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Kevin M. Woods and Mark E. Stout, "Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions: The Case of 'Desert Storm'," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 33:1 (February 2010): 5-41.

Reviewed by **F. Gregory Gause, III**, University of Vermont

Kevin Woods and Mark Stout have provided a valuable service to the scholarly community by using the trove of primary source documents captured by American forces in Iraq to try to reconstruct Saddam Hussein's strategic thinking. Those who follow this case will be familiar with their arguments, which they (and other authors) set out in *The Iraqi Perspectives Report* (U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2006) and *The Mother of All Battles* (U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2008). The former dealt with Iraqi (which is to say, Saddam's) decisions in the 2003 war and the latter with how Iraq behaved in the Gulf War of 1990-91. Woods and Stout, in footnote 3, assure readers that a "recent decision by the Department of Defense will in the near future make portions of this collection available to non-governmental scholars" on the model of how Washington dealt with documents captured during World War II. I hope that they have read the Pentagon's thinking on this correctly, and I hope that the "portions" are pretty close to 100%. It is hard to imagine what national security rationale there would be for classifying the internal deliberations of a defunct foreign regime.

As someone who had earlier tried to dope out Saddam Hussein's strategic thinking from public sources and Arabic memoirs,¹ I was more than anxious to check my conclusions against those of scholars with access to the primary sources. I did not do too badly, which is an argument for the relevance and usefulness of publicly available sources even when studying the most closed and dictatorial of regimes. After their thorough engagement with the secret documents of the Iraqi regime, Woods and Stout conclude that "a good starting point" for understanding the strategic thinking of an adversary, even one as mercurial as Saddam Hussein, "might be to assume that foreign leaders mean what they say publicly, no matter how odd these public pronouncements may sound" (37). This can only be encouraging news for scholars who work on the international relations of countries and regions where the regimes are non-transparent.

Woods and Stout chose to frame their analysis of Saddam's decision making in terms of perceptions and misperceptions. They argue that his reading of the Gulf War as a victory for Iraq, because his regime survived the war, greatly affected his policy in 2003. Since the United States could not or would not dislodge him in 1991, he reasoned, Washington most likely would not try again. At most the United States might try to lop off part of southern Iraq as an autonomous zone, as the United States, Great Britain, and France did in the Kurdish areas after the Gulf War. Even as American forces mobilized in Kuwait against him, he continued to believe that the most serious threat to his survival was an internal coup and he configured his military forces accordingly.

Woods and Stout see Saddam's misperception of American intentions in 2003 as a motivated bias. With so much of his own self-regard and his regime's hold on power tied up with the perception that Iraq "won" the Gulf War, Saddam was unable to read the clear signals that, this time, Washington was serious about getting rid of him. Maybe so, but one need not revert to the idea of bias to explain Saddam's belief that America really was not serious about coming after him. After all, he had faced down other American military

¹ F. Gregory Gause, III, "Iraq's Decisions to Go to War, 1980 and 1990," *Middle East Journal* 56:1, (Winter 2002).

mobilizations against him, most notably operation Desert Fox in 1998, where Washington had huffed and puffed, but in the end limited its military actions to air and missile strikes. He saw a Security Council deeply divided on the question of war, and could have hoped, not unreasonably, to be saved by French, Soviet and Chinese vetoes of any war resolution. Moreover, Saddam in essence surrendered on the issue of Iraqi WMD. In September 2002 he permitted the return of international inspectors and turned over mountains of documents to them. While Hans Blix's first take on the documents was that Iraq had "missed an opportunity" for full disclosure, that judgment was based on a presumption that there must have been some chemical and biological programs ongoing, which we now know to be false. Blix and Mohammed El Baradei both reported Iraqi cooperation with the weapons inspections in the pre-war months of 2003. If WMD were the central issue in America's march to war, Saddam had some basis for believing that he had given Washington what it wanted.

Saddam's focus on internal security might be better understood not as the result of a motivated bias about the United States, but as a very common perception among rulers and regimes in unstable polities about the most serious threats to their rule. There is a small but interesting literature from the 1990s on "Third World security" that emphasizes the centrality of domestic threats in the foreign and security policies of "Third World" leaders.² Saddam's focus on his own internal threats, and the connection between Iran and his own domestic Shia population, fits very nicely into this framework. Woods and Stout themselves emphasize his obsession with internal threats in their account of his 2003 decision-making. We also know that the United States was in touch with Iraqi military leaders right up to the beginning of the invasion, urging them to stand down and, perhaps, to take matters into their own hands in dealing with Saddam.³ If we know that now, Saddam in all probability knew it then. Undoubtedly Saddam made some bad mistakes in the 2003 war, and nobody can say anything good about him as a military strategist. But whether motivated biases best explain his miserable performance can be debated.

Woods and Stout imply, though do not openly argue, that motivated biases are particularly important when dealing with one-man regimes like Saddam's. But the Iraq War itself calls this implication into question. The Bush administration also seemed to be plagued by motivated biases in its decision-making. It read the mixed evidence on the WMD front, particularly on nuclear weapons, and the very questionable evidence on a Saddam-al-Qaeda connection as proof that Iraq fell squarely into the Bush Doctrine of legitimate targets for preventive war. (The alternative interpretation is that the administration was just lying when it talked about Iraqi WMD and the al-Qaeda connection, in order to gin up public support for the war.) It might be that motivated biases are more important in explaining American policy in the Iraq War than Iraq's reactions.

This is a very useful and interesting article. It presents fascinating empirical material from the Iraqi side about an extremely important episode in recent international politics. It places that material in an interesting theoretical framework. While I am not completely convinced that motivated bias is the best way to

² See, for example, Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Steven R. David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-states: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Brian Job, ed., *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1992).

³ George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 387.

understand Saddam Hussein's behavior in 2002-03, Woods and Stout open the door to what could be a fruitful theoretical debate. If the Pentagon is good to its word to make the documents to which the authors had access available to scholars, more interesting research can be generated. Readers should be warned that this article does not delve deeply into related questions in which they might be interested, like why Saddam pursued such a strange policy on his WMD programs between 1991 and 2002, acting to "protect" from international scrutiny programs that he had already cancelled or mothballed, or why he invaded Kuwait in the first place in 1990. For Woods' and Stout's takes on those questions, one will have to read their books mentioned above.

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