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Introduction by James McAllister

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## Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College

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The simplest and most readily accepted explanation for the onset of the American war against Iraq focuses on the beliefs and actions of President George W. Bush and his neoconservative advisors. While certainly not absolving the President or the neocons of their substantial responsibility for the fiasco of the war, Michael MacDonald casts a much wider net in attempting to explain its origins. American elite support for the war, in his view, clearly went far beyond Bush and neoconservatives in and outside of the administration. If the war was all about Bush's personal crusade against Saddam Hussein, MacDonald suggests that there would have been substantial opposition from American foreign policy elites over the ends sought by the administration rather than just opposition about how to best go to war. In his view, "Elites facilitated Bush. They argued aplenty about *how* to go to war. Democrats, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Secretary of State Colin Powell pressed the White House to win approval from the US Senate and to seek approval from the United Nations Security Council before invading Iraq. But these arguments about means assumed agreement on ends. They were disagreements about how to get the war that they stipulated should be fought" (11).

All of the reviewers believe that MacDonald has presented an original and provocative argument. Andrew Flibbert argues that *Overreach* is "the best study to date of the war's causes and unfolding, and the leading edge of a second generation of accounts that benefit from the distance of a decade and—though this cuts both ways—our awareness of the war's consequences." Lloyd Gardner agrees with MacDonald that the war was not really about weapons of mass destruction but about America's foundational political and cultural assumptions about the world. In his view, *Overreach* provides "much needed perspective not only on the war but how Americans understand their place in the world." Even David Palkki, while quite critical of aspects of the overall argument put forward by MacDonald, writes that "The book is more than merely well-written: it contains novel and thoughtful explanations to fantastically important and interesting questions."

Of all of the reviewers, Palkki is certainly the most critical of various aspects of MacDonald's thesis. He believes that MacDonald is much too quick to dismiss the importance of the Bush administration's fears about Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction and its links to international terrorism. While those fears later turned out to be unfounded, Palkki argues that MacDonald "discounts" too quickly the evidence that these fears were nevertheless important causes behind the actions of the Bush administration. Echoing a point also raised by Flibbert, Palkki also wonders whether there are alternative explanations for American policy that are superior to MacDonald's emphasis on liberal assumptions and American exceptionalism. Finally, he suggests that it is highly unlikely that diplomatic historians or students of security studies will find it convincing that the war's primary motivations were rooted in the desire to expand markets and "implant global capitalism in Iraq."

H-Diplo/ISSF thanks Professor MacDonald and all the reviewers for contributing to a roundtable that will surely be of great interest to both political scientists and historians.

### Participants:

**Michael MacDonald** is the Frederick L. Schuman Professor of International Relations at Williams College. Working primarily in comparative politics, his previous books addressed the origins of the conflict in Northern Ireland and the reasons why race has come to organize politics in South Africa. Both works deal with collective identities and the role of politics in producing them, colonialism, nationalism, divided societies

and the meaning of democracy in them, and political violence. He also works on neo-liberalism. His doctorate is in political science from the University of California at Berkeley.

**Andrew Flibbert** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Trinity College. A Middle East regional specialist, he teaches international and comparative politics, and he writes primarily about security and foreign policy. His research has addressed the Iraq war, state failure, WMD proliferation, civilian suffering and wartime ethics, human rights in the Middle East, and the political economy of cultural production. He has contributed to edited volumes and published articles in *Political Science Quarterly*, *Middle East Policy*, *Security Studies*, *Middle East Journal*, and *PS: Politics and Political Science*, and he is the author of *Commerce in Culture: States and Markets in the World Film Trade*. His current book project uses ideational and institutional theory to explain American involvement in Iraq and its consequences.

**Lloyd C. Gardner** is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A University of Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe for Democracy: The Anglo-American Response to Revolution, 1913-1923* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Approaching Vietnam* (W.W. Norton and Co, 1989), and *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Ivan R. Dee, 1995) He has been president of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Affairs, and at present he is working on a book on leakers from Daniel Ellsberg to Edward Snowden. He lives in Newtown, Pa, with his wife Nancy.

**David Palkki** is the Scowcroft Institute Post-Doctoral Fellow at Texas A&M University and will soon begin work as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Strategy at the Air War College. He is co-editor of *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime, 1978-2001* (Cambridge University Press). Dr. Palkki holds a Ph.D. in political science from UCLA.

**Review by Andrew Flibbert, Trinity College**

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It has become easy and fashionable to call the 2003 Iraq war a failure and then to change the subject. Analysts, pundits, and politicians have tried to do so for years, though the rise of the Islamic State and its expansion across northern Iraq and Syria have made it difficult to turn the page. Michael MacDonald's contribution to maintaining the conversation, for starters, is a well-timed reminder that nothing is resolved regarding what the Americans were doing in Iraq for decades before knife-wielding figures from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) appeared on YouTube. The internet barely existed when the first Bush administration realized, in August 1990, that President Saddam Hussein's Iraq was a serious problem. A quarter century later, Iraq remains wholly unsettled, having shifted in various costly ways from regional aggressor in Kuwait, to defiant resistor of inspections and sanctions, to target of invasion and occupation, to shaky postwar ally, to battleground in the face of a metastasized Islamist insurgency. Only a power as formidable as the United States could afford such a string of failures, though one wonders how long this state of affairs can last.

More to the point, no American war since Vietnam has provoked such wild disagreement over its origins, despite the general consensus regarding its imprudence after the fact. Much of the debate starts with the questions we ask, two of them in contention: 'What for?' versus 'Why?' The first question is dominant and reflects an ongoing argument over what the war was for, or what objectives the George W. Bush administration sought to achieve. Was it a war for oil, democracy, strategic position, security from weapons of mass destruction, Israel, presidential vendetta, or domestic political gains? Given the variability of its purported causes, one might be tempted to think the invasion was entirely overdetermined. The second question is more significant because it seeks to identify the underlying impetus to the war, examining more than the stated (or hidden) policy objectives at the center of rival explanations. It assumes that a satisfactory account will include the most fundamental causal elements, whether policymakers were aware of them or not. Answering this question is more suitable for a war that has generated its share of puzzles, oddities, and regrets, all requiring better explanations than one-dimensional accounts of intelligence failure or Vice President Dick Cheney's association with oil interests.

MacDonald's book, *Overreach*, is more fully and importantly in this second category. While it puts the pursuit of regime change at the center of the story, it does not offer a narrow tracing of the Bush administration's efforts toward this end, so much as an exploration of the material and ideational forces that moved the administration and its coalition of enablers to act as they did. Suitably ambitious, it is a sweeping but also incisive and deeply considered plumbing of the war, from its conceptual underpinnings and implicit philosophical tensions to the political angles worked by its authors. This makes it the best study to date of the war's causes and unfolding, and the leading edge of a second generation of accounts that benefit from the distance of a decade and—though this cuts both ways—our awareness of the war's consequences. One could not expect much more, even if the book has its provocations and shortcomings, or at least choices the author made that may not sit well with all audiences.

The heart of *Overreach*, evident in the subtitle, is MacDonald's emphasis on a set of collective "delusions" regarding regime change in Iraq, or the widely shared American view that launching the invasion made sense, would be manageable, would benefit Iraq as a country, and would be welcomed by its people. What gave rise to these delusions? He claims, in short, that the war's proponents and supporters idealized American interests in that "they translated geopolitical and neoliberal interests into ideals, and then expected Iraqis would embrace the interests that they idealized as the answer to the universal stirrings of the human spirit (39)."

That is, “the United States bumbled into a self-subverting war because policy-makers, in an atheoretical, unexamined, obvious-beyond-notice kind of way, *conflated* American interests and ideals, *associated* American ideals with universal values, and then *imagined* that the power they had idealized was a godsend to the world (and sincerely *expected* Iraqis to concur)” (Emphasis added, 39-40). The United States invaded Iraq, smashed the Iraqi state, and initiated neoliberal reforms “because they assumed that liberal values are natural in origin, universal in scope, and ordering in effect” (6).

In this regard, MacDonald’s account contends that the ideational dimensions of the conflict mattered a lot to both the war’s origins and to the subsequent, troubled occupation. He does not tell the story of a war caused by the struggle for power, or wealth, or as an institutional failure, or the result of cognitive psychological dysfunction. It is a social story, one of shared ideas, identities, presumptions, and other intangibles, albeit as they related to material realities on the ground. The conflations, associations, and imaginings MacDonald emphasizes in the quotation above occurred in the minds of elite decision makers and their supporters. The social facts of the case, in Emile Durkheim’s sense, had a grip on all the central actors, from Bush administration principals to what the author describes as the invasion’s neoconservative, liberal hawkish, and neoliberal backers. He implicates the “Elite Consensus,” a device that aggregates the views of key political and foreign policy figures in the period after “dreams of regime change in Iraq soured” (72). What the war’s architects and apologists *thought*, he claims, mattered as much as what they did. They thought everything would be fine, and when it so obviously was not, they still misunderstood the nature of the problem and made the wrong adjustments. Mistaken thoughts led to mistaken actions, which led to unfortunate outcomes.

This raises the question of *Overreach*’s relationship to other studies of war in international relations. Where does it fit? One may take as a compliment or criticism the book’s relatively light referencing of contemporary theoretical political science. There might have been value in a more fully theorized assessment of the powerful ideational currents MacDonald examines, but situating the book explicitly in the constructivist literature, for example, probably would have been more distracting and costly than illuminating. It is a complicated narrative already, but MacDonald stays focused on the question posed in the first chapter, “Why Elect a Self-Defeating War?” Why, that is, “fight a war whose risks were plain and gains were suspect from the outset,” an empirical puzzle with five alternative explanations or “theses” that he takes apart analytically and with contrary evidence (8). His own answer invokes the tensions between Hobbesian and Lockean political theory, along with the related assumptions of contemporary neoliberal and neoconservative thought. In other words, *Overreach* relies more on foundational than explanatory theory.

Despite this orientation, the book is not disconnected from the political battles surrounding the war. In developing his argument, MacDonald names names, calls out hypocrisies, and generally spares no one. He has sections devoted to the wide range of pro-war figures both in and outside Bush circles, including prominent democrats like Hillary Clinton and Joseph Lieberman, journalists like Thomas Friedman and George Packer, think tankers like Kenneth Pollack and David Wurmser, and academics like Anne-Marie Slaughter and her unlikely fellow travellers, Harvey Mansfield and Bernard Lewis. The value here is in reminding us of the great diversity of people in the political and foreign policy worlds who were taken by the thinking that led to the war. In the process, MacDonald solves the mystery of why even “pillars of the Republican foreign policy establishment, like Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, James Baker, and Colin Powell, sign[ed] on to a war whose risks were obvious, whose goals were unreasonable, and whose salesmen were alarming” (129). Once Iraq fell apart, many on both sides of the aisle sought to distance themselves

from it or to portray the failure as simply one of poor planning and implementation, but *Overreach*'s focus on the fatal flaws in the entire project makes such evasion more difficult.

MacDonald's critical appraisal of the war and its aftermath is bound to elicit rejoinders from his many targets. One potential criticism is that the book's evidence is as soft, anecdotal, and subjective as the variables he identifies. This is a perennial challenge for any study addressing intangible causal factors that may shift over time, as political actors change their minds and, more vexingly still, redefine their views. The criticism is not without merit, though there may have been little alternative. The methodological or even epistemological intractability of ideational evidence does not invalidate a claim so much as render it more tentative. Likewise, one might contend that MacDonald's account has too many of its own moving parts, including his discussion of ten "tenets" (72), five "theses" (8), three "images" (60), two "axioms" (45), and one "deduction" (51). Then again, the latter are effective if artificial organizing devices that help to order an unruly, amorphous, contested, and capacious set of issues. The book's larger narrative structure is straightforward and replete with pithy summaries of the author's core claims, and the text itself is remarkable for both the clarity and verve of its prose.

The present-day implications of *Overreach* are important in a tumultuous region marked by yet another new—but old—set of characters in the form of the Islamic State. Many of those black-clad ISIS figures are, of course, by-products of the Iraq war. It is tempting to dismiss their most barbaric acts as wanton stupidity: the beheading, immolation, killing of children, and destruction of antiquities. But perhaps we need to look further. With their outrages against decency, they scream, 'This is what you get.' And it is true. This is what we get. Michael MacDonald helps us to figure out why.

**Review by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University**

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The debate over the wisdom of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 to overthrow Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has now become the town meeting hall of historians, political scientists, and international law professors. There are even echoes of philosophical disputes going back to William James, often called America's philosopher. The title of Michael MacDonald's book, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq*, perfectly captures the complexity of issues involved. If we are to go beyond the all-too-tempting wish to see the war as a personal crusade or as stemming from a neo-con collective seizing control of the levers of power, as we must, reading MacDonald's book will provide much-needed perspective not only on the war but on how Americans understand their place in the world. Why is the Iraq War more important than the agonizing Vietnam experience to understanding the limits of American power? One potential answer is that it was the first real post-Cold War challenge. But that is not sufficient. Despite the effort to portray Iraq as a global threat with an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, the war was really about deep-seated political and cultural assumptions. Without a foe that actually had the capability of destroying the United States, the clarity of the American military power's connection to American politics and culture emerged as an effort to reshape the future. All this was evident in the "End of History" narrative that developed between 1989 and 1992 as the Soviet Union collapsed in a heap of unfulfilled promises, and America became the world's only superpower. Although the person most associated with that narrative, Francis Fukuyama, would step back from what was being ascribed to him in 2006 as the Iraq War 'went south,' the dual meanings of the phrase – an end to the ideological wars of the twentieth century, and the natural 'end' of what American history had meant and means for the world, did not.<sup>1</sup>

The term President George W. Bush used to describe his desperate military gamble in 2007, 'The Surge,' illustrates the ethos of American policy. The United States has been on an urgent mission to the world since its beginnings when it declared its interests and ideals as one, and projected those as the objective hope of all nations. MacDonald makes that the major theme of the tenets in the 'Elite Community' of American policymakers. The neo-cons were actually no more than 'Johnny-on-the-Spot' available to re-awaken that spirit to its full force as a passion for constructing a global capitalist order, and for re-awakening the supposedly dormant entrepreneurial spirit at home weakened by years of 'liberal' coddling (this sounds very much like Theodore Roosevelt's crowd on the stimulant of a splendid little war to wash out the dregs of the Gilded Age). On that score they were out ahead of their more cautious 'realist' counterparts, but far from unique. Bush put it this way in his second inaugural: advancing the ideal of freedom "is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time." (45)

How did those goals work out in practice? In Iraq after the invasion, the Bush administration built up an aptly named 'Green Zone,' where young neocons with very little experience of the world worked to try to establish a pre-New Deal type of political economy for the Iraqis, while at home the Iraq War helped to boost intolerance and pre-game ceremonies honoring American soldiers. MacDonald dissects the assumptions bringing the philosophers John Locke and Thomas Hobbes into focus as important figures for understanding American history and foreign policy, both of whose work supports certain of the tenets. Locke proposed that once upon a time all the world was America, meaning that the political order that fostered individualism pre-existed in nature. Indeed, when William James talked about needing a moral equivalent of war, a more appropriate term might have been a moral equivalent for the frontier. Hobbes comes into the picture when

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

we get to the ‘Surge,’ as the godfather of a competing, yet associated idea, that in some cases one has to establish the order first and individualism will follow. As the author writes, “thoroughly idealized, policy-makers never anticipated that American power would be resisted.” (71)

Those who resisted, like Saddam Hussein, were, therefore, not rivals in a nation-state, balance-of-power, sense, but simply evil figures who desired Weapons of Mass Destruction. The only solution was elimination. Indeed, MacDonald could have widened his historical focus to the first Iraq War, when the ‘realist’ George H.W. Bush called Hussein more evil than Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, because the German tyrant had not held embassies hostage as the Iraqi dictator did in Kuwait. Or, he could have gone back to Washington’s plans for getting rid of Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro after the Cubans stubbornly refused to rise up and support the Bay of Pigs ‘liberators.’ One of these plans, devised by counter-insurgency specialist Colonel Edward Lansdale, called for a display of dramatic fireworks from American ships near Havana Bay that he called “Elimination by Illumination” – another telling phrase.<sup>2</sup>

As attention now turns to the current situation in Ukraine, MacDonald’s insights should be plugged into the debate over sending ‘defensive’ weapons to the Kiev government. This time the *ab*-normal figure is Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, who according to former Air Force General Charles Wald, one of the authors of a new report, “Preserving Ukraine’s Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression,” is a “thug,” and “he does not listen to international norms.”<sup>3</sup> That title “thug” has become a generic for leaders America does not like, because it suggests that their ambitions are never motivated by anything but an overweening ambition. But, more interesting, Wald touched upon an issue in a debate with realist scholar John Mearsheimer that speaks directly to MacDonald’s point.<sup>4</sup> Before the second Gulf War, British Prime Minister Tony Blair developed in several speeches the argument that globalization had outdated the old 1648 Treaty of Westphalia’s enshrinement of national sovereignty as the ruling code in international behavior. The treaty was a result of the experiences of more than a century of religious wars, and established the principle that nations should not intervene in the internal affairs of other nations. Of course it had been more honored in the abstract than in reality. But Blair was building a case for intervention in Iraq that liberals could trust – helping out his own new-Labour persona as well as putting a different accent on his friend George Bush’s tendency to talk like the actor John Wayne.

Wald picked up on the message in the debate with Mearsheimer, trying to use it in both a pre and post-Blair understanding of the stakes in the Ukraine, as in this somewhat confusing sentence about one of the latter’s points about behavior and spheres of influence: “That was an implication that expecting nations in the world, the world order today, the Westphalian model, which is being pressured a little bit today, that Westphalian model of national sovereignty – but the fact of the matter is that the implication that we shouldn’t expect

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<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Nashel, *Edward Lansdale’s Cold War* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press 2005), 14, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Pifer, et al., “Preserving Ukraine’s Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression: What the United States and NATO Must Do,” Brookings Institute Report, Washington, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The debate was featured on “Democracy Now,” February 10, 2015, and can be accessed at, <http://www.democracynow.org/2015/2/10>.



governments to treat their people with dignity, respect, and have human rights in mind, to me is unfortunate, because that's really what this is really all about.”<sup>5</sup>

What was this really all about? Was it the fact that the “Westphalian model” was being pressured by Russian aggression? Or was it that if the “pro-Russian” rebellion was successful, that would disrespect the internal affairs of Ukraine, and disregard the issue of “human rights”? This was unclear because the basis for using drone warfare in the Great War on Terror was definitely a post-Blair concept, as President Barack Obama included it before his election in speeches about the right to eliminate terrorist leaders and camps where states could not, or would not, act on their own. Wald’s problem is that he wishes to condemn international aggression in a state-to-state situation, while not denying intervention for the sake of defending a “legitimate” (Hobbesian) right to suppress rebellion. It could not be justified under a Westphalian understanding, because the debate about drones always centered on the meaning of the words ‘imminent threat.’ In other words, if the United States presses Russia on Westphalian terms to cease its interference in a borderlands area as aggression against another state, what of U.S. ignoring of Pakistani, and now Yemeni, protests about drone warfare?

The debate has a particular meaning for the experience of the Iraq War, for there is no better discussion of the ‘Surge’ and the implementation of a COIN-operated offensive than appears in *Overreach*. MacDonald devotes a good deal of the final sections of the book to an investigation of the theory and practice of Counter Insurgency doctrine (COIN) in Iraq. COIN theory posits that in any insurgency/counter-insurgency situation the greatest number of local citizens are fence sitters waiting to see which side is going to win, and, therefore, when to jump off and join the newly legitimate regime. The problem was that Iraq proved not to be an exception, but rather the rule. General David H. Petraeus, the man in charge of the 2007 “surge,” and COIN expert, got himself seemingly “stuck in an inescapable quagmire” in Iraq because the American counterinsurgents, instead of the host government, had become the providers of security; MacDonald concludes that “inadvertently, Petraeus’s counterinsurgents have become the state.” (233).

The American un-surge to get out of Iraq, writes MacDonald, should then have caused the state to collapse, since it had only limited security and administrative powers. But that did not happen. Instead, a semi sovereign state emerged under Shi’i control, as Sunnis acquiesced (for the time being at least) to the new situation. The tragedy is that the Sunni decision lends credence to the elite opinion that COIN worked – and redeemed a Cheney-Rumsfeld-Bush failure – and thus preserved belief that military intervention had, with the right direction, succeeded in Iraq, and COIN could become more than a tactical ‘handyman’ for crucial assignments in the future.

MacDonald’s book, with its serious probing of the political and cultural foundations of American policy, has given readers the opportunity to explore new avenues in thinking about the Iraq War, and, as I suggest above, about general questions of where those avenues finally led down a blind alley.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.democracynow.org/2015/2/10>

**Review by David Palkki, Texas A&M University**

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In *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* Michael MacDonald provides a thoughtful and novel argument for why the United States invaded Iraq. From the author's perspective, American assumptions about liberalism led to Americans' inability to foresee the inevitable, disastrous consequences of a U.S. occupation. He writes, "Having postulated American ideals as universal and liberalism as naturally and spontaneously ordering, regime-changers broke Iraq's civic order" without recognizing how incredibly difficult it would be to establish a liberal democracy in Iraq (69)<sup>1</sup> MacDonald presents a good deal of evidence that assumptions that the occupation would be relatively easy were widespread among American leaders.<sup>2</sup> Had influential Americans more carefully analyzed their ingrained assumptions, it follows, the war may not have taken place. MacDonald presents a serious, well-articulated explanation that future scholars should take into account. The book draws on a breadth of literatures and does so in a sophisticated manner. Among other sources, the footnotes include references to philosophical treatises, decision-makers' memoirs, governmental studies, and press reports.

The author challenges the notion that the war was motivated by fear of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and of Iraq's links with terrorists. He argues that because the George W. Bush administration's first two National Security Council (NSC) meetings dealt with what the United States should do about Iraq (among other things), the administration wanted to attack Iraq from the moment it entered office. Since at this time the administration was unconcerned about terrorists, he writes, it wanted war with Iraq even though it did not fear Iraqi state-sponsored terrorism. Bush's claim that the 9/11 attacks "changed everything" is inaccurate, MacDonald posits, since the President had wanted to invade prior to 9/11 even though at that time he did not take the terrorist threat terribly seriously (15-16, 35-37).

What little we know about these NSC meetings, however, does not support the author's argument. In the first meeting, neither Bush, nor Vice President Dick Cheney, nor Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, nor anyone else, for that matter, was advocating war.<sup>3</sup> In the second meeting, Rumsfeld commented, "It's not my specific objective to get rid of [Iraqi President] Saddam Hussein. I'm after the weapons of mass destruction. Regime change isn't my prime concern." According to Secretary of Treasury Paul O'Neill, "everyone" noted Rumsfeld's statement, apparently in agreement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also 7, 39-40, and 184-87.

<sup>2</sup> The Chief of Staff of the Army, Secretary of State, House Majority Leader, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and others did warn that the occupation would be costly and lengthy, though such views seem to have had little effect on invasion and occupation plans. For these warnings, see Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 208-09, 214-15; Eric Schmitt, "Threats and Responses: Military Spending," *New York Times*, 28 February 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Baker, *Days of Fire*, 91.

<sup>4</sup> Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 85.

Administration officials had good reasons, other than a desire to invade Baghdad, to discuss Iraq in these initial NSC meetings. Iraq, after all, had been firing on U.S. aircraft on an almost daily basis for years, including over 2,000 times from January 2000 to September 2002.<sup>5</sup> The United States was under immense diplomatic pressure at the time to ease the sanctions on Iraq, which were faltering because of widespread cheating and which were badly damaging America's image throughout the Arab world. Why should we take from these meetings, as the author does, the idea that administration officials wanted to invade Iraq from the get-go, for reasons unrelated to security concerns, but waited until after 9/11 for the appropriate opportunity? A more plausible interpretation of this evidence would seem to be that administration officials were concerned about events in Iraq and wished to alter the status quo, but saw regime change as a possible means to an end (WMD disarmament) rather than as the end itself. Given that Iraq was the only country in the world that was repeatedly attacking American forces at the time, the administration would have been derelict in its duty if it had waited until well into the term before discussing Iraq policy.

The author presents a few additional arguments against the idea that the war was motivated by fear of Iraqi WMD, but these arguments are similarly unconvincing. He writes that the war cannot be explained in terms of preemptive motivations since "preemption requires actual threats, not imaginary ones," and there were no WMD (35-36). The important factor for preemptive war, however, is the belief that one is about to be attacked, and for preventive war it is the belief that one is about to experience a negative power shift. In both cases the motivation for war deals with expectations that inaction will lead to worse consequences than will action. Whether fears motivate behavior has nothing to do with whether we later learn that they were ill-founded.

MacDonald argues that insiders used "Saddam's alleged WMDs and terrorist ties as the pretext" for war, but his best evidence belies his assertions. For instance, he quotes Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz as saying that WMD were chosen as the "core reason" because it was "the one issue that everyone could agree on..." (54). Far from demonstrating that fears of Iraqi WMD were a pretext, though, this comment indicates that worries about Iraqi WMD were more widespread among American officials than other concerns. As Wolfowitz elaborated, "There have always been three fundamental concerns. One is weapons of mass destruction, the second is support for terrorism, the third is the criminal treatment of the Iraqi people."<sup>6</sup> MacDonald quotes CIA Director George Tenet as claiming that the war was not "solely because of WMDs" and that WMD weren't the "principal cause." (54) But Tenet did not say that fears of Iraqi WMD were insignificant. Moreover, the CIA Director had strong incentives to downplay the importance of preventive motivations involving Iraqi WMD given the CIA's faulty intelligence on the issue, including his personal assurance to Bush that the problematic intelligence was a "slam dunk."

It is unfortunate that the author discounts the WMD/terrorist explanation with so cursory a treatment and without acknowledging more of the potentially problematic evidence for his thesis. Indeed, the author spends as much time arguing that neoconservatives wanted war to make American men more "manly" – that they demanded war "precisely because war is irrational" and "overwhelms rationality with manliness" – as he does attempting to refute what is probably the most widely-held explanation for the war (136-41). It feels odd to

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), p. 418.

<sup>6</sup> "Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Interview with Sam Tannenhaus," *Vanity Fair*, 9 May 2003, accessed 12 January 2015 at [www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2594](http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2594).

be focusing much of this response on only a handful of pages of a generally thoughtful study, yet the point here is that the author provides an answer for why the United States invaded Iraq without seriously addressing the conventional interpretation.

I also wish that MacDonald had expounded a bit more on the logic at the heart of his argument. How constant were the American assumptions he describes over time? Should we expect to see the same sort of optimistic planning prior to the occupations of Germany and Japan as the author documents with respect to Iraq? How problematic would it be for his argument if U.S. officials greatly overestimated the difficulties in occupying Germany and Japan?<sup>7</sup> Are the assumptions he describes unique to Americans, or do other peoples also conflate their national interests with universal values? Would it discredit his thesis if people in countries such as the United Kingdom, with similar interests and values to those of Americans, reached markedly different conclusions about the prospects for a successful occupation of Iraq? Would it matter for his argument if individuals in countries with radically different cultures and interests reached basically the same optimistic assessments about occupation outcomes as Americans? He writes that America's Arab allies pushed the Obama administration to overthrow Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, but then faults American assumptions (but not illiberal Arabs' assumptions) for the surprising difficulties in establishing order (97). What falsifies his argument?

The author's extended discussions of alternative explanations makes clear that a plethora of variables could have contributed to the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. These discussions are generally thoughtful, though I am uncertain that MacDonald has identified all of the most important American assumptions. For instance, to what degree did American leaders come to believe that an occupation and democratic transition would be successful based on previous American experiences in Germany, Japan, and Panama? Did the bloodless emergence of Eastern European democracies in the 1990s affect American assumptions? Did belief in 2002/2003 that regime change in Iraq would be quick and cheap stem, in part, from an appearance at the time that a reasonable transition could take place in Afghanistan without a major U.S. troop commitment? In other words, how do we know that assumptions about liberalism, as opposed to lessons from previous and ongoing experiences, led to the optimistic assessments?

The invasion, as I see it, was influenced by both pessimistic and optimistic thinking. On the one hand, U.S. officials recognized that sanctions were fraying, worried that Iraq was pursuing prohibited weapons and would reconstitute its WMD stockpiles, and feared that Saddam might arm terrorists and once again engage in reckless aggression that would put Americans, regional allies, and U.S. interests at risk. On the other hand, rosy prognoses of the outcomes of a U.S. military occupation did little to dampen the calls for war. Belief that the United States could transform Iraq into a liberal democracy, with positive regional ramifications, may, as MacDonald writes, have helped fuel the decision to go to war. I do not, however, find persuasive the author's claims that the war was motivated by American "dreams of markets" and desire "to implant global capitalism in Iraq" (8 and 39).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This seems to have been the case regarding the occupation of Germany. See James Dobbins, John G. McGinn, Keith Crane, Seth G. Jones, Rollie Lal, Andrew Rathmell, Rachel M. Swanger, and Anga R. Timilsina, "Chapter 2: Germany," in *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (RAND Corporation, 2003), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> See also 1, 3, 31-32, 35, and 37.

Despite my various criticisms, there is much to admire in this study. It is certainly among the best written books I have read. I could imagine assigning one or more chapters to students if only to draw their attention to the beauty of the prose. This is not intended, nor should it be interpreted, as damnation by faint praise. The book is more than merely well-written: it contains novel and thoughtful explanations to fantastically important and interesting questions. Even skeptics, who, like me, are not persuaded by many of MacDonald's arguments, will benefit from considering his thesis when thinking and writing about the causes and consequences of the 2003 war. The book is a useful contribution.

## Author's Response by Michael MacDonald, Williams College

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I am honored that *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* has received thoughtful and considered attention from Andrew Flibbert, Lloyd Gardner, and David Palkki. I thank all three reviewers for taking the time to read carefully and comment perceptively on my book, and H-Diplo/ISSF for arranging the occasion.

Before engaging some of the specific points that are raised in the reviews, I'd like to develop two points that the reviewers alluded to but did not have the opportunity to develop. First, I argue that American political, foreign policy, and national security elites identified regime change as their objective in Iraq, but that they disagreed fundamentally, and not always consciously, about what they meant by the term and what they thought regime change entailed. Accounts of what went wrong in Iraq invariably feature mismanagement by American officials. But these accounts rarely connect the incompetence to the deep, and often unrecognized, confusion about the content of regime change. In particular, uniformed officers and intelligence officials operated with a minimalist understanding of regime change. Counting on the Iraqi army and administration to remain intact after limited changes at the top, they expected Iraq's Sunni minority would retain disproportionate influence in, even hegemony over, the Iraqi state. Neo-conservatives and liberal hawks, by contrast, envisioned regime change more expansively. Wanting to marketize Iraq's economy, transform its culture, and democratize its governance, they meant to break the power of Saddam Hussein's security apparatuses, dismantle the state's capacity to oppress, and, less visibly, strip Sunnis of their ascendancy.

Second, the expansive conceptions of regime change entailed fracturing the monopoly on violence and the effective administration that are hallmarks of modern states. While the U.S. military and CIA foresaw that rupturing the state's power might unleash disorder, civilian regime-changers disregarded their warnings. They did allow that some disruptions might arise during the transition, and they entertained strategies for containing them during the interval between the dismantling of the old order and the construction of the new. But they didn't take seriously the dangers of full-fledged conflicts over the broad terms that would order Iraq after Saddam. Taking for granted that Iraqis agreed on them and that they were uncontroversial and achievable, regime-changers thought (as Lloyd Gardner notes) they were riding the wave of history to its evident destination. Thus intoxicated by visions of their eventual victory, hawks did not see that they were dismantling government in a country whose previous despots, by their own accounts, already had repressed civil society, sown distrust, pitted Iraqi's sects and tribes against each other, and systematically corrupted, abused, and discredited the state.

The war's objective was regime change, but the purpose was to project American power. Most hawks did not admit their deeper motivations, preferring to delude themselves by identifying American power interests with liberal values, and then by proclaiming their liberal values as universal in extent. The arrangement worked perfectly for hawks, first allowing them to think liberally while acting self-interestedly, and then obligating the U.S. to project its power as the means of spreading liberal beneficence throughout the world. Immersed in the certainty that they were freeing Iraqi citizens, promoting prosperity, and inaugurating regional peace, regime-changers convinced themselves that expanding American influence would materialize disinterested, altruistic, and irresistible values. In other words, they wished away the hostility that greets foreign conquerors.

With these points as background, let me address some of the specific issues that are raised in the reviews. I must begin by admitting that it is disconcerting to have a reviewer discover insights into my work that I had not spotted myself, but that was my experience in reading Andrew Flibbert's review. I think his distinction between what the war was fought for and why it was fought helps clarify my project. I wish I had formulated the point as clearly as he does. I agree too that I tell a "social story," but I must admit again that I had not thought of the point in this way, and I agree with Flibbert's presentation of the weight I assign to ideas and ideology in my argument. The one point I would add is that while ideology plays a prominent role in my understanding of why the U.S. fought the war and why the war went wrong, I use it to explain why policy-makers lost sight of their geopolitical and economic commitments amid a fog of irrationality, and why liberal ideals subverted American interests by mystifying officials about the import of their acts.

Flibbert does raise two gentle criticisms. First, he notes that I do not engage constructivism. I take his point. My argument hinges on the association in American foreign policy of increasing American power and promoting liberal principles, and I could have delved into the constructivist literature for insights into how the U.S. construes its interests as universal values. I chose to bypass this detour because it would have involved a full discussion of ideology, what it is and does, and, perhaps, of the sociology of ideas. Worrying this would divert me from my core argument, I opted to make the point about the conflation of interests and values and proceed from it, and not to explore the issue theoretically. Still, discussing constructivism could have enriched the book. Second, Flibbert raises questions about the nature of my evidence, before letting me off the hook. I appreciate his final word on the topic, which allows that the argument does not lend itself to methodological rigor. I would add in my defense that the best evidence for key parts of my argument hides in plain sight. The American government equated Saddam's regime with the Iraqi state, announced in the late '90s its intent to change the regime, and abolished the regime and crippled the state in 2003. In thus calling their shot, U.S. policy-makers divulged both that the regime was the root of the problem and that they did not think that incapacitating the state would radically disorder Iraq. Brushing aside the terms of political order as unworthy of their attention, regime-changers assumed that order would arise naturally from the rubble of the old regime.

I also appreciate Lloyd Gardner's generous review. I am pleased that he likewise attributes the war to deeply embedded assumptions about America's place in the world, and I am flattered that he thinks my argument also applies to current American policy in Ukraine. I take Gardner's basic point to be that hawks did not get the 'facts' in Iraq wrong in the way that the conventional wisdom admits. Their failure was more fundamental. They were wrong in believing that their conception of how all societies should be ordered applied to Iraq, and that history had ended and had culminated in liberalism. Many hawks, sincerely moved by the specifics of Iraq, never registered what grounded their understandings of American interests, values, opportunities, and of what made Iraq threatening. Unfortunately, these interpretations breed pessimism about the future. I regret that I share Gardner's fear that the war is being reduced to just another chapter in a foreign policy tradition that resists restraints, rejects the lessons that should be taught by defeat, and, through selective misremembering, sustains delusions of universality and favors the pursuit of more misadventures. I suspect that Gardner too wishes he could conclude more optimistically.

David Palkki writes more critically than the other reviewers, and his criticisms deserve detailed responses. He faults me for not addressing the influence of successful precedents of regime changes on American calculations. He is right that I omitted these examples, and he is right to suggest that I should have discussed them. I should have noted that in arguing in favor of war, regime-changers misapplied the examples of

regime change in post-war West Germany and post-Communist East Europe, and that these examples not only differed fundamentally from Iraq but actually show why regime change was likely to fare poorly there. Unlike Iraq, Germany had a strong liberal tradition from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, although the reactionary, militarist, anti-liberal forces that were concentrated in Prussia, the Junkers, and the military stifled it. But when the Junkers and the German military were destroyed in World War II, and when Prussia – the heartland of German reaction – was subjected to Communist control in the post-war division of Germany, the obstacles to liberalism in West Germany were eradicated and liberal traditions were freed to flourish. In other words, liberal forces in Germany could be released. They did not have to be created.

The fall of Communism in East Europe did not auger well for Iraq either. East European societies rejected Communist regimes, and when in 1989 the USSR quit upholding them via the threat of military force, the societies shed their Communist governments (much as Karl Marx had anticipated would happen when advanced capitalist societies turned to socialism). East Europeans, in other words, were not emancipated from the outside; they scrapped Communism themselves from within. When, therefore, hawks used post-World War II Germany and post-Communist East Europe as precedents for successful regime change in Iraq, they not only loaded the dice. They also substantiated my point about their predispositions to war and to interpreting the world accordingly.

My thesis is that broad geopolitical and neo-liberal ambitions inspired the idea of the war, and that visions of American universality invigorated American aspirations in spite of powerful arguments against the war. My strategy for establishing this thesis is to identify the power politics and economic incentives for war, and then to review the calculations that should have overridden them. Consequently, I seek to identify why neo-conservatives and liberal hawks wanted expansive regime change, why they ignored the conditions in Iraq that counseled against their designs, and why they disregarded the risks of undermining the Iraqi state.

Palkki focuses differently in explaining the choice for war. By adopting the viewpoints of policy-makers as authoritative and by ignoring what Flibbert calls the “ideational” dimensions of the war, Palkki treats policy-makers as responding common-sensically to threats as they appeared at the time. Thus he discounts my claim that delusions of American universality actually influenced policy, and he effectively restricts interpretations of the causes of the war to those factors that policy-makers consciously regarded as important. In the process, Palkki risks repeating their mistakes and makes it impossible to focus, as I did in the book, on why officials were prone to see what they saw and not to see what they did not see.

Palkki’s central criticism of my book is that I avoid the main explanations for the war, which he generally endorses. In these accounts, the U.S. went to war primarily because Saddam held, or was thought to have held, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). Palkki believes that I miss this, the central point of the war. While I respect his inclination to focus on what he sees as the glaring omission in my book, and while I appreciate both his close reading of *Overreach* and his fair-minded, serious, and substantive criticisms, I do take exception to these criticisms on two specific scores.

First, Palkki dismisses the statements of Paul Wolfowitz, the administration’s most prominent hawk, that I quote as evidence of the relative unimportance of WMDs in American motivations for war. In doing so, Palkki overlooks that Wolfowitz’s point is both a statement against interest – and, therefore, ought to be accorded substantial weight for the very reason he discounts CIA Director George Tenet’s statement – and that Wolfowitz’s point rests on the distinction between justification and motivation. In acknowledging that



hawks “settled on” Saddam’s alleged WMDs “as the core reason” for the war for bureaucratic reasons, Wolfowitz was implying that many or most hawks were motivated by other factors too, and that these usually were the decisive motivations. Hawks agreed to highlight WMDs because, as Palkki suggests, almost all of them objected to Saddam’s alleged weapons. But Wolfowitz’s use of the word “settled” connotes that many hawks were moved by the deeper motivations and that they emphasized Saddam’s WMDs to justify the war they wanted for reasons that were independent of the alleged weapons. Envisioning a cultural revolution, Wolfowitz and like-minded neo-conservatives made as clear as was politic that WMDs were the occasion for the emancipation that they regarded as morally and politically imperative. I do not deny that WMDs were the dominant factor for some hawks. But these hawks usually entertained minimalist conceptions of regime change and often were reluctant warriors. By contrast, those that conceived regime change enthusiastically and expansively advocated war because, as they announced publicly, Saddam thwarted American hegemony, liberal values, and capitalist transformation.

Second, Palkki criticizes me for offering only a “cursory” treatment of the Bush administration’s fears of WMDs and terrorism. This charge too, I think, is unwarranted. I review the various explanations for the war in Chapter 1, and the final section, from pages 29 to 37, considers the administration’s explanation of, and justification for, the war. Analyzing the logic and implications of the doctrine of pre-emption (also known as the ‘Bush doctrine’), I note that it refers explicitly to WMDs and terrorism, but that it also attributes the danger of the weapons to the nature of Saddam’s regime. The weapons were a problem, but they warranted war because of the regime that possessed them. As I put the point on pages 29 and 30, “Bush asserted that Saddam held WMDs, speculated that he might share them with terrorists due to their common hatred of America and liberal values, proposed to solve the problem by spreading market liberalism to Iraq, and explained the war as America’s defensive response to the threats posed by anti-liberal regimes pursuing WMDs for the purpose of destroying America and its values. The war, therefore, was meant not just to remove Iraq’s alleged WMDs but also to secure America by liberalizing and marketizing Iraq.” Palkki, then, might disagree with how I situate WMDs and terrorism in the Bush administration’s calculations, but he cannot sustain the claim that I do not take them seriously.

I would make a similar point in response to the claim that I see only the dreams of what hawks hoped would go right with regime change and not their fears about what could go wrong with Saddam, WMDs, and his ties to terrorists. I disagree with this reading of my argument, and think that I address that very issue when I elaborate the logic that inspired the Bush administration’s conception of security. My point is that the Bush doctrine undermined the distinction between defense and offense, fear and hope, and that it invited the U.S. to act offensively in the name of defense. To quote myself again, the doctrine of pre-emption “licensed the United States to project power if it felt threatened, and the doctrine expanded what qualified as a national security threat to include threats to liberal values and institutions. What was relevant, according to the doctrine, was what *could* happen if freedom is attacked, which is why it featured the *threat* of the alliance between Saddam and Al Qaeda” (33). Fearing Saddam because they believed his regime was innately and incorrigibly threatening, regime-changing hawks expected these threats to endure whether Saddam had or did not have WMDs and whether he had or did not have ties to Al Qaeda. If he didn’t have them, he had powerful incentives to get both in the future. That is the point of the Bush Doctrine. Thus, regime change was the only means available for eradicating multifarious threats, which had the fortuitous effect of coinciding with American interests in projecting power and presenting its power interests as emancipating Iraqis. But to achieve its security and Iraq’s liberation through Saddam’s demise, the U.S. first had to summon its will to put Iraq’s bully in his place, and this is why ‘manliness’ matters to neo-conservatives.

On that note, let me conclude by repeating that it has been a pleasure to clarify my thinking about the issues raised by these reviews. Thanks, again, to the readers for both their praise and their criticisms and to H-Diplo/ISSF for giving me this opportunity.