, including George W. Bush administration memos, reporting by journalists, work by other scholars, and interviews he conducted with former U.S. government officials. Importantly, this evidence includes many statements that plausibly represent the private views of senior Bush administration officials who played central roles in the decision to invade Iraq, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. These statements show clearly that, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, key administration officials thought that military action against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan would not constitute a sufficient response to the attacks. For instance, Butt quotes Rumsfeld saying privately on the evening of 9/11, “We need to bomb something else [other than Afghanistan] to prove that we are, you know, big and strong and not going to be pushed around by these kinds of attacks” (270-271). The evidence presented by Butt along these lines is so extensive that any open-minded reader should be convinced by the article that the senior Bush administration officials who pushed most aggressively to overthrow Saddam Hussein did so in large part to send a message to the world about U.S. power and America’s willingness to exercise it.

Butt also shows that senior administration officials, and President George W. Bush himself, were determined to go to war in Iraq following the 9/11 attacks regardless of whether Saddam Hussein offered major

concessions to the United States, such as unfettered access for United Nations weapons inspectors to any site within Iraq, suggesting that the administration was not principally motivated by the goal of preventing Iraq from possessing WMD. Butt effectively rebuts, too, the notions that Bush invaded Iraq primarily to spread democracy or appease domestic interest groups.

The article is also noteworthy because, as Butt observes, international relations scholars have given relatively little attention to the question of why the United States invaded Iraq. Butt reports that major academic journals in the fields of international relations, security, and conflict have published only six articles about the causes of the Iraq War, though scholars have also analyzed this question in books and other fora.¹ The limited attention devoted to this question in leading journals may reflect both a bias among some international relations scholars against research based on a single case study—no matter how important the case study—and the difficulty of determining why a government took a certain action before relevant government documents have been declassified. Butt is to be commended for tackling the issue anyway, and creatively and effectively triangulating among different kinds of information sources that themselves provide a lot of relevant evidence.

Beyond the Iraq War case. Butt's argument contributes to an ever-growing body of research examining how non-material considerations, such as status and reputation, influence the behavior of countries.² Butt also explains the implications of his findings for bargaining models of international conflict. He notes that while such models generally assume that countries would be better off not fighting than fighting, the Iraq War case suggests that countries sometimes value fighting more than not fighting—and therefore that war cannot be avoided (282-283). This is an important, if depressing, take away.

Further research could explore whether the demonstration effect motivation for war is evident not only in the Iraq War case, but also in other cases of contemporary conflict. Butt cites research suggesting that several

¹ See, for example, Andrew Flitbort, "The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War," *Security Studies* 15:2 (2006): 310-352, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410600829570>; Brian C. Schmidt and Michael C. Williams, "The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War: Neoconservatives Versus Realists," *Security Studies* 17:2 (2008): 191-220, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802098990>; David Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War," *International Security* 35:3 (2010/11): 7-52, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00029; Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall, eds., *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Alexandre Dubs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War," *International Organization* 68:1 (2014): 1-31, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000192>.

² See, for example, Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Tudor A. Onea, "Between Dominance and Decline: Status Anxiety and Great Power Rivalry," *Review of International Studies* 40:1 (2014): 132-33, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210512000563>; Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 371-393, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-071112-213421>; T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Joshua Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Marina G. Duque, "Recognizing International Status: A Relational Approach," *International Studies Quarterly* 62:3 (2018): 577-592, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy001>; Paul Musgrave and Daniel H. Nexon, "Defending Hierarchy from the Moon to the Indian Ocean: Symbolic Capital and Political Dominance in Early Modern China and the Cold War," *International Organization* 72:3 (2018): 591-626, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818318000139>.

other conflicts—such as the nineteenth-century Anglo-Zulu and Sino-Japanese wars, World War I, and the Falklands War—were also initiated “to impress or scare would-be adversaries” (266). But I was left wondering whether other more recent military interventions have also been driven by this motivation. I therefore look forward to future studies of the motivations of, say, the Donald Trump administration when it conducted airstrikes in Syria in 2017 and 2018, Saudi Arabia when it intervened in Yemen in 2015, or Russia when it intervened in Ukraine in 2014.

All that said, at times Butt’s argument seems a bit too sweeping, and, with respect to the Iraq War case, it appears to neglect some important parts of the historical record. Butt suggests that a desire to preserve U.S. primacy and hegemony caused American elites across the political spectrum to favor the use of force against Iraq, noting that Democrats, such as then-Senators Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, also supported the intervention (284). But there were also many Democrats who opposed the Iraq war. In the 2002 congressional votes on a resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq, 61 percent of Democratic members of the House of Representatives and 42 percent of Democratic senators voted no.³

Moreover, most Democrats who supported the use of force against Iraq did so for different reasons than those of Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz. In particular, many liberal internationalists—who represented a large portion of the Democratic foreign policy community in 2001-2003—considered it important to take forceful action against Saddam Hussein in order to enforce international norms against weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation. Although we know now that Saddam Hussein did not possess and was not developing WMD at that time, non-proliferation hawks and supporters of international institutions were greatly troubled by repeated efforts by Saddam Hussein dating back to the 1990s to thwart United Nations inspections of military facilities within his country.⁴ In addition, many liberal supporters of the war in Iraq were motivated by sincere concern about Saddam Hussein’s extremely repressive governance of Iraq.⁵ In short, we should not extrapolate from the motivations of Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz to conclude that all U.S. supporters of the Iraq War had the same motivation.

Indeed, it is not even clear that President Bush saw the issue in the same way as his key hawkish advisors. Butt quotes private comments by Bush in May 2002 in which he expresses fury about Saddam Hussein gassing his own people and lying to the world, while describing his desire to kick Saddam Hussein’s “ass all over the Middle East” (281). Such comments suggest that Bush was determined to overthrow him, but may have had some different, or additional, motivations than the chief advocates for war within the administration.

It is also important to underscore that Saddam Hussein was far from blameless in this tragedy. As part of his rebutting of the idea that nonproliferation concerns motivated the Iraq invasion, Butt correctly explains that

³ House Vote 455 on H.J. Res. 114, *Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution of 2002*, 10 October 2002; Senate Vote 237 on H.J. Res. 114, *Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution of 2002*, 11 October 2002.

⁴ For instance, see the following editorials by major liberal newspapers: “The Case for Action,” *Washington Post*, 5 February 2003 and “Disarming Iraq,” *New York Times*, 15 February 2003.

⁵ See, for example, George Packer, “The Liberal Quandary over Iraq,” *New York Times Magazine*, 8 December 2002.

international inspections and the U.S. intelligence community failed to find evidence that Iraq possessed WMD or was seeking to acquire them. But Butt neglects to mention the extent to which Saddam Hussein did not cooperate with the UN weapons inspection regime that was established following the 1991 Gulf War, including by refusing to give the inspectors access to certain sites and at times blocking all weapons inspections.⁶ This behavior naturally made many observers suspicious that he had something to hide, despite the absence of evidence that he actually had WMD or WMD programs.

Butt points out that Saddam Hussein did allow more intrusive international inspections in the months immediately prior to the invasion, and argues that if the Bush administration sincerely cared about nonproliferation, it would have taken yes for an answer at that point. Although I agree with this point, it is worth pointing out that even in the run-up to the invasion, Saddam Hussein still did not fully cooperate with UN inspections.⁷ Moreover, his past behavior had made it harder for many leaders and foreign policy experts to trust his word, and it was reasonable for U.S. officials to wonder if he would stonewall international inspectors again once U.S. pressure on him was eased. In short, at the time there were legitimate reasons to be concerned that Saddam Hussein might one day threaten the United States or other countries with WMD.

I also think Butt overstates matters in seeming to suggest that it was inevitable that the United States would take a step like invading Iraq in order to preserve its hegemonic status. Butt writes: “Having experienced status-loss as a result of 9/11, the United States *was compelled* to burnish its reputation for toughness and establish a generalized deterrence against challenges to its hegemony. Consequently, it *had* to fight...” (my italics) (282). I am doubtful that there was really any need for the United States to demonstrate its toughness after 9/11 beyond its aggressive military actions against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. After the United States had removed the Taliban from power in Afghanistan and launched an unprecedented global campaign to decimate al-Qaeda, would there really have been any leaders overseas who would have doubted the U.S. determination to protect the position of the United States in the world or combat threats to its security? In other words, Bush administration hawks may have felt that the overthrow of Hussein was necessary to preserve U.S. hegemony, but this was a misguided perception.

Ironically, of course, the invasion of Iraq had the opposite effect as that intended by Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz, as the war’s unpopularity and failure harmed, more than strengthened, the U.S. reputation worldwide. The war also led to the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), while the war’s enormous costs in lives and treasure made the United States less capable of countering future security threats effectively. Going forward, the United States would be better served when making use-of-force decisions by thinking about its reputation not only among adversaries, but also among allies and partners—and by recognizing the many harmful unintended consequences that can follow from war.

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⁶ See, for instance, Arms Control Today, “Iraq: A Chronology of UN Inspections,” available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-10/features/iraq-chronology-un-inspections>.

⁷ Julia Preston, “U.N. Inspector Says Iraq Falls Short on Cooperation,” *New York Times*, 28 January 2003.

national security policy. His publications include *Rivals for Power: Presidential-Congressional Relations*, 6th edition, co-edited with James A. Thurber (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018); *Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions Can Drive Change During Crises* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); and *A Creative Tension: The Foreign Policy Roles of the President and Congress*, co-authored with Lee H. Hamilton (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002). He is currently writing a book about bipartisanship in contemporary U.S. foreign policy. He holds a Ph.D. from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.

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