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## Author's Response to H-Diplo | ISSF Essays, Number 11

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Response by **Frank P. Harvey**, Dalhousie University

**R**ichard Ned Lebow admits, in his very insightful review of my book on the Iraq war, that his initial reaction was to scoff at my counterfactual about an Al Gore presidency taking the same path to war, “until (he) read the book.” I suspect anyone who takes the time to read the book will recognize the effort I invested in getting the ‘facts’ and the history right. The application of comparative counterfactual methodology was the ideal tool to construct, in my view, a more compelling, complete, historically accurate, logically informed, and theoretically grounded account of the path-dependent momentum that guided the coalition to war in 2003. I suspect the book will have a very hard time getting any real traction in academic or policy communities, for reasons noted in Lebow’s review and covered at length in my conclusion: the arguments contradict very entrenched (and politically motivated) ‘memories’ of what transpired. Democrats are unlikely to accept ‘any’ responsibility for the decisions, intelligence assessments or general threat narrative that led to war, and Republicans are very happy to distance themselves from the ‘neocons’ whom, they claim, hijacked U.S. foreign policy. Similarly, many scholars will reject my version of history because it directly challenges

their widely accepted, and very popular first-image (leadership) theories of the war. Most people are comforted by the thought that a relatively simple change in leadership would have changed (or will change) foreign policies. With these systemic biases in mind, I am very grateful to Lebow for his careful and balanced comments on the book and the methodology.

Of course, Lebow is not entirely convinced that my Gore-war conclusion is the only counterfactual outcome to emerge from a careful reading of the case history, and he qualifies his endorsement by making several important points. He begins his critique by asking his own counterfactual question - would a "Gore administration have hijacked 9/11 the way George W. Bush did? Might they have pursued a different strategy for going after Osama bin-Laden and reducing the threat posed by al-Qaeda? Without an Afghan invasion, or with an invasion and the successful elimination of Osama, the context of Iraq changes."

These are great points and perfectly reasonable (and important) questions to ask in the context of counterfactual analysis, but they are all addressed in the book. The context would certainly have changed in some ways, but the real questions are these - how exactly would these events have changed the context, are the changes path-altering, and would the new path be sufficient to alter the 'comparative' counterfactual conclusions I develop in the book? The logical and historical counterfactual case underpinning Lebow's point would have to be carefully constructed with the same attention to every part of the case history. For example, what are the counterfactual consequences of a different policy or outcome in Afghanistan? If Gore resolved Afghanistan more quickly, perhaps because it had been such an important priority of Gore's, then his team would have been more likely to have shifted focus to the other nagging post-9/11 foreign policy crisis facing the country, Iraq's WMD and the absence of inspectors. As I explain in the book, there is no evidence to suggest that Iraq was so low on Gore's (or 2000 Vice- Presidential nominee Joe Lieberman's or Richard Holbrooke's) agenda(s) to be completely ignored, so the real question is what a Gore team would have done on Iraq (with or without a relatively quick end to the fighting and/or death of Osama), in light of the changing context stipulated in Lebow's counterfactual question. My argument is that a Gore team would very likely have gone back to the UN to establish robust inspections, a reasonable solution embedded in a policy that still 'prioritized' Afghanistan - and the path dependent option is selected again. As I explain in detail in Chapter Two, there is no conceivable (realistic) set of circumstances in which Iraq could have become a non-issue after 9/11, and no evidence from Gore or any of his Democratic advisors that this would have been likely. In sum, *Iraq would have remained important enough to begin the process of returning inspectors, and the only way to have gotten inspectors back into Iraq with a robust mandate was to follow the same basic strategy.*

But let's assume Gore's team decided to deploy, say, an additional 50,000 to 80,000 troops to Afghanistan. The overall impact on Washington's Iraq policy would have been negligible. As I explain in Chapter Two, a larger, even more successful Afghanistan

operation that, for instance, succeeded in killing more Taliban fighters or capturing Osama bin Laden would have increased rather than decreased the likelihood of shifting to the next foreign policy challenge – getting inspectors back into Iraq to address heightened fears of WMD after 9/11. As I explain in the book, we know that Iraq was a central foreign policy pre-occupation throughout the two Clinton-Gore administrations – it was important enough to start a major (unilateral) strategic bombing campaign against Hussein in 1998. The issue would have remained an important foreign policy concern in 2002, especially after 9/11, because inspectors were essential for re-invigorating containment or monitoring the arms control piece of the sanctions and oil-for-food programs. Gore provided no indication in his campaign speeches (or those he delivered in 2002) that he was inclined to downplay or ignore Iraq (he argued in his 2002 Council on Foreign Relations speech that both crises could be addressed simultaneously). Moreover, Gore’s team would not have been inclined to ignore Iraq in the face of serious criticisms from the media and Congress, as well as the American public slamming the Clinton-Gore policies that led to the departure of UN inspectors in 1998. Gore’s team would very likely have been criticized for shifting the focus away from their responsibility for the absence of UN inspectors – a very difficult position to embrace after 9/11.

Keep in mind that almost everyone in Congress was “hijacking” 9/11 for their own benefit, including (and especially in many cases) the Democrats and Al Gore - they were all trying to highlight their post-9/11 commitments to American security and public safety.

Lebow’s second point is equally important - “I would not take at face value the statements of public officials. What political figures and their advisors say what they would do and what they would actually do are often not the same.” Absolutely true – but I never make the argument in the book that statements are ‘sufficient’, in and of themselves, to convey preferences. However, with respect to the substance of these statements and the larger counterfactual argument I am making, it is very important to acknowledge not only the sheer number of statements that support (in part) my ‘comparative’ counterfactual argument, but the almost complete absence of statements that could conceivably be interpreted as supporting the *Gore-no war* outcome – they don’t exist. The same caveat one can raise in relation to my collection of statements would apply equally to statements cited by advocates of *Gore-no war*, but where are those statements? For reasons outlined in Chapter Two, Gore’s 2002 Council on Foreign Relations speech doesn’t come close.

Lebow also challenges my treatment of the domestic political context. “It is not convincing,” Lebow argues, “to cite public opinion polls and statements by politicians as evidence that a Gore administration would have faced the same pressures to attack Iraq.” The public concern for Iraq, Lebow believes, “was a product of the nearly constant efforts by administration officials to focus public opinion on the issue, and to do so by making a series of unsubstantiated claims about Saddam’s WMD and putative support for al-Qaeda.”

But the volume of statements I include in the book that make a strong case for the serious threats from Saddam's WMD programs come from almost every White House official, and every Democrat in Congress, across three administrations. Every one of these players shared part of the blame for consistently reinforcing the narrative regarding Iraq's serious WMD threat - the Iraq problem was not a hyped up fabrication of the Bush administration. Moreover, as I explain in the book, very few Republicans or Democrats accepted the Iraq links to al-Qaeda (the CIA rejected those claims) and were not pressured in any way to reference those links when defending their October authorization votes - these particular "hyped-up" claims were not relevant to their decisions. In fact, as I explain in Chapters Four and Five, hyped up threats regarding aluminum tubes, uranium yellow-cakes and links to Al-Qaeda were *not* required to defend the widely supported "multilateral" policies (endorsed by Gore) that led the country closer to war.

Lebow then raises another important counterfactual question - what would public opinion have looked like "in the absence of the full court press of the Bush administration to equate Saddam with Hitler and mobilize public support for war." Leaving aside my previous point regarding widespread complicity in creating the threat narrative, it is very important for readers to understand the point I am making about public opinion during this period. Public support for the President started to rise dramatically when the Bush administration began to adopt the multilateral strategy endorsed by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Gore, the Democrats, most Republicans and the American public. In other words, despite the constant push by neoconservatives and unilateralists in the administration to exaggerate the intelligence, the unilateral option was *rejected* -- Bush went back to Congress and the UN against the wishes of neocons and unilateralists. It was when the administration adopted a moderate (non-unilateralist) strategy tied to a generally accepted and more moderate interpretation of the WMD intelligence that public opinion went up. There is no reason Gore would have done anything differently to pursue the same multilateral strategy he endorsed in 2002/3, and he would have benefited from the same uptick in popular support.

Lebow also cautions against citing estimates by foreign intelligence agencies when identifying "consensus" on WMD, because these estimates "were based on, or at least influenced by, intelligence provided by the U.S." True, but this would not have changed under a Gore administration. Keep in mind that a significant part of the intelligence on Iraq's WMD was compiled under the watch of the same CIA Director in the Clinton-Gore administration (George Tenet).

Finally, Lebow argues, I focus too narrowly on the neocons and "could have made a stronger case for (my) structural explanation if (I) also attempted to counter more nuanced arguments that attribute the war not just to them." It is true that the real purpose of my book is to challenge the dominant 'neonconist' narrative and any other first-image theory that relies so heavily on similar theoretical foundations. Although I do anticipate and respond to a variety of other arguments, including those put forward by

Chaim Kaufmann (2004) regarding the “failure of the market place of ideas”,<sup>1</sup> I remain convinced that my case evidence is comprehensive enough to credibly address alternative, more nuanced explanations.

The book may not change entrenched views about what happened from 2002-2003, but if my arguments compel readers to at least question their impressions, assumptions or conclusions about what transpired, that outcome is important and sufficient. As I note in the conclusion, the more sweeping the consensus regarding the crucial role of neoconservatism (and other first-image, leadership theories of the war), the more pressing the obligation to challenge it, and the more important the findings if these standard (and widely-accepted) theories are largely disconfirmed.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.