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Roundtable Review 15-6

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Introduction by Frank Costigliola, University of Connecticut

Not many historians associated with SHAFR would venture a study of President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq based largely on interviews with the engineers of that ultimately disastrous enterprise. Fewer still and, really, only one such foreign relations historian could emerge from this challenge with an untarnished reputation. While not totally convincing the H-Diplo reviewers of his arguments in *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, Melvyn P. Leffler's pioneering research and provocative analysis have burnished his reputation as his generation's foremost diplomatic historian. (The adjective "diplomatic" here is useful and merits revival.) Richard I. Immerman appropriately starts off his exhaustive review by highlighting Leffler's outstanding record in terms of books, prizes, fellowships, and other honors. What bears special attention, however, is that early on in his illustrious career, Leffler won a Council on Foreign Relations fellowship that enabled him to work in the Pentagon for a year.

That experience seems to have heightened Leffler's already strong inclination to empathize with the dilemmas, uncertainties and anxieties faced by policymakers. Leffler tries to see issues through the eyes of officials, whether they are President Herbert Hoover and Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes endeavoring to channel private lending into European reconstruction, President Harry S Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson aiming to contain the Soviets while constructing the "Free World," or President George W. Bush and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice striving to safeguard America while getting rid of President Saddam Hussein. At the same time, Leffler, as part of that age cohort of foreign relations historians who were affected by the traumas of the Vietnam War and as a person with deeply humanistic values, has throughout his career expressed his dismay at the hubris and overweening power often displayed in the exercise of US power abroad. He always aims for balance. "I both empathize and criticize; I seek to understand, explain, and extrapolate lessons," he writes in replying to the reviewers in this forum.

Reflecting on his career in an essay revealingly entitled "Embracing Complexity," Leffler explains that "I did not fit easily into any of the prevailing categories" of historians.[1] These categories, to over-simplify a bit, break down between those scholars who are more inclined to justify, and those who are more inclined to criticize, US foreign policy. Leffler tends to straddle this divide. In this forum and, indeed, throughout his writings, Leffler stresses that his "key themes dwell on fear, power, and hubris." Fear as a motivator suggests that US foreign policy is largely defensive: protecting the homeland, vital American interests, and what Leffler terms the core values of freedom, democracy, and capitalism. Hubris points up the pride, ambition, and assumptions of American exceptionalism that have impelled US expansion around the world. Power refers to the economic, political, cultural, and, not least, military might that has enabled the United States to approach global hegemony.

Discerning where Leffler draws, blurs, or nuances the line between defense and offense in US foreign policy is the first key to understanding both his scholarship and how the reviewers in this forum have responded to his latest book. Readers of Leffler's books have encountered this challenge before. In important ways, the structure of *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, particularly in the contrast between chapters 1-9 and the conclusion, tracks a pattern laid out in Leffler's Bancroft Prize-winning *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*.[2] In the latter book on the Truman administration, Leffler's effort to both criticize and empathize led to a near bifurcation. Though the many chapters of *Preponderance* detail Washington's often aggressive pursuit of advantage at the expense of the Soviets, the conclusion judges the

[1] Melvyn P. Leffler, "Embracing Complexity" in Melvyn P. Leffler, ed., *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 19.

[2] Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

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behavior of Truman administration as ultimately defensive of core values and as "prudent."[3] While that contrast appealed to readers taking a more benign view of US policy, it frustrated others who wanted to enlist Leffler's formidable talents in the cause of critical Cold War revisionism. The bottom line, however, is that Leffler retained his scholarly independence and kept a foot in each camp. That stance and Leffler's high standing within the historical profession perfectly situated Leffler to write this book. A legion of former officials of the George W. Bush administration sat for interviews with this respected historian, attempting to make their case and refurbish their reputations.[4]

Leffler understood that his discussions with former officials, no matter how cordial, entailed a test of wills. As he puts it in the preface to *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, the ability of the media-savvy former policymakers "to spin…might exceed my ability to probe" (xiv). He resolved to fact-check the interviews by reading as much of the documentary evidence and secondary sources as he could find. While Vice President Dick Cheney's assistant Scooter Libby urged him to "forget everything [Leffler] had read," Leffler "had no intention of doing that." He added, "I had spent most of my academic career examining documents in archival boxes. I was, and remain, a firm believer in the power of written evidence" (xv). Herein, in evaluating how successful Leffler was in resisting the "spin" and in mobilizing the available documentary record, lies the second key to understanding how the reviewers judge *Confronting Saddam Hussein*.

Richard Immerman's review, the most extensive of the four, offers a comprehensive, knife-edged balanced appraisal of Leffler's book and the underlying historical issues. Immerman himself ranks as a foremost expert on issues of declassification of documents, intelligence, and recent US foreign policy. In writing his own book, *Empire for Liberty*, which includes a chapter on Paul Wolfowitz, he refrained from interviewing this former policymaker.[5] "How could I believe him?," Immerman asked himself. In reference to Leffler's book, Immerman details the author's diligence in scooping up available archival evidence. Moreover, he appreciates that Leffler, especially in his final chapter, "is decidedly critical." Nevertheless, "to an uncomfortable degree," *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, taken as a whole, "approximates the history that policymakers want to be written." Responding vigorously to this criticism, Leffler counters that the former policymakers "will not like the portrayal of them as motivated by too much fear, too much hubris, too much power, and not enough prudence."

Descriptions of the Bush administration's fears and largely defensive stance predominate in chapters 1-9 of Leffler's history. As Immerman puts it, in terms of causation, what Leffler "posits is elegant in its simplicity: fear." He quotes Leffler's argument that not only Bush, but also "'Rumsfeld, Cheney, Libby and their neoconservative friends were not inspired by missionary fervor or idealistic impulses." Instead, "they were seeking to safeguard the country from another attack, save American lives, avoid the opprobrium that would come from another assault, and preserve the country's ability to exercise its power in the future in behalf of its interests.'" Immerman notes that "Leffler repeats this argument over and over again" because that is what his interviewees told him. Although Bush remained reluctant to go to war, "Saddam Hussein's assumed capacity to provide terrorists with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) posed an intolerable threat." In the final analysis, Immerman notes, "not a single adviser, let alone the president himself, doubted that hidden within Iraq were WMD."

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[3] Leffler, *Preponderance*, 502-06.

[4] See, for instance, the book jacket blurb for *Confronting Saddam Hussein* by former Ambassador to Turkey and former Deputy National Security Advisor to Vice President Richard B. Cheney Eric S. Edelman.

[5] Richard H. Immerman, *Empire for Liberty A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

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Don Casler candidly positions his review within the context of his experience as a member of the millennial generation. On that blue-sky Tuesday in September 2001, Casler, then, in the fourth grade, rode his bike home after school. He was imprinted with the memory of walking into the house, "immediately gathering from my mother's stricken face that something was deeply amiss." He grew up with "certain stylized facts" of Bush as "a bumbling nincompoop if not a war criminal," who was manipulated by Cheney and Rumsfeld into invading Iraq on the basis of doctored intelligence. From this ingrained perspective as well as from his training as a political scientist specializing in crisis bargaining, Casler appraises Leffler's book as a corrective that "is admirable but often misses the mark." He sees Leffler's treatment of Bush as "perhaps too even-handed." He, by contrast, faults Bush as unable to see the complexity of issues and as a "terrible manager" of his often conflicting advisers. "More troublingly, Leffler's conclusions are based on the memoirs" and on the self-serving interview statements of his advisors. Drawing on his professional expertise, Casler finds much to admire in Leffler's criticism of Bush's "strategic incoherence" about precisely what he was aiming for with "coercive diplomacy." Did the President want Saddam Hussein himself, or just the dictator's supposed cache of WMD, gone? Leffler responds by disputing Casler's criticism that he was "too even-handed." While agreeing that Bush was a "terrible manager," Leffler points to the many entries in the index under the term "administrative dysfunction." He then devotes nearly a page of his response to reviewing Bush's many faults in leading his administration.

We get to the core controversy surrounding *Confronting Saddam Hussein* in the exchange between Casler and Leffler over the latter's claim that "there was no reason to doubt the veracity" of interview statements made by former policymakers that fear had been their primary motivator. The validity of the interviews and the centrality of fear as a motivator make up the heart of Leffler's thesis. After acknowledging the "scores of books and articles that argue otherwise," Leffler in the book cites seven specific examples of contemporary documents in which Bush administration officials affirmed that their motive was simply "'self-defense'" (98).

In contrast to Casler, Megan Stewart largely accepts Leffler's position on the truth-value of the interviews and on the centrality of fear, along with hubris, in shaping the Bush administration's response to 9/11. She writes that from the interviews and memoirs, "Leffler captures the profound fear, uncertainty, guilt, and sense of responsibility that gripped" Bush and his advisers after the terror attacks. "In an atmosphere of paranoia," the administration calculated that "because some terrorist groups and Iraq shared a common enemy in the United States," Iraq might provide the terrorists with chemical and biological WMD. "The Bush administration could not abide such a threat." Stewart does, however, question Leffler's argument that the Bush administration would have accepted Saddam Hussein's remaining in power if the dictator had given up his presumed cache of WMD. She points out that Bush denied the weapons inspectors' request for more time when their efforts on behalf of discovering WMD seemed to be making progress. "To me," Stewart concludes, "the bulk of evidence suggests that regime change was the preferred goal and that [Bush administration] officials recognized that regime change required war." In his response, Leffler points to Bush's agreement with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the summer of 2002 that war would not be necessary if Saddam Hussein disclosed and discarded his supposed WMD.

Stewart wishes that Leffler had done more to explore the connections between the hubris that led to war and the missionary zeal inherent in democracy promotion. Both impulses arose "from an underlying ideology of moral superiority," a key factor in shaping US policy, Stewart argues. Pointing to the importance of understanding how hubristic thinking comes about, Stewart calls for further study of "the systems that create and nurture ideologies or frameworks that encourage hubris." What is it in American society that "enables leaders to be so confident in the moral superiority of themselves and their goals" that they feel justified in invading another country "where we can operate with impunity" (77)? While not directly responding to this question—which entails the impact of American exceptionalism, prejudice against racialized others extending back to colonial days, and insulation from death made possible by fighting in far-away lands (here 9/11 proved the maddening exception)—Leffler does answer Stewart's call for lessons. Leffler's lessons merit

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quoting in full, because they touch on the persistent, largely self-inflicted problems that still beset US foreign policy, and because they fault the judgment of Bush and his advisers:

> Modulate fears—think deeply about what really constitutes an "existential" threat; grasp the limits of power—you can win a war against a weak adversary, but you can't easily remake the political institution, economic infrastructure, and cultural traditions of another country; curb hubris; re-examine core assumption (like the one that assumed Iraq had WMD); analyze costs and consequences before embracing strategies and initiating policies; clarify goals and define priorities (regime change or WMD); recognize that credibility entraps; insist on better staff work; and link means and ends.

Such judgments, however, fit more the conclusion of *Confronting Saddam Hussein* than the first nine chapters.

The most comprehensive criticism of the book comes from James H. Lebovic's extensively footnoted appraisal. Like Immerman and Casler, Lebovic takes issue with "Leffler's reliance on the words of key administration officials." That emphasis puts "a rational imprimatur" on a messy process "based on less-than-rational assessments." Lebovic questions Leffler on nine points. Rather than Bush deciding only late in the game to go to war, "the WMD issue was always about regime change," Lebovic maintains. Second, Leffler understates the determination of key administration officials from early on to invade Iraq. Third, if the administration was focused for many months predominantly on WMD rather than on invading Iraq, "how was it, then, that the administration so easily accepted the creation of the Coalition Provisional Authority" with its sweeping ambition to remake and democratize Iraqi society? Fourth, he questions the assertion that the administration was worried not just about Iraq's current but also about its future potential holding of WMD. Fifth, Lebovic views the administration's diplomacy not as an alternative to going to war, but rather as a political ploy "to grease the wheels" toward war. Sixth, according to Lebovic, Leffler underestimates how the success in Afghanistan accelerated the push for invading Iraq. Seventh, he charges that the author downplayed the extent to which conflict within the administration reflected the ongoing push for war. Eighth, "Leffler does not ask why administration officials never huddled with the president to make critical prewar decisions." This was because, Lebovic argues, war was regarded as inevitable. Ninth and finally, Lebovic asks how the administration's supposed care in deliberating whether to go to war squares with its inattention to the consequences of going to war. The charge here seems less a criticism of Leffler than an indictment of the Bush administration. If Bush and his advisers were so focused on WMD, why did they show so little concern about the Iraqis actually using these weapons when their country was invaded? And why did Washington then make seizing and securing the supposed WMD such a low priority?

In responding to the reviewers, especially on the core issue of the credibility of the interviews and memoirs, Leffler does not back down. With spirited "I" statements, he reaffirms his arguments. He disputes Lebovic's assertion that the book justifies the administration's response to 9/11 by asserting that "I [also] offer 'sharp criticism.'" Further, "I am perfectly aware, as Richard Immerman stresses, that this account is not a definitive history." Doubling down on his claim on page 98 that there was "no reason to doubt the veracity" of his interview results, Leffler emphasizes that those statements "were confirmed in the written documents that I explicitly cite," writing, "I disagree" that the former policymakers will like all of his portrayal of them. As for the positive depiction of President Bush by his former associates, "we need to ponder whether they knew the man better than we do." With regard to Lebovic's criticism that he ignored the feuding within the administration, Leffler advises that readers should "see 'personality conflicts' in the index."

Leffler protests that his reviewers "sometimes overlook" that the fact that "I stress the *distinction* between goals and motives. Bush and his advisers "were *motivated* by a sense of threat" (emphasis in the original) Saddam Hussein's "alleged weapons of mass destruction might find their way into the hands of terrorists, any terrorists," that he might escape from sanctions, blackmail the United States, "and check the exercise of

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American power in the region in the future." He goes on, "I also highlight the contrasting goals that divided top policymakers, a point that some reviewers also obfuscate." Leffler emphasizes that while "Bush did want a more democratic Iraq," that "was *not* what motivated him" (emphasis in the original). In concluding his response, Leffler puts the failings of the Bush administration into wider focus by pointedly asking, "How many of us, for example, are ready to re-examine our own core assumptions, or are willing to curb our own hubris? I find those tasks difficult," he admits.

Continuing with the wider view, it seems unlikely that the controversy over how and why the Bush administration went to war with Iraq in 2003 will ever be definitively settled. Aside from the challenges of declassifying the documents and the politics at stake, the whirl of emotions, confusion, and reconstructed memory will continue to blur the historical record and the written history.

As a coda to this forum, I want to flag three issues. First is the misleading assumption that "fear" can be a simple, stand alone, self-explanatory emotion, an element of causation "elegant in its simplicity." What we label as fear is a mix of feelings which is different at different times and among different people. When we interpret something as "fear," we are reducing, simplifying, and codifying a blend of sometimes disparate feelings. Emotions, even those we conventionally consider as basic, such as fear, are not discrete modes or nuggets of sensation. Moreover, as neuroscientists have shown, emotional and rational thinking are not polarities, but rather are integrated processes that engage many regions of the brain simultaneously. Not only are "emotion" and "reason" inseparable, but they also often commingle independent impulses, even seemingly contradictory anxieties and desires. While the spoken or written word smooths out this complexity in the cause of coherence, constructed memory tends to sanitize it to safeguard conscience.[6] In other words, the danger was not just that Leffler's interviewees were trying to "spin" the history for him, they may also have been "spinning" it for themselves.

As such cultural analysts of 9/11 as Corey Robin and Susan Faludi have shown, the fear sparked on that day was for many also experienced as a morning "cleanser, washing away a lot of the self-indulgence of the" previous decade. "Fear restored to us the clarifying knowledge that evil exists, thereby making moral, deliberate action possible again."[7] In this vein, Leffler tells us of an official who witnessed Bush "'transform from a president who really didn't have a strong agenda, didn't really have a clear path that he was on, that quite frankly was struggling…. I saw him transform from that to commander-in-chief and to somebody who almost instantaneously'" knew that he had a mission "'to protect the country from this ever happening again'" (54). In launching their ambitious Global War on Terror and, later, their invasion of Iraq, members of the Bush administration may have been impelled by, though not necessarily aware of, feelings similar to those of the writer Christopher Hitchens after the 9/11 attacks. Along with fear and rage, Hitchens was seized with "exhilaration. Here was the most frightful enemy—theocratic barbarism—in plain view…. I realized that if the battle went on until the last day of my life, I would never get bored in prosecuting it to the utmost."[8]

That Bush administration officials labeled as "fear" what they felt after 9/11, and what they later remembered as feeling at that time, does not preclude that their actions were also shaped by ambition, excitement, and

[6] See Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); Feldman Barrett and James A. Russell, eds., *The Psychological Construction of Emotions* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015); Joanna Bourne, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005); Frank Costigliola, "Reading for Emotion" in Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan (eds.), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* 3rd ed.,(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 356-73; Costigliola, "Freedom from Fear" in Jeffrey A. Engel, ed., *The Four Freedoms Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Evolution of an American Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 165-91.

[7] Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2. Robins was quoting the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks and the journalist George Packer.

[8] Corey, *Fear*, 24.

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desire for revenge—feelings approaching exhilaration. Hubris may have been baked into contemporary feelings and thinking that later, after the Iraq war proved a debacle, memories and interview statements sanitized as more purely fear. Leffler himself in the conclusion suggests that more than fear of attack impelled Bush administration officials toward war. They were motivated by "a sense of guilt that 9/11 had occurred on their watch, and by a desire for revenge." Moreover, their fear also encompassed worry about their political future. In the event of another attack, "the reputation of the Republican Party as the stalwart defender of American national security would be eviscerated" (242-43).

Any further parsing of this history would require a close reading of the actual interview transcripts or, better, listening to audio that recorded the tone, emphasis, and cadence of these former officials as they tried to make sense of what had happened, and how they enunciated what they wanted remembered. It is to be hoped that Leffler, who did a great service for history in recording these interviews, can make them available in an appropriate archive.

For my second point, I cannot help but hark back to what George F. Kennan repeatedly stressed throughout the Cold War: the distinction between a nation's capacity and its intentions.[9] Cognizance of this difference is basic to making rational choices in foreign relations, especially in the nuclear age. Certainly, the United States, displaying its military and naval preeminence around the globe, expects other nations and groups to distinguish between the destruction America is capable of wreaking and the caution it claims to exercise. Presuming that Saddam Hussein had WMD, a big assumption as it turned out, and presuming he had the capacity to transfer those weapons to terrorists, what would be his intention, his motives, for making that risky move? Why would Saddam Hussein share his precious WMD, if he had them, with a group over which he had no control, especially if he would likely bear the brunt of retaliation by the United States after terrorists deployed his weapons? Why was deterrence, which had worked with the supposedly fanatical Soviets and Chinese Communists, simply dismissed as a policy option in dealing with Saddam Hussein, who was fiercely determined to stay in power? What does this say about the degree of hubris and the sense of overweening power that afflicted decision making in the George W. Bush administration? What was the mix of fear and hubris operating here?

Third, it bears calling attention to the implicit acceptance bordering on endorsement of American hegemony that is displayed in much of the discussion of 9/11 and its aftermath. Language, that is, choice of words, can be revealing. That Saddam Hussein was brutal, cruel, and an ambitious dictator who challenged the United States did not alter the fact that he was also the legal ruler of a sovereign nation. And yet US officials, and the scholars who write about them, habitually discuss the overthrow of this and other foreign governments in terms of the anodyne phrase "regime change," without interrogating it. How would Americans react to foreigners insisting the US government is a "regime" that is so dysfunctional that it should be overthrown by outsiders? The language "regime change" normalizes the brazen toppling of another government. Without reflecting on the full implications of that phrase, the contributors to this forum, in their text and notes, uncritically repeat the phrase "regime change:" Immerman three times, Casler four times, Stewart nineteen times, Lebovic eleven times, and Leffler four times. Similarly, the casual acceptance of "anticipatory self-defense," in other words "preventive war," as just another policy offers a further instance of what could be called imperial thinking (158-59, 165).

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[9] See John Lewis Gaddis, *Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Costigliola (ed.), *The Kennan Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); Costigliola, *Kennan: A Life between Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

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In its research basis, assumptions, and analysis, *Confronting Saddam Hussein* does what the very best books do: challenge us to think about what happened, how it happened, and why. Leffler has written yet another foundational, crucially important book that will long be read and debated.

Participants:

Melvyn P. Leffler is Emeritus Professor of American History at The University of Virginia. He is the author of several books on the Cold War and on US relations with Europe, including *For the Soul of Mankind* (2007), which won the George Louis Beer Prize from the American Historical Association, and *A Preponderance of Power* (1993), which won the Bancroft, Hoover, and Ferrell Prizes

Frank Costigliola is a Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor at the University of Connecticut. His most recent book is *Kennan: A Life between Worlds* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

Don Casler is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He received a PhD in political science from Columbia University in 2022 and studies topics at the nexus of international security and international political economy, with a particular focus on political psychology, organizational theory, and the use of historical and experimental methods. His research is published or forthcoming in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Politics*, *Security Studies*, and *World Politics*. He is working on a book project about when and why foreign policy bureaucracies express concern for their state's credibility and reputation, as well as how these considerations shape national security officials' policy advocacy regarding the use of force during crises.

Richard H. Immerman is Professor and Edward Buthusiem Distinguished Faculty Fellow in History Emeritus and Emeritus Marvin Wachman Director of the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy at Temple University. He also served as an Assistant Deputy Director of National Intelligence and held the Francis Deserio Chair in Strategic Intelligence at the US Army War College. A former SHAFR President and recipient of several of is prizes, Immerman's books include *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, co-edited with Beth Bailey (New York University Press, 2015), and *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

James H. Lebovic is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at The George Washington University. He has published widely on defense policy, deterrence strategy, arms control, military budgets and procurement, foreign aid, democracy and human rights, international organizations, international conflict and cooperation, and military intervention. He is the author of seven books including *The False Promise of Superiority: The United States and Nuclear Deterrence after the Cold War* (Oxford University, 2023), *Planning to Fail: The US War in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Oxford University, 2019), *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Johns Hopkins, 2013), *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Johns Hopkins, 2010), and *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11* (Routledge 2007). From 2015-2017, he chaired the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association.

Megan A. Stewart, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan's Ford School of Public Policy. Her book *Governing for Revolution: Social Transformation in Civil War* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2021. Other works have been published in outlets such as *International Organization, the Journal of Politics,* the *European Journal of International Relations, Comparative Political Studies,* and *the Journal of Conflict Resolution,* among others. Her research has received awards or recognition from professional organizations

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such as the American Political Science Association, the International Studies Association, and Peace Science Society (International).

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Review by Don Casler, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In many ways, today's world, especially for Americans, was created by the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[1] The human, economic, and prestige-related costs that the United States incurred in first toppling Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's government, then largely failing to deal with the consequences of that decision, continue to ripple through American society—to say nothing of the pain and suffering that it inflicted on those the invasion was supposed to help: the people of Iraq. Thousands of casualties, billions of dollars, and twenty years later, it is worth asking what fresh insights we can glean about the conflict with the benefit of more extensive hindsight, especially concerning the leadership of President George W. Bush, the perspectives of key players in his administration, and the conceptual architecture of the war.

Through this lens, Melvyn P. Leffler's *Confronting Saddam Hussein* offers a fresh and somewhat provocative take on the fateful events of 2001–2003. In brief, Leffler posits that the Bush administration took the US to war with Iraq out of a combination of fear, power, and hubris. The events of 9/11 catalyzed a significant update to the administration's threat perceptions, according to which apparently undeterrable rogue states and terrorists had to be challenged before they could inflict more damage on the American homeland or blackmail the US into submission. A brutal cocktail of anxiety, guilt, and confidence in US military might encouraged the war yet blinded policymakers to both its risks and what would come next. The invasion and the chaos that followed were not a function of cartoonish incompetence or a hawkish conspiracy, but rather the misdeeds of an earnest president who simply wanted to keep his people safe.

As Leffler recognizes at the outset, anyone of a certain age recalls exactly what they were up to on 11 September 2001. In my case, I was a fourth grader at an elementary school about twenty miles east of New York City. I too recall a brilliantly sunny day with the clearest of blue skies. I vividly remember riding my bicycle home after school (a novel perk of being a fourth grader), walking into my parents' house and immediately gathering from my mother's stricken face that something was deeply amiss. My father worked in Manhattan, but thankfully far from what would become known as Ground Zero. More than a dozen families in my hometown were not so fortunate. The smoke from the towers was faintly visible from my parents' backyard; so were the beacons of light that eventually replaced them in memoriam.

If 9/11 is seared into my childhood memory, then like many millennials, my political awakening came with the 2008 election, and particularly the Democratic primary. Within the contours of this race, the candidates' voting history (or lack thereof) on the congressional authorization to use force against Iraq proved both divisive and decisive. Senator Barack Obama won the primary, and then the presidency, in no small part because he could credibly claim to have opposed a war that was obviously a mistake, unlike his major opponents, senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain.

This political environment was conducive to the development and propagation of certain stylized facts which roughly fit the following pattern: the invasion of Iraq revealed that Bush was a bumbling nincompoop, if not a war criminal; Bush's advisers, especially Vice President Richard Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, rolled him by taking advantage of his inexperience to enact their preconceived plans for Iraq; and the intelligence basis for the invasion was not just badly flawed, but rather doctored to comport with the administration's preferred outcome. Indeed, the first draft of the Iraq War's history leaves little doubt

[1] Susan B. Glasser, Jane Meyer, and Evan Osnos. "We're Living in a World Created by the Iraq War," *The Political Scene* | *The New Yorker*, 17 March 2023; Resul Cesur, Joseph Sabia, and W. David Bradford, "Did the War on Terror Ignite an Opioid Epidemic?" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2019), https://doi.org/10.3386/w26264.

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regarding who is at fault for the United States' misadventures.[2] I share my personal perspective because these shibboleths are deeply baked into the political psyche of my generation, perhaps in the same way that Vietnam was for previous ones. An informal (and unscientific) poll of my friends from college that I conducted while writing this review revealed that they think, without exception, that the Bush administration tinkered with the intelligence in order to engineer a faulty case that favored war. For all of these reasons, it is past time to grapple with what we think we know about this conflict.[3]

Leffler's book seeks a fairer accounting of what policymakers thought and did (or didn't think, and didn't do) and how it all went awry. The book's preface makes clear that it aims to "correct some widely held misconceptions" and "confirm some of the established wisdom" (xvii). Its novel contribution lies in the hours of interviews that the author conducted with top national security officials from the Bush administration. In my estimation of three central conclusions that Leffler draws—about Bush as a leader, the dispositions and role of his advisers, and the administration's attempted performance of coercive diplomacy—the attempt is admirable but often misses the mark.

First, Leffler's assessment of Bush's qualities as a political and wartime leader is perhaps too even-handed. The book's second chapter (entitled "George W. Bush") recapitulates a largely conventional account of the 43rd president's upbringing, formative experiences, and entry into politics. Central to the story, for our purposes here, are Bush's midlife development of religious convictions and his lack of experience with foreign policy. The former became critical, insofar as it informed Bush's beliefs about the evil nature of Saddam Hussein's despotic regime, and thus may explain why Bush proved fundamentally unable to consider whether Saddam would respond to any positive incentives for cooperation (184). The latter led him (with an assist from his father, President George H.W. Bush) to his future national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice. On the one hand, this portrait of Bush would seem to bode well for a successful presidency—he is described as "smart, witty, incisive, eager to learn, and disciplined" and as someone who "asked good questions, listened carefully, and possessed an uncanny way to get to the heart of a problem." On the other hand, we can see the seeds of trouble, as one of the reasons that he hit it off with Rice is that she "simplified complex issues" for him (28-29).

The question then becomes why Bush's apparently inquisitive nature did not manifest itself when it came time to decide about Iraq. To counter the common narrative that Bush was a foolish man who allowed his hawkish advisers to drive policy, Leffler devotes significant attention to demonstrating that Bush was "absolutely in charge" of the decision to begin prosecuting the global war on terror (54-60). Yet as quickly and forcefully as Bush made up his mind concerning the immediate US response to the events of 9/11, he does not appear to have harnessed similar levels of decisiveness in addressing either the substance or process of confronting Iraq. On substance, Bush never apparently reconciled what he actually sought as the outcome of coercive diplomacy, in terms of the resumption of weapons' inspections versus disarmament versus containment versus regime change (152)—a theme on which I expand in the third point below. On process, Bush was simply a terrible manager, as he never intervened to "quell the simmering feuds" among the strong personalities (particularly Cheney, Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Rice) whom he had chosen

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[2] James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking,, 2004); Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); Barton Gellman, *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How The War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009); Terry H. Anderson, *Bush's Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[3] Samuel Helfont, "The Iraq War's Intelligence Failures Are Still Misunderstood," *War on the Rocks*, 28 March 2023, https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/the-iraq-wars-intelligence-failures-are-still-misunderstood/?__s=93tserkrmtar86a2k5qe.

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as advisers (95). A more experienced manager might have told his subordinates to knock it off, empowered particular individuals to control the decision flow, or even shuffled those who remained recalcitrant. Yet Bush hardly reprimanded officials like Cheney when they went off script, did not grant Rice or Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley sufficient authority to arbitrate when the views of officials diverged, and gave Rumsfeld a long leash despite his inability to play nice with his peers or subordinates (154-156). While Leffler carefully documents the internal bickering and also takes Bush to task for the personal qualities that "served him poorly" (144), his account does not shed light on why Bush's apparently impressive leadership credentials abandoned him at such a critical juncture.[4]

Second, and related, Leffler forcefully shows that Bush's hawkish advisers did not hoodwink or force him into invading Iraq on the basis of their preconceived notions about the threat that Saddam posed, and furthermore, that they themselves were not set on an invasion from the outset. On this score, he successfully demonstrates that Bush waved off repeated entreaties from Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz to go after Iraq in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (57, 79) and may not have turned fully toward war until sometime in late January 2003 (192). But in some sense, this conclusion misses the forest for the trees, as there was still a significant undercurrent of support among administration's hawks for dealing with Saddam, and violently if necessary.[5] Wolfowitz had been sounding the alarm about Iraq as a national security threat Iraq since the late 1970s.[6] Even prior to 9/11, Cheney, together with his Deputy National Security Adviser Eric Edelman and Chief of Staff Scooter Libby, wanted to reboot a version of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (41), one of the most hawkish strategy documents ever produced at the Pentagon.[7] Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith may not have supported a full-scale invasion from the beginning, but they still harbored rather fantastical plans for fomenting regime change (81-82).[8]

Perhaps more troublingly, Leffler's conclusions are based on the memoirs of these officials and the interviews that he conducted, about which he suggests there is "no reason to doubt the veracity" (98). As he details in the preface, the opportunity to speak with many members of the Bush team came to him somewhat serendipitously; he was right to take advantage of it and clearly approached the task with a professional sense of informed skepticism. However, it still seems fair to ask whether a group of people who orchestrated the liquidation of a sovereign state under what turned out to be false pretenses, with full awareness that the intelligence they were acting on was uncertain and ambiguous, would not have strong post hoc incentives to argue that they "did not want to assign priority to Iraq" (80).[9] One means of addressing this concern would have been to include the interview questionnaire (if there was a standard one used across individuals) or potentially even anonymized transcripts—as is common in political science—in an appendix to the book, so

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[4] Elizabeth N. Saunders, "No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in Group Decision Making," *International Organization* 71, no. S1 (2017): S219–47, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831600045X.

[5] Joseph Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics, 1990-2003* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[6] Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston, MA: Back Bay Books, 1995), 6-7.

[7] Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21;3 (Winter 1996/97): 5–53.

[8] Also see Ahsan I. Butt, "Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?," *Security Studies* 28:2 (March 15, 2019): 250–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1551567.

[9] On this point, also see Joseph Stieb, "Confronting the Iraq War: Melvyn Leffler, George Bush, and the Problems of Trusting Your Sources," *War on the Rocks*, 30 January 2023, https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/confronting-the-iraq-war-melvyn-leffler-george-bush-and-the-problem-of-trusting-your-sources/.

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that readers could evaluate the evidence for themselves. Should such materials exist, perhaps they could be made available online through the book's publisher or in a future edition of the text.

Third, Leffler conveys the extent to which the Bush administration thought it was practicing coercive diplomacy before the invasion. As a scholar of crisis bargaining, I found the anecdote in which Rice introduced Bush to the concept of coercive diplomacy darkly amusing, as Bush clearly thought that it lent some imprimatur to the exercise (111). But as any student of coercive diplomacy would tell you, it is a tricky business.[10] Moreover, the prospects for success further diminish if the entity doing the coercing is unsure of its ultimate aims, and this is where Leffler's account really shines by illustrating Bush's strategic incoherence. The ultimate problem with trying to coerce Iraq was that Bush himself never figured out what his goal was in threatening the use of force: was it simply to intimidate Saddam into resuming inspections and certify that he possessed no weapons of mass destruction? Or was the idea to remove him from power altogether? (105)

While it remains debatable whether the administration really gave coercive diplomacy a chance to succeed (however much Bush loved the terminology), the analytically prior issue, at least in Leffler's account, is that Bush did not actually decide on the endgame for Iraq, despite memorably styling himself as "The Decider."[11] For coercive diplomacy to succeed, the coercer must not only have clear goals, but also crisply convey to the target both the threatened consequences for continued noncompliance and an assurance that the threat will not be carried out in the event of compliance; in other words, coercive threats must be sufficiently contingent on the target's behavior to have their intended effect.[12] On the contrary, Bush "conveyed mixed messages, filled with purposeful innuendos to intimidate Hussein, yet fraught with ambiguities" (116); he "struggled to clarify what coercive diplomacy could achieve and how it could be implemented" (120) as well as "to define his priorities—inspections, disarmament, containment, regime change" (133). The only positive inducement for Saddam "seemed to be the president's willingness to allow Hussein to remain in power if he opened up Iraq, welcomed inspectors, and either relinquished his WMD or demonstrated that he did not possess any" (164). Yet Bush's public statements used "language whose full significance was probably understood only by his closest advisers and their British counterparts" (170), and ultimately, "what might satisfy him and avert war remained unclear…He warned Hussein not to throw away his last chance, yet offered no inducements or commitments" (196-197).

Leffler's reinterpretation of the evidence about coercive diplomacy—which was in practice just plain coercion—therefore strikes me as significant insofar as it offers a relatively parsimonious explanation for the US's failures in Iraq that does not rely on monolithic ideology or caricatures of the central players. It is one thing for leaders to define their country's interests in the abstract (Bush did plenty of that in the aftermath of 9/11), but it is quite another to figure out what those interests mean in the context of practical policy choices.[13] The lack of clarity on what Bush actually sought to achieve in Iraq (beyond a general desire to "deal with Saddam") almost certainly empowered his subordinates to either improvise or inject their own views,

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[10] Robert J. Art and Patrick M. Cronin, *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2003); Kelly M. Greenhill and Peter Krause, *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[11] John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54; Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "The Decider," *The New York Times*, 24 December 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/weekinreview/the-decider.html.

[12] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Reid B. C. Pauly, "'Stop or I'll Shoot, Comply and I Won't': Coercive Assurance in International Politics," PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2019 .

[13] Arnold Wolfers, "'National Security' as an Ambiguous Symbol," *Political Science Quarterly* 67:4 (1952): 481–502, https://doi.org/10.2307/2145138.

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and because Bush was fundamentally unsure of what he wanted, he was in no position to ask the sort of discerning questions that might have improved the quality of the policies that the US finally pursued.[14]

In conclusion, Leffler's timely reevaluation of what we think we know about the invasion of Iraq is a welcome addition to the conflict's historiography, but is not without its flaws. The book appropriately centers Bush in its analysis, but could have delved more deeply into why the president was unable to lead or manage the war properly. It shows that Bush was not duped into war, but may be a shade too credulous in its handling of interview evidence suggesting that his advisers were not set on regime change from the outset. It thoroughly probes the administration's conduct of coercive diplomacy, showcasing its flawed logic and poor assumptions.

[14] Stephen Benedict Dyson, "'Stuff Happens': Donald Rumsfeld and the Iraq War," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5:4 (1 October 2009): 327–47, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2009.00096.x; Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013).

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Review by Richard I. Immerman, Emeritus Temple University

Melvyn P. Leffler belongs in the very top tier of historians of US foreign relations. His peers elected him president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) and awarded him its Bernath article prize, its Ferrell book prize, and its Graebner Award for lifetime achievement. The dozen or so books that he has written or edited include such classics as *The Elusive Quest*, *The Specter of Communism*, *For the Soul of Mankind*, and perhaps most notably, *A Preponderance of Power*.[1] For them he has received not only the SHAFR awards but also the Hoover Prize, the Beer Prize, and the Bancroft. He has held fellowships at the Woodrow Wilson Center, the Council on Foreign Relations, the ACLS, the Nobel Institute, the U.S. Institute for Peace, and the Library of Congress, among others. He has served as a Visiting Distinguished Professor at Cambridge and the Harmsworth Professor at Oxford.

With the publication of *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*, Leffler shows himself to be no less a courageous historian than an exceptionally skilled and accomplished one. His scholarship had long demonstrated his willingness to challenge the conventional, whether it lean toward orthodox or revisionist. And those of us who have been fortunate enough to observe him at a seminar or workshop know how forcefully he articulates his arguments and digests but never backs down from criticism. Still, to wade into the treacherous debates over the Iraq War is something different. Leffler obviously did not need another book to cement his reputation. And he knew the risk he was taking. Yet his passion for the subject is manifest on every page. Moreover, dissatisfied with the extant literature, such as it is, he makes clear that he felt a responsibility to write this book, the consequences of doing so be damned.

Leffler had to be brave to write this book in the first place because whether the Bush administration and the War in Iraq "qualify" as history is in itself controversial and contested. Many argue no. The current executive order governing declassification stipulates that unless a document contains sensitive information, it is eligible for automatic declassification after ten to twenty-five years from the date of its origin, depending on the originating agency's, or agencies', assessment of "the national security sensitivity of the information."[2] The Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1992, which is known as the Foreign Relations Act and was enacted by Congress in 1991 to bolster the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (*FRUS*) series in the aftermath of the Iran and Guatemala "whitewash" volumes, mandates that the State Department's Office of the Historian (OH) publish *FRUS* volumes no later than 30 years after the events that they document. Since the act's enactment, OH has rarely met that target, in large part because the continued classification of documents prevents a volume from meeting the standard of "thorough, accurate, and reliable."[3]

Leffler embarked on this project fully aware of the challenge for a historian: even with the publication of government reports and hearings and the scattered success of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) requests, paltry few of the necessary archives are accessible. Those archives that are accessible, moreover, were likely to be the lowest hanging fruit. Characteristic of

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[1] I cite the original editions: Melvyn P. Leffler, *The Elusive Quest: America's Pursuit of European Stability and French Security, 1919-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); *The Specter of Communism: The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1994*); For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2007); *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[2] Executive Order 13526- Classified National Security Information, 29 December 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/executive-order-classified-national-security-information.

[3] The Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1991 (Public Law 102-138 [105, Stat. 647, codified in relevant part at 22 U.S.C. § 4351 *et seq*.]), 28 October 1991, https://www.congress.gov/102/statute/STATUTE-105/STATUTE-105-Pg647.pdf.

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Leffler's scholarship, he has voraciously consumed virtually everything that has appeared on paper or in digital form. His research covered UN documents, including the Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission, and US government documents ranging from the 2005 Robb-Silberman Report, the Report of the Joint Survey Group a year earlier, and more familiar US Senate reports to the Electronic Briefing Books of the National Security Archive to the Electronic Reading Room of the Central Intelligence Agency. He found material in the William Burns Papers, the Donald Rumsfeld Archive, and the National Archives, and exploited the online Conflict Records Research Center, the National Archives of the United Kingdom, and the *Report of the Iraq Inquiry* commissioned by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. His itemization of the books and articles on which he drew covers eight single-spaced pages. If Leffler had not written a word of text, his notes and bibliography alone would make *Confronting Saddam Hussein* a treasure.

But some two-hundred fifty pages of text precede the notes and bibliography, dense pages that provide background and context; a detailed accounting of and explanations for the decisions first not to go to war in Iraq and then to do so, and the after-effects of both; and illuminating portraits of those responsible for those decisions, most notably President George W. Bush. As is the norm in a work by Leffler, interpretations and arguments appear on every page.

But that is also where the book's problems arise and his courage is manifest. Leffler knew from the start that while necessary, his research in archives, libraries, and online would not be sufficient. In order for him to tell the story that he wanted and felt compelled to tell, he would need to rely heavily on memoirs and, more importantly, interviews. For some of these interviews he could use the Miller Center's George W. Bush Oral History Project. But the majority are interviews that he needed to conduct himself. For that purpose he required access, and Eric Edelman provided it for him. Edelman was Vice President Dick Cheney's principal deputy assistant for national affairs before moving to the Department of Defense as undersecretary of defense for policy.

Edelman could and did provide Leffler with access—amazing access, enviable access. Needless to say, however, it is access to high level insiders, the highest levels: Cheney, Edelman, Douglas Feith, Scooter Libby, Stephen Hadley, Colin Powell, Paul Wolfowitz, Condoleezza Rice, pretty much anyone who was anyone within Bush's national security architecture except for Donald Rumsfeld and Bush himself.[4] More than twenty Bush officials spoke with Leffler. Their collective insights into this history is unparalleled; yet their vested interest in this history is indisputable.

I became excited the moment I learned about this project, but skeptical at the same time. I had used interviews and oral histories extensively in my own writings over the decades. And the reputations of some of those whom I interviewed were shady, to put it mildly (Howard Hunt! Dick Bissell!). But I used them conservatively and cautiously, relying on and corroborating with the written record, which reached critical mass due to successful FOIA requests. On occasion I stretched the definition of corroboration (I got hammered at my dissertation defense). On many occasions I omitted juicy material because the stretch was too great.[5]

[4] Feith was Edelman's predecessor as undersecretary of state for policy; Libby, Cheney's assistant for national security affairs and Edelman's successor as the vice president's chief of staff; Hadley, deputy and then national security advisor; Powell, secretary of state; Wolfowitz, undersecretary of defense; and Rice, national security advisor and secretary of state.

[5] For example, in my *CIA and Guatemala* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), I omitted Hunt's claim that Arbenz and his wife, Maria Cristina Vilanova, were involved in ménages-à-trois with several Guatemalan Communists.

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With the Iraq War, that written record is at most sketchy. Further, reflecting my own biases and predispositions, I doubt the trustworthiness of many if not all of the architects of what Paul McDonald recently labeled in a H-Diplo|Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum Policy Roundtable as "one of the great seminal catastrophes of the twenty-first century."[6] When researching a chapter on one of those architects, Paul Wolfowitz, for a book that I wrote, I purposely did not seek to interview him. How could I believe him? Where could I find credible corroboration? What do I do with stories that I suspect are misleading and self-serving but cannot disconfirm? Several years later, I contributed to a project on the 2007 surge in Iraq. To provide a source base for the essays and the resultant volume, Jeffrey Engel's Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University conducted and made available to us the transcripts of numerous oral histories, including one by President Bush (but again, not Rumsfeld). Their value is incontrovertible. Nevertheless, I was shocked (I probably should not have been) at the rosy-colored lenses through which the principal players viewed that decision. The transcripts further convinced me that I was right not to have interviewed Wolfowitz.[7]

That leads to the final reason I call Leffler a courageous historian. He is highly sensitive to the potential traps he was walking into. But unlike me, he was willing to accept the risks in order to secure information otherwise unavailable because of continued classification. He was confident he could manage the risks. He also knew that because of his sources, and in part because of an amalgam of the extant scholarly literature, contemporary journalism, preconceptions, and emotions that were still raw, many of his readers would question if not reject outright his interpretations and arguments. In fact, when he sent me a draft article that he was writing on Bush's decision to engage Iraq's President Saddam Hussein militarily, he wrote "I know you will not be inclined to embrace my view." Nevertheless, he "would love to hear [my] reactions…. [P]erhaps you can point out the flaws."[8]

I did react, and I did point out some what I deemed flaws. But of much greater significance, I encouraged Leffler to expand the article into a book. And although I still do not "embrace" his views, I am so very glad that he did, because he makes it impossible to discount them. *Confronting Saddam Hussein* will need to be a part of—or more accurately, it will need to be central to—all conversations and debates over America's War in Iraq for the foreseeable future—at a minimum until far more archives are declassified. What is more, written intelligibly and accessibly, it will be grist for many lecture mills. It is too early to claim there is an orthodox interpretation of the war.[9] Yet I do not judge it too early to label Leffler's arguments "revisionist." To me, that is the highest compliment we can pay a historian.

Conversely, I included Bissell's claim that his worst-case scenario for the Bay of Pigs operation was a stalemate that the OAS would resolve.

[6] Commentary by Paul McDonald in "Post-Mortem on Iraq: What Assessments of the US Failure in Iraq Tell Us about American Foreign Policy," *H-Diplo/Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum Policy Roundtable* II-1, 7 April 2023, https://issforum.org/policy-roundtable/12639.

[7] Richard H. Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 196-231; and Timothy A. Sayle, Jeffrey A. Engel, Hal Brands, and William Inboden, eds., *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019). Recently many of these same principals edited a volume of the Bush to Obama transition memos, which I judge a far more credible source than their recollections. Stephen J. Hadley, Peter D. Feaver, William Inboden, and Meghan L. O'Sullivan, eds., *Hand-Off: The Foreign Policy George W. Bush Passed to Barack Obama* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2023).

[8] Leffler email to Richard H. Immerman, 16 July 2020, author's possession.

[9] A starting point might be Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman, eds., *Understanding the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan* (NY: New York University Press, 2015). See, most recently, "Post-Mortem on Iraq."

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In *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, Leffler's many historiographic interventions are unmistakable. The most fundamental of these concerns the driving force behind the administration's decision to invade Iraq. Scholars, pundits, and commentators have postulated a laundry list that defies a consensus.[10] They include, but are not limited to: democracy promotion; securing Iraq's oil; cementing US hegemony over and/or remaking the Middle East by buttressing Israel and reducing regional tension; disrupting the bonds been the Iraqi regime, al-Qaeda, and other terrorists and terrorist organizations; asserting or reasserting US primacy; avenging the attempted assassination of Bush's father, President George H. W. Bush; accelerating and demonstrating the efficacy of military transformation; and most prominently, locating and destroying Saddam Hussein's allegedly concealed cache of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The list is so long, complex, and interlocking that isolating one motive or even establishing a hierarchy among them presents a different set of challenges. Consequently, Paul Wolfowitz's explanation became a fallback position. When asked by the journalist Sam Tanenhaus to identify the primary reason for the intervention, Wolfowitz replied, "The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the U.S. government bureaucracy we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on which was weapons of mass destruction as the core reason."[11]

Drawing primarily on the interviews, including one with Wolfowitz, Leffler rejects not only Wolfowitz's contention but also every one of these "standard" explanations other than ridding Iraq of WMD, which he presents with unconventional nuance. His critique zeroes in particularly on democracy promotion, probably because the term neoconservative is applied to the Bush administration so frequently and recklessly. Yet none of the orthodox reasons for the decision to go to war can withstand Leffler's scrutiny. Every one of them was according to his assessment at most a "second order" issue (30).

The alternative that Leffler posits is elegant in its simplicity: fear. "Fear of impending attacks pulsated through Washington as Bush prepared to meet with his national security team on September 12," he writes in an effort to capture the environment in which that meeting occurred. "When Bush and his advisors declared a global war on terror," he explains, "dwelled on terrorist networks and their sponsors, and launched their assault on Afghanistan, their overriding goal was to prevent another attack on American citizens, the United States, and its allies." Both Bush's most muscular advisors and their more ideologically inclined allies in the administration, Leffler elaborates, hawks "like Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Libby and their neoconservative friends, were not inspired by missionary fervor or idealist impulses…. They were seeking to safeguard the country from another attack, save American lives, avoid the opprobrium that would come from another assault, and preserve the country's ability to exercise its power in the future in behalf of its interests." That they suffered from collective guilt because they had let America down once buttressed their determination never to do so again (28-29; 55, 62, 98).

Leffler repeats this argument over and over again, because, he writes, this explanation is evident over and over again in the transcripts of the interviews he conducted, the memoirs of the actors, and those archives that he could access. And although more than a year elapsed between the assault on Afghanistan and that on Iraq, he underscores that this same fear remained the overarching driver in formulating policy toward Saddam Hussein. If anything, the fear intensified over the weeks and months as Iraq's strongman, whom Leffler describes in the most odious terms, resisted inspections, "glorified" suicide bombers, allowed the notorious

[10] The many articles marking the twentieth anniversary of the Bush administration's launching of the war underscore the cacophony of explanations. Representative is Max Fisher's "The Interpreter" column in the *New York Times*: "20 Years On, a Question Lingers: Why Did the U.S. Invade Iraq," *New York Times*, 18 March 2023, updated 19 March, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/18/world/middleeast/iraq-war-reason.html. Fisher undermines his article by inexplicably failing to reference *Confronting Saddam Hussein*. See also *H-Diplo/Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum Policy Roundtable*.

[11] "Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Interview with Sam Tannenhaus [sic]," *Vanity Fair*, 9 May 2003, http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/useur/wolfowitztanenhaus.html.

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Abu Musab al-Zarqawi safe haven in Iraq, "reveled in his financial support of Palestinian terrorists," and otherwise behaved in ways that that administration officials—whether policymakers or intelligence analysts—perceived as both menacing and incomprehensible (120).

Saddam Hussein's agency in bringing on the US attack has received too little attention, Leffler argues, persuasively, and his corrective constitutes another valuable intervention. The Iraqi dictator's "record and his behavior made a difference." He was a cold-blooded killer—"ruthless" and an "inveterate conspirator." He was "ambitious," "pragmatic," and "opportunistic," but he was also "flexible and malleable." For this reason it was almost unavoidable that whether in Washington or Langley, Americans would misread his intentions. His "policies fluctuated, characterized by incoherence, incompetency, and profligacy," Leffler writes. "Predicting what Hussein would do at any given moment was excruciatingly difficult" (3-11).[12]

It was not that Bush officials and analysts judged Saddam Hussein to be an imminent threat. Rather, Leffler spells out, they feared that he could provide assistance, including the provision of WMD, to terrorists who were imminent threats. Further, while Powell and others agreed that a hostile Iraq could be contained in the short term, they did not dispute that it would be reckless to count on that containment remaining effective for the long-term. In this regard, and perhaps most decisively, with no dissent across the White House, the Pentagon, Foggy Bottom, and Langley, officials worried about Saddam Hussein's potential to "blunt" the employment of American power. As "Hussein amassed more biological and chemical weapons and pursued Iraq's nuclear ambitions," Leffler summarizes official thinking, "he would be emboldened while his adversaries might hesitate to deter and contain him." (158)

Pivotal to Leffler's argument, and another of his important historiographic interventions, is his account of the degree of difficulty and the length of time it took for Bush to assess the threat of Saddam Hussein as so severe as to constitute a *casus belli*. He convincingly exposes as wrongheaded the claim that, if only because of the influence of his advisers, and within minutes of collecting himself after the 9/11 attacks, Bush was dead set on invading Iraq as soon as he could dispose of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Leffler asserts that Cheney's influence on the president has in particular been greatly exaggerated, qualifying as an "urban legend" (33, 72). The same holds true for Rumsfeld and the others, who in any case were much less bent on employing US forces in Iraq that almost all of us would have it. They advocated regime change, but not as a product of the US military).

Even Wolfowitz, "who was the most committed to regime change," was a pragmatist who did not want "to use American troops to invade the country." He preferred that the US support "a Shi'a rebellion in the south, establish an enclave or liberation zone for the organization of a provisional government, and, if successful, denying Saddam control of the oil resources of the region." These were ideas he had been expressing well before 9/11 and were devoid of any "ideological or idealistic edge." (73, 81) Leffler's Wolfowitz bears little resemblance to the one I portray in my book, or David Milne does in his finely textured *Worldmaking*.[13]

For months, indeed for more than a year, Bush resisted even these proposals. And Bush was the decider; about this Leffler is unequivocal. He is likewise unequivocal about Bush's evolution. Leffler makes clear that the president's priority when he came into office was domestic affairs, that he was unsure of himself when it

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[12] On the CIA's postmortem that recounts how and why it misread Saddam's intentions regarding his WMD programs, see Intelligence Assessment, "Misreading Intentions: Iraq's Reaction to Inspections Created Picture of Deception," 5 January 2006, accessed on 8 September 2012; http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20120905/CIA-Iraq.pdf.

[13] Immerman, *Empire for Liberty*, 196-231; and David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of Diplomacy* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 387-456.

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came to foreign policy, that he made no effort to design a grand strategy for national security and all but ignored the National Security Council, and that he underestimated the threat posed by al-Qaeda and other terrorists and terrorist networks even as he mistakenly focused on rogue states and missile defense.

But all that changed after 9/11. "I saw him [Bush] transformed," Leffler quotes Michael Morell, Bush's briefer in the first year of his presidency who later headed the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence and served as the agency's acting director. "I saw him transform from a president who really didn't have a strong agenda, didn't really have a clear path that he was on, that quite frankly was struggling…. I saw him transform from that to commander-in-chief and to somebody who almost instantaneously" recognized that his mission was 'to protect the country from this happening again'" (54). Morell was among multiple Bush observers who attested to Leffler that in the aftermath of the plane flying into the second of the World Trade Center's twin towers the president was not shell-shocked, staring blankly into space while surrounded by elementary school children in Sarasota, Florida. To the contrary, Bush was "calm, collected, determined." His "tone" impressed everyone. Indeed, while other high-level officials in the administration were "shaken," Bush's demeanor "inspired confidence" (60).[14]

Leffler certainly does not idealize this president. That is evident in his critique of Bush prior to his "transformation" following 9/11 and, as I'll discuss below, his behavior (perhaps a better word is negligence) in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall. But congruent with his book's framework and argument, he does portray him sympathetically and, just as importantly, as virtually the polar opposite of Saddam. The thumbnail biography he provides is sufficient for this purpose. "Charming" and "good looking," when growing up in Texas, Bush proved himself a "natural born leader" who made friends easily (25). He was, as is well known, something of a rabble-rouser who liked to have a good time, which often led to excessive alcohol consumption and indifference toward his studies. But he grew up. Leffler presents Bush's 1986 encounter with the evangelist Billy Graham as a watershed in Bush's evolution almost on a par with 9/11. He grew "more disciplined and religious." Prayer "nourished" him and "steadied" him, Leffler avers, and from then on, "religion and prayer profoundly shaped his sensibilities, rhetoric, and beliefs." As president, consequently, Bush judged US ideals and interests as indistinguishable (24-25, 30).

None of this is new, especially to those who have read Bush's memoir, Leffler's primary source for the claim.[15] What is new is Leffler's depiction of Bush during the interregnum and once in office. The Bush who roamed the halls of the White House was "sharp, incisive, and witty." He was "confident and unpretentious" an executive who during meetings with his advisors "asked good questions, listened carefully, and possessed an uncanny way to get to the heart of a problem." Leffler puts a positive spin even on the president's familiar shortcomings. To provide one example, Bush "conveyed a restless energy, a distaste for jargon, a lust for clarity," Leffler writes, before adding "perhaps at the expense of curiosity and complexity" (29).

It is this George W. Bush whom Leffler depicts as taking charge throughout the period between 9/11 and 20 March 2003, when he approved the "shock and awe" military campaign against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. It is also this George W. Bush who, even as he insisted that the United States must not distinguish between terrorists and the states that harbored and sponsored them and declared a Global War on Terrorism, rebuffed suggestions to make Iraq an early target and rejected theories that linked Saddam Hussein to the attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon.

What is more, Leffler leaves the reader with the impression that even as Saddam Hussein seemed to do everything he could to invite if not goad the administration into invading his country, Bush did everything he

[14] The iconic image of Bush at Booker Elementary School comes from Michael Moore's "Farhenheit 9/11."
[15] George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (NY: Crown Publishers, 2010).

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could to avoid that eventuality, notwithstanding the progressively louder drumbeats for war emanating from seemingly all corners of his administration. That Saddam Hussein still retained a cache of WMD and was seeking a nuclear capability was not open to debate among policymakers, military advisers, or intelligence analysts. That politically the administration would be unable to recover from another attack was gospel, as was the presumed certainty of such an attack. The only question was when and what kind of assistance Hussein might provide. In this regard, according to Leffler, in increasing numbers Bush's advisors told him that the longer the United States tolerated Hussein's behavior and rhetoric, the more likely a second attack would come sooner because the United States would appear "weak and feckless." They further warned that, unless and until Hussein surrendered his WMD and allowed inspectors *carte blanche*, he remained in a "position to blackmail the United States and constrain the exercise of American power" (88-89, 91-92).

Bush did not dispute any of the above. Further, his contempt for Hussein was "visceral" (83). Nevertheless, although the commander in chief instructed General Tommy Franks to formulate a war plan for Iraq, it took him many months and a lot of anguish to decide to implement it. His advisers were divided as to what to do, albeit, with Cheney in the lead, momentum shifted inexorably toward a military solution. In this context, Leffler contends, at no time throughout 2002 and the first months of 2003 was Bush well-served by Rice and Hadley, his national security adviser and her deputy. They "seemed unable or unwilling to overcome divergent views" and failed "to frame papers or structure debates" so that the president and his constellation of advisors "could systematically weigh recommendations, options, and warnings." They thereby "contributed to the disarray within the administration that was now beset with intense bureaucratic and personal feuding" (159-62). The "murky" intelligence produced by the Intelligence Community exacerbated the decider's dilemma. Leffler stresses in this context that the salience of the daily and weekly reports had a much greater impact on the administration's outlook than the notorious National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's WMD program, Skeptical of the evidence and not eager to act militarily, a deeply conflicted Bush again and again deferred making a decision (140, 149-50, 154).

Leffler sympathizes with Bush's struggle and, if only implicitly, applauds him for not rushing to judgment. He does not point out that intelligence collected from "hard targets" is almost always murky and that evaluating it in a climate when fear of "impending attacks pulsated through Washington" demanded heightened vigilance and skepticism. Sidestepping that issue, he portrays the president's preferred course of action as prudent and perhaps even wise. Not wanting to go to war, but resolute in his conviction that Saddam Hussein's assumed capacity to provide terrorists with WMD posed an intolerable threat, Bush pursued what he judged was a middle way: coercive diplomacy. Leffler credits Bush for his willingness to take a chance on pressure, particularly international pressure, to achieve a satisfactory outcome. It was Rice who explained to him that in academic circles the combination of diplomatic pressure and the threat of force was called coercive diplomacy. Bush "loved that terminology." It allowed him to square the circle of preparing for war in order to avoid waging it (111).

Leffler makes a compelling case that Bush genuinely pursued coercive diplomacy as a strategy for avoiding war, not simply to provide more time to mobilize support for or to justify going to war. He dedicates an entire chapter to it. Yet he also makes clear that Bush was not at all sure what he intended his coercive diplomacy to achieve. "Bush wanted to intimidate Hussein," he writes. "He also wanted to use the threat of force to remove the Iraqi dictator from power," "to resume inspections," and "to gain confidence that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction." Leffler's sources do not reveal which of these goals was Bush's priority. He writes only that these "conflicting, overlapping impulses coursed through Bush's mind for the next year." Leffler concedes that this confusion and indecision was a problem. Indeed, it was a big problem. Perhaps because of the reliance on interviews and paucity of notes and memoranda, absent from the narrative is a definition of what successful coercive diplomacy would have looked like. One wonders whether Bush in fact even knew what he was doing until Rice enlightened him (105).

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As a consequence, that much more so because not a single adviser, let alone the president himself, doubted that hidden within Iraq were WMD, and yet because Saddam did not possess them he could not give them up, coercive diplomacy did end up achieving nothing more than buying time to mobilize support and bolster the justification for war. Leffler masterfully dissects the administration's internal debates and shifting postures in the lead-up to the decision to invade Iraq, sorting through the morass of murky intelligence reporting (Leffler repeatedly modifies the word intelligence with "murky") and Bush's weighing of the conflicting advice he received. His account unambiguously reveals that the president was far more dovish than the majority of his advisors, Rumsfeld and Cheney above all, and that in his ideal world, coercive diplomacy would somehow defang Saddam Hussein.

Yet his account also reveals that Bush's ideal world was contingent on Saddam Hussein's surrendering not only his non-existent WMD but also his power. In addition, the military's success in Afghanistan buoyed his confidence. Thus the inescapable conclusion for any reader of *Confronting Saddam Hussein* is that from summer 2002 to Bush's decision to go to war in March 2003, the administration was but playing out the string, even if unwittingly. Occupying the Oval Office, the president was the decider, and he "never doubted that the Iraqi dictator had WMD, and he greatly feared that Hussein might share them with terrorists," Leffler states without qualification. "His beliefs were entrenched based on the 'intelligence' he had received over the past two years, the lessons extrapolated from decades of dealing with the Iraqi dictator, and the absence of dissenting voices in high administration circles" (183-84). (Leffler encloses the word "intelligence" in quotation marks).

While Leffler does not at any time intimate that Bush's decision was the right one, he presents that decision as having been entirely reasonable under the circumstances. Notwithstanding the dysfunction of the administration's advisory system, the poor quality of the intelligence collection and analysis, and the president's frequent lapses in leadership, responsibility for the war falls squarely on Saddam Hussein. But he attributes the grief that befell both Iraqis and Americans as an outcome of that decision to go to war primarily if not exclusively to Bush and his subordinates. Focused all but exclusively on protecting Americans by removing what he judged was the existential threat posed by Hussein, the president paid scant attention to the potential after-effects of regime change. He "instinctively shied away" from resolving disputes over the nature and composition of a post-Saddam government and resisted imposing his will on his feuding advisors even as relations among them progressively grew more "poisonous" (206, 222-23). Leffler rightly indicts Rumsfeld as the most toxic cancer, but he also indicts Bush for allowing the cancer to metastasize. Compounding the fall-out from the president's detachment, the initial successes of the military campaign seduced Bush into revising his war aims, replacing the promotion of American security with a freedom agenda that required transforming Iraq. Leffler's critique is so devastating that it warrants quotation at length:

> President Bush stood atop the morass of postwar planning, and did little to uplift it. He knew his top Cabinet officers were feuding, but for the most part did not interfere…. Shifting his focus from security of the US homeland to democracy-promotion and nation-building in Iraq, President Bush failed to orchestrate the requisite planning. He did not resolve the divergent predilections of the two most consequential officials making Iraq policy—his newly appointed administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority [Paul Bremer] and his secretary of defense—or heal the animosity between his most important advisers: Cheney, Powell, and Rumsfeld (237).

In sum, Leffler does not condemn Bush for going to war, but for what the war wrought.

That bifurcation is unsatisfying. To me, even if to an extent understandable, Bush's decision is unforgivable. Leffler's summative final chapter suggests as much. In it he provides an analysis that is as convincing and absorbing as it is astute and nuanced. Enveloping the decisions leading up to the decision to invade Iraq as

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well as the aftermath of that decision, it is so trenchant that the takeaway, to my mind, challenges if not contradicts the tenor of the narrative that Leffler fashions over the first two-hundred pages of his two-hundred-fifty page book. He reiterates in his conclusion that Bush "went to war *not* out of the fanciful idea to make Iraq democratic, but to rid its deadly weapons, its links to terrorists, and its ruthless, unpredictable tyrant." In addition, the president succeeded "at preventing another major attack on American soil and did remove a murderous dictator" (248-249).

Nevertheless, Leffler resurfaces criticisms that he expresses previously in the book but now highlights: Bush "failed," he writes emphatically, because "his information was flawed, his assumptions inaccurate, his priorities imprecise, and his means incommensurate with his evolving ends." He adds that Bush "was unable to grasp the magnitude of the enterprise he was embracing, the risks that inhered in it, and the costs that would be incurred" (249). Moreover, in what I consider a shift in tone as well as substance, Leffler depicts Bush's decision as less reasonable than he suggests earlier. What drove that decision went beyond a fear of Saddam Hussein's capacity to inflict harm on Americans and the homeland. "Fear alone did not shape the president's strategy of confrontation," Leffler declares. He continues: "Bush's sense of power—its capacity to achieve what it need to do—was equally important… Fear and power were an intoxicating brew when reinforced by hubris, a sense of exceptional goodness and greatness" (245-46).

This bottom-line judgment captures the insight and analytic brilliance we have come to expect from the histories Leffler has produced over the decades. But coming at the very end of *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, and I'd go so far to say somewhat at odds with the thrust of the prior chapters, the power of this argument signals the perils of writing contemporary history. Leffler previewed that argument in his initial writings on the Iraq War, which he published prior to conducting his interviews. "Think Again: Bush's Foreign Policy," which appeared in a 2004 issue of *Foreign Policy*, and "9/11 and American Foreign Policy," which he published the next year in *Diplomatic History*, were pathbreaking and anticipated this conclusion to *Confronting Saddam Hussein*. In both Leffler repeatedly underscores threat perception and the fear of vulnerability, amplified by a pervasive feeling of guilt and responsibility, in contrast to democracy promotion or other explanations. He derived his support exclusively from the public record: speeches, government documents, and the most reliable journalistic accounts. He conducted no interviews.[16]

Both articles were persuasive and powerfully shaped the conversation, especially among historians of US foreign relations. But as a good historian Leffler sought more insight into the motives, beliefs, and character of Bush and his principal advisors and the process by which they reached decisions. The spate of memoirs that came out over the next half-dozen or so years provided him the opportunity, and he devoured them. In 2013 Leffler published, again in *Diplomatic History*, his seminal "The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy." It was a tour de force, drawing on virtually every memoir in print at the time, which by then included ones by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Feith, CIA Director George Tenet, and down the line. Leffler acknowledged that memoirs are "usually self-serving" and "often suffer from omissions, silences, and distortions." But at the same time they can be "critical and incisive" and "offer valuable insights into the motives, thoughts, hopes, fears, and personal relationships." Further, and I would suggest most significantly, memoirs "highlight the legacies that top leaders wish to nurture. They suggest how policymakers want to be remembered, how they want history to be written."[17]

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[16] Leffler, "Think Again: Bush's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy* 144 (September-October 2004): especially 24, 26; and Leffler, "9/11 and American Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 29 (June 2005), especially 406-07.

[17] Leffler, "The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy," *Diplomatic History* 37 (April 2013): 191.

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The interviews that Leffler conducted, and for that matter those conducted by the Miller Center, predictably corroborate and reinforce the narratives and claims of the memoirs. Consequently, the reader of *Confronting Saddam Hussein* cannot help but worry that to an uncomfortable degree it approximates the history that policymakers want to be written. This is not to say that this is "court history." Most emphatically in his final chapter but interspersed throughout, Leffler is decidedly critical, and he did everything he could to substantiate his narrative and arguments with the extant documentary record. But because that documentary record is so incomplete, the memoirs and interviews by necessity must receive pride of place. Classification, or better yet, overclassification, left Leffler with no choice.

Confronting Saddam Hussein's story, notwithstanding Leffler's withering criticisms, is therefore his interviewees' and memoirists' story, or too much their story. Bush was the decider. He was driven by threat perception, fear, and his responsibility to protect Americans, America, and its allies; democracy promotion, oil, the landscape and configuration of the Middle East, barely warranted a second thought in their deliberations. Bush's decision to invade Iraq was an anguished one that came only after a desperate search for alternatives. His behavior and judgments were eminently reasonable, as were those of all his advisors with the possible exception of Rumsfeld. The advisory mechanism was pathetically dysfunctional, yet it was composed of well-intentioned men and women, not evil doers let alone war criminals. Only after the bombs began to fall and the boots hit the ground did the mission go "awry" (235-36, 244). At this point ideology, which hitherto had remained either nonexistent or dormant, came into play. Hubris and exceptionalist thinking undermined the conduct and in large part explain the consequences of the war, but they did not influence the origin of it.

The history that Leffler has written may turn out to be the right history. It is unquestionably the most well-crafted and informed history that we have to date. The final verdict, however must await the release of far more sources, archival sources, and the current classification regime in the United States bodes ill for their accessibility in the foreseeable future.[18] So while I will rely on *Confronting Saddam Hussein* as my go-to text, and I congratulate Leffler for his courage as well as skill in writing it, I will retain many questions. Leffler's relentless research should provide all of us with that much more incentive to keep search for answers to them.

[18] For a devastating assessment of overclassification in the United States, see Matthew Connolly, *The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals About America's Top Secrets* (NY: Pantheon, 2023).

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Review by James H. Lebovic, The George Washington University

We might suspect that there is little left to write concerning the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. But much of the literature on the war is polemical, often written with a decidedly political slant. Former Bush-administration officials wrote books to defend their personal records;[1] critics, in turn, assailed the administration for its trigger-happiness, inexcusable ineptness, ideological zealotry, vendettas against the Iraqi leadership, and indebtedness to special interests.[2] Melvyn Leffler offers his take, then, on the state of that literature: "too many accounts that stress the lying, the manipulation, and the preconceived predilections of officials obfuscate the real lessons of the tragic intervention in Iraq" (xviii). He deftly challenges at least some of these claims in his well-researched new volume,[3] drawing from his exceptional access to key administration officials, mining of relevant documents, and ability to convey the evidence in an interesting—even compelling—story.

The book starts intriguingly with successive chapters on Saddam Hussein, the late president of Iraq, and George W. Bush, the former US president. Written for sharp contrast, the two chapters suggest a prewar showdown between fundamental opposites: Hussein—a brutal, unrepentant thug who clawed his way to the top from an upbringing marred by poverty, mistreatment, and neglect—and Bush—a child of privilege for whom all doors opened widely and often, even if he consistently squandered his opportunities. The introductory chapters are deceptive, however, for that is not the story that Leffler chooses to tell. He casts Hussein ultimately in a supporting role: he remains but a distant antagonist, or foil. The spotlight shines brightly, instead, on Bush. His story, and his moment, animate the book. It is Bush who carefully weighs the evidence, asks the right questions, and deflects ill-advised pressure to act sooner rather than later from his advisers.

Leffler puts his readers in President Bush's shoes in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, in New York, and the Pentagon, outside Washington D.C. For Bush, and his key advisers, the world had changed suddenly, dramatically, and unexpectedly: as the administration saw it, the attacks exposed a severe US domestic vulnerability to catastrophic attacks, of almost incalculable proportions, from terrorist adversaries that would do anything to accomplish their deadly, destructive goals—aided, perhaps, by states that were ruled by nefarious leaders. Saddam Hussein was a prime suspect in that regard. He had murdered his opponents to seize and maintain power; he had used poison gas against opposition

[1] See, in particular: Douglas J. Feith. *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008); Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011); and George J. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). For an insightful critique of the Feith and Tenet volumes, see Robert Jervis, "War, Intelligence, and Honesty: A Review Essay," *Political Science Quarterly* 123:4 (2008-09): 645-675.

[2] Robert K. Brigham, *Is Iraq Another Vietnam?* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006); Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Peter W. Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); Lloyd C. Gardner, *The Long Road to Baghdad: A History of U.S. Foreign Policy from the 1970s to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2008); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Middle East Policy* (XIII: 3) 2006; Jeffrey Record, *Wanting War: Why the Bush Administration Invaded Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2010); and Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (UK: Penguin, 2007).

[3] He does, however, implicitly dismiss much of the rival literature on the subject (without singling individual works out for criticism). See, for example, Frank P. Harvey. *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic and Evidence* (UK: Cambridge University, 2012) and Joseph Stieb. *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics 1990-2003* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019). I place my own book in that category. See James H. Lebovic, *Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

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groups, exterminating Kurds and Shiite Muslims by the thousands; he had supported terrorist groups and even tolerated, it seemed, the presence on Iraqi territory of operatives from al-Qaeda, the group behind the 9/11 attacks; and he had attacked neighboring countries, without provocation, for territorial and resource gains. Most importantly, according to all authoritative intelligence assessments, he retained a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability which he was required to dismantle transparently in order to comply with various United Nations resolutions. Rather than comply, he had brazenly hindered international inspections, even before 1998, when he threw the inspectors out of Iraq; and he acted furtively, as if he had something to hide. The United States could wait him out—keeping him "in a box" militarily—but that would require a costly regional presence of unknown duration, and still might have allowed Saddam to get the drop on the United States. Regardless, even had he complied with UN resolutions, he could have restarted his WMD programs once sanctions had been lifted, and would thus remain a potent US national-security threat. Could the administration stand idly by given the possibility that Saddam would pass some of his deadly weapons to a terrorist group, use them himself against his enemies, or coerce countries, including the United States, into conceding to his demands?

Leffler's answer is "no." He makes the case—justifying the administration's response—with a realist analysis. In his view, the administration acted prudently, in defense of US interests under conditions of uncertainty, in response to a potentially catastrophic threat. To its credit, the administration tried to bring the international community along, with direct appeals to the United Nations membership. It resorted to force—reluctantly—when it had no other viable option given the gravity of the threat.

But is this the whole story? More specifically, how well does Leffler's account comport with the evidence? From my perspective, Leffler's reliance on the words of key administration officials yields a reconstruction of history that puts a rational imprimatur on a final outcome that emerged fundamentally from a "non-decision" that was based on less-than-rational assessments, and underemphasizes the competition within the administration over visions and goals. Leffler's conclusions are suspect, then, for many reasons.

First, in emphasizing the Bush administration's reluctance to accept that the United States had to impose regime change militarily in Iraq, Leffler's narrative downplays the fact, and implications, of the conflict in the administration's intermediate goals: to rid Iraq of WMD and to preclude Iraq from eventually resuscitating its WMD programs. It is hard to imagine how Iraq could have met the latter goal—to satisfy the Bush administration—by simply complying with UN resolutions, for key administration officials identified Saddam Hussein himself as the problem.

That was the explicit point, in the Clinton administration, of the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, for which the Bush administration's Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith were then among the strong outside advocates. In January 1998, they, along with fifteen other conservatives, signed a letter to President Bill Clinton that advocated replacing the administration's allegedly failing Iraqi "containment" policies with a strategy for removing Saddam's regime from power.[4] Saddam as "the problem" was also the implication of the Bush administration's focus on the Iraqi president's brutal conduct and predispositions; support for terrorist groups; unwillingness, even inability, to offer definitive evidence that Iraq no longer possessed illicit weaponry; and—relevant here—Saddam's aspiration to reconstitute Iraq's weapons programs in the future.

[4] See Steven R. Weisman, "A NATION AT WAR: A NEW DOCTRINE; Pre-emption: Idea with a Lineage Whose Time Has Come," *New York Times*, 23 March 2003, https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/world/nation-war-new-doctrine-pre-emption-idea-with-lineage-whose-time-has-come.html

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In that sense, the WMD issue was always about regime change. On this point, we should remember that the administration's Iraq hawks assumed that the window to act, in order to forestall Saddam's use, or handoff, of WMD, would soon close, presumably, that is, before opposition groups, even with US support, could hope to bring down the brutally suppressive Iraqi regime. Should we not conclude, then, that these top administration officials believed that the US military had to act now to end the Iraqi regime? Taking such action was well within the letter and spirit of the Bush administration's 2002 National Security Strategy of employing preemption, which was understood to include preventative attacks ("anticipatory action to defend ourselves"), to address threats from US adversaries.[5]

Leffler writes, in fact, that Bush himself was unsure of which of his goals—getting rid of Saddam Hussein or achieving the resumption of inspections—deserved priority: "He sometimes wanted Hussein's removal in order to feel assured there was no threat of WMDs falling into the hands of terrorists; at other times, he wanted to use the threat—the demand for inspections—as a ruse to justify military invasion in order to overthrow him. These conflicting, overlapping impulses coursed through Bush's mind for the next year. He never clearly sorted them out, yet each would become more and more compelling" (105; on this, see also 118). Given Bush's own inability to prioritize his goals, it remains unproven, in Leffler's analysis, that Bush decided to go to war rather late in the game.

Second, Leffler's account understates the early conflict among key administration officials over the desirability of invading Iraq. Whether or not Bush was conflicted on the issue of US-imposed, regime change, his administration obviously was, as Leffler observes in the wake of the 9/11 attacks (57):

> During the next few days, the president defined his priority. He repeatedly rejected suggestions from Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz that Iraq become a target for initial action. "We'll get to Iraq at the appropriate time," he declared. In [Deputy National Security Advisor, Stephen] Hadley's words, this was "not about Iraq, this is Afghanistan. Debate over." When Wolfowitz tried to refocus attention on Iraq at meetings at Camp David—the presidential retreat—over the weekend of September 15 and 16, Bush shunted his advice aside.

This portrayal of events effectively buries the serious—indeed, ongoing—disagreement within Bush's advisory circle over the wisdom of pursuing regime change in Iraq. In the text, the disagreement remains devoid of context. It seems to come out of nowhere: "With no good targets in Afghanistan and with no war plans to dislodge the Taliban, defense officials thought Iraq might be a better target to demonstrate American resolve and resilience" (79). Rumsfeld, according to Feith, pitched that argument directly to Bush within days of the 9/11 attacks: "In Iraq, he noted, we could inflict the kind of costly damage that could cause terrorist-supporting regimes around the world to rethink their policies."[6] But why attack Iraq rather than any number of other countries ruled by repressive regimes? Wolfowitz, himself, offers an answer: Saddam Hussein posed a direct threat to US national security and his overthrow promised to reverberate positively throughout the

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[5] The White House, National Security Strategy: President George W. Bush, September 2002. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nss1.html. For a critical response to the strategy statement, see James B. Steinberg, Michael E. O'Hanlon, and Susan E. Rice, "The New National Security Strategy and Preemption," Brookings Institution, 21 December 2002, https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-new-national-security-strategy-and-preemption/

[6] Feith, *War and Decision*, 15.

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Arab world.[7] His response suggests that the debate was not over. Indeed, "we'll get to Iraq" sounds like a conditional endorsement of the dissenters' position.

Third, Leffler argues that administration officials sought—above all else—to allay the threat from Iraqi WMD. How was it, then, that the administration so easily accepted the creation of the Coalition Provisional Authority (under the leadership of Paul Bremer) with a far grander mission than that envisioned with the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance for Post-war Iraq (under Jay Garner). Does that not suggest that a vision of a democratic Iraq also tugged (perhaps, strongly) at the participants in prewar planning? To the contrary, however, Leffler asserts that key, neoconservative participants like Douglas Feith, were not motivated primarily by a desire to democratize Iraq. Feith denied that his support for an invasion stemmed from anything more than concern about current and future Iraqi WMD holdings. The war, in his view, was an act of US self-defense.[8]

But, if neoconservatives gave no serious thought to democratizing Iraq, what exactly made them neoconservatives? One would think that the opportunity to turn an authoritarian, anti-Western country—in a conflict-prone, democracy-impaired part of the world, no less—into a beacon of light and harbinger of all-good-things within the community of nations would be highly appealing. Feith gives extensive treatment in his memoir to the potential blessings of democracy coming to Iraq. He devotes pages to lessons of history that speak to the importance of regime type, though he insists that democracy-imposition was not an appropriate reason for the United States to go to war. He maintains, then, that neither he, nor Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, "insisted that democracy promotion necessarily took precedence over all other U.S. interests."[9]

The injection of "necessarily" and "all other" obviously weaken his denial. That matter aside, Feith's assertions strain credulity: "If we decided we had to remove Hussein from power, the *next* decision was whether the United States should try to help the Iraqis build democratic institutions—or accept the possibility that Hussein might be replaced by another military dictator."[10] His claim defies what we know about the influence of goals in both non-rational and rational decisionmaking. Take the latter. I decide to go to the store to buy milk but I also want to buy pudding. I can justify going to the store to acquire milk—though I could conceivably get by without it—but not solely to purchase pudding. Do I think to myself, if I go to the store I can buy milk or do I think, "if I go to the store I can buy milk and pudding—and maybe even some apples?"Any reservations, or uncertainty, about my need to buy milk are offset, to some degree, by my desire for pudding (and maybe, apples). The goal of acquiring milk can trump all my other considerations (purchases) only if I believe, with absolute certainty, that I need milk, period. Otherwise, what else I can buy at the store weighs into my (rational) decision. Indeed, as the probability that I will actually *find* milk at the grocery store decreases, other potential purchases might also weigh into my decision.[11]

Democratizing Iraq was but one of additional incentives that likely influenced Bush administration officials in their march to war. We can certainly add promoting Bush's "global war on terrorism" to the mix. How could the administration—and Bush, in particular—reconcile his stark vision of a black-and-white world—a battle of good and evil—with the minimalist objective of simply stripping Saddam Hussein of his WMD capabilities? After all, the war on terror was an all-consuming battle for Bush: "He was framing the struggle as

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[7] Michael Dobbs, "For Wolfowitz, A Vision May Be Realized," *Washington Post*, 7 April 2003, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/04/07/for-wolfowitz-a-vision-may-be-realized/0cfc6580-70fc-44a3-8104-f7387573395f/

[8] Feith, *War and Decision*, 236.

[9] Feith. *War and Decision*, 237.

[10] Feith, *War and Decision*, 236.

[11] I hope that my attempt at allegory, in the prior sentence, is not overly subtle.

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a civilizational battle over a way of life" (59), and his contempt for Saddam Hussein was supposedly "visceral" (82).[12] Yes, the administration was concerned about a handoff of Iraqi WMD to terrorist groups like al-Qaeda—so, in one sense, Iraqi WMD and support for terror groups were a single issue. But why would a power-driven leader, like Hussein, relinquish control voluntarily to anyone, let alone a group that despised his secular regime? Is it not likely that administration officials folded the battle with Saddam into Bush's grand battle with the forces of darkness, much like the administration did to Iraq as a purported "axis of evil?"

In this context, it is useful to reference the controversy that Wolfowitz sparked in his 2003 interview with *Vanity Fair*. In the resulting article, Wolfowitz is quoted as saying, "For bureaucratic reasons we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was the one reason everyone could agree on."[13] The Defense Department responded to the ensuing outrage by insisting that the stand-alone sentence misrepresented Wolfowitz's position. It supplied his follow-on comments for context:

> There have always been three fundamental concerns. One is weapons of mass destruction, the second is support for terrorism, the third is the criminal treatment of the Iraqi people. Actually, I guess you could say there's a fourth overriding one, which is the connection between the first two.[14]

Yet the additional content fails to counter the implication of the prior stand-alone sentence that US officials—individually and collectively—were not of one mind on the issue. That Wolfowitz deems to mention the "treatment of the Iraqi people" as a "fundamental concern" and can only "guess you could say" that the link between terrorism and Iraqi WMD is the "overriding" consideration—though not among his initial "three"—hardly refutes the argument that an administration consensus was missing on the question.

Fourth, Leffler makes Iraq's potential to reacquire WMD, not just its actual WMD holdings, the central motivation for war. He is correct that Iraq's current holdings offered the more persuasive pitch for acquiring political support. But, if he is correct that Iraq's potential holdings mattered greatly to administration officials, why the big secret? Making the case publicly would have strengthened the case for regime change. To be sure, emphasizing a potential problem might suggest that the threat was not imminent and that the administration had already made up its mind for regime change. That is, the administration was disingenuous in its claims that the United States sought Iraqi compliance with UN resolutions. Still, as Leffler recognizes, Democrats in Congress—including then-senator Joe Biden (111-112)—were not exactly begging the administration to avoid war. In October 2002, the US House of Representatives and the US Senate passed the Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution with bipartisan support—and most Democrats in the Senate (though not in the House) backed the resolution. One wonders why, then, administration officials engaged in finger-pointing, to deflect blame, when Iraq proved not to possess WMD, hoping, in particular, that the CIA would take the fall. They could have argued loudly—then, as before—that current weapon stocks were never the sole point. Did their flatfooted response not suggest that Iraq's existing WMD holdings had fueled the case for war within the administration?

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[12] As Robert Jervis observes, "Feith, Rumsfeld, and presumably Bush retained the view they held when they came into office, that states were central to the threats faced by the United States and that tyrannical states (presumably only some of them) would find alliances with terrorists attractive. The two sets of actors shared enmity toward the United States, a lack of moral scruples, and a paucity of benign instruments." Jervis, "War, Intelligence, and Honesty," 660.

[13] Paul Wolfowitz quoted in Sam Tanenhaus,"Bush's Brain Trust," *Vanity Fair*, July 2003, 114.

[14] Jamie McIntyre, "Pentagon Challenges *Vanity Fair* Report," CNN.com, 30 May 2003, http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/05/30/wolfowitz.vanity.fair/

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Fifth, Leffler indicates that the decision for war was touch-and-go until the end, but that Bush hoped that, in the interim, preparing for war would lend credibility to his coercive threats to obtain Saddam Hussein's compliance with inspection demands. Although Leffler observes that eventually the administration was forced, by its advanced state of preparedness, to make a "use-them-or-lose them" decision (200), preparations for war could well have created their own reality, considerably earlier. A cost-effective case for coercive diplomacy can become a cost-effective case for war with a force buildup and the mobilization of political support, which the administration pursued ardently. It advertised ambiguous, implicating evidence as fact,[15] doggedly pursued information concerning Saddam's al-Qaeda ties and illicit procurement of uranium from Niger, and embraced the infamous 2002 National Intelligence Estimate that Iraq had retained significant biological and chemical weapons stocks and was reconstituting the country's nuclear weapons program. It seems unlikely that the administration would have expended capital and tied its own hands by hyping the threat and creating expectations of a war that would end the threat had it not made up its mind to go to war.

Even these counterarguments overgenerously allow for the possibility that the administration pursued the diplomatic and military tracks with equanimity. The primary goal of the diplomatic track, especially among potentially sympathetic Middle Eastern states, was to obtain support for US-imposed regime change, not to apply pressure on Iraq to open its doors and books to international inspections. Indeed, administration officials showed little regard for the objectivity and performance of international institutions, including the international inspection regime. In April 2002, Rumsfeld publicly disparaged the capability of the inspectors to find hidden Iraqi weaponry.[16] Vice President Dick Cheney did, too, in August of that year: "So even if you had the return of inspectors, I'm not sure they would be able to do enough to be able to guarantee us and our friends in the region that he had, in fact, complied."[17] Wolfowitz also sought, and received, a CIA assessment of Hans Blix, the head of the UN inspection team, and (along with others in the Defense Department) purportedly feared that a negative UN finding pertaining to Iraqi WMD—or drawn out negotiations on the inspections—would deflate the chances of imposing regime change in Iraq.[18] Thus, we should view the administration's diplomacy less as a second track, and more as a complementary path in the administration's march to war. It was not designed—with the best intentions—to prevent war; rather, it was meant to grease the wheels to strengthen the case and the US hand, politically, for war. That is, "American diplomacy sought to build the foundation for war."[19]

Sixth, Leffler's interpretation glosses over the impact of both the 9/11 attacks and the administration's exuberance over an early "lesson" of the Afghanistan War that the United States could capitalize on its technological advances (the Revolution in Military Affairs) to quickly vanquish unfriendly governments. He depicts the ensuing months as a watershed of sorts though oddly without practical consequences. Of 9/11, he writes, "Shocked by the events of 9/11, fearing another attack, feeling vulnerable, seeking revenge, Rumsfeld and his hawkish colleagues were not advocating full-scale war against Iraq in the fall of 2001. Nonetheless

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[15] Paul Pillar. *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 68.

[16] Walter Pincus, "Rumsfeld Disputes Value of Iraq Arms Inspections," *Washington Post, 16* April 2002, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/04/16/rumsfeld-disputes-value-of-iraq-arms-inspections/0dd51b33-32d4-46d0-91d9-4549d38b41ce/

[17] Christopher Marquis, "Cheney Doubts Weapons Inspectors Can End Baghdad's Threat," *New York Times*, 8 August 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/08/world/cheney-doubts-weapons-inspectors-can-end-baghdad-s-threat.html

[18] Walter Pincus and Colum Lynch, "Skirmish on Iraq Inspections," *Washington Post*, 15 April 2002, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/04/15/skirmish-on-iraq-inspections/1223f8bd-2129-4a05-b5e4-f1c5ca1c6582/

[19] John Prados and Christopher Ames, "Analyses: Was There Even a Decision?" *The National Security Archive*, 1 October 2010, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB328/.

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they yearned to get rid of Hussein, demonstrate American resolve, protect US interests, and thwart the resurgence of Iraqi power when they had an opportunity to do so" (89). That sounds, to me, like they were thinking about regime change in Iraq, and looking for an opportunity to conduct it. The early success against Afghanistan, it seems, created the opportunity (94): "Bush and his advisers were buoyed by their success. They triumphed against heavy odds, beyond their expectations. A sense of their own power now mixed with their ongoing dread of another attack. Fear and power were surely an intoxicating, dangerous brew" (94). Instead of detoxifying or otherwise coming to their senses, Leffler observes to the contrary that "On November 21, in the shadows of anthrax and the cheers of liberations, Bush quietly took Rumsfeld aside after an NSC meeting, 'Where do we stand on the Iraq planning he inquired"' (94).

Seventh, Leffler depicts an administration that was roiled by conflict, dissension, and turf battles. But other than pre-9/11, divergent world views (33-50), differences in decisionmaking styles (with National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice looking in vain for consensus (36-37), and, of course, Rumsfeld's caustic manner (39), what was the basis of the conflict if not key policy issues like regime change in Iraq? Leffler does touch on some of the issues briefly—for instance, the matter of who would govern Iraq—but that was not a "small" issue. With the State Department pushing for an Iraqi transitional government (204)—and a stay in Iraq of unclear duration—the issue points to a fundamental disagreement over a central policy question among Bush administration officials.

Eighth, Leffler does not ask why administration officials never huddled with the president to make critical prewar decisions pertaining to Iraq, as they had in the past (for instance, at Camp David, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks). Leffler reports that Secretary of State Colin Powell, Rumsfeld, and Cheney did meet on various occasions in the early months to discuss Iraq policy and wrestle over preferred US goals toward that country (37). Left unclear is what exactly ended the consultative process, and why many US officials were under the impression early that the United States was going to war. Thus, when Richard Haass, the State Department's Director of Policy Planning, asked Condoleezza Rice, in July 2002, about assessing the wisdom of attacking Iraq, she responded dismissively, saying that the president "had made up his mind."[20] Others including, Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, reported an early sense among senior CIA officials "involved in assembling support for the U.S. military" that "war was inevitable."[21] The implication is that Bush, having made his decision, saw no reason for further discussion. For that matter, it is not clear why Rumsfeld, himself, was so dismissive of opinions concerning potential US challenges in occupying Iraq. A likely answer is that he, too, sought to move forward, not entertain concerns that might derail the operation.

Finally, Leffler's treatment of the Bush administration's deliberate, and deliberative, decisionmaking is hard to square with the administration's prewar inattention to the post-war occupation of Iraq. In the book's final substantive chapter ("Mission Awry"), on the occupation of Iraq, Leffler joins the administration's critics. But it is hard to give the administration credit for making the "right call"—in invading Iraq—when the operational plan was so fundamentally flawed. The woeful failure of the administration to think seriously about—let alone prepare for—what came next in Iraq by tapping area experts, examining lessons learned, establishing an appropriate bureaucratic division-of-labor, and adequately resourcing postwar preparations impugns the assumption that the administration acted rationally, per realist assumptions, when opting for military intervention. After all, a potential threat, of uncertain proportions, is insufficient justification for leaping, headfirst, into the unknown.

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[20] Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity/War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 213.

[21] George J. Tenet with Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 309.

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The administration's failings here go deeper. The administration justified the invasion of Iraq with the claim that it was necessary to rid the world of a general WMD threat, yet in executing its war plan, it showed little regard for the threat of Iraqi WMD use—at the very moment when the survival of the Iraqi regime was at risk, and when it was most inclined to use such weaponry. Then, it made the seizure and securing of suspected WMD sites effectively a low-priority mission. These shortcomings speak at best to the failure of the administration in the pursuit of the main mission; at worst, they impugn the veracity of the administration's stated justification for the war.

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Review by Megan A. Stewart, University of Michigan

In *Confronting Saddam Hussein,* one of Melvyn Leffler's primary motivations in recounting the build-up and fallout of the War in Iraq was a "growing conviction that too much of the history of the Bush administration has been entwined with partisan, personal, and ideological battles that have made it difficult to both empathize and criticize" (xvii-xviii). He often succeeds in doing both.

Building upon a mass of evidence ranging from interviews and memoirs to documents and internal memoranda from the time, Leffler captures the profound fear, uncertainty, guilt, and sense of responsibility that gripped President George W. Bush and the top leaders of his administration immediately after September 11. In an atmosphere of paranoia, intelligence reports indicated that terrorist groups sought weapons of mass destruction (WMD), primarily biological and chemical ones, which adversarial Iraq was presumed to have. Because some terrorist groups and Iraq shared a common enemy in the United States, Bush and his top officials feared that Iraq would provide terrorist groups with the chemical and biological weapons necessary to attack US civilians with these weapons. The Bush administration could not abide such a threat.

In Leffler's telling, because Bush was not yet convinced of war, he first pursued a strategy of coercive diplomacy to compel Saddam Hussein to open Iraq to inspections, to completely comply with inspectors, and possibly to succeed in Bush's goal of regime change. Those inspections did not move in the way the Bush administration had hoped. Fearful of another attack, surprised at the rapid success of the campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and confident of the superiority and greatness of US actions relative to the alternative of doing nothing, Bush and senior US officials turned to a war for which they were unprepared. When no WMDs were unearthed, the Bush administration justified its campaign as democracy promotion.[1] This combination of fear, power, and hubris led to the war in Iraq and its subsequent devastation.

Leffler's text captures the fear and uncertainty in the wake of September 11 and, in so doing, humanizes his subjects. The work is concise and considered. These strengths notwithstanding, the book raises two central questions. The first is about the extent to which the Bush administration was willing to accept anything short of regime change in Iraq and, in turn, the plausibility of coercive diplomacy as an alternative to war. The second is a more profound question regarding the lessons learned about the personal characteristic of hubris, and whether we should consider not only hubris but the more systemic origins and sources of ideologies and pathologies that exacerbate hubristic thinking.[2]

The Plausibility of Successful Coercive Diplomacy

One of Leffler's central arguments is that because Bush had not yet resolved to go to war, coercive diplomacy was perhaps the sole policy tool available that could have prevented war, but still achieved some reasonable concessions from Iraq. Bush's coercive diplomacy was a genuine effort to achieve key policy objectives but avoid conflict. However, what these desired concessions actually were is ambiguous in the text. Seemingly, this ambiguity arises because they were unclear to Bush himself, whom Leffler portrays as waffling between satisfaction with removal of WMDs by inspectors, or regime change through the removal of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein (105).

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[1] Alexander B. Downes and Jonathan Monten. "Forced to be Free?: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization," *International Security* 37:4 (2013): 90-131

[2] Robert Jervis, "The Compulsive Empire," *Foreign Policy* 137 (Jul-Aug. 2003): 83-87. Stephen Walt, "Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping US Foreign Policy," *International Security* 26:3 (2001): 56-78.

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The extent to which the reader is persuaded that Bush would have been satisfied with leaving Saddam Hussein in power if the WMDs could have been removed is central to how compelling Leffler's arguments are. Leffler notes that in April 2002, Bush agreed that "if Hussein complied with UN resolutions, there would not be an invasion" (144). If one believes that the Bush administration could have been satisfied with inspectors coming into Iraq and removing WMDs, then it is plausible that coercive diplomacy was a genuine effort to avert war. Under these conditions, there is a reasonable probability that the US might not have initiated war in Iraq because the threat of war may have been enough to allow a thorough investigation and subsequent destruction of any recovered WMDs.

Yet, if the reader perceives that the Bush administration would have only been satisfied with the removal of Saddam Hussein himself, then more evidence is needed to demonstrate that Bush believed that coercive diplomacy could have genuinely avoided war. Leffler describes that Bush "wanted to use the threat of force to remove the Iraqi dictator from power" (105). But it seems that the Bush administration had little reason to believe that anything short of actual force would be sufficient to oust him (109). For instance, as Leffler describes, intelligence officials did not think that covert options were possible. Local partners who might have mounted an insurgent campaign were unwilling to work with the US unless a military intervention was forthcoming (108-9). British Prime Minister Tony Blair's national security advisor, David Manning, explained to Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice that he did not think a coup would work (126). While the administration could achieve regime change if Saddam fled, Bush explained that "(a)ll [Saddam Hussein] cared about is staying in power" (111). Perhaps coercive democracy could have caused Saddam to flee, but the probability of coercive diplomacy's success in that regard seems extremely small if his chief goal was to stay in power. Bush and Blair did not think it would work (145).[3] Rice even makes this claim herself: the US had two options: "increasing international pressure to make him give up his WMDs or overthrowing him (regime change) by force" (109). In short, I am not convinced that administration officials believed they could have plausibly achieved regime change without accepting the need for the use of force.

Coercive diplomacy also provided several benefits in preparation for a war for regime change with few costs. Coercive diplomacy[4] created an opportunity to build an international coalition and present the case of why war with Iraq was necessary and justified (129). It provided time to develop a strategy for how to execute regime change. It offered the US an opportunity to gain more information about the extent of Iraq's WMDs. Coercive diplomacy also entailed few costs if war was the ultimate outcome. As Leffler explains, Iraq was not perceived as an immediate threat, but a looming (albeit growing) one (141). The additional time spent engaging in coercive diplomacy does not appear to have made the US overwhelmingly vulnerable to new attacks by Iraqi-backed terrorist groups wielding WMDs.

Insofar as only the removal WMDs was acceptable to the Bush administration, it seems reasonable that officials believed coercive diplomacy could yield a successful outcome and avoid war (105). Yet, much of the evidence indicates that Bush preferred regime change. For instance, Leffler chronicles that the Bush

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[3] Beyond coups, insurrections, or fleeing as mechanisms through which coercive diplomacy might produce regime change, Leffler also recounts a discussion Rice had with Manning from August 2002 in which they discussed disarmament as meaning that "Saddam would be forced to run Iraq in a completely different way" (161) that was sufficient to constitute a change in regime and satisfy US concerns. But how and why the WMD removal would accomplish this significant change in the regime is not further explored. Similarly, Leffler notes that Bush said there were "many ways to effectuate regime change, a goal he was not abandoning, but which might be accomplished if Hussein lived up to his obligations and disarmed" (162). What these options were, given the main goal of regime change, and whether administration officials believed they could work, however, is unclear and not further explained.

[4] Alexander L. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War.* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1991); Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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administration wanted the straightforward goal of regime change (101, 161) and that the policy of the government "is Saddam not be in office" (118). It does not seem plausible that Bush and his team seriously thought that anything but force had a realistic chance of precipitating regime change. Perhaps these quotations suggest that Bush was leaning towards regime change but thought that coercive diplomacy was an opportunity to see if he could live with Saddam Hussein in power with successfully completed inspections. Yet, Bush denied inspectors' request for more time when they began to make more progress in Iraq: precisely when coercive diplomacy appeared to be starting to work (198-200).

The persuasiveness of Leffler's arguments about coercive diplomacy rests on how convinced one is that Bush was willing to let Saddam Hussein stay in power after the removal of WMDs. If readers are convinced that Bush was willing to accept Saddam's continued leadership, then coercive diplomacy seems like a reasonable effort to avoid all-out war. To me, the bulk of evidence suggests that regime change was the preferred goal and that officials recognized that regime change required war. The text needs further evidence that administration officials either would have been satisfied with Saddam staying in power, or that they believed coercive diplomacy had more than a minuscule chance of working to bring about regime change, especially given that coercive diplomacy had several benefits in the lead-up to declaring war.

Beyond Hubris

Hubris is a central factor in Leffler's explanation for Bush's decision to provoke a war with Iraq. Leffler describes hubris as "an exceptional sense of goodness or greatness" (246). He argues that this "unreflective hubris" stemmed from a belief in the supremacy and absolute moral superiority of certain American values, particularly the president's long-standing commitments to freedom and democracy, which he believed were threatened by rogue states (173). Bush believed freedom was "God's gift to humanity" (246). Freedom and a democratic peace were central to Bush's foreign policy ideas, even before he was president (30). When Bush announced his global war on terror, he stated that the purpose was to rid the world of "terrorists so our children and grandchildren could grow up in freedom" (59). It was a "civilizational struggle" between freedom on the one hand and terrorist organizations and their supporters on the other (74).

Despite the central role of Bush's steadfast belief in divine freedom and democracy, and despite the fact that these commitments ultimately shaped the president's feelings of moral superiority that lay at the heart of hubris, Leffler dispels arguments that democracy promotion led Bush to decide to start a war with Iraq. Rather than "yearning to promote democracy abroad," Bush and his team "were seeking to preserve it at home" (59). Despite Bush's conception of freedom as God's gift to humanity, according to Leffler, it was not "missionary fervor" but "pedestrian" motives of "self-defense" that motivated Bush and his hawkish advisors (98). The evidence Leffler cites for these claims originates in from memoirs and interviews. He states that "there is no reason to doubt [their] veracity" because they correspond to official documents produced at the time that Leffler references but does not extensively cite (98).

By attempting to separate the hubris that led to war on the one hand from the missionary zeal of democracy promotion on the other, Leffler misses an opportunity to explore the relationship between the two. Both the policy of democracy promotion and the personal attributes of hubris that led to the decision to invade Iraq arose from an underlying ideology of moral superiority that almost any foreign policy decision with respect to Iraq would be better than the alternative of doing nothing. If officials believed that the US was so morally superior to Iraq, how could almost any action the administration chose to take be worse than the status quo? Though the decision to invade Iraq might have been motivated by security concerns that fell short of idealistic democracy promotion, the belief in the unwavering moral superiority, irrespective of the consequences of its actions, that was common to both motivations led to similar ends: the US attempted to create democracy in Iraq and rationalized US foreign policy choices as morally good and better than the alternative of doing nothing (even despite the substantial costs). Leffler even describes the Bush

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administration as thinking that "[i]f the United States had to act out of self-interest and use its awesome power to overthrow an evil dictator, American officials could take comfort in knowing that they would offer something superior to the benighted Iraqis whose lives Americans would be enriching" (246).

Rather than draw a bright line dividing the goals of democracy promotion from the hubris that characterized the Bush administration's decisionmaking, Leffler's conclusions might have been even more profound had he explored how broader ideologies of absolute moral superiority given that the United States is a democratic country influenced both. I am not the first person to make this critique, and scholars like Joseph Stieb note that Leffler "never connects the administration's hubris with the role of specific ideologies in fueling the decision to invade."[5] However, while this explanation might have been developed more in Leffler's answer for why Bush invaded Iraq, its absence is perhaps most prominent in the lessons to learn from the story.

Leffler writes that it "is important to get the story" of Iraq "right in order to grapple earnestly with the dilemmas of statecraft," many of which were "inhered in the aftermath of 9/11" (252). The seemingly most actionable lesson of Leffler's account is the dangers of hubris. Avoiding hubris, however, requires that leaders be able to differentiate it from confidence or leadership at the moment of decisionmaking. Certainly, with the benefit of hindsight and an accounting of the trauma, failure, and devastation wrought by one's decision, it might be easy to say that a decision was made with hubris, and we should avoid making decisions based on hubris in the future. But is hubris knowable when decisions are made, without the outcome yet unknown?

One potential suggestion is that further work could explore the development, maintenance, and promotion of ideologies and pathologies that undergird hubristic thinking and how this type of thinking operates among some leaders.[6] Stated otherwise, rather than focus on the development of the personal attribute of hubris, further work could identify the systems that create and nurture ideologies or frameworks that encourage hubris. Unlike hubris, these ideologies are knowable and often publicly expressed. Why is it that Bush, Blair, and senior US administration officials came to view their fight as a civilizational one (83)? Indeed, an ideology of the moral superiority of the US relative to other countries globally seems to have been shared by many leaders at the time, and some researchers suggest that these beliefs would have pushed Bush's Democratic challenger, Al Gore, to go to war in Iraq.[7] What processes enable leaders to be so confident in the moral superiority of themselves and their goals that they believe that their best course of action is "[t]ake the fight to the enemy overseas where we can operate with impunity" (77)? Leffler's work compellingly raises these questions and asks us to draw lessons from them. Perhaps these lessons could be even more profound, however, had Leffler considered the underlying ideologies that contributed to the hubris of leaders.

Conclusion

Confronting Saddam Hussein is a thought-provoking book on the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. Leffler draws upon an impressive array of sources to carefully contextualize just how fraught the post-9/11 decisionmaking environment was. He demonstrates that fear, combined with power and hubris, compelled

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[5] Joseph Stieb, "Confronting the Iraq War: Melvyn Leffler, George Bush, and the Problem of Trusting Your Sources," *War on the Rocks*. 30 January 2023. https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/confronting-the-iraq-war-melvyn-leffler-george-bush-and-the-problem-of-trusting-your-sources/

[6] See, for example, Christopher J. Fettweis. *The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris in US Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[7] Frank P. Harvey, "President Al Gore and the 2003 Iraq War: A Counterfactual Test of Conventional 'W' isdom," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 45 :1 (2012): 1-32.

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the Bush administration to initiate its devastating war with Iraq. Like any important work, it raises several questions and inspires readers to consider new ones.

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Response by Melvyn P. Leffler, The University of Virginia, Emeritus

I want to thank my reviewers for spending the time to engage my arguments and conclusions, and for raising some important issues. I am pleased that they think the book is a provocative, worthwhile contribution to understanding one of the most consequential international events since the end of the Cold War. Rather than discuss the critiques seriatim, I will focus on the big issues that my reviewers raise.

First, let me stress that *Confronting Saddam Hussein* is *not* a justification of the administration's response to 9/11, as James Lebovic says it is. I state clearly in the introduction that I both empathize and criticize; I seek to understand, explain, and extrapolate lessons. Although the book was not written to assign guilt or to acquit, I offer sharp criticism. I am clear that the invasion of Iraq turned into a tragedy, and I try to explain why. If readers have any doubts about my position, I simply invite them to read pages xvii—xviii of the introduction and pages 249-52 of the conclusion.

I am perfectly aware, as Richard Immerman stresses, that this account is not a definitive history of the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. I agree with him that most of the archival documents have yet to be declassified. Mine is one of the first stabs by an historian at a very difficult, challenging topic. In the preface I note that I was wary of tackling this subject precisely because of the paucity of declassified documents. I only decided to proceed when I realized that I would have an opportunity to interview many key policymakers. But I realized from the onset that they might spin more effectively than I could probe. Consequently, I labored diligently to use as many declassified US materials as I could access as well as British documents, captured Iraqi archives, and UN records. I am grateful to Immerman for highlighting these varied sources. When I say in one instance (98) that there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the statements made in the interviews, it is because the claims being discussed were confirmed in the written documents that I explicitly cite.

Nonetheless, critics find it tempting to say that I rely too heavily on my own interviews as well as those conducted by the Miller Center Oral History project. Immerman concludes his very generous review by noting, regretfully, that my account "approximates the history that policymakers want to be written." I disagree. I do think that the president and his advisers will appreciate my portrait of them as earnest, hardworking policymakers who were faced with unprecedented challenges, inadequate, ambiguous, and conflicting information, and agonizing choices. But they will not like the portrayal of them as having been motived by too much fear, too much hubris, too much power, and not enough prudence. Nor will they like my illumination of the administrative dysfunction that beleaguered their efforts and contributed to tragedy.

Readers are jolted by my portrait of President Bush. Let me emphasize that I do not claim that Bush was "smart, witty, incisive, eager to learn, and disciplined," as Casler and Immerman suggest. In discussing the president's positive qualities on page 29 and again on pages 243-44, which they accurately quote, I am very careful to state that these are the traits that were highlighted by the people who worked with Bush. Frankly, I was surprised by the favorable way he was portrayed, even by some civilian and military advisers who were critical of his actions and policies. Nonetheless, I thought it was important for readers to grasp the president as he was seen by the men and women who worked with him. We need to ponder whether they knew the man better than we do. Bush certainly was not the clueless, listless leader that many of us thought he was.

In *Confronting Saddam Hussein* I try hard to describe a president with good and bad qualities. Don Casler thinks that I am too even-handed. He stresses that Bush was a terrible manager. I agree. In fact, "administrative dysfunction" is a major theme of the book, as a check of the index will reveal. Throughout, I stress Bush's hubris, naivete, sense of victimhood, misjudgments, and mismanagement (for example, 74, 76-77, 174). Bush,

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I conclude, "was unable to grasp the magnitude of the enterprise he was embracing, the risks that inhered in it, and the costs that would be incurred" (249). He

> delegated too much authority and did not monitor implementation of the policies he approved. He did not order people to do things or criticize them for their failures. He did not insist on rigorous process. He let issues linger in bureaucratic wastelands, where their real-life outcomes had huge ramifications. He was indifferent to the nasty bickering among his subordinates, acrimony that went well beyond personality conflicts and adversely affected his policies. More important, Bush disliked heated arguments, and, therefore, did not invite systematic scrutiny of the policies he was inclined to pursue. He did not ask his advisers if invading Iraq was a good idea (244).

Based on the evidence, I argue that Bush was the key decider on all the critical issues related to Iraq—not Vice President Dick Cheney and not neoconservatives like Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith. Yet, I do not disregard these advisers. Lebovic suggests that I ignore or underestimate the feuding and acrimony among them and their counterparts in other departments. This is not the case (see "personality conflicts" in the index). Throughout, I emphasize this dissension within the government. Bush's advisers, I note, "started feuding with one another and disrespecting the process" at the very onset of the administration (33-34). Nor do I disregard the fact that some of the hawkish advisers like Wolfowitz and Scooter Libby, Cheney's chief of staff, were constantly pushing for tougher, bolder action. I do not miss the forest for the trees, as Casler says I do, when I maintain that these hawkish advisers did not prevail until Bush himself resolved to go to war. He did so in early 2003 when he concluded that his own strategy of coercive diplomacy had failed. His advisers advised; he decided.

All my reviewers focus on my discussion of "coercive diplomacy," and I appreciate the importance they assign to this topic. Bush wanted to use the threat of force to compel Hussein to flee or to disclose and destroy his alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The threat was the deployment of US forces, which began in the late summer and fall of 2002. The diplomacy had two components: securing additional UN resolutions and convincing Saddam Hussein to comport with them or relinquish power. Almost all officials in the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as many leaders abroad, including Hans Blix, the Swedish head of the UN inspection team, agreed that Saddam would not comply with past UN resolutions or accept new ones unless threated with force. As my reviewers accurately note, I stress that Bush's coercive diplomacy was poorly executed, beset as it was with intersecting yet competing goals—WMD disclosure and/or regime change—and inadequate incentives. Megan Stewart, therefore, smartly inquires whether Bush would have accepted anything less than regime change, and Lebovic maintains that coercive diplomacy was simply a ruse to hide a preconceived determination to invade Iraq. This disregards the evidence I present from British sources that suggest that Bush, however grudgingly and reluctantly, might have settled for less than regime change. In August 2002, for example, he accepted Prime Minister Tony Blair's advice (and Secretary of State Colin Powell's) to go back to the United Nations and seek a new resolution. "We were giving Saddam one final choice," said Prime Minister Tony Blair. If Hussein welcomed the inspectors and complied, "action would have been avoided. I made this clear to President Bush and he agreed" (145-47, 163, 164). Neither Blair nor Bush, I stress in the book, expected Saddam Hussein to welcome back the inspectors and disclose and destroy his alleged WMD, but the choice would be his.

This raises the important question of agency. Immerman goes much too far when he writes that I argue that "responsibility for the war falls squarely on Saddam Hussein." I do think that understanding the Iraqi president's character, behavior, and actions are critical to understanding the invasion of Iraq, and that is why I open the book with a chapter on the Iraqi leader. If Saddam Hussein had acted differently after 9/11, if his regime had not gloated over the attack, if he had invited back the UN inspectors when fears of a biological or chemical attack were growing in the autumn of 2001, if he had abided by UN resolutions, if he had not kept

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violating the sanctions regime, if he had not championed suicide missions, if he had cooperated fully with Blix's inspection team, the temptation to invade would have been mitigated. I am perplexed, therefore, to read that Lebovic thinks that the book's focus on Iraq after 9/11 is "devoid of context" and "comes out of nowhere." The entire first chapter dwells on Saddam Hussein's career and provides context. Much of chapter three (79-98) illuminates why attention gravitated to Iraq after 9/11. Nonetheless, responsibility for the invasion falls squarely on the shoulders of Bush.

I carefully describe the reasoning that led to the invasion. I do so empathetically, but readers should not think I am uncritical. I highlight the difficulties of applying coercive diplomacy, the growing concern with America's credibility, and the exasperation with Saddam's defiance. But I also emphasize that Bush and his advisers failed to assess the costs and consequences prior to the invasion; indeed, their big mistake was failing to assess the costs and consequences prior to launching their strategy of coercive diplomacy. In other words, they had plentiful reasons to invade, but prudence should have dictated otherwise. At the end of the book (251-52), I write that Bush and his advisers, like most Americans, conflated "the evil that Hussein personified with a magnitude of threat that he did not embody" (251-52).

I do not see Bush as a rational realist, as Lebovic suggests I do. My three key themes dwell on fear, power, and hubris. Fear is an emotion that may be rational, or not; hubris is a sense of superiority that may or may not be justified; power is a capability that might or might not be properly assessed and employed. In *Confronting Saddam Hussein* I am not creating a theoretical model or a justification. I am painstakingly seeking to describe the emotions and calculations that shaped the tragic outcome.

In so doing, I stress the *distinction* between goals and motives, a point my reviewers sometimes overlook. Bush and his advisers were *motivated* by a sense of threat, a short-term fear that Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction might find their way into the hands of terrorists, any terrorists—not just al-Qaeda terrorists; a "gathering" threat that Saddam's escape from sanctions would enable him to reinvigorate his WMD programs, "blackmail" the United States, and check the exercise of American power in the region in the future. Policymakers did not just want "to keep the American people safe." Casler inadvertently simplifies my argument when he sums it up this way. I write, "they were seeking to safeguard the country from another attack, save American lives, avoid the opprobrium that would come from another assault, and preserve the country's ability to exercise its power in the future in behalf of its interests" (98).

I also highlight the contrasting *goals* that divided top policymakers, a point that some reviewers also obfuscate. If he invaded, Bush did want a more democratic Iraq to emerge, but that was *not* what motivated him. After all, he had *not* declared a global war for freedom; he had declared a global war against terror, and Iraq became part of that war. But having made the decision to invade Iraq in early 2003, Bush did want to promote freedom—God's gift to humankind, as he liked to say. Rumsfeld, however, cared not a whit about promoting freedom. The secretary of defense, moreover, controlled much of the planning process, and Rumsfeld, along with General Tommy Franks, the head of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), allocated little time and even fewer resources to laying the groundwork for the promotion of freedom; hence the terrible disarray in the months following the invasion. Bush assumed that the Iraqis would embrace freedom; that its appeal would trump order, security, safety, sovereignty, and national identity. That was hubris.

I am pleased that in her review Stewart asks for a discussion of lessons. Here are a few: modulate fears — think deeply about what really constitutes an "existential" threat; grasp the limits of power—you can win a war against a weak adversary, but you cannot easily remake the political institutions, economic infrastructure, and cultural traditions of another country; curb hubris; re-examine core assumption (like the one that assumed Iraq had WMD); analyze the costs and consequences before embracing strategies and initiating policies; clarify goals and define priorities (regime change or WMD); recognize that credibility entraps; insist on better staff work; and link means and ends.

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The tragedy in Iraq was avoidable, but applying the lessons that might be learned will not be easy because the challenges that inhere in them are formidable. How many of us, for example, are ready to re-examine our own core assumptions, or are willing to curb our own hubris? I find those tasks difficult, and I hope this book, if nothing else, invites others to self-reflect on long-held ideas.

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