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Post-Mortem on Iraq: What Assessments of the US Failure in Iraq Tell Us About American Foreign Policy

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 Introduction by Joe Renouard, Johns Hopkins University, Nanjing, China

The War on Terror defined US foreign policy in the first decade of this century. The counterterrorism security paradigm of the Bush era focused on counterinsurgency against non-state actors in adversarial or failing states, and it entailed the expansion of America's force projection capabilities ('stop them there before they attack us here'), expansion of the surveillance state (ostensibly to prevent another 9/11), pragmatic partnerships with a wide array of governments (many of them authoritarian), moral compromises (Guantánamo, 'extraordinary rendition'), and of course major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Arguably the most critical turning point in the War on Terror—the US-led invasion of Iraq—commenced on March 20, 2003. Now twenty years on, we are still grappling with many of the most basic questions about that fateful decision and its aftermath: Why did the Bush administration (joined by leaders of the UK and other countries) decide to invade Iraq? Why did so many things go wrong? Why were postwar planning and policy implementation so inept? What have been the long-term effects for the US, its coalition partners, the region, and the Iraqi people? In short, what lessons, if any, can we learn from the war? From the perspective of the 2020s, some new and somewhat less conventional questions also command our attention: To what extent did the Iraq War contribute to America's current predicament of apparent discontentment and polarization? Did the war play a major role in the long-term erosion of Americans' trust in their leaders and institutions?

The four specialists in this roundtable—Jane K. Cramer, Peter Hahn, Paul K. MacDonald, and David Palkki—have crafted insightful, nuanced assessments, each of which deserves a close, careful read. With the advantage of time and distance, they weigh in on a number of debates familiar to scholars of American foreign policy, diplomatic history, and strategic studies. These include consideration of the 1991-2003 'containment era,' during which the US maintained 'no fly' zones, supported UN Security Council sanctions against Iraq, carried out occasional airstrikes on Iraqi targets, and ultimately made 'regime change' a matter of US policy via the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act. There is also the debate over the true causes of the war, including everything from Americans' fear of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and another 9/11 to the more ideological desire to end Iraq's President Saddam Hussein's brutality and transform the region. Then there are the many questions about the war's proponents, including not only key figures in the Bush administration but also members of Congress and influential pundits. And, of course, there is the ongoing debate over ultimate responsibility for the war's human, financial, and strategic costs to the US, Iraq, and the region.

All four authors agree that, to at least some degree, the war was a failure for the United States. Cramer argues that many of the figures who led the US into war "knew that there was no clear or firm evidence for weapons of mass destruction" and "that the intelligence process was being 'politicized.'" Hahn calls the Iraq invasion "a substantial error committed by a president who failed to evaluate rationally the pros and cons—the rewards and risks—of the action before ordering it," and he notes that the long-term outcomes "contradicted US interests across the Middle East and beyond." MacDonald calls the war "one of the great seminal catastrophes of the twenty-first century," adding that its architects got very little of what they wanted (no WMDs, no stable and democratic Iraq, no regional democratization) but got much of what they didn't want (200,000 Iraqi civilians killed, strengthened violent jihadist groups, Islamic State replacing al-Qaeda, civil wars in Syria and Yemen). Regarding the failures of postwar planning, Palkki asserts that unresolved disagreements over objectives "led to plans to occupy Iraq with limited forces and then quickly withdraw them, on the one hand, and to utterly incompatible plans to engage in sustained nation building and democratization efforts, on the other. The result was strategic incoherence."

Beyond a general consensus on failure, each panelist highlights a unique set of concerns, and there is some disagreement regarding motivations and culpability. Cramer's essay is perhaps the most critical. She assails two groups of political elites: those who launched the war and those who refused to reprimand its architects *post bellum*. The former consists of both the top Bush administration officials who lobbied for war (especially Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney) and those members of Congress who

failed to assess the available intelligence before voting to authorize an invasion (a veritable “who’s who” of top figures from both parties, including senators Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Chuck Hagel, and Richard Lugar). Yet despite the disastrous human toll, she notes, none of the war’s American architects have faced any punishment, nor has there been a formal Iraq inquest analogous to the UK’s Chilcot Inquiry.¹ “The repeated lies of these key leaders, and others, are well-known and astounding,” writes Cramer, “but because they were never systematically interrogated the historical record has become jumbled with a lot of vague ‘intelligence failure’ excuses.”

Like Cramer, MacDonald considers the lack of accountability to be one in a long list of Iraq War failings. “Despite their many misjudgments,” he writes, “none of the government officials who made the case for the war have paid a significant political or personal price for doing so.” Yet, MacDonald dwells much more on the limitations of postwar assessments. He is skeptical that Americans have learned much from the war, in part because he finds that the “lessons learned” genre of ex post facto policy analysis “often proves to be a poor mechanism through which to learn genuinely useful lessons.” He points to multiple weaknesses in this literature, including the tendency to focus on dramatic decisions by important figures, the tendency to attribute failure “to some combination of hubris, groupthink, or bureaucratic infighting,” and the untestable assumption that alternative policies would have wrought better outcomes. He concludes that “decisionmakers should be wary of the idea that failed wars generate neat and tidy lessons.”

Palkki and Hahn find much to criticize in US Iraq policy, but they also remind us that policymakers were dealing in the world of 2003, not 2023. Hahn argues that containment of Saddam Hussein was the better alternative to invasion but also asserts that policymakers had legitimate reasons to be concerned about him. The Iraqi leader’s regional aggression, domestic brutality, and use of chemical weapons had marked him as a villain, while his efforts to avoid UN inspections had marked him as a wildcard. “Given Saddam’s resume as a troublemaker, his strident anti-Americanism, his quest to rearm, and his unpredictability,” writes Hahn, “it was not unreasonable for security officials in the Bush Administration to identify him as a threat to US national interests.”

Palkki notes that Saddam was such a curious combination of rational and delusional thinking that he may not have been deterrable. He suggests that there was (and is) enough evidence of the dictator’s malevolence and unpredictability to at least make the case that he was a threat to other nations. Palkki also notes the pitfalls of premature assessments. For example, the 2004 Duelfer Report on Iraq’s WMDs had its merits, but we now know that it was incomplete.² “A key lesson from the war,” he writes, “is that assessments are not facts, whether in the form of pre-war intelligence or post-war historical analysis.”

MacDonald, Palkki, and Hahn mention modest policy successes, or at least broach counterfactuals to note that different policies might not have produced better results. MacDonald asserts that rebuilding Iraq would have been remarkably difficult no matter how thorough the planning and no matter how many boots on the ground. “Emphasizing the multitude of structural challenges facing post-war Iraq makes for a less compelling narrative,” he writes, “but more accurately fits what political science suggests about the inherent challenges of post-conflict nationbuilding.” Palkki adds that the Bush administration’s overemphasis on weapons stockpiles was deeply flawed and that if it had presented different messages, we might remember this history differently. “More mistaken than Machiavellian,” he concludes, “senior administration officials made their arguments for war ‘clearer than truth’ yet, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates, sincerely believed the core stories they

¹ *The Iraq Inquiry*, National Archives (UK), July 2016, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20171123123237/http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/>.

² Central Intelligence Agency, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq’s WMD* (Duelfer Report), Vols. I-III, September 2004, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~graceyor/govdocs/duelfer.html>.

told.” Hahn highlights the many tragic outcomes of the initial operations and occupation but also credits the 2007-08 surge with keeping Iraq from disintegrating.

The authors also address the war’s long-term outcomes and significance. Cramer points both to the injustice of a system that held nobody accountable for failure and to the weaknesses of popular and scholarly accounts which disingenuously blame outcomes on “intelligence failure.” “We need to set the record straight,” she writes. “The Bush administration was fixing the intelligence around the policy of regime change” and “Congress knowingly went along.” MacDonald, Hahn, and Palkki lay out some of the voluminous evidence that America’s power and reputation took a hit, for example the shocking loss of human life, the millions of displaced Iraqis, the financial costs to the US, the rise of Iran as a regional power, and the regional and global rise in anti-Americanism. Palkki notes that Iraq “has been an authoritarian-led terrorist training ground rather than a beacon of democracy” for much of its postwar history.

Finally, Hahn and MacDonald allude to the long-term crisis in American political and social life. Hahn argues that the war “gradually drained the morale of the American people and fed the emerging extremism and gridlock within the US body politic” and MacDonald adds that it “eroded the public’s faith in government, fueled growing political polarization and far-right extremism, helped unsettle civil-military relations, and contributed to large budget deficits and a ballooning national debt.”

These fine essays give us much to consider and even more to debate. And on this twentieth anniversary of the Iraq invasion, we would do well to acknowledge that American operations in Iraq continue. The US still has around 2,500 troops there carrying out regular operations, many of which end in civilian or military deaths. “In this respect,” writes MacDonald, “the American war in Iraq has not yet ended; it simply endures.”

Participants:

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Jane K. Cramer is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Oregon. She co-edited and contributed to two volumes on the Iraq War, *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11* (Routledge, 2009) and *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* (Routledge, 2012) (both with A. Trevor Thrall) and is currently working on a project on the United States’ current threat inflation of China.

Peter L. Hahn (PhD, Vanderbilt University) is Professor of History at Ohio State University. Among his several books are *Missions Accomplished? The United States and Iraq since World War I* (Oxford University Press, 2012); *Caught in the Middle East: The United States and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945-1961* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the Early Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991). Hahn served as Dean of Arts & Humanities at Ohio State in 2015-21 and as President of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) in 2018.

Paul K. MacDonald is Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College. He received his PhD in political science from Columbia University in 2007 and is the author of two books: *Networks of Domination: The Social Foundations of Peripheral Conquest in International Politics* (Oxford 2014) and (with Joseph M. Parent) *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Cornell 2018).

David D. Palkki is an Associate 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, 2011). He has also published a variety of journal articles and book chapters on international security affairs. He previously served as the Deputy Director (and Acting Director) of the National Defense University's Conflict Records Research Center, where he made copies of captured Iraqi records available outside of government channels. He holds a PhD in political science from UCLA.

 Essay by Jane K. Cramer, University of Oregon

“Iraq War Retrospective: Lies and the Need to Correct the Historical Record in Order to Prevent the Next Fraudulent War”

Congressman George Santos recently made many headlines for his astounding number of personal lies; many in his own party have called for his resignation. President Bill Clinton was impeached for lying about a romantic affair with an intern. And while political leaders often manage to get away with lying, it is appropriate and necessary for public officials to be held fully accountable for lying about important issues. The recent Congressional hearings on the January 6th 2021 insurrection made clear that it is possible and extremely useful to have a thorough investigation of shocking events that we hope to prevent in the future.¹ No similar thorough investigation of the Iraq War took place, and no leaders were ever held accountable for the lies that took the US to war. Because there was no clear investigation, there is real confusion and continuing disagreement about how to characterize the actions and process that took the United States and its allies to war in Iraq in 2003.

After such a catastrophe, one must wonder why the US did not have an “Iraq Inquiry” like the British Chilcot Inquiry.² Why were no leaders investigated for making the many demonstrably false statements that led the US to war? Instead of investigating the officials who led the United States into a war that cost thousands of lives and over three trillion dollars,³ leaders from both parties chalked it up as an “intelligence failure.”⁴ Many

¹ In addition to the hearings on the January 6th insurrection, another excellent investigation was the Church Committee investigations of abuses by federal agencies including the CIA, FBI, Internal Revenue Service, the National Security Agency and more in 1975, see Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry Revisited: The Church Committee Confronts America's Spy Agencies*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2015 [1985]).

² The British Iraq Inquiry was not perfect, but it did lead to numerous clear and damning findings. See Sir John Chilcot, *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Executive Summary*, Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors, 6 July 2016 at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/535407/The_Report_of_the_Iraq_Inquiry_-_Executive_Summary.pdf; see the H-Diplo/ISSF policy forum on the Chilcot Report at <https://issforum.org/policy/1-1-chilcot>.

³ Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict*, (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008).

⁴ The United States Senate Committee on Intelligence did release in 2004 a bipartisan report on the numerous ‘flaws’ in the intelligence gathering and analysis process that led to the flawed October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction. This very narrow first report largely led to calls for intelligence reforms and did not fully investigate the politics of what happened. The Senate Committee that produced this report acknowledged this was only a first step in the investigation of what happened (Phase I), but this Phase I report successfully set the dominant narrative to be about “intelligence failure.” A much later Phase II report includes the very important finding that the US Administration “repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent. As a result, the American people were led to believe that the threat from Iraq was much greater than actually existed.” These included President George W. Bush’s statements of a partnership between Iraq and al-Qaeda, that Iraq’s President Saddam Hussein was preparing to give weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups, and Iraq’s capability to produce chemical weapons. Since these findings and other damning findings were contested and countered, and since the Democrats were not at all unanimous in wanting to pursue further investigation, the report failed to be a definitive statement on what led to the Iraq War. See the Phase I report- *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, 9 July, 2004, United States Select Senate Committee on Intelligence, <http://intelligence.senate.gov>; Phase II report- *Report on Whether Public Statements Regarding Iraq by U.S. Government Officials Were Substantiated By Intelligence Information*, June 2008, United States Select Senate Committee on Intelligence, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080611232451/http://intelligence.senate.gov/080605/phase2a.pdf>. See the insightful journalist investigation of the politicization of the intelligence is PBS Frontline, *The Dark Side*, Season 2006, Episode 12, <https://www.pbs.org/video/frontline-dark-side/>.

leaders have since that time said “if I knew then what I know now”⁵ it would have been different. The lack of a full official investigation of the decision for the Iraq War and this so-called “intelligence failure” offers cover for leaders of both parties. Most of the government officials who reluctantly went along with the war were not actually ‘tricked’ into war; they were politically pressured into war. Even though it is too late for an official inquiry, the historical record needs to be set straight so that the right lessons about the lying, the politicization of intelligence, and the political frailty of the United States’ ‘checks and balances’ are revealed in the hope that the next fraudulent war might be prevented.⁶

Because the right lessons have not been made clear, leading reflections on the war utter vague pronouncements on the war: “the decision to go to war was driven by the psychological impact of 9/11 on key administration officials, together with their pre-existing beliefs about the dangers that Saddam posed” as the main reason for the war while at the same time also questioning the honesty and morality of the US decision to go to war.⁷ With only a small nod to the dishonesty of the arguments made to justify the war, this type of explanation of the decision for war is unhelpful. This fundamentally false narrative, that the war was mistakenly about weapons of mass destruction, is included in major college textbooks that contain the claim, for example, that “Iraq was also a target of the U.S. war on terror. ... Convinced that Iraq maintained weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the United States built a coalition, including its key ally Great Britain. ...”⁸ This misleading interpretation should not be the “history” that students are being taught.

Decisionmaking for the war was complex. Some people, perhaps even President George W. Bush,⁹ were convinced by advocates of the war that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that were a matter of concern. However, it is important to make very clear that leaders who understood the intelligence process knew that there was no clear or firm evidence for weapons of mass destruction, and that they also knew that the intelligence process was being “politicized.”¹⁰ Further, while the war was devised and pushed by many officials, most of them were underlings or associates for the top two key leaders who lied about the intelligence: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney.¹¹

⁵ Hillary Clinton was the loudest with this refrain, but many democrats echoed it as well. See M. Alex Johnson, “Democrats seek to seize initiative on Iraq,” *MSNBC.com*, 26 April 2007, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna18343153>. While Joe Biden resisted blaming the intelligence by initially arguing he supported the war for other reasons, by August 2004, after public opinion turned sharply against the war, Biden began to say he would not have voted for the war if he knew there were no weapons of mass destruction, see Andrew Kaczynski, “How Joe Biden defended his Iraq vote,” *CNN politics*, 17, January, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/17/politics/biden-iraq-kfile/index.html>.

⁶ This was not the first fraudulent war. As will be discussed below, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution that led to the Vietnam War resulted from a very similar multi-part flawed political process, so learning these lessons is not merely an academic exercise. Edwin E. Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁷ For example, Gideon Rose, “Iraq in Retrospect,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2013-03-18/iraq-retrospect>.

⁸ Karen A. Mingst and Heather Elko McKibben, *Essentials of International Relations, Ninth edition*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022), 58.

⁹ Narrowly focusing on President Bush, Melvyn P. Leffler argues that “fear, power and hubris,” including genuine fear of Iraq weapons of mass destruction, took America to war. Melvin P. Leffler, “What Really Took America to War in Iraq,” *The Atlantic*, 23 January 2023.

¹⁰ Abundant evidence for this in the documentary PBS Frontline, *The Dark Side*, 2006, with an extensive transcript of numerous expert interviews <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/darkside/themes/nie.html>.

¹¹ Other top officials played very important roles in exaggerating the threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. For example, the Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet was a key actor in pushing through the critical flawed intelligence estimate and more. Despite his crucial role, he was not an initiator in pressing for the war (for example, just after 9/11 Tenet made clear the attacks were done by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, not Saddam Hussein), and he was not taking the lead in lying to the public. Tenet was a necessary accomplice, but not a lead architect

The evidence of their misleading statements is abundant. On 9/11, barely five hours after an American Airlines plane plowed into the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld was dictating orders for how to respond saying he wanted “best info fast. Judge whether good enough hit S.H. (Saddam Hussein) at same time. Not only UBL (Osama bin Laden). . . . Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not.”¹² This is not evidence of a ‘psychological response’ to 9/11 but planning to use 9/11 as an excuse to attack Iraq even though Iraq was not in any way culpable in the 9/11 attacks. By September 2002 Rumsfeld was declaring he had “bulletproof” evidence of links between al-Qaeda and the government of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein.¹³

Rumsfeld also definitively testified under oath before the Senate Armed Services Committee in September 2002: “We do know that the Iraqi regime currently has chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, and we do know they’re currently pursuing nuclear weapons.” Rumsfeld also argued that “even the most intrusive inspection regime would have difficulty getting at all of his [Saddam Hussein’s] weapons of mass destruction. Many of his WMD capabilities are mobile. They can be hidden from inspectors no matter how intrusive. He has vast underground networks and facilities and sophisticated denial and deception techniques.”¹⁴ At the time of his utterance, not even the ‘faulty,’ politicized intelligence gave validity to such claims. The record shows that Rumsfeld was a leading source of very specific lies about Iraq’s WMD. As Hans Blix, Chairman of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) in Iraq described the Bush administration’s certainty: “It’s sort-of puzzling that you can have 100 percent confidence about WMD existence, but zero certainty about where they are.”¹⁵

Cheney was the other key architect of the Iraq War and a prime source of many falsehoods. He began the public push to war without prior approval by President Bush when he made a speech on August 26, 2002, declaring “There is no doubt [Saddam Hussein] is amassing [Weapons of Mass Destruction] to use against our friends, against our allies and against us.”¹⁶ Cheney persisted in repeating that “we know that there are connections between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda.”¹⁷ And in highly irregular fashion, Cheney visited Langley repeatedly while the CIA rushed to prepare the NIE (National Intelligence Estimate) on Iraq, pressuring intelligence experts to deliver “intelligence” in support of the pre-ordained policy to invade Iraq.¹⁸

for the war. His overly defensive memoir reveals his extensive culpability, George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

¹² Joel Roberts, “Plans for Iraq Attack Began on 9/11,” *CBS News*, 4 September, 2002, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/plans-for-iraq-attack-began-on-9-11/>.

¹³ Eric Schmitt, “Threats and Responses: Intelligence; Rumsfeld Says U.S. has ‘Bulletproof’ Evidence of Iraq’s Links to Al Qaeda,” *The New York Times*, 28 September, 2002, Section A, Page 9, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/28/world/threats-responses-intelligence-rumsfeld-says-us-has-bulletproof-evidence-iraq-s.html?smid=url-share>.

¹⁴ Testimony of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld before The House Armed Services Committee regarding Iraq (Transcript), 18 September, 2002, <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/useur/rumsfeld180902.html>.

¹⁵ Hans Blix to the Council on Foreign Relations, 23 June 2003 cited in Frank Ronald Cleminson, “What Happened to Saddam’s Weapons of Mass Destruction?” *Arms Control Today*, 33:7 (September 2003) 37, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2003-09/features/what-happened-saddams-weapons-mass-destruction#textone>.

¹⁶ Kurt Eichenwald, “Dick Cheney’s Biggest Lie,” *Newsweek Magazine*, 19 May 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/2015/05/29/dick-cheney-s-biggest-lie-333097.html>.

¹⁷ Glenn Kessler, “The Cheney’s Claim of a ‘Deep, Longstanding, Far-Reaching Relationship Between al Qaeda and Saddam” *The Washington Post*, 17 July 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2014/07/17/the-cheney-s-claims-of-a-deep-longstanding-far-reaching-relationship-between-al-qaeda-and-saddam/>.

¹⁸ I provide a much more complete account of both Rumsfeld and Cheney’s central roles and lies in Jane K. Cramer and Edward C. Duggan, “In Pursuit of Primacy: Why the United States Invaded Iraq,” in Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall, eds., *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 201-244.

The repeated lies of these key leaders, and others, are well-known and astounding, but because they were never systematically interrogated the historical record has become jumbled with a lot of vague “intelligence failure” excuses.

When President Barack Obama took office, while the war was still happening, Democratic leaders had ample opportunity to investigate—why didn’t they? Some argue that they wanted to move forward and not be distracted by an investigation.¹⁹ It could be argued that it was somehow disrespectful to the war dead to question the underlying validity of their sacrifice, or that an investigation would polarize an already divided US electorate. A thorough investigation would clearly have shown that leading Democrats and key Republicans knowingly authorized a war based on a phony premise. Members of Congress knew that there was no substantial evidence for WMD in Iraq before the war. Senator Joe Biden knew. Senator Hillary Clinton knew. Republican Senators Chuck Hagel and Richard Lugar, House Majority Leader Dick Armey, and Secretary of State Colin Powell all clearly knew. Everyone who was paying attention knew. Democratic Senator Bob Graham, who chaired the Senate Intelligence Committee and voted against authorizing the war repeatedly urged his colleagues to go read the full NIE (National Intelligence Estimate) on Iraq because it was being wildly misrepresented. Everyone knew this and Congress members had full access to the intelligence on Iraq and it was their constitutional responsibility to decide for war. Despite this grave responsibility, fewer than a half dozen or so members went to the secure room to look at the NIE before voting, even though they knew the intelligence was highly dubious.²⁰

Instead of studying the WMD intelligence, both houses of Congress very, very briefly debated the ‘blank check’ authorization for war. The Senate voted for Bush to be able to launch a war after less than a week of debate. Given that Iraq had not attacked the United States and no threat was imminent, the lack of debate was stunning and unprecedented. Senator Robert Byrd later recalled he begged his colleagues to take more time and to not be politically pressured to authorize war. He said it was clear they all knew the intelligence was shoddy, but they did not want to debate it. They just wanted to get the vote behind them before the upcoming November election. Byrd, who deeply regretted that he had voted for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution under very similar political pressure, based on ‘faulty intelligence’ about an attack on US forces in the Gulf of Tonkin, did not want to replay that disaster that led to the Vietnam War. He pointed out the Senate had debated the Elementary and Secondary Education Act for twenty-one days, the energy bill for twenty-three days, the trade bill for nineteen days, and the farm bill for eighteen days, so less than six days on a vote for war was unscrupulous.²¹

On the twentieth anniversary of the Iraq War, we need to set the record straight. Instead of calling the Iraq War an ‘intelligence failure,’ we need to admit that the famous “Downing Street Memo” written by Matthew Rycroft, a foreign policy aide recording the views of the head of Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) after his recent visit to Washington in July 2002, succinctly captured what was happening within the Bush administration in the summer of 2002: “Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.”²² The Bush administration was fixing the intelligence around the

¹⁹ Carl Hulse, “The Why-Haven’t-You Impeached-the President Tour,” *The New York Times*, 15 August, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/us/politics/15web-hulse.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

²⁰ The most detailed account of how everyone knew the intelligence was lacking but the political process pressured everyone to go along is Michael Isikoff and David Corn’s, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal and the Selling of the Iraq War*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), with its discussion of how few Congress members went to read the intelligence report on 137.

²¹ This account of the Democrats not debating and wanting to just get the vote behind them, very similar to the Gulf of Tonkin episode, is in Chapter 7, “Out of Business,” in Senator Robert C. Byrd, *Losing America: Confronting A Reckless and Arrogant Presidency*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004).

²² Mark Danner, *The Secret Way to War: The Downing Street Memo and The Iraq War’s Buried History*, (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006) 48.

policy of regime change. Even more disastrous, Congress knowingly went along. Twenty years on it is time to figure out how to prevent intelligence politicization and lying about intelligence by US political leaders, and even more difficult, how to make functional the institutional 'checks and balances' on war that a democracy is supposed to have.

“Lessons of the Iraq War”

From the vantage point of its twentieth anniversary, the US invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003, appears to have been a substantial error committed by a president who failed to evaluate rationally the pros and cons—the rewards and risks—of the action before ordering it.

While the invasion succeeded at its immediate goal of destroying the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, it did not achieve its objective of facilitating a smooth and rapid transition of power to democratically elected and friendly Iraqi leaders. The invasion generated changes and created conditions that contradicted US interests across the Middle East and beyond.

To be sure, President George W. Bush did not make his fateful decision without deliberation, without reason, or without reservation. As Melvyn P. Leffler shows clearly in his terrific new book, Bush presided over months of conversations among his national security team, deciding only in January 2003 on an invasion.¹ His national security advisers who advocated for an invasion cited legitimate reasons. Saddam Hussein’s legacy of brutality, record of aggression, and use of chemical weapons in the 1980s and 1990s rendered him a legitimate security concern to his neighbors and to the United States. While he posed a limited immediate threat, his determined efforts to escape the United Nations-sanctioned containment apparatus erected against him after the Gulf War in 1991 meant that he likely would become more dangerous in the future.

Firmly dealing with Iraq had bipartisan support within the United States. As early as October 1998, the US Congress overwhelmingly passed and President Bill Clinton signed into law the Iraq Liberation Act clarifying that the United States, as a matter of national policy, would seek the removal of Saddam Hussein from power and the transition of Iraq to a democracy. Although that law did not specifically authorize military means for regime change, Clinton ordered massive airstrikes against Iraqi military facilities in December 1998, after Saddam expelled United Nations arms inspectors from his country.²

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on Washington and New York exacerbated US security concerns with Saddam’s regime. Because of their magnitude, and because they culminated in a series of terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists against the United States in the 1990s, the 9/11 attacks impelled US leaders to consider proactive measures to prevent another assault on such scale. They pondered the possibility that a foreign leader might aid and abet terrorists and militants who were determined to bloody the United States. In the minds of Bush administration leaders, the potential provision of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to such groups presented an existential threat to the United States. Although sketchy and of questionable veracity, intelligence reports that Saddam had communicated with al-Qaeda leaders after 9/11 portended trouble in the estimates of security officials who were responsible for protecting the American people from future attack. In late 2002, moreover, Saddam refrained from fully cooperating with United Nations officials seeking to resume international inspections that could have verified the conventional nature of his armaments. Given Saddam’s resume as a troublemaker, his strident anti-Americanism, his quest to rearm, and his unpredictability, it was not unreasonable for security officials in the Bush Administration to identify him as a threat to US national interests.³

¹ Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). .

² Peter L. Hahn, *Missions Accomplished?: The United States and Iraq since World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119-33.

³ Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, 51-77.

Although there was merit in these reasons for military action against Iraq, Bush's ultimate decision to invade Iraq in 2003 proved to be a major strategic error. The president overlooked or downgraded factors that mitigated against invasion, such as the renewal of initiatives by the UN to resume arms inspections, the tenuous nature of intelligence linking Saddam to al-Qaeda terrorists, and the relatively limited danger posed by his unconventional weapons given his primitive delivery systems, deteriorated infrastructure, and economic malaise. Having been shocked and humbled by the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent anthrax letter attacks, Bush resolved to do everything possible to prevent another strike on the US homeland and thus decided that the risks of proaction against Iraq were lower than the risks of inaction.⁴ In that decision, he let his fears get the best of him and crowd out rational reasons to pursue alternative action. Reinforcing the containment of Iraq would have been far preferable to rolling the iron dice and gambling on the uncertain outcome of war.

The Bush administration based the decision to invade on several premises that could and should have been recognized as faulty before the invasion was ordered. No one practiced healthy skepticism regarding the US intelligence reports that were later found to have grossly overestimated the scale and lethality of Iraqi unconventional weapons. By centering its public justifications for the war on disarming Iraq of such weapons, the administration sacrificed its own credibility when the invading forces and the arms inspectors who followed them discovered no meaningful exotic weaponry in the country. The administration made bad assumptions about the ease with which the government in Baghdad could be transitioned from Saddam's regime to one of new Iraqi leaders. To establish a new government, the United States relied heavily on aspiring politician Ahmad Chalabi and other Iraqi exiles organized as the Iraq National Congress, but they lacked the credibility among the Iraqi people and the political and administrative skills needed to erect a stable new regime.⁵

The Bush Administration failed to plan adequately for the conduct and aftermath of the war. US officials should have anticipated that an invasion of Iraq would unleash such destabilizing forces as the renewal of sectarian tensions between the Shia and the traditional Sunni elite. They overestimated the likelihood of seamless continuity from Saddam's regime to a new government because they failed to appreciate that his brutal authoritarianism was the most significant factor holding society together and that his sudden removal would render the structures of society prone to collapse. Having assumed erroneously that the Iraqi people would freely embrace the transition to a democratic form of government, the administration deliberately understaffed the invasion force that was assigned to deal with the aftermath of conflict. Because they had made these false assumptions, US officials were surprised by, unprepared for, and unable to deal with the instability and insurgency that suddenly swept across Iraq.

The prospects for early success in Iraq were diminished considerably by mistakes in the actual invasion and its immediate aftermath. Because Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld limited the number of soldiers committed to the invasion, the US forces that occupied Baghdad bypassed and thus failed to secure weapons and munitions stockpiles and financial institutions that eventually armed and funded insurgents. Those forces also lacked the firepower and personnel to enforce security and stability in the capital and other cities. US leaders failed to anticipate and thus neutralize such asymmetrical defensive maneuvers by Saddam as emptying prisons of common criminals, a development that undermined the prospects for a smooth transition to a new government.⁶

While the military invasion quickly demolished the Saddam Hussein regime, US administrative and political blunders undermined the prospects for a smooth transition to a democratic government. US leaders denied political responsibilities to Britain (even though its troops had fought alongside US armies) and to the United

⁴ Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 168-266; Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein*.

⁵ Terry H. Anderson, *Bush's Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 131-213.

⁶ Hugh F.T. Hoffman, "Lessons from Iraq," *Journal of Complex Operations* (Nov. 20, 2017): 328-59.

Nations, fumbling opportunities to earn international expertise and credibility for initiatives to remake the Iraqi government. The Pentagon bumbled administratively by creating the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) and then isolating and undermining it, and in failing to ensure coordination between senior military leaders and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Bush erred in sending retired diplomat L. Paul Bremer, who had no experience in Iraq and no experience in military occupation duty, to head the CPA.⁷

Soon after reaching Baghdad, Bremer made two monumental errors that undermined US objectives. In CPA Order #1, he banned from government service many Iraqis who had belonged to the Baath Party and all officials (including non-Baathists) who had served in the top three levels of any government ministry. Order #1 purged Saddam Hussein's loyalists but also removed tens of thousands of experienced civil servants, physicians, teachers, and technocrats who knew how to run the government and whose party membership had been pragmatic rather than ideological. In CPA Order #2, Bremer dismantled the Iraqi Army, state security apparatus, and intelligence services. That order purged senior officers who had been loyal to Hussein, but also expelled hundreds of thousands of apolitical, professional soldiers and police officers who likely would have stabilized the country against sectarian violence and insurgency.⁸ While there is potential merit in the counter-factual argument that preserving the legacy security apparatus would have alienated the Iraqi Shias and Kurds who had been suppressed by Hussein's regime, it is clear that CPA Order #2 destabilized Iraq and provided a legion of unemployed, armed, and experienced combatants for recruitment to the anti-US insurgency. The Iraqi Army, in particular, was a national institution, and many of its leaders were willing to work with the US military. Reforming the army by eliminating senior Baathist leadership would have been far preferable to building a new institution from scratch.⁹

In hindsight, the costs and consequences of the US invasion of Iraq were severe. The loss of human life is staggering, including 4,431 US military troops, 368 Allied soldiers, and more than 200,000 Iraqi combatants and civilians. (How sadly ironic that whereas Bush and Rumsfeld had considered an invasion on the grounds that some of the US military aviators enforcing the prewar No Fly Zones might be shot down, the actual invasion caused so much more loss of life.)¹⁰ More than 9 million Iraqis were displaced from their homes. The long-term financial costs to the US Treasury exceeded \$2.4 trillion, excluding the costs of veteran care.¹¹ The resort to arms in defiance of the counsel of allies and other world powers tarnished the US global reputation and triggered a spike in anti-Americanism across the Middle East and beyond. The action in Iraq drained energy and resources from the US war in Afghanistan, reducing the prospects of success there. Iran took advantage of the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime to extend its influence among Iraq's Shia community, to advance its WMD programs, and to develop its partnerships with unconventional militias across the Middle East. The US action gradually drained the morale of the American people and fed the emerging extremism and gridlock within the US body politic.

⁷ Hahn, *Missions Accomplished?*, 136-61.

⁸ L. Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 39-58; Hoffman, "Lessons from Iraq"; Meghan L. O'Sullivan, "Lessons Learned: The Iraq Invasion," Belfer Center, May/June 2013, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/lessons-learned-iraq-invasion>.

⁹ James P. Pfiffner, "US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army," *Intelligence and National Security* 25:1 (Feb. 2010): 76-85.

¹⁰ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 12-23.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Casualty Status," <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf> (last accessed Jan. 9, 2023); Catherine Lutz, "US and Coalition Casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan," Feb. 21, 2013, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2013/USandCoalition.pdf> (last accessed Jan. 9, 2023); Neta C. Crawford, "Human Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars: Lethality and the Need for Transparency," November 2018, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Human%20Costs%2C%20Nov%208%202018%20CoW.pdf> (last accessed January 9, 2023).

To his credit, Bush mitigated some of the negative consequences of his invasion before he left the White House in 2009. In the Surge of 2007-8, he boosted US forces in Iraq and modified their strategy, which succeeded in defeating al-Qaeda in Iraq, pacifying the insurgency, reducing the power of Shia militias, and providing the stability needed for Iraq's new democratic government to function. Although that success did not completely rectify the damage caused by the original invasion, it improved the conditions within Iraq and kept the country from disintegrating.¹²

That verdict on the Surge points to a final lesson of the Iraq War: that each presidential decision should be evaluated based on the available evidence and in the context in which the decision was made. Simply because Bush erred in launching the war does not mean that his decision to launch the Surge was an error. Similarly, simply because Illinois State Senator Barack Obama was wise and prescient in vocalizing opposition to an invasion of Iraq in October 2002 does not mean that President Barack Obama was wise and prescient in ordering a complete withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq in 2011. That latter decision gave the Islamic State (IS) an opportunity to overrun large swaths of northern and western Iraq and northern and eastern Syria, which aggravated the Syrian refugee crisis, triggered IS attacks in Europe and the United States, further extended Iranian influence across the Middle East, and prompted the return of US troops to Iraq to battle against IS.¹³

¹² Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

¹³ Hal Brands and Peter D. Feaver, "Lessons from the Iraq War," *National Review*, June 20, 2019.

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The 2003 Iraq War was one of the great seminal catastrophes of the twenty-first century.² By almost any accounting, the war failed to produce the outcomes intended by its architects.³ The war did not compel Iraq to surrender its weapons of mass destruction, because Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction to surrender.⁴ The war did not result in a stable democratic Iraq, but produced a series of weak and corrupt governments riven by sectarian and ethnic divides.⁵ The war did not deal a blow to violent jihadist groups, rather it reinvigorated them and led directly to the rise of the Islamic State, which is arguably a more capable and extreme organization than al Qaeda.⁶ The war did not lead to the spread of democracy around the Middle East, instead it inflamed regional rivalries and indirectly contributed to the outbreak or intensification of civil

¹ I would like to thank Marsin Alshamary, David Blagden, Adam Cayton, Bridget Coggins, Ryan Dawkins, Stacie Goddard, Justin Login, Igor Logvinenko, Myra MacDonald, Rich McAlexander, Joseph Parent, Robert Ralston, and Larry Rosenwald for their comments or suggestions. All claims and errors remain my own.

² Apologies to George Kennan, who originated this phrase to describe the First World War. George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890* (Princeton, University of Princeton Press, 1980), 3.

³ For a journalistic and insider accounts of these motives, see Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); and Ron Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). For academic discussions of the causes of the Iraq War, see Robert Jervis, "The Confrontation between Iraq and the U.S.: Implications for the Theory and Practice of Deterrence," *European Journal of International Relations*, 9, no. 2 (June 2003), 315-337; Andrew Flibert, "The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War," *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 310-52; Brian C. Schmidt and Michael C. Williams, "The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War: Neoconservatives Versus Realists," *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 191-220; Robert Jervis, "Explaining the War in Iraq," in Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall, eds., *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 25-48; David Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/11): 7-52; Frank P. Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic, and Evidence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Ahsan I. Butt, "Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003?" *Security Studies*, 28, no. 2 (2019): 250-285.

⁴ On the roots of this intelligence failure, see Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), chap. 7; Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), chap. 3; and Paul R. Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), chap. 2-4.

⁵ On the challenge of nationbuilding in Iraq, see Daniel Byman, "Constructing a Democratic Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities," *International Security*, 28, no. 1 (2003): 47-78; Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: the American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005); Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Bruce E. Moon, "Long Time Coming: Prospects for Democracy in Iraq," *International Security*, 33, no. 4 (2009): 115-148. On the continued legacy of the invasion on the politics of post-occupation Iraq, see Marsin Alshamary, *Postwar Development of Civil Society in Iraq's Mid-Euphrates Region* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 2022).

⁶ On the connection between the Iraq war and the rise of ISIS, see Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015); William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's, 2015); Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015); and Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).

wars in countries across the region including Syria and Yemen.⁷ The human toll of the war has been tremendous, with an estimated 200,000 Iraqi civilians losing their lives.⁸

Given these outcomes, the war did little to bolster the power, authority, or reputation of the United States. Systemic abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison, the massacre of innocent civilians in Haditha, and other war crimes tarnished America's global reputation.⁹ Years of grinding counterinsurgency warfare put significant stain on the American military and resulted in the deaths of roughly 4,400 American troops.¹⁰ Back home, the war eroded the public's faith in government, fueled growing political polarization and far-right extremism, helped unsettle civil-military relations, and contributed to large budget deficits and a ballooning national debt.¹¹ Despite their many misjudgments, none of the government officials who made the case for the war have paid a significant political or personal price for doing so.¹² Twenty years on, the United States still retains roughly 2,500 troops in Iraq,¹³ and just this past year, these forces conducted 191 operations that resulted in 159 people detained and at least 220 killed.¹⁴ In this respect, the American war in Iraq has not yet ended; it simply endures.

What lessons should the United States draw from the 2003 Iraq War? This is not an unfamiliar question. Almost from the outset, as the American occupation of Iraq began to devolve into chaos and a sectarian civil

⁷ On the broader regional impact of the Iraq war, see Louise Fawcett, "The Iraq War Ten Years On: Assessing the Fallout," *International Affairs*, 89, no. 2 (March 2013); Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016); and Frederick M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁸ Costs of War project "Human Cost of post-9/11 Wars" (1 September 2021), <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/WarDeathToll>; and Iraq Body Count "Documented Civilian Deaths from Violence" (28 February 2017), <https://www.iraqbodycount.org>.

⁹ On the impact of the Iraq war on global attitudes and anti-Americanism, Giacomo Chiozza, "Disaggregating Anti-Americanism: An Analysis of Individual Attitudes toward the United States," in Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007): 93-128; and Giacomo Chiozza, "A Crisis Like No Other? Anti-Americanism at the Time of the Iraq War," *European Journal of International Relations*, 15, no.2 (2009): 257-289.

¹⁰ Congressional Research Service, "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics" (29 July 2020), 15. On the impact of the Iraq war on the US military, see Michael E. O'Hanlon, "The Iraq War and the State of the U.S. Military," in John S. Duffield and Peter J. Dombrowski, eds., *Balance Sheet: The Iraq War and U.S. National Security* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009): 87-105;

¹¹ On the civil-military questions raised by the Iraq war, see Hew Strachan, "Making Strategy: Civil-Military Relations after Iraq," *Survival*, 48, no.3 (2006): 59-82; Michael C. Desch, "Bush and the Generals," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2007); Peter D. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security*, 35, no.4 (Spring 2011): 87-125; and Stefano Recchia, *Reassuring the Reluctant Warriors: U.S. Civil-Military Relations and Multilateral Intervention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), chap. 6. On the fiscal impacts of the war, see Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, *Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2008); Thomas Oatley, *A Political Economy of American Hegemony: Buildups, Booms, and Busts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), chap. 7; and Sarah E. Kreps, *Taxing Wars: The American Way of War Finance and the Decline of Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), chap. 6. On the domestic political impacts of the Iraq war, see Gary C. Jacobson, "Perception, Memory, and Partisan Polarization on the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly*, 125, no.1 (2010): 31-56; Ole R. Holsti, *American Public Opinion on the Iraq War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011); and Richard McAlexander, Michael Rubin, and Rob Williams "They're Still There, He's All Gone: American Fatalities in Foreign Wars and Right-Wing Radicalization at Home," (Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Conference, 2021)

¹² See Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), chap. 5.

¹³ Meghann Myers, "U.S. Troops will likely be in Iraq for years to come, Central Command boss says," *Military Times* (18 March 2022).

¹⁴ Dan Lamothe, "U.S. Says it Killed Nearly 700 Islamic State Suspects this Year," *Washington Post* (29 December 2022).

war, scholars and commentators sought to understand “what went wrong in Iraq”¹⁵ and to provide an “autopsy of the Iraq debacle.”¹⁶ These assessments came from a variety of sources: academics,¹⁷ think tanks,¹⁸ journalists,¹⁹ alongside current and retired military officers.²⁰ Perhaps the most famous was the final report of the “Iraq Study Group,” a blue-ribbon panel established by Congress that was chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressional Representative Lee Hamilton.²¹ These post-mortems identified a litany of US missteps over the course of the war, including truncated pre-war diplomacy, a lack of pre-war planning, rapid democratization and early elections, sluggish economic reconstruction efforts, an overreliance on sectarian Iraqi security forces, and the setting of artificial timelines for withdrawal, among many others. They introduced numerous proposals to avoid these kinds of errors in the future, ranging from investing in the State Department and other civilian agencies, improving military preparations for counterinsurgency operations, fostering inter-agency communication and integration, developing better practices for building host nation security forces, and integrating civil society organizations more thoroughly into post-war reconstruction programs.

Based on the sheer volume of this material, one of the main lessons learned from the Iraq war, it appears, is that it is really important to learn lessons from major policy blunders. But has the United States actually learned the right lessons? I am skeptical that it has, in large part because the “lessons learned” genre of policy

¹⁵ Larry Diamond, “What Went Wrong in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs*, 83 (September/October 2004).

¹⁶ Daniel Byman, “An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or Bridge Too Far?” *Security Studies*, 17, no. 4 (October 2008): 599–643.

¹⁷ See, for example, David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, “Revisions in Need of Revising: What Went Wrong in the Iraq War,” *Survival*, 47, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 7–32; Andrew Rathmell, “Planning post-conflict Reconstruction in Iraq: What Can We Learn?” *International Affairs*, 81, no.5 (2005): 1013–1038; Andrew Rathmell, “Allocating Blame: Dissecting the Coalition’s Failures in Iraq,” *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2006): 177–181; Toby Dodge, “The Causes of U.S. Failure in Iraq,” *Survival*, 49, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 85–106; David Mitchell and Tansa George Massoud, “Anatomy of Failure: Bush’s Decision-Making Process and the Iraq War,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 5, no. 3 (July 2009): 265–286; Dina Badie, “Groupthink, Iraq, and the War on Terror: Explaining U.S. Policy Shift towards Iraq,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 6, no. 4 (October 2010): 277–296; Andrew Flibbert, “The Consequences of Forced State Failure in Iraq,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 128, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 67–95; and Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ See, for example, Kenneth M. Pollack, *After Saddam: Assessing the Reconstruction of Iraq* (New York: Brookings Institution 2004); Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Iraq Without a Plan,” *Policy Review* (December/January 2005); Andrew F. Krepinevich, “How to Win in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (September/October 2005); Nora Bensahel, “Mission Not Accomplished: What Went Wrong with Iraqi Reconstruction,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29, no. 3 (June 2006): 453–373; James Dobbins, “Who Lost Iraq? Lessons from the Debacle,” *Foreign Affairs*, 86 (September/October 2007); James Dobbins et al., *After the War: Nation-Building from FDR to George W. Bush* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008); Nora Bensahel et al., *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008); Andrew J. Bacevich et al., “Lessons Learned: The Iraq Invasion,” *World Affairs* (May/June 2013); Jon Finer “The Last War—and the Next? Learning the Wrong Lessons from Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2019); and David E. Johnson et al., *The U.S. Army and the Battle for Baghdad: Lessons Learned—And Still to be Learned* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019).

¹⁹ See, for example, David Rieff, “Blueprint for a Mess,” *New York Times Magazine* (2 November 2003); James Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (January/February 2004); Richard Lowry, “What Went Wrong?” *National Review*, 25 (October 2004); David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006); and Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: the Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006); and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq’s Green Zone* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

²⁰ See, for example Nigel Aylwin-Foster, “Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations,” *Military Review* (November/December 2005); Paul Yingling, “A Failure in Generalship,” *Armed Forces Journal*, 7 (May 2006); Peter R. Mansoor, *Baghdad at Sunrise: A Brigade Commander’s War in Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013); Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General’s Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014); and Richard D. Hooker and Joseph J. Collins, *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* (Washington: National Defense University, 2015).

²¹ James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report* (New York: Vintage Books 2006).

commentary often proves to be a poor mechanism through which to learn genuinely useful lessons. These kinds of analyses frequently reflect a kind of ‘technocratic vision’ of world politics, one which sees events as driven by key individuals, who make critical decisions, and as unfolding in more or less linear ways. Yet as my mentor Robert Jervis emphasized across a series of influential books, human beings tend to overemphasize their own centrality and control over events, tend to dismiss painful value tradeoffs between policy options, and tend to ignore the possibility of unintended consequences and negative feedbacks.²² The “lessons learned” genre thus replicates many of the same faulty assumptions that led US-policymakers to choose war in the first place: a belief that difficult circumstances can be transcended, that previous failures can be avoided, and that success can be all but guaranteed through some combination of superior intellect, rigorous processes, and sheer willpower.

To be clear, many of the Iraq war post-mortems provide useful descriptions of the myriad policy failures that took place over the course of the US-led war and occupation. Yet there are a number of motifs that reappear across these publications that are worrisome from a Jervisian point of view. The first is the tendency to center the analysis on dramatic decisions made by critical individuals. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s pressure on the military to keep troop numbers low; head of US occupation authority Ambassador Paul Bremer’s decision to disband the Iraqi army and to de-Baathify Iraq’s civil service; commander of the 4th Infantry Division General Ray Odierno’s emphasis on aggressive patrols rather than ‘winning hearts and minds’; and commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force General James Conway’s sudden withdrawal from Fallujah in early 2004, are among the ‘critical decisions’ that undermined the US-led occupation and contributed to a growing insurgency.

Yet as Daniel Byman and others have emphasized, even if policymakers had gotten all these early decisions right, the task of rebuilding Iraq would have remained an exceedingly difficult one.²³ Iraq’s economy had been decimated by years of economic sanctions and an absence of investment. Its government institutions had atrophied after decades of authoritarian mismanagement and personalist rule. Iraq was split along ethnic and sectarian lines, which its previous leader Saddam Hussein had exploited to maintain power. Rebuilding Iraq’s economy and managing a transition to democracy would have been difficult for any actor to accomplish under these circumstances, let alone a foreign occupier that had little familiarity and few ties with Iraq or its people.²⁴ Emphasizing the multitude of structural challenges facing post-war Iraq makes for a less compelling narrative, but more accurately fits what political science suggests about the inherent challenges of post-conflict nationbuilding.

A second motif that recurs across Iraq war post-mortems is the tendency to attribute policy failure to some combination of hubris, groupthink, or bureaucratic infighting. Various publications narrate the failure to plan for the post-war occupation, to take one example, in these terms. The Defense Department undermined—and then ignored—State Department efforts as part of its “Future of Iraq” project to develop post-war plans. The young and inexperienced ideologues who were hired to staff the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the interim US-led occupation authority established shortly after the fall of Baghdad, ignored country experts and imposed impractical and inappropriate plans. The patchwork character of the military occupation led to a patchwork of different post-war policies: the British military in the south did things differently than its American counterparts in the north; the US Marines favored different policies than the Army; lighter Airborne units in the north adopted different patrolling practices than heavier units in the mid-Euphrates. All

²² See Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

²³ See Byman “Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle,” 609-619; and Hendrickson and Tucker “What Went Wrong in the Iraq War,” 25-26.

²⁴ See Paul K. MacDonald, *Networks of Domination: The Social Foundations of Peripheral Conquest in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap.6.

the while, back in Washington, officials in the Bush administration, confident that they would be “greeted as liberators” and that rapid democratization would cure all of Iraq’s problems, were slow to react to a widening insurgency, dismissing violence as the work of a few “dead enders.”²⁵

While these bureaucratic snafus—along with many others—clearly hampered US efforts, the emphasis put on them in Iraq war post-mortems creates the impression that had policymakers simply been more open-minded and had bureaucracies simply coordinated more effectively with one another, then superior policy options would certainly have presented themselves. Yet in many cases, the problem was not simply a lack of policy coordination, but an absence of good policy options. Take the State Department’s “Future of Iraq” project. While officials in the Defense Department erred by not paying more attention to this analysis, it is not clear that its final report, which stretched to more than twelve hundred pages, provided an actual blueprint to rebuild post-war Iraq. Of the ninety-nine papers culled from the twelve working groups that were bundled in the final report, only twenty-nine “reflected the consensus of the participants.”²⁶ Many key working groups, including the Defense and Economy groups, admitted that they lacked the “accurate information” and “actual data” required to develop actionable plans.²⁷ Similarly, while the CPA was plagued by staffing shortages and high turnover, it is not clear that there were any alternatives. Prior to the war, the US Army reported that it had filled only half of its authorized Arabic positions, while the entire State Department had just sixty people who were considered fluent in Arabic.²⁸ Turf-sensitive bureaucrats and bungling ideologues make for convenient villains, but the roots of America’s failure in Iraq extend much deeper.

A third theme that one encounters in Iraq war post-mortems is the assumption that if some alternative policy had been chosen, it would have been a clear and obvious improvement. If the United States had invaded Iraq with more troops, so the argument goes, then it could have prevented the looting, criminality, and reprisal killings that contributed to a sense of chaos in the initial weeks after the invasion. If the United States had not rushed to hold early elections, then it could have helped build up Iraqi civil society and promote cross-cutting cleavages so that sectarian parties would not have dominated. If the American military had been better trained in counterinsurgency best-practices, including cultural sensitivity, tribal engagement, dismounted patrols and the like, then it could have more quickly anticipated and extinguished violent resistance by disgruntled Sunni Arab groups.

Perhaps some of these counterfactual claims might be valid, but it is also possible that alternative policies would simply have created a whole set of different—and potentially more vexing—problems. Flooding post-war Iraq with more American troops may have deterred looters, yet it might also have increased the strains the war put on the American military, introduced additional logistical complications, fueled nationalist backlash among Iraq’s population, and provided easy targets for the growing insurgency. Delaying national elections may have given time for local institutions to gain legitimacy, as was the original plan,²⁹ yet it might also have fueled corruption, enflamed local sectarian or ethnic rivalries, and estranged the coalition from prominent Shi’a figures such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who had demanded national elections. Dismounted patrols may have repaired relations with local populations, yet they might also have exposed American units to more frequent armed attacks, resulting in ballooning American casualties and fueling

²⁵ Holsti *American Public Opinion on the Iraq War*, 40, 45.

²⁶ The entire twelve-volume report has been posted on the National Security Archives’ website, at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/index.htm>.

²⁷ Department of State, *Future of Iraq*, *Defense Policy and Institutions Working Group Report*, 33–37; and Department of State, *Future of Iraq*, *Economy and Infrastructure Working Group Report*, 64.

²⁸ See General Accountability Office, “Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls,” GAO-02-375 (January 2002), 7; and Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World* (1 October, 2003), 28.

²⁹ See Diamond *Squandered Victory*, 81-87; and Celeste J. Ward, “The Coalition Provisional Authority’s Experience with Governance in Iraq,” Special Report 139, United States Institute for Peace (May 2005), 6-7.

demands for a rapid and premature troop withdrawal. The bottom line is that policies adopted in complex multi-sided conflicts such as the Iraq war are rife with unintended consequences and painful tradeoffs.

The limits of Iraq war post-mortems apply not only to analyses of failures, but also rare moments of success. Many authors, for example, have heaped praise on President George W. Bush's decision to authorize a "troop surge" of roughly 30,000 troops to Baghdad in late 2006. The combination of these additional forces, plus new counterinsurgency tactics introduced by General David Petraeus, are credited with dramatic reductions in violence in the summer and fall of 2007.³⁰ Yet again, the blinders imposed by the technocratic vision of world politics permeate many of these analyses. Publications emphasize the part played by Petraeus, even though many of the tactical changes he is credited with introducing predate his assumption of command.³¹ They stress the crucial contribution of additional American troops, even though the break between al Qaeda and tribal sheiks in Anbar province, the so-called "Sunni Awakening," occurred months before these forces began arriving.³² They stress the short term impacts of the surge, notably a sharp decline in sectarian violence in Baghdad, while ignoring its long-term downsides, such as the elevation of sectarian militias and local warlords at the expense of top-down processes of national reconciliation.³³ More ominously, the observation that "troop surges paired with counterinsurgency tactics works" was seized upon to push for a similar buildup of American forces in Afghanistan, despite significant differences in the political, social, and military context.³⁴ But this "lesson learned" turned out to be a disaster: when President Barack Obama opted to surge an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan in late 2009, it led to a spike in American casualties, an increase in Afghan civilian deaths, and did little to alter the course of that war.

So what lesson should the United States take away from its catastrophic war in Iraq? One important one to learn is that decisionmakers should be wary of the idea that failed wars generate neat and tidy lessons. In some wars, failure is overdetermined and victory is simply impossible. In other wars, failure is the product of a complicated blend of multiple factors, which may be difficult to identify even in hindsight. And even if a war does suggest clear and obvious lessons, it is not clear that they will be at all applicable in future conflicts fought under much different circumstances. For all of their obvious limitations, one of the benefits of the kinds of quantitative and comparative analyses produced by political scientists is that they can help uncover the recurrent structural conditions that make some conflicts harder to solve than others. But even then, the world does not provide us with natural experiments where scholars can reliably test the efficacy of different policy instruments. Some policies fail because they tend to be used under difficult circumstances. Others succeed because they address relatively simple problems. War remains one of the most costly, chaotic, and

³⁰ See Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2008); Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009); and Paula Broadwell, *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus* (New York: Penguin, 2012). For an academic analysis of the surge, see Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security*, 37, no.1 (Summer 2012): 7-40.

³¹ See Douglas A. Ollivant, "Countering the New Orthodoxy: Reinterpreting Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *New America Foundation* (June 2011), 6; and International Crisis Group, "Iraq after the Surge: The New Sunni Landscape," *Middle East Report No. 74* (April 30, 2008), 1.

³² See Niel Smith and Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," *Military Review* (March/April 2008): 41-52; Michael Eisenstadt, "Tribal Engagement: Lessons Learned," *Military Review* (September/October 2007):161-174; and Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50, no. 2 (April/May 2008): 67-94.

³³ See Steven Simon, "The Price of the Surge: How U.S. Strategy is Hastening Iraq's Demise," *Foreign Affairs*, 87, no.3 (May/June 2008): 57-76; and Nick Schiffrin, "Campaign Analysis: The 'Surge' in Iraq, 2007-2008," *Orbis*, 62, no.4 (2018): 617-631.

³⁴ See Jeffrey Michaels and Matthew Ford, "Bandwagonistas: Rhetorical Re-description, Strategic Choice, and the Politics of Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 22, no.2 (May 2011): 352-384; and Kevin Marsh, "Obama's Surge: A Bureaucratic Politics Analysis of the Decision to Order a Troop Surge in the Afghanistan War," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 10, no.3 (July 2014): 265-288.

unpredictable of all human activities, so it makes sense that it has seen its fair share of failure and that its lessons often remain cloaked in mystery.

A second lesson to learn is that decisionmakers need to think much longer and harder about the kinds of challenges they take on, not just the policies required to solve them. Grand strategy requires more than just endless technocratic tinkering. It demands an honest and accurate accounting of one's interests relative to one's capabilities. It necessitates the careful weighing of ends and means, with an understanding that even the best laid plans may not work, that circumstances may change, and that sometimes doing nothing is the most prudent option. While the Iraq war was arguably the most significant strategic blunder of the post-9/11 era, it was certainly not the only one. The United States has failed—and then been forced to learn lessons—multiple times over the past twenty years, whether in its unsuccessful occupation of Afghanistan, its mismanaged intervention in Libya, or its confused handling of the Syrian civil war. Perhaps being the global hegemon means that one will inevitably be dragged into difficult circumstances, yet as was the case with the 2003 Iraq war, many of these quagmires were quagmires of choice.³⁵ Investing in the State Department and fostering better inter-agency coordination are both laudable ideas, but neither addresses the more fundamental question of why American policymakers keep putting the United States in such untenable foreign policy positions, confident somehow, that this time will be different.

³⁵ See Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 118, no.3 (Fall 2003): 365-388; Robert Jervis, “Why the Bush Doctrine Cannot Be Sustained,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 120, no.3 (Fall 2005): 351-377; and Robert Jervis, “The Compulsive Empire,” *Foreign Policy* (3 November 2009).

Pursuing lessons from the Iraq War is a perilous endeavor. Every war is unique, making analogies problematic. Closeness to events can cloud understandings. Today, twenty years after the Iraq conflict, discussions about the war still frequently generate more heat than light. Even dispassionate analysis is hindered by a woefully incomplete documentary record. Many records, including highly classified US intelligence reports, are inaccessible. Only recently has the Clinton Presidential Library begun to release relevant records.⁷⁴ Key decisions on the Iraqi side were unrecorded and documents destroyed, sometimes systematically.⁷⁵ A shortsighted decision to shutter the Conflict Records Research Center has stymied efforts to learn from Iraqi documents.⁷⁶ The British have released useful documents and excellent studies have emerged on French and British decisionmaking, yet the same cannot be said for the Russians or for any of Iraq's neighbors.⁷⁷ Some insights are lost forever, while others, when they emerge, may invalidate earlier conclusions in unforeseen ways. I will introduce a few key findings despite the risks.

In terms of the big picture, there was no “Bush Revolution” in American foreign policy.⁷⁸ John Lewis Gaddis finds that the preemptive, unilateral, and hegemonic aspects of Bush's post-9/11 foreign policy behavior were “as American as apple pie.”⁷⁹ “There is little that is revolutionary about Bush's foreign policy,” agrees Melvin Leffler. Indeed, he concludes, “unilateralism is quintessentially American.”⁸⁰ The lack of a US preventive war against the Soviet Union, writes Marc Trachtenberg, is attributable less to American reluctance to wage it than to Soviet willingness to repeatedly back down in the face of US threats.⁸¹

Prior to 9/11, continuities in Iraq policy from one American administration to the next were far greater than any differences. A broad, bipartisan consensus emerged during the 1990s that sanctions were failing, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein would re-arm, containment was unsustainable, and a new, more aggressive policy was in order.⁸² According to Martin Indyk, who served as President Clinton's Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, only one senior Clinton administration official advocated for “a renewed strategy of ‘containment plus’ in the pre-Iraq War debate.” In marked contrast, he adds, Clinton and most of his senior

⁷³ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, or Air War College.

⁷⁴ Joseph Stieb usefully incorporates these records in Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics, 1990-2003* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁷⁵ David D. Palkki, “Deterring Saddam Hussein's Iraq: Domestic Audience Costs and Credibility Assessments in Theory and Practice,” unpublished UCLA Ph.D. Dissertation in Political Science, 2013, 23-30.

⁷⁶ Michael Gordon, “Archive of Captured Enemy Documents Closes,” *New York Times*, June 21, 2015.

⁷⁷ Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors, “The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary,” July 6, 2016, accessed January 15, 2023 at http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/246416/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry_executive-summary.pdf; Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Frédéric Bozo, *A History of the Iraq Crisis: France, the United States, and Iraq, 1991–2003* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁷⁸ For an argument to the contrary, see Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

⁷⁹ Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005). The quote comes from the following review of Gaddis's study: John Lehman, “Power Drive,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 2004.

⁸⁰ Melvyn Leffler, “9/11 and American Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History* Vol. 29, No. 3 (June 2005), 405-06.

⁸¹ Trachtenberg, “Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies* Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan-Mar 2007), 1-31 (especially 7-8).

⁸² Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars, from 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 178-209; Joseph Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics, 1990-2003* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

advisers supported Bush's decision to topple Saddam.⁸³ The relevant views of key Democratic national security officials are often difficult to distinguish from those of Paul Wolfowitz and others in his orbit.⁸⁴

The US decision to invade Iraq, writes Gregory Gause, "is straightforward. The attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, changed the strategic outlook of President George W. Bush."⁸⁵ Gause is surely correct to identify 9/11 as a decisive turning point; absent the attack, there would have been no invasion. Neither the president nor any of his principal foreign policy advisers had been maneuvering to invade Iraq prior to 9/11, nor could any of them prior to this event rightly be labeled a 'neoconservative.' Lower-level officials and individuals outside of government had lobbied for regime change in Iraq prior to 9/11, yet their views never held sway with Bush before the terrorist attacks. While there was widespread bipartisan consensus among American leaders, even prior to 9/11, behind the goal of regime change in Iraq, there was little willingness on either side of the aisle to sacrifice blood or treasure toward this end. A massive disconnect existed between the lofty end of regime change, on the one hand, and the limited means and inadequate ways devoted toward achieving it, on the other. Prior to 9/11 the United States did not have a strategy for removing Saddam. It had a pipedream.

After 9/11, US leaders developed a viable strategy for removing the regime, though the decisionmaking processes about whether to do so, and how to shape what would come thereafter, were inadequate. At no time did the National Security Council meet to debate whether to invade Iraq and to make a formal decision for war. Decisionmaking about what would follow the toppling of Saddam was worse yet. "What never happened," CIA Director George Tenet later wrote in his memoir, "was a serious consideration of the implications of a US invasion... In looking back, there seemed to be a lack of curiosity in asking these kinds of questions, and the lack of a disciplined process to get the answers before committing the country to war."⁸⁶ Unresolved disagreements among American leaders over US objectives in Iraq, including the degree to which democratization should form a core objective, led to plans to occupy Iraq with limited forces and then quickly withdraw them, on the one hand, and to utterly incompatible plans to engage in sustained nation building and democratization efforts, on the other.⁸⁷ The result was strategic incoherence. In 2013, Leffler concluded that "the incompetence and indifference surrounding the planning and execution of reconstruction policies remain baffling, almost incomprehensible."⁸⁸ Ten years later, his indictment stands.

The war was far costlier than its proponents had predicted.⁸⁹ Thousands of Americans have died, as have far greater numbers of Iraqis. Altogether, the war may have cost American taxpayers as much as several trillion dollars.⁹⁰ Some supporters of the war expressed hope that the liberation of Iraq would lead to a democratic Iraq and unleash a wave of democratization in the region. Iraq is no longer under Saddam's dictatorial rule and there are elections, yet for much of its post-war history the country has been an authoritarian-led terrorist

⁸³ The official was Morton Halperin, who had served as Director of Policy Planning at the State Department. See Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 82-214 (the quote is on 207).

⁸⁴ Frank P. Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic, and Evidence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 90-125. See also the evidence in Indyk, *Innocent Abroad*, 182-214 and Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*, 178-209.

⁸⁵ F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 184.

⁸⁶ George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 308.

⁸⁷ Brendan R. Gallagher, *The Day After: Why America Wins the War but Loses the Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 51-52.

⁸⁸ Leffler, "The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, and Legacy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2013), 214.

⁸⁹ For a synopsis of the rosy estimates, see Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 215-23.

⁹⁰ Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008); Neta C. Crawford, "The Iraq War Has Cost the US Nearly \$2 Trillion," *Military Times*, February 6, 2020.

training ground rather than a beacon of democracy. Iraq devolved into entities aptly labeled “Shiastan,” “Jihadistan,” and “Kurdistan” by former US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker.⁹¹ “It is hard to imagine,” observes Louise Fawcett, “that there was no link” between Saddam’s removal from power and the uprisings that removed three additional Arab dictators in 2011-2012, yet, as she makes clear, the war failed to produce western-style democracy, prosperity, or regional stability.⁹² Iran’s influence in Iraq and the broader region have grown considerably since the US invasion. It is no wonder that the war has its critics.

Too many of these critics, however, assess the war’s costs as a one-sided ledger. The costs of the war are easier to measure than the price the world would have incurred had Saddam remained in power, yet any judgment about the wisdom of the war must take both into account. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt usefully point attention to both sides of the equation. Prior to the war, these political scientists argued that because Saddam was eminently deterrable an invasion of Iraq would be unnecessary and foolish, even if Baghdad were able to acquire nuclear weapons and other WMD. And, in any case, they argue, Saddam would not cooperate on terrorist operations against the United States with the likes of al-Qaeda.⁹³

Scholars who have conducted research in the captured Iraqi records have reached less sanguine conclusions about Saddam’s deterrability. According to Amatzia Baram, Saddam was rational yet extremely difficult to deter.⁹⁴ The Iraqi dictator suffered from various “delusions,” the authors of an important Pentagon study conclude.⁹⁵ Saddam sought nuclear weapons, in part, because he believed they would enable him to more safely initiate and wage a bloody war of attrition against Israel.⁹⁶ Contrary to what some have claimed, the US ambassador to Baghdad was in fact not guilty of passing along a ‘green light’ to invade Kuwait, which makes Saddam’s decision to swallow Kuwait in 1990 a much less sensible decision than Mearsheimer and Walt (and so many others) have made it out to be.⁹⁷ Iraq was a major sponsor of international terrorism.⁹⁸ Saddam was even willing to work with al-Qaeda on mutually beneficial operations, though the extent to which they cooperated was rather limited.⁹⁹

If Saddam had been allowed to acquire nuclear weapons and to grow old, how confident can we be that he would not have exploded one (or more) on Israel? As Saddam’s former head of military intelligence put it, “I’m seriously considering that Saddam might use [biological or chemical weapons] when he’s about to die.... And perhaps he would say to himself that he will be immortalized in history textbooks.”¹⁰⁰ Even in such a

⁹¹ David Palkki, “How Washington Can Bolster Iraq,” Council on Foreign Relations Issue Brief, August 13, 2014, accessed January 18, 2023 at <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/how-washington-can-bolster-iraq>.

⁹² Louise Fawcett, “The Iraq War Ten Years On: Assessing the Fallout,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (March 2013), 326-27.

⁹³ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy* Vol. 134 (January-February 2003), 51-59.

⁹⁴ Amatzia Baram, “Deterrence Lessons from Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (July/August 2012).

⁹⁵ Kevin M. Woods, Michael R. Pease, Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam’s Senior Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Operational Analysis, 2006); Woods, Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, “Saddam’s Delusions: The View from the Inside,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 85, No. 3 (May/June 2006).

⁹⁶ Hal Brands and David Palkki, “Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?” *International Security* Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2011), 133-66.

⁹⁷ Hal Brands and David Palkki, “‘Conspiring Bastards’: Saddam Hussein’s Strategic View of the United States,” *Diplomatic History* Vol. 36, No. 3 (June 2012), 625-59.

⁹⁸ Kevin M. Woods with James Lacey, *Iraqi Perspectives Project – Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Iraqi Documents*, Volume 1 (Redacted), IDA Paper P-4287 (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, November 2007).

⁹⁹ Samuel Helfont, “Saddam and the Islamists: The Ba’athist Regime’s Instrumentalization of Religion in Foreign Affairs,” *The Middle East Journal* Vol. 68, No. 3 (Summer 2014), 362.

¹⁰⁰ Wafiq al-Samarrai, PBS Frontline interview, May 2, 2002, accessed September 10, 2010 at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/iraqis.html.

hypothetical scenario, approaching his deathbed, Saddam might well have been deterred. However, one should not assume that an elderly Saddam would have subordinated his desire for lasting glory to a few extra years of mortal existence.

The war's critics might rightly insist that when assessing the Iraqi threat one must take into consideration not only Saddam's desires and decisionmaking, but also Iraqi capabilities. And, in 2003, Saddam was nowhere close to acquiring nuclear weapons. The CIA's post-war Iraq Survey Group report ("Duelfer Report") assessed that whereas Saddam continued to desire WMD and planned to reconstitute prohibited WMD-related programs once sanctions had been lifted, Iraq had no WMD stockpiles or nuclear weapons program at the time of the invasion.¹⁰¹ Since the report was issued, though, roughly 5,000 pre-1991 chemical munitions have surfaced in Iraq, some of which "still contained potent mustard agent or residual sarin."¹⁰² It is possible that additional WMD would have been found if Iraq Survey Group inspectors had been able to more fully complete their work.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, there are solid grounds to conclude that Saddam and his most relevant advisers believed they had no WMD stockpiles or active "weapons" programs.¹⁰⁴ The likeliest explanation behind the existence of these old munitions may be that Saddam's regime incorrectly recorded them as destroyed and forgot all about them.¹⁰⁵ We simply don't (yet) know. Whatever the case may be, a key lesson from the war is that assessments are not facts, whether in the form of pre-war intelligence or post-war historical analysis. Scholars would do well to remember this.

In any case, stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons were less important than the relevant production capabilities.¹⁰⁶ Chemical weapons are also far less dangerous than their biological or nuclear counterparts. According to the Duelfer Report, Baghdad had retained the ability to quickly produce significant amounts of chemical and biological weapons and had been developing rockets with prohibited ranges. The report finds that Iraq could have begun "BW agent production within four to five weeks after the decision to do so..." and that this production had the potential, in a short period of time, to "exceed the capacity Iraq possessed in

¹⁰¹ Central Intelligence Agency, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD* (hereafter "Duelfer Report"), Vol. 1, "Regime Strategic Intent," 30 September 2004, accessed 8 April 2016 at www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/Comp_Report_Key_Findings.pdf.

¹⁰² C. J. Chivers, "Abandoned Chemical Weapons and Secret Casualties in Iraq," *New York Times*, October 15, 2004.

¹⁰³ Nathan E. Busch and Joseph F. Pilat, *The Politics of Weapons Inspections: Assessing WMD Monitoring and Verification Regimes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 97-98.

¹⁰⁴ For evidence that Saddam had terminated his programs and had no stockpiles, see David D. Palkki and Shane Smith, "Contrasting Casual Mechanisms: Iraq and Libya," 290-91, in Etel Solingen, ed., *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also the Duelfer Report.

¹⁰⁵ Whereas many in 2002 would have considered this explanation ridiculous and those who took it seriously as naïve, this would not be altogether different from how the United States behaved after discovering the munitions. According to a *New York Times* report, "several participants said the United States lost track of chemical weapons that its troops found..." A problem that plagued American ordnance disposal teams was that "Chemical munitions can resemble conventional munitions -- a problem compounded by Iraq's practice of mislabeling ordnance to confuse foreign inspectors and, with time, by rust, pitting and dirt." American officials sometimes took shortcuts when destroying WMD they found in Iraq and failed to submit proper reports up the chain of command. As one technician who'd served in Iraq explained, his team discovered a mustard shell but decided not to report it since doing so would add another 12-14 hours to the job of destroying the shell. Rather than submitting a report, he explained, his team opted to place the shell alongside high-explosive shells and to simply "get rid of it." It doesn't seem unthinkable that the Iraqis also dealt with incomplete and problematic internal reports and also "lost track of chemical weapons." See Chivers, "Abandoned Chemical Weapons and Secret Casualties in Iraq."

¹⁰⁶ As Stu Cohen, the former Acting Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, explains, "There is practically no difference in threat between a standing chemical and biological weapons capability and one that could be mobilized quickly with little chance of detection." See Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, "Iraq's WMD Programs: Culling Hard Facts from Soft Myths," press release, November 28, 2003, declassified October 31, 2012, 5 (of PDF), accessed March 27, 2020 at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/MDR_Releases/14-M-21310001.pdf.

1990.” Had Iraq opted for break-out production, the authors of the report assess, it would have gone with anthrax. Baghdad possessed “a break-out capability to produce large quantities of sulfur mustard CW agent...” At the time of the invasion, the report finds, Iraq could have produced mustard gas “within days” or “weeks.”¹⁰⁷

The focus on stockpiles tells us as much about the Bush administration’s ill-fated public messaging as anything else.¹⁰⁸ Had Colin Powell emphasized both stockpiles *and* production capabilities in his famous presentation before the United Nations, the ‘Bush lied, people died’ arguments would presumably have gained less traction. Had he focused attention on WMD *and* other issues such as Saddam’s human rights abuses and sponsorship of terrorism, as individuals in the White House and Pentagon had advocated, this also would have helped after stockpiles were not found. Such simple changes to Powell’s (and other administration officials’) salesmanship could have helped ensure, entirely ingenuously, that the war’s architects would be remembered in a less sinister light. But Powell wanted an ‘Adlai Stevenson moment’ at the UN rather than an ‘Adlai Stevenson week,’ among other reasons, so he presented a narrow case.¹⁰⁹ More mistaken than Machiavellian, senior administration officials made their arguments for war ‘clearer than truth’ yet, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates, sincerely believed the core stories they told.

It is still too soon to know exactly how the war will be remembered fifty years from now. It is possible that a scholarly consensus will eventually emerge that faults both the Bush administration for invading and the Obama administration for squandering stability in Iraq by precipitously withdrawing American combat forces.¹¹⁰ If so, then the trite and obvious ‘lesson learned’ that it is difficult to use military power to accomplish political objectives may not be terribly useful. Indeed, if such a consensus does emerge it will mean that the Obama administration overlearned this lesson. One category of lessons deals with process. Leaders and intelligence analysts should focus much more attention on assumptions and decisionmaking processes, especially those dealing with phase-IV operations. Whether this would have led to superior or fundamentally different outcomes will remain a matter of conjecture and debate. Finally, unfolding events will change how we think of the war’s costs and benefits. If the United States and China go to war anytime soon, then Americans will increasingly think of the Iraq War as a squandered opportunity to prepare for (and deter or otherwise avoid) great power war in the Indo-Pacific. Based on my personal observations, this is already how the Iraq War and two decades of American counterterrorism efforts are increasingly viewed in America’s military academies.

¹⁰⁷ See Central Intelligence Agency, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq’s WMD* (hereafter “Duelfer Report”), Vol. 1, “Regime Strategic Intent,” September 30, 2004, 1; CIA, Duelfer Report, Vol. 3, “Biological Warfare,” 42; CIA, Duelfer Report, Vol. 3, “Chemical,” 25.

¹⁰⁸ It also tells us that too few Americans understand that chemical weapons are not really a WMD, at least not in the same sense as thermonuclear or biological weapons, which are far more dangerous.

¹⁰⁹ This rankled Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Doug Feith, and Dick Cheney. See Dick Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 396; Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), 435; Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008), 351-54; Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 439; Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), 200; George Tenet with Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 374; Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 291.

¹¹⁰ Hal Brands and Peter D. Feaver, “Lessons from the Iraq War,” *National Review*, July 8, 2019.