

2019

H-Diplo

 [@HDiplo](https://twitter.com/HDiplo)

Article Review
No. 908
6 December 2019

Article Review Editors: Seth Offenbach and Diane Labrosse
Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Carl Forsberg. "Iraq, the United States, and the Long Shadow of the Cold War." *Cold War History* (April 2019): 1-20. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2019.1594784.

URL: <https://hdiplo.org/to/AR908>

Review by **Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut**, California State University, Stanislaus

Carl Forsberg's article "Iraq, the United States, and the long shadow of the Cold War" attempts to shed new light on the history of U.S.-Iraqi relations during the critical period between the emergence of the President Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in July 1968, and the start of the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91. Forsberg argues that during this period, each state consistently misperceived and misunderstood the motives and designs of the other—and that these misperceptions were a result of each state viewing the other through an inevitably distorting 'Cold War lens' (though he does not refer to it as such).¹ The article employs the most recently declassified U.S. documents in addition to Arabic language sources, specifically, Iraqi documents and voice recordings that the U.S. captured during its 2003 invasion and that are currently held by the U.S. Department of Defense.²

In this relatively short article, Forsberg seeks to recount and analyze the decision-making process in two states over the course of nearly two decades. The article's general claim is that "from 1975 to 1990, Iraq and the US were locked into a relationship of mutual misunderstanding, enabled by the conditions of the global Cold War" (2). While misperceptions abound in international relations, what, specifically, did each side misperceive about the other? Forsberg argues that throughout the period under study, Saddam "saw the US as intrinsically hostile to his regime" (2). Indeed, Forsberg describes Saddam in this period as driven by a paranoid obsession with a perceived American-Israeli-Iranian conspiracy arrayed against him (2, 4, 7, 9, and

¹ Matthew Connelly coined the phrase "Cold War lens" in his seminal article "Taking off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence," *American Historical Review* 105: 3 (2000): 739-769.

² The article was first presented at the 2017 UCSB/GWU/LSE International Graduate Student Conference on the Cold War. See https://ccws.history.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.hist.d7_ccws/files/sitefiles/conferences/Grad%20Student%20Conference%202017-finalized%20program.pdf.

19). American policymakers, for their part, misperceived Saddam Hussein's regime as a "moderate" and "pragmatic" pillar of regional stability (9).

On the question as to whether Saddam saw the U.S. as intrinsically hostile to his regime, Forsberg notes that Saddam's view of the U.S. as being engaged in a conspiracy with Israel and Iran against his regime took shape in the 1972-75 period in which the U.S. conspired with Israel and Iran to finance a Kurdish separatist movement in northern Iraq. So far, this perception was on the mark. However, Forsberg argues that the Iraqi president continued to see the U.S. as inimical to his regime after the March 1975 Algiers Agreement that brought an end to the U.S.-Israeli-Iranian conspiracy against Iraq. Forsberg's most powerful, and most direct piece of evidence in support of this claim is a 1985 voice recording in which the Iraqi leader described the Americans as "conspiring bastards" with regard to an Israeli airstrike on Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) targets in Tunisia (7). However, a page later, Forsberg notes that the U.S. backed Iraq in its war against Iran (1980-88), and that Saddam observed the following in that context: "We deal with the Americans even though they conspired against us yesterday ... There is a difference between dealing with him and suspecting his intentions" (8).³ The second quotation seems to cancel the first. And indeed, seeing someone as a "conspiring bastard" in no way precludes conspiring with them. One can only conspire with fellow conspirators.

The other piece of direct evidence that Forsberg cites in support of his claim that Saddam saw the U.S. as intrinsically hostile toward his regime is an April 1990 voice recording of a conversation with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to the effect that Iraq was prepared to "fight America" and "kick it out of the whole region" (9). The status of Palestine is, however, a key symbol in Arab nationalist politics, and Forsberg concedes that Saddam's "bellicose rhetoric" might have amounted to little more than ideological posturing (9). Forsberg notes that the Saddam did, shortly thereafter, invade Kuwait and threaten Saudi Arabia, which lends credence to his apparent willingness to challenge U.S.-allied regimes in the region. However, Forsberg does not produce evidence of Saddam's perception of the likely U.S. response to his potential invasion of Iraq. He rather details Saddam's perception of the likely Soviet response to such an invasion.

The question of how Saddam thought the U.S. would respond to his invasion of Kuwait is significant, as many scholars have suggested that the U.S. may have given a 'green light' to the Iraqi invasion.⁴ The so-called

³ The ellipses appear in the original. Saddam's reference to "him," is presumably a reference to the U.S., or perhaps to the Ronald Reagan in particular. The ambiguity points to the dangers of using casual/ informal conversations recorded in another language as documentary evidence that speaks to a state's motivation. As Frank Costigliola shows us, there can be a world of difference between what a document says and what it means. This difference is all the greater when translating across languages, cultures, and political systems. The evidence here does not speak for itself, and needs to be made to speak by the author's interpretation of its meaning. See Frank Costigliola, "Reading for Meaning: Theory, Language, and Metaphor," in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas S. Patterson eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 279-303.

⁴ Forsberg cites the following sources as arguing that "US indulgence encouraged Iraq's invasion of Kuwait": Bruce Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994); Gary Sick, "The United States in the Persian Gulf: From Twin Pillars to Dual Containment," in David Lesch, ed., *The Middle East and the United States: A Historical and Political Reassessment*, ed. David Lesch (Boulder: Westview Press, 2007); and Said Aburish, *Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000). He cites Amatzia Baram as arguing

'green light' thesis is based mainly on a leaked transcript of a conversation between Saddam and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie in July 1990. Forsberg claims that the 'green light' thesis is undermined by "Saddam's belief in the US' unfailing hostility to his regime" (16). However, Forsberg's claim remains on rather shaky evidentiary grounds, and the article does not actually cite or analyze the Glaspie transcript, and does not address what transpired in that critical meeting between Saddam and Glaspie.

The documentary evidence that Forsberg presents in support of his claim that Saddam saw the U.S. as intrinsically hostile toward his regime is at best tenuous. Forsberg does, however, present a great deal of evidence suggesting that Saddam had reason to believe that the U.S. saw his regime as a pillar of regional stability—especially after the collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran in 1979. Forsberg notes that the U.S. and (U.S. businesses in particular) sought to "entice" Iraq into alignment with the U.S. as oil wealth poured into the county in the mid-1970s (6). He notes that in the late 1970s, "National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski speculated that Iraq might replace Iran as a 'Twin Pillar' in upholding the security of the Persian Gulf" (11), and discusses the fact that the U.S. provided material assistance to Iraq during its long war with Iran (though he does not take up the question of whether or not the United States gave a 'green light' to Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran).⁵ And he writes that as late as October 1989, the George H.W. Bush administration issued a National Security Directive (NSD) calling for improved relations with Iraq. Forsberg does not tell us how Saddam viewed any of these U.S. policy initiatives. He suggests that Saddam failed to perceive them, but it strains credulity to think that the Iraqi leader could, for instance, receive satellite imagery of Iranian and Kurdish troop concentrations from the U.S., without having been cognizant of the fact that U.S. opposition to his regime amounted to something less than "intrinsic" or "unfailing."⁶

Despite Forsberg's Arabic language skills and access to captured Iraqi documents, the article does not present compelling evidence that Saddam believed the U.S. was intrinsically hostile to his regime. But what about the other side of the register? On this matter he presents compelling evidence that the U.S. perceived Saddam's regime as "moderate" and "pragmatic" (9). But in this case, "moderate" may be an empty signifier, and Forsberg does not define what he means by "moderate." Nor does he define what he means by "pragmatic," but he does suggest that pragmatism is a willingness to subordinate ideological objectives to the dictates of balance of power politics. The longer history of the Ba'ath—including its covert liaisons with the CIA—

"against the thesis that the US gave Iraq a green light to invade Kuwait in "U.S. Input into Iraqi Decision Making, 1988-1990," in Lesch, ed., *The Middle East and the United States*.

⁵ On the 1980 "green light" controversy, see James C. Blight, Janet M. Lang, Hussein Banai, Malcolm Byrne, and John Tirman, *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 58-69. For analysis of the green light question in that book, see my review, "Making Friends and Enemies in the Middle East," *Reviews in American History* 46:3 (September 2018): 523-529.

⁶ On U.S. support for Iraq, see Blight et al., *Becoming Enemies* (on the provision of satellite imagery to chemically-armed Iraqi forces, see pp. 180-181). On U.S. efforts to shield Iraq from international criticism for its use of chemical weapons see, Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

reveals ample evidence of this kind of pragmatism.⁷ And indeed, Forsberg's analysis of Saddam's alternations and neutralism in the Cold War speaks to this pragmatism.

Forsberg's claim that Saddam was not pragmatic, but rather ideological, therefore hinges largely on Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Forsberg shows convincingly that he miscalculated the likely Soviet response to that action. But Saddam's perception of the USSR is not the issue; his perception of the USSR is logically irrelevant to Forsberg's thesis about Saddam's misperceptions of the U.S. The issue raised by Forsberg's thesis is how Saddam thought the U.S. would respond to his threats against Kuwait? To answer this question, Forsberg needs to analyze in detail the critical period between the October 1989 NSD and the July 1990 Glaspie-Saddam meeting. It might be that Saddam did not know how the U.S. would respond because the U.S. itself did not know.⁸ Perhaps the Americans were lost in a void of meaning as the Cold War, which had served as a fundamental ordering principle for more than four decades, collapsed.⁹ It is not clear what the Americans were thinking in that moment, and Forsberg's article does not provide any insight.

The logical breakdown in Forsberg's article might be the result of a broader category error. At root, Forsberg's argument is about *misperceptions*. Reality exists, but neither the U.S. nor Iraq could accurately perceive it because of Cold War ideological blinders. But what would we see if we removed that Cold War lens? What was the reality to which each set of actors was blind? According to Forsberg, American policymakers failed to perceive the evil that resided in Saddam's heart, while Saddam was just as blind to the virtue that animated the American spirit. Despite his invasion of Iran, the Americans were unable to see that Saddam would commit international aggression in pursuit of regional objectives if and when he thought he could gain advantage by doing so. And despite America's defense of the 'Free World' in the Cold War, Saddam underestimated the American willingness to use force to deter the use of force.

What emerges from this analysis is an image of the U.S. as exceptionally and intrinsically benevolent, and an image of Iraq as exceptionally and intrinsically malevolent. Each image is sustained by statements of intent recorded in the archives. But what if we start from the premise that one's true intentions and underlying designs are opaque—not just to one's adversaries—but to oneself? What if the Americans did not really know why they were doing what they were doing with regard to Iraq and the larger region? What would we learn if we discounted statements of intent in favor of a more sustained analysis of patterns of observed behavior? I suspect that we would be reminded of the truism that states do not have friends, they have interests (or at least perceived interests). Saddam embraced the U.S. when he saw a tactical advantage in doing so, and the U.S. repaid the favor in kind. The mystery of 1990 remains just that.

⁷ I have developed this argument in the following articles: Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, "Embracing Regime Change: US Foreign Policy and the 1963 Coup d'état in Iraq," *Diplomatic History* 39:1 (January 2015): 98-125, and "Oil Sovereignty, American Foreign Policy, and the 1968 Coups in Iraq," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 28:2 (June 2017): 235-253.

⁸ Something along these lines is suggested in Douglass Little, *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 64-69.

⁹ For this interpretation see Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 126-29.

H-Diplo *Article Review*

Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut teaches U.S. and Middle East History at California State University Stanislaus. His book manuscript *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and the Limits of Power in Iraq, 1958-1975* is currently under review. He has published essays on U.S.-Iraqi relations in *Diplomatic History*, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, and elsewhere.

© 2019 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](#)