



WHY DID THE UNITED STATES INVADE IRAQ? THE DEBATE AT 20 YEARS

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Twenty years after the Iraq War began, scholarship on its causes can be usefully divided into the security school and the hegemony school. Security school scholars argue that the main reason the Bush administration decided to invade Iraq was to safeguard the United States against the conjoined threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorist groups. Hegemony school scholars argue instead that the purpose of the Iraq War was to preserve and extend U.S. hegemony, including the spread of liberal democratic ideals. Debates between these camps inform broader disputes about the lessons of the Iraq War for the future of U.S. foreign policy and the analysis of other key questions about the war's origins. Nonetheless, this binary may not be productive for Iraq War scholarship, and more attention to global and cultural factors would be a useful way to advance this field.

Twenty years after the United States invaded Iraq, there is no shortage of explanations for why this war took place. Political scientists and journalists dominated the early waves of scholarship on the subject, but in the last few years historians have increasingly intervened. This includes major new works published this year from Melvyn Leffler and Samuel Helfont.¹ The invasion of Iraq remains the single most important foreign policy decision by a U.S. president in the 21st century, so the surfeit of analysis should surprise no one.

This article maps out the debate on the Iraq War's origins as they have developed over the last 20 years. It aims to play honest broker between competing schools of thought, clearly laying out their interpretations, assessing points of tension, and factoring in the influences of politics and ideology on scholarship. Below, I will show how divergent interpretations of the war have emerged from the different lenses, methodologies, and objectives that scholars have brought to the table.

No single article can tackle every aspect of Iraq

War scholarship. Thus, this essay focuses on three questions that are essential for explaining the war's origins but that continue to divide scholars. First, was the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq driven more by the desire for security or the pursuit of primacy? Second, was the Bush administration's decision to pursue "coercive diplomacy" in the fall and winter of 2002–2003 a genuine attempt to avoid war or a means to legitimize a decision for war made earlier in 2002? Third, how much did neoconservatives matter in the making of the Iraq War?

The first question — security vs. hegemony — constitutes the primary point of scholarly disagreement about the Iraq War. Security-focused explanations like those found in Leffler's new book argue that the Bush administration's primary motive was protecting the nation from future terrorist attacks in the transformed, post-9/11 environment in which threats like Iraq had to be re-evaluated.² Scholars in the hegemony school like Ahsan Butt argue, in contrast, that the Bush administration used 9/11 and the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction

1 Melvyn Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); and Samuel Helfont, *Iraq Against the World: Saddam, America, and the Post-Cold War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). See also Marjorie Gallelli, "It's Been Twenty Years — Time for Historians to Turn to Iraq," *Passport* 54, no. 1 (April 2023): 63, <https://shafr.org/system/files/passport-04-2023-last-word.pdf>.

2 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein*; Frederic Bozo, *A History of the Iraq Crisis: France, the United States, and Iraq, 1991-2003* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016); Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro, "Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War," *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1–31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43282094>; Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005); Peter Hahn, *Missions Accomplished?: The United States and Iraq Since World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Hakan Tunc, "What Was It All About After All? The Causes of the Iraq War," *Contemporary Security Policy* 26, no. 5 (2005): 335–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12523260500190492>; Steve Yetiv, "The Iraq War of 2003: Why Did the United States Decide to Invade," in *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies*, 6th ed., ed. David Lesch and Mark Haas (New York: Routledge, 2018), 253–74; and Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies since 9/11* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).



as a pretext to justify a war that was motivated primarily by the desire for regional and/or global hegemony.³ Other important questions flow from this security-hegemony divide, including the nature of Bush's coercive diplomacy strategy and the role of neoconservatives in causing the war.

Useful historiographical analysis begins with explaining why the scholarly landscape looks the way it does and then proposes directions for growth. The unavoidable challenge of interpreting history is all the more difficult in this case, because scholars have access to only a fraction of the primary documentation. As a result, much of the debate has boiled down to how to approach, critique, and contextualize the same small body of sources. In addition, political and policy debates have often had an outsized, if not always ideal, impact on the scholarship.⁴

In methodological terms, the security school has largely trusted that what policymakers say their motives were, both at the time and in hindsight, is what they actually were, unless clear contradictory evidence can be found. For this group, the critical context for understanding the war is the pressurized post-9/11 environment in which protecting the nation was everything and in which most parties saw Iraq as a significant threat.

The hegemony school retorts that key questions about the war do not make sense when viewed through a security prism. This group points out that scholars should not trust the testimonies of policymakers who have a strong incentive to deny the more ideological or delusional aspects of their actions. Instead, these scholars cast the Iraq War decision in wider historical contexts, identifying factors like the longstanding primacist policy views of figures like Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz that they believe have more explanatory relevance than security factors.

As might be expected with such a recent and contentious event, the Iraq War has not merely been a

subject of scholarly analysis but an arena for rival political and policy views, especially when it comes to what lessons we can take away. Debates on the war's origins have real-world stakes in terms of what the United States should learn from the war as it moves into an era of great-power competition. Security school scholars often view the Iraq War as an understandable mistake given the harrowing post-9/11 context and the fact that almost everyone believed Iraq was producing weapons of mass destruction at some level.⁵ They therefore rarely call for major revisions to post-Iraq U.S. foreign policy. The hegemony school, in stark contrast, argues that this war emerged from the ruinous bipartisan pursuit of global primacy and that similar disasters will occur if that grand strategy is not abandoned.

A few caveats: This essay does not defend the existence of the security-hegemony divide nor take sides in this debate. Instead, it seeks to explain its parameters, evolution, and stakes. Some may object to this depiction of two broad interpretive camps as oversimplifying a vast body of nuanced scholarship. To address this problem, this article tries to identify possible means of synthesizing these interpretations. The security and hegemony camps do overlap in some ways, as discussed below, but this divide also reflects that scholars themselves have identified genuine differences about what set of factors drove the causal boat. Finally, this essay concludes with a plea for more global and cultural analysis of the Iraq War as a way to challenge this binary.

Nevertheless, there is value in "lumping" in historiographical analysis, which is particularly useful for newcomers to the field or non-specialists who want a bird's-eye view of the existing scholarship. This broad approach also helps to identify the essential questions that continue to divide and drive the field, questions that future work on the Iraq War should tackle.

Consequently, this essay does not exhaust the totality of scholarship of the Iraq War, nor does it offer its own historical or theoretical explanation

3 Ahsan Butt, "Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?" *Security Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 250–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080.09636412.2019.1551567>; Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016); Jeffrey Record, *Wanting War: Why the Bush Administration Invaded Iraq* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011); Frank Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic, and Evidence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007); Paul Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Patrick Porter, "Iraq: A Liberal War After All," *International Politics* 55, no. 2 (March 2018): 334–48, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-017-0115-z>; Lloyd Gardner, *The Long Road to Baghdad: A History of U.S. Foreign Policy from the 1970s to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2008); Gary Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006); Stephen Wertheim, "Iraq and the Pathologies of Primacy," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/iraq-and-pathologies-primacy>; Michael Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/2008): 7–43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30130517>; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Realism, Liberalism, and the Iraq War," *Survival* 59, no. 4 (2017): 7–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1349757>; Jane Cramer and Edward Duggan, "In Pursuit of Primacy: Why the United States Invaded Iraq," in *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* ed. Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall (New York: Routledge, 2011), 201–45.

4 Major primary source collections that scholars have drawn on to analyze U.S. decision-making on Iraq include the Digital National Security Archive, the Donald Rumsfeld Papers, U.S. Intelligence in the Middle East 1945–2009, and the British Iraq Inquiry, also known as the Chilcott Report.

5 Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

of the war's causes. Both tasks would occupy far too much space. Thus, certain topics on which there is outstanding work receive less attention, including the beliefs and decisions of the Baathist regime, the history of weapons inspectors prior to 2002–2003, problems with pre-war planning, and the international diplomacy that preceded the war's onset. These questions are important for fully understanding the war's origins, but they have not formed the primary lines of scholarly disagreement, which are the focal points of this essay.⁶

Security vs. Hegemony: The Core Divide

Did the United States invade Iraq in a misguided effort to remove a security threat in the unprecedentedly heated post-9/11 atmosphere? Or did U.S. leaders use 9/11 as a pretext to pursue an opportunistic war that was really about American hegemony?

The obvious answer might be “a little of both,” or that this is a false dichotomy. The United States, for example, could have pursued security through a hegemonic grand strategy that might have involved regime change in nations like Iraq. Iraq could have been seen as both a real security threat *and* an obstacle to U.S. primacy.⁷

Nonetheless, this core divide among scholars is real, reflecting meaningful differences in interpretation, contextualization, and even politics. The scholars themselves frequently identify security- or hegemony-based factors as the most salient. Security-focused explanations maintain that, in the post-9/11 atmosphere, hegemonic aspirations were secondary to security imperatives. Hegemony-focused explanations rarely dismiss security altogether, but they contend that concerns about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties served as pretexts for deep-seated hegemonic designs. Each school casts the war in different

contexts, with the security school emphasizing the post-9/11 moment and the hegemony school stressing the preceding decades in which the architects of the war developed their policy worldviews.

The Security School

Leffler is the dean of the security school, which also includes Robert Jervis, Frederic Bozo, Alexander Debs, Ivo Daalder, James Lindsay, Peter Hahn, Hakan Tunc, and Steve Yetiv. While these scholars do not ignore larger U.S. goals and ideologies, they argue that the Bush administration's pursuit of security in the aftermath of 9/11 was the primary cause of the decision to invade. Bush, Leffler writes, “went to war *not* out of a fanciful idea to make Iraq democratic, but to rid it of its deadly weapons, its links to terrorists, and its ruthless, unpredictable tyrant.”⁸ Jervis does not dismiss democracy as a secondary motive, but he claims that “[t]he fundamental cause of the invasion was the perception of unacceptable threat from Saddam [Hussein] triggered by the combination of pre-existing beliefs about his regime and the impact of terrorist attacks.”⁹ Bozo concludes that “the choice for war clearly arose first and foremost from a logic of national security.”¹⁰

Security school arguments emphasize the transformative impact of 9/11 on U.S. national security as essential for understanding the Iraq War. Leffler and Jervis argue that, while the Bush administration entered office with several prominent regime-change proponents in high-ranking positions, it did not obsess over Iraq in its first nine months nor make meaningful moves toward toppling Saddam Hussein. Bush also came into office opposing nation-building and promising strategic restraint.¹¹

The 9/11 attacks, however, revolutionized U.S. foreign policy and set the stage for the Iraq War. The Bush administration felt extraordinary anger, fear, and vulnerability after 9/11, which prompted

6 On Iraqi foreign policy and politics in this era, see Helfont, *Iraq Against the World*; Lisa Blaydes, *State of Repression: Iraq Under Saddam Hussein* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); David Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam's Senior Leadership* (Norfolk, VA: United States Joint Forces Command, 2006). On U.N. weapons inspections, see Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, “Cheater's Dilemma: Iraq, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Path to War,” *International Security* 45, no. 1 (Summer 2020): 51–89, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00382; Gregory Koblentz, “Saddam Versus the Inspectors: The Impact of Regime Security on the Verification of Iraq's WMD Disarmament,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 2 (April 2018): 372–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1224764>. On the role of U.S. allies and the United Nations on the road to war, see David Malone, *The International Struggle Over Iraq: Politics in the U.N. Security Council, 1980–2005* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Alexander Thompson, *Channels of Power: The U.N. Security Council and U.S. Statecraft in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

7 For example, see Benjamin Miller, “Explaining Changes in U.S. Grand Strategy: 9/11, the Rise of Offensive Liberalism, and the War in Iraq,” *Security Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 26–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903546426>.

8 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 248.

9 Robert Jervis, “Explaining the War in Iraq,” in *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* ed. Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall (New York: Routledge, 2011), 33.

10 Bozo, *History of the Iraq Crisis*, 9. See also Tunc, “Causes of the Iraq War,” 336.

11 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 28–40; Jervis, “Explaining the War,” 30; and Yetiv, “Iraq War of 2003,” 400–01.

it to rethink other security threats.¹² Leffler argues that, for the Bush team, “the risk calculus had changed dramatically after 9/11.”¹³ They could no longer tolerate states that pursued weapons of mass destruction, threatened their neighbors and/or the United States, and supported terrorism.

Why, then, invade Iraq in particular? The Bush administration viewed Iraq as the “nexus” of these threats.¹⁴ As Bush himself argued, Iraq checked the following boxes more than any other state: “state sponsors of terror ... sworn enemies of America ... hostile governments that threatened their neighbors ... regimes that pursued WMD [weapons of mass destruction].”¹⁵ Top officials may have made major mistakes and exaggerated regarding Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties, but they did not hoodwink the people. Rather, they truly believed these threats were real and growing. Moreover, few analysts at the time, even from nations that opposed the war, accurately assessed the truth that Saddam was not engaged in meaningful production of weapons of mass destruction. Saddam also obstructed inspectors for nearly a decade, creating the reasonable impression that he aimed to resume production of such weapons.¹⁶

The United States could not wait for the Iraqi threat to fully emerge given the risk of “the smoking gun coming in the form of a mushroom cloud,” as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice famously stated.¹⁷ So, it declared a right to launch preventive wars to remove the threat. This presumed right formed the core of the Bush Doctrine, which, for the security school, was less a blueprint for primacy than an adaptation of longstanding ideas about the use of force in the face of a new threat.¹⁸

For the security school, the Iraq War did not stem primarily from grand schemes of extending U.S. hegemony or liberal values. Overwhelming

U.S. military power and the unipolarity of the international system made regime change possible, but the war was not motivated primarily by these factors. Leffler asserts that “missionary fervor or idealistic impulses” played little role in the Bush team’s decisions.¹⁹ Tunc contends that hegemony makes little sense as a motive for the Iraq War, as eliminating this relatively minor rival would not have changed the global balance of power.²⁰

Idealistic dreams and the global imbalance of power, after all, had existed for at least a decade when 9/11 happened. The attack was the decisive new variable that prompted a reevaluation of national security, which ultimately led to the invasion. Leffler summarizes the fundamental, security-centric causes: “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 on behalf of its interests.”²¹

Security school scholars often take a more sympathetic view of the Bush administration’s Iraq policy. Leffler stresses the emotional trauma of 9/11, including top officials’ visits to Ground Zero and meetings with first responders and the bereaved. Context is vital to this interpretation, as he argues: “Critics forget how ominous the al Qaeda threat seemed and how evil and manipulative Hussein really was.”²² He maintains that the Bush team sought to “do the right thing” and protect the nation from what they believed was an imminent threat.²³ But scholars in the security school agree that the weapons of mass destruction-terrorism-rogue state security threat was no mere pretext but rather the driving motive for the war. As Jervis argues, given the consensus about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and the post-9/11 need to rethink security threats, “There is little reason to doubt that Bush and his colleagues

12 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 51–60; and Hahn, *Missions Accomplished*, 142–43.

13 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 91. See also Jervis, “Explaining the War,” 34; “Debs and Monteiro, “Known Unknowns,” 3–4, 17; Tunc, “Causes of the Iraq War,” 339; Yetiv, “Iraq War of 2003,” 398–408; and Philip Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe, and the Crisis Over Iraq* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 83

14 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 157–58; and Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 120–23.

15 George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), 228. See also: Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), 435; Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 51–52; and Richard Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), 369.

16 Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 23; and Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 85, 167.

17 “Interview with Condoleezza Rice,” *CNN*, Sept. 8, 2002, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/le/date/2002-09-08/segment/00>.

18 Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 116–28; and Yetiv, “Iraq War of 2003,” 401–02.

19 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 98. See also Jervis, “Explaining the War,” 30; and Debs and Monteiro, “Known Unknowns,” 26.

20 Tunc, “Causes of the Iraq War,” 342.

21 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 98.

22 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 252.

23 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 252. See also Hahn, *Missions Accomplished*, 143.

sincerely believed that Saddam had active WMD [weapons of mass destruction] programs.”²⁴

The security school overlaps considerably with Bush officials’ memoirs, which also emphasize security motives for war.²⁵ These memoirs depict the emotional weight of the post-9/11 moment, in which the administration felt responsibility for not stopping 9/11 and dreaded the next attack. “I could not have forgiven myself had there been another attack,” recalls Rice.²⁶ Bush writes that “before 9/11, Saddam was a problem America might have been able to manage.” However, “through the lens of the post-9/11 world, my view changed.”²⁷ Protecting the nation from further terrorist attacks became the overriding priority, and threats like Iraq could no longer be tolerated.²⁸ Official memoirs emphasize that the administration did not want war with Iraq and sought ways to avoid it, but ultimately national security concerns required removing this menace.²⁹

This overlap makes sense given the reliance of scholars like Leffler on interviews with administration insiders. However, it also raises concerns that the security school may be accepting policymakers’ portrayals of events at face value. Bush officials have an obvious interest in saying that they remained open to non-violent solutions to the Iraq problem or that they were not idealistic crusaders.³⁰ As we will see, the hegemony school takes a more adversarial approach to this question.

The Hegemony School

Scholars in the hegemony school include Butt, Stephen Walt, Andrew Bacevich, Patrick Porter, Paul Pillar, G. John Ikenberry, David Harvey, John Mearsheimer, and Jeffrey Record. They tend toward the realist school of international relations,

but not exclusively. They acknowledge the role of security concerns in motivating the Iraq War, but they view security rationales as radically incomplete explanations. Their core claim is that the primary motivation of the invasion was maintaining and expanding U.S. hegemony. The hegemony school splits, however, on whether the United States sought realist or liberal forms of hegemony.

On the side of realist hegemony, Butt argues that the war stemmed from the “desire to maintain the United States’ global standing and hierarchic order,” with security acting more as a pretext for domestic consumption than a causal factor.³¹ 9/11 threatened U.S. hegemony, leading the United States to opt for a “performative war” that would re-establish “generalized deterrence,” or the reputation for unassailable power and the willingness to use it that undergirded hegemony.³² He quotes Rumsfeld saying on 9/11 that “[w]e need to bomb something else [other than Afghanistan] to prove that we’re, you know, big and strong and not going to be pushed around by these kinds of attacks.”³³ Butt contends that nothing in the available intelligence about Iraq suggested that it was an imminent threat. It was, however, a convenient foe for demonstrating U.S. power, as it had not yet constructed any weapons of mass destruction, remained weak militarily and isolated diplomatically, and was detested by the U.S. public.³⁴

Stephen Wertheim agrees, arguing that “the decision to invade Iraq stemmed from the pursuit of global primacy,” the goal of which is to “dissuade other countries from rising and challenging American dominance.”³⁵ Ikenberry and Daniel Deudney concur: “The primary objective of the war was the preservation and extension of American primacy in a region with high importance to American national interests.”³⁶ Record likewise contends that “the

24 Jervis, “Explaining the War,” 31, 34.

25 Melvyn Leffler, “The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy,” *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 2 (April 2013): 190–216, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44254516>.

26 Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), 121.

27 Bush, *Decision Points*, 229.

28 Rumsfeld, *Known Unknowns*, 422–24; Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 147–49; and Feith, *War and Decision*, 6.

29 Bush, *Decision Points*, 223; Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 147; Feith, *War and Decision*, 181.

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

31 Scholars in the realist-hegemony school include: Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 284; Wertheim, “Pathologies of Primacy;” Gardner, *Long Road*, 2–3; Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 181–82; Deudney and Ikenberry, “Realism, Liberalism,” 8–9; Cramer and Duggan, “Pursuit of Primacy,” 201–03; Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: MacMillan, 2007), 11–16; and Steven Hurst, *The United States and Iraq Since 1979* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 19–20.

32 Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 251.

33 Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 271.

34 Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 257–58, 272.

35 Wertheim, “Pathologies of Primacy.”

36 Deudney and Ikenberry, “Realism, Liberalism,” 8.

invasion was a conscious expression of America's unchecked global military hegemony that was designed to perpetuate that hegemony by intimidating those who would challenge it."³⁷

Scholars in the realist-hegemony camp see the Iraq War as a means to maintain realist priorities like unipolarity and U.S. freedom of action in the world. The Bush administration seized 9/11 and the ostensible Iraqi weapons-of-mass-destruction threat as a "pretext," "opportunity," or "rationale" to extend this agenda, which they believed would destroy the terrorist threat and other challenges to U.S. power.³⁸ Democratization was a secondary motive to justify a war that was grounded in the pursuit of power.³⁹

Walt, Porter, and Bacevich agree that the United States sought to demonstrate its power and preserve hegemony by invading Iraq, but they contend that the Bush administration aimed specifically to solidify liberal hegemony. Under this grand strategy, the United States sought to spread liberal democracy and capitalism, which were not only good in themselves but were ways to maintain global predominance.⁴⁰ The Cold War had restrained this strategy, but the Soviet collapse allowed the United States to pursue it with reckless idealism and hubris. The bipartisan foreign policy establishment came to assume the universality of liberal ideals and a presumed U.S. right to intervene anywhere in the world, either to protect human rights or suppress challenges to American power.⁴¹

When attacked on 9/11, according to this narrative, the United States did not examine whether liberal hegemony was generating resistance. Instead, the Bush administration, with bipartisan backing, escalated the pursuit of liberal hegemony and as-

serted a unilateral right to change the regimes of rival states through preventive war, also known as the Bush Doctrine. Security school scholars see this doctrine as a response to a new category of threat. The hegemony school, however, views it as a blueprint for preserving U.S. primacy that asserted the unilateral American right to destroy potential threats like Iraq and stated a desire to prevent the rise of peer competitors.⁴² Some scholars also emphasize the importance of protecting Israel and advancing U.S. oil interests as additional hegemonic motives for this war, although these remain controversial explanations.⁴³

For Walt, Porter, and others, the Iraq War emerged from the pursuit of liberal hegemony, a revisionist grand strategy that sought to spread democracy and other liberal values, topple tyrants, and thereby build a more peaceful and cooperative world order. Following this vision, the United States wanted not only to remove a threat but to revolutionize Middle Eastern politics by implanting democracy in Iraq.⁴⁴ They cite considerable evidence that democracy promotion was an important motive for the war, particularly for Bush, rather than a mere justification for a war based in power.⁴⁵ The 2002 *National Security Strategy*, for example, reflected this universalistic idealism in declaring, "The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom — and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise."⁴⁶

This war fit the longstanding and essentially liberal belief of many U.S. policymakers that autocracies represent an inherent threat to long-term peace, prosperity, and security and that only a

37 Record, *Wanting War*, 24–25. Record explicitly aligns his argument with the realist school of international relations.

38 James Bamford, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Doubleday, 2004); Wertheim, "Pathologies of Power;" Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 292; Gardner, *Long Road*, 4; and Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 203.

39 Butt, "Invade Iraq," 253; Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War*, 140; Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival*, 140–41; Deudney and Ikenberry, "Realism, Liberalism," 18; and Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 230–37.

40 Walt, *Good Intentions*, 13, 54–64; Andrew Bacevich, *The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020) 110–11; and Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020), 112.

41 Walt, *Good Intentions*, 25–32; John Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *National Interest*, no. 11 (January/February 2011): 16–19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42897726>; Bacevich, *War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016), 358–63; Desch, "Liberal Illiberalism," 7–9; and Miller, "Offensive Liberalism," 35–37.

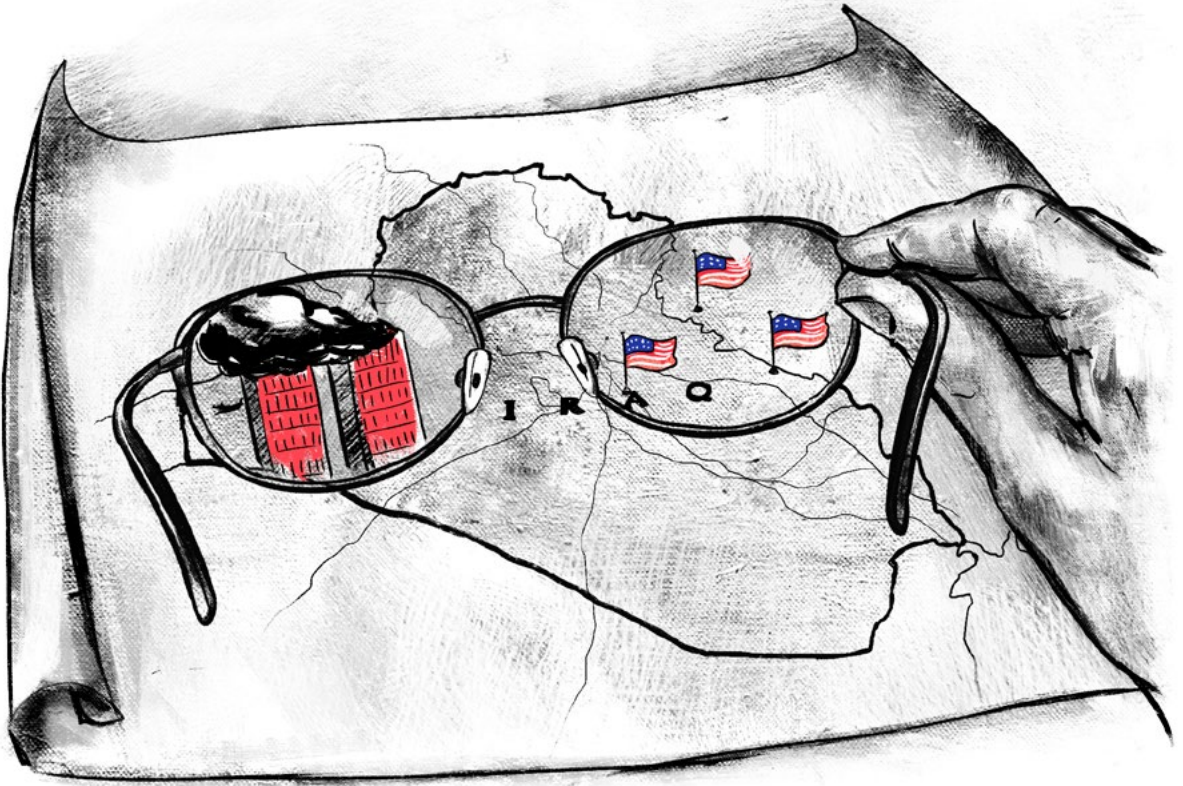
42 Bacevich, *Age of Illusions*, 114; Record, *Wanting War*, 49–52; and John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 150–51.

43 On oil motives, see Michael Klare, "Blood For Oil, in Iraq and Elsewhere," in *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* ed. Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall (New York: Routledge, 2011), 129–145; and Hurst, *United States and Iraq*, 2–9. On the Israeli alliance as a motive, see Mearsheimer and Walt, *Israel Lobby*, 253–55. Michael MacDonald effectively rebuts the arguments that oil and Israel were core motives for the Iraq War in *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 24–26.

44 Walt, *Good Intentions*, 76, 110; Porter, "A Liberal War," 346; and MacDonald, *Overreach*, 3–6.

45 Porter, "A Liberal War," 340–42; Walt, *Good Intentions*, 65–76; and Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 24–30, 59–63.

46 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, September 2002, introduction, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>. For first-hand testimony of Bush's commitment to democracy in Iraq, see Natan Sharansky, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 239–44.



democratic international order can assure these goods.⁴⁷ As Bush argued in a February 2003 speech, “The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder.”⁴⁸ Liberal idealism, as Michael MacDonald argues, also convinced the Bush administration that regime change in Iraq would be easy, because the Iraqis would quickly adopt the default of democracy after the removal of the Baathists.⁴⁹

Mearsheimer calls the Iraq War “probably the best example of this kind of liberal interventionism” that dominated post-Cold War U.S. thinking.⁵⁰ Bacevich argues that the weapons of mass destruction threat was a “cover story” and that the war’s main objectives were to “force the Middle East into the U.S.-dominated liberal order of capitalist

democracies and assert its prerogative of removing regimes that opposed U.S. interests.”⁵¹ As Porter contends, “The Iraq War ... was an effort to reorder the world. Its makers aimed to spread capitalist democracy on their terms.”⁵²

To some extent, this divide within the hegemony camp reflects the different worldviews of the top decision-makers in the Bush administration. Rumsfeld and Cheney fit a more realist paradigm, focusing on reasserting power more than spreading democracy. Others, like Wolfowitz, viewed the Iraq War as part of the liberal project. Bush embodied a mix of these perspectives.⁵³

Differences over whether the United States sought to achieve realist or liberal hegemony should not obscure fundamental commonalities of the hegemony school. These scholars concur that

47 Porter, “A Liberal War,” 339–42; Desch, “Liberal Illiberalism,” 25–29; Eric Heinze, “The New Utopianism: Liberalism, American Foreign Policy, and the War in Iraq,” *Journal of International Political Theory* 4, no. 1 (April 2008): 116–17, <https://doi.org/10.3366/E1755088208000116>.

48 George W. Bush, “George Bush’s Speech to the American Enterprise Institute,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 27, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/27/usa.iraq2>.

49 MacDonald, *Overreach*, 39–46.

50 Mearsheimer, *Great Delusion*, 154.

51 Bacevich, *Age of Illusions*, 110–13; and Bacevich, *Greater Middle East*, 240–43.

52 Porter, *False Promise*, 112–13. For similar claims, see Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 18; MacDonald, *Overreach*, 37; and Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 181.

53 Barton Gellman, *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 232; Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 1–3; and Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 15–16.

the United States had been pursuing some form of primacy well before 9/11, that 9/11 both threatened that primacy and provided a pretext or opportunity to reassert it, and that Iraq was less a threat than a convenient target for solidifying hegemony.

In terms of contextualization, the pre-9/11 era is more important for the hegemony school than the security school, as the former stress continuities in U.S. foreign policy stretching back into the Cold War.⁵⁴ These scholars emphasize that key architects of the war like Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Wolfowitz had openly supported U.S. hegemony in the decades preceding 9/11. Many cite the 1992 *Defense Planning Guidance*, which was written by Zalmay Khalilzad and Abram Shulsky under the oversight of Wolfowitz, then serving under Cheney.⁵⁵ This document endorsed a hegemonic grand strategy that would maintain indefinite global military dominance and seek to “prevent the re-emergence of a new rival.”⁵⁶ Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, and a host of other future Bush administration officials also signed open letters in the late 1990s calling for regime change in Iraq and a primacist grand strategy.⁵⁷

Following 9/11, these hegemonists immediately linked the Baathist regime to the terrorism problem in spite of a dearth of evidence, pushed dubious intelligence, hyped the Iraqi threat, and downplayed the risks of invasion. For the hegemony school, this is evidence that the administration “wanted war,” to paraphrase Record’s book, and that its later claims that it went to war regretfully are self-serving myths.⁵⁸

Some Bush administration officials have bucked the official security-focused explanation and acknowledged the importance of larger ideological or hegemonic designs. CIA Director George Tenet wrote in his memoir that top administration members seemed uninterested in figuring out the details of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programs. He interpreted this to mean that they

decided to invade Iraq using such weapons as a pretext. He held that “The United States did not go to war in Iraq solely because of WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. In my view, I doubt it was even the principal cause. Yet it was the public face put on it.” As real reasons, he pointed to “larger geo-strategic calculations, ideology,” and “democratic transformation.”⁵⁹ White House Press Secretary Scott McLellan similarly concluded that “removing the ‘grave and gathering danger’ Iraq supposedly posed was primarily a means for achieving the far more grandiose objective of reshaping the Middle East as a region of peaceful democracies.”⁶⁰

Synthesizing the Security and Hegemony Schools

Why can’t the hegemony and security schools just get along? Some scholars have tried to synthesize these approaches. Michael Mazarr, Robert Draper, and Justin Vaisse’s works examine the national security urgency of the post-9/11 moment without ignoring the historical context of U.S. hegemony and idealism.⁶¹ In my own attempts at synthesis, I have contended that during the 1990s a bipartisan “regime change consensus” formed on Iraq that predisposed the U.S. foreign policy establishment to support Saddam’s ouster and to view containment as a failing alternative policy. Broad agreement about U.S. hegemony fed this consensus and made the Iraq War seem logical to many U.S. elites. Nevertheless, 9/11 was a critical variable that drastically decreased America’s willingness to tolerate threats like Iraq while providing more leeway to U.S. leaders to pursue risky strategies.⁶²

One way of synthesizing these schools is to create a division of causal labor, wherein the hegemony school helps explain “Why Iraq?” and the security school addresses “Why now?” Hegemony school analysts often ask: If the United States was really

54 Gardner, *Long Road*; and Bacevich, *Greater Middle East*.

55 “Excerpts from 1992 Draft ‘Defense Planning Guidance,’” *Frontline*, 1992, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/etc/wolf.html>.

56 Scholars who cite the 1992 *Defense Planning Guidance* include Bacevich, *Greater Middle East*, 362; Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 273; and Wertheim, “Pathologies of Primacy.”

57 Joseph Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics, 1990-2003* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 160–61; and “Project for a New American Century Statement of Principles,” in *The Iraq Papers*, ed. John Ehrenberg et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 19–20.

58 Record, *Wanting War*, 1–5. See also Gardner, *Long Road*, 126–30; Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 251; Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 181–82; Bamford, *Pretext for War*, 423; and MacDonald, *Overreach*, 35.

59 George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 305–08, 322.

60 Scott McLellan, *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington’s Culture of Deception* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), xiii. See also Richard Clarke: *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 30–32.

61 Michael Mazarr, *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America’s Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), 406–07; Justin Vaisse, *Neoliberalism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 14–17; and Robert Draper, *To Start at War: How the Bush Administration Took America Into Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2021).

62 Stieb, *Regime Change Consensus*, 1–13.

concerned about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, why not focus on countries with more advanced programs, like North Korea? If the United States was really concerned about terrorism, why not focus on more active state sponsors, like Iran?

These inconsistencies having to do with “Why Iraq?” expose a key problem for security-based explanations: Iraq, which became the central front of the War on Terror, was neither the most powerful “rogue state,” nor was it involved in 9/11. Instead, in the hegemonic framework, Iraq was an opportunity more than a threat, and its putative weapons of mass destruction programs were a pretext more than a motive. As former CIA intelligence analyst Paul Pillar starkly puts it, concern about such weapons “was not the principal or even a major reason the Bush administration went to war.” It was “at most a subsidiary motivator of the policy.”⁶³ After all, as Pillar and others argue, the Bush administration used the intelligence process not in a good-faith effort to accurately assess Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction but to gather — if not inflate — evidence to support the case for regime change.⁶⁴

However, the hegemony school struggles to answer the “Why now?” question. If the bipartisan pursuit of hegemony and liberal idealism are constants in U.S. foreign policy, then why did the Iraq War not happen sooner, possibly after inspectors left Iraq in 1998? By focusing on how 9/11 reshaped U.S. foreign policy and threat perception, the security school gets at a fundamental point that few analysts contest: A U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq is virtually inconceivable without 9/11.

One interesting point of agreement between the security and hegemony schools is that the end of the Cold War constitutes an essential precondition for the Iraq War. The idea of the United States in the midst of the Cold War invading a mid-sized country — once a Soviet satellite — to change its regime seems far fetched. The hegemony school particularly emphasizes the importance of unipolarity, which it believes allowed dreams of hegemony, realist or

liberal, to run wild in the U.S. imagination.⁶⁵ This leads one to speculate as to whether the return of multipolarity will deter the United States from further attempts at direct regime change.

The relationship between the 1990–1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War remains an under-studied aspect of this field. Scholars like Helfont, Christian Alfonsi, and myself have argued that the Gulf War’s messy ending initiated a pattern of conflict between the United States and Iraq that festered throughout the 1990s, creating a strong desire in the U.S. political establishment to finish the job, even before 9/11.⁶⁶ There was, after all, no war with Iran or North Korea in the 1990s, nor was there an Iran or North Korean Liberation Act. There was, however, the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, which declared regime change as the official U.S. policy toward Iraq.⁶⁷ Relatively few works, however, systematically trace U.S.-Iraqi relations through this period, although Helfont’s recent book significantly rectifies this by tracing Iraq’s challenge to the post-Cold War, U.S.-led international order through the 1990s.⁶⁸

Despite attempts at synthesis, there is a meaningful tension between the security and hegemony schools that makes any kind of reconciliation difficult. It is hard to interpret a war as both predetermined and contingent — harder still to view the Bush administration as obsessed with regime change and open to many ways of disarming Iraq. Moreover, as this section demonstrates, there is primary source evidence to support both major interpretations.

The security and hegemony schools’ points of contrast also matter for how the war is interpreted as a whole. Was it an understandable tragedy or an unforced and unforgivable blunder?⁶⁹ In terms of periodization, was the war essentially rooted in a response to 9/11, or do its roots stretch back decades in U.S. foreign policy? Finally, does the Iraq War, especially the controversial Bush Doctrine, represent a sharp change in U.S. diplomatic history or continuity with previous trends, goals, and ideas?⁷⁰

63 Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 41. See also Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 255–57.

64 Pillar, *Intelligence in U.S. Foreign Policy*, 13–42; Cramer and Thrall, “Pursuit of Primacy,” 204–07; and Bamford, “Pretext for War,” 269–70.

65 Desch, “Liberal Illiberalism,” 9.

66 Christian Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand: Why We Went Back to Iraq* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); Samuel Helfont, “The Gulf War’s Aftermath: Dilemmas, Missed Opportunities, and the Post-Cold War Order Undone,” *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 25–47, <https://tnsr.org/2021/02/the-gulf-wars-afterlife-dilemmas-missed-opportunities-and-the-post-cold-war-order-undone/>; and Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus*, 4–11.

67 *The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998*, Public Law 338, 105th Cong., 2nd sess., Oct. 31, 1998.

68 Helfont, *Iraq Against the World*, 1–10.

69 For scholars who call the Iraq War a “tragedy,” see Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 11; and Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, 252. For scholars who call it a “blunder,” see Stieb, *Regime Change Consensus*, 1; and Wertheim, “Pathologies of Primacy.”

70 Scholars who emphasize continuity include Gardner, *Long Road*, 2; and John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 80–91. Scholars who stress discontinuity include Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 122–23; and Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: MacMillan, 2008), 74–75.



What Was “Coercive Diplomacy” All About?

Whatever side scholars favor in the security-hegemony debate shades how they understand other key questions about the war’s origins. This essay tackles two additional issues that have divided scholars, starting with the question of why Bush attempted a “coercive diplomacy” strategy in late 2002 and early 2003.

In the fall of 2002, under pressure from British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Secretary of State Colin Powell, Bush decided to take the “diplomatic track” on Iraq. On Sept. 12, at the United Nations, he called for Iraq to readmit weapons inspections or face being overthrown. He also sought a congressional authorization to use force against Iraq.⁷¹ At the same time, the build-up of U.S. troops in the region put the credible threat of force behind this final attempt at diplomacy. Rice describes this strategy as “coercive diplomacy.”⁷²

But what was the purpose of coercive diplomacy? Was it a genuine attempt to peacefully disarm Iraq? Or was it a way of gaining legitimacy and allied and domestic political support for a predetermined policy of regime change? This debate matters for establishing when the Bush administration made the decision for war and the extent to which it was simply hell bent on regime change, no matter the circumstances. The security-hegemony debate is important but somewhat deterministic. The coercive diplomacy debate incorporates questions about the contingency of the war as well as possible off-ramps.

Leffler writes that, in early 2002, Bush was “not yet ready to choose between containment and regime change,” and he remained undecided into the fall of 2002.⁷³ Bush was torn as to whether disarmament could be achieved without regime change. Coercive diplomacy was a final attempt to find this out. When he adopted this strategy,

he accepted that it might mean that war would not occur and that Saddam might remain in power for the time being. He also rejected, for the moment, the advice of more hawkish advisors like Cheney and Rumsfeld that working through the United Nations would be counter-productive.⁷⁴ As Leffler writes, Bush “decided to see if he could accomplish his key objectives ... without war.”⁷⁵ In this narrative, Bush did not decide to invade until January 2003, after Iraqi authorities had failed to fully comply with a new round of weapons inspections.⁷⁶

Other scholars, especially those in the security school, agree with Leffler’s view of coercive diplomacy. Frank Harvey claims that coercive diplomacy sought “to re-invigorate a failing containment policy by reinforcing multilateral, U.N. inspections that demanded full and complete compliance.”⁷⁷ Debs and Nuno Monteiro also agree that in supporting new inspections the Bush administration genuinely sought to test Iraqi cooperation and avoid war.⁷⁸

These analyses stress the contingency of Bush’s approach to Iraq. Some Bush officials may have been impassioned advocates of regime change, but Bush nonetheless proceeded deliberately and gave peaceful methods of disarmament a final chance. He did so because he prioritized disarmament by whatever means, not regime change for ulterior reasons.

Again, this account matches U.S. leaders’ descriptions of their own actions. Bush states in his memoir, “My first choice was to use diplomacy” on Iraq.⁷⁹ Coercive diplomacy was an earnest attempt to avoid war, but Saddam’s failure to comply with inspections compelled Bush to choose war in early 2003.⁸⁰ Rice similarly claimed, “We invaded Iraq because we believed we had run out of other options.”⁸¹

Michael Mazarr and others challenge Leffler’s account of coercive diplomacy and locate the decision to invade well before early 2003. Mazarr writes

71 George W. Bush, “Remarks at the United Nations General Assembly,” *White House Archives*, Sept. 12, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html>.

72 Bush, *Decision Points*, 229–30; and Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 110

73 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 109.

74 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 94, 120, 160–64. See also Gordon and Shapiro, *Allies at War*, 96–98.

75 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 160.

76 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 184, 191. See also Draper, *Start a War*, 181.

77 Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War*, 7.

78 Debs and Monteiro, “Known Unknowns,” 3–4. See also Draper, *Start a War*, 181; Todd Purdum, *A Time of Our Choosing: America’s War in Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2004), 46–63; and Anthony Lake, “Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War,” *International Security* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/2011): 7–52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40981251>.

79 Bush, *Decision Points*, 229.

80 Bush, *Decision Points*, 244–45; Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, 442; Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 181; and Feith, *War and Decision*, 223.

81 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 186–87.

that “between September 11 and December 2001 ... the Bush administration — while nowhere near what would be defined as the formal ‘decision’ to go to war — had irrevocably committed itself to the downfall of Saddam Hussein.”⁸² War planning began in November 2002, and Bush made several private and public comments before spring 2002 that he intended to remove Saddam.⁸³

That fall, Bush sided with Powell in choosing the diplomatic track, but even Powell never challenged the wisdom of invading Iraq.⁸⁴ There was almost no debate in his administration about whether invading Iraq was a sound idea, suggesting that the decision had been made even before the coercive diplomacy effort began.⁸⁵ Mazarr adds that a “tidal wave of evidence can be found that many senior officials assumed war was inevitable long before September 2002.”⁸⁶ The Bush administration quickly judged that the inspections had failed in early 2003 and cemented the decision to invade in January.⁸⁷

My own research concurs with Mazarr and further adds that the idea that Bush sought to restore containment through coercive diplomacy makes little sense. Bush had already made the case earlier in 2002 that containment could not handle the “nexus” threat. Moreover, most of his advisers and the policy establishment already viewed containment as a dead letter. Finally, the Bush administration was exceedingly doubtful of the efficacy of inspections, and it set such a high bar for their success as to virtually predetermine failure.⁸⁸

Scholars in the hegemony school generally agree with Mazarr’s analysis of coercive diplomacy. They hold that the Bush administration was uninterested in peacefully resolving this crisis because it was looking for an opportunity to assert U.S. power. They therefore view coercive diplomacy as a charade to legitimize a pre-

determined war. Butt, for example, argues that Iraq could not have done anything to avoid war, because the United States had decided to crush a rival to re-establish generalized deterrence.⁸⁹ John Prados contends that Bush made the decision for war in the early spring of 2002, and Richard Haass locates that decision in July 2002, all before coercive diplomacy began.⁹⁰

As with the core security-hegemony divide, the debate about coercive diplomacy resists resolution. For scholars like Leffler, the situation remained fluid and contingent until just months before the invasion. For scholars like Mazarr, the war was virtually inevitable once the Bush administration set its sights on Iraq in early 2002. A possible synthesis may be that the administration’s intense pessimism about the possibility that Saddam would give in to U.S. threats and comply with inspections constituted a *de facto* decision for war, if not an absolutely final determination.⁹¹ If anything, coercive diplomacy might be another under-examined aspect of the Iraq War, skipped over by numerous analyses that assign the war’s origins to security or hegemony.⁹² Doing so leads to overly deterministic explanations of the war that leave little room for contingency.

One way this impasse might be addressed is through more analysis of the State Department’s role in the lead-up to war. Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage supported the war but were not true believers, and many skeptics of the war filled the State Department’s higher ranks.⁹³ When more sources become available, it will be interesting to see whether Powell or anyone else asked any critical questions about the fundamental decision to go to war or pressed Bush to pursue coercive diplomacy thoroughly. This would show whether there really was uncertainty in the administration and openness to non-violent solutions, as Leffler

82 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 113. See also John Prados, “The Iraq War-Part II: Was There Even a Decision?” National Security Archive, Oct. 1, 2010, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB328/index.htm>; and Mark Danner, ed., *The Secret Way to War: The Downing Street Memo and the Iraq War’s Buried History* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006).

83 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 222.

84 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 3, 218–21; and Stieb, *Regime Change Consensus*, 214–16.

85 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 245–246; and Prados, “Even a Decision?”

86 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 9.

87 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 292.

88 Stieb, *Regime Change Consensus*, 236–40.

89 Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 251.

90 Prados, “Even a Decision?”; and Richard Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 213.

91 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 238.

92 Prominent works that skip coercive diplomacy include Bacevich, *Greater Middle East*; and Mearsheimer and Walt, *Israel Lobby*; Record, *Wanting War*.

93 William Burns, “How We Tried to Slow the Rush to War in Iraq,” *Politico*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/13/bill-burns-back-channel-book-excerpt-iraq-225731/>.



claims, or whether the United States was on an unalterable path to war before the fall of 2002, as Mazarr argues.⁹⁴

Scholars should be careful, however, of thinking that new documentary evidence will fully resolve these disagreements. The British Iraq Inquiry, published in 2016, released a flood of primary sources and interviews on British policymaking on Iraq from 2001 to 2009.⁹⁵ Numerous scholars have drawn on this fascinating material, but interpretive tensions remain because they look at this evidence through different lenses. For example, Leffler argues that Blair's correspondence with Bush after 9/11 demonstrates that neither party was rushing to war with Iraq but merely establishing a general timeframe for pressuring the Iraqi regime to disarm.⁹⁶ This supports his larger argument that the Bush administration was not obsessed with war, attempted other means of disarming Iraq, and only decided on war after the exhaustion of other options.

Butt, in contrast, argues that these same sources demonstrate that "war was decided upon very soon after — probably even on-9/11." Blair, after all, told Bush on Oct. 11, 2001, that "I have no doubt we need to deal with Saddam" and that "we can devise a strategy for Saddam deliverable at a later date."⁹⁷ For Butt, this source shows that Bush and Blair agreed on the goal of regime change in Iraq and the reassertion of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East almost immediately after 9/11. Blair merely cautioned Bush not to rush into war without building a coalition.⁹⁸ Porter, author of a book on Britain's war in Iraq, also draws heavily on the Iraq Inquiry and arrives at a similar conclusion. He contends that the Blair government was as ideologically committed to strategic primacy and the spread of liberal democracy as Bush. It never seriously considered alternatives but "worried predominantly about how to create conditions that would legitimize a British military campaign, that would generate enough support."⁹⁹

The discrepancies between scholars using the same documents demonstrate the importance of the interpretative frameworks that analysts bring

to their sources. As a result, new sources will not necessarily lead to convergence between interpretive camps.

How Important Were the Neocons?

The last major question this essay tackles about the Iraq War's origins is the role of neoconservatives. Were they the intellectual architects of this war or extraneous to the decision to invade? While the alignment here is imperfect, the security school tends to downplay neoconservatives while the hegemony school usually argues for their central importance.

Neoconservatives are a loose intellectual movement that has evolved considerably since its origins in the 1960s. Vaisse defines third-wave neoconservatism as a nationalistic movement that peaked in the 1990s and early 2000s. It sought to promote U.S. primacy, "national greatness," and the spreading of democracy, all with a unilateralist bent.¹⁰⁰ A significant number of neoconservatives worked in high positions in the Bush administration, most notably Wolfowitz.¹⁰¹

While neoconservative intellectuals like Robert Kagan and William Kristol clearly advocated for regime change in public discourse, debate about the role of neoconservatives in bringing about the Iraq War has been contentious. Much early commentary crudely suggested that a "cabal" of neoconservatives hijacked U.S. foreign policy and drove the nation into a disastrous war. For instance, then-Sen. Joe Biden, who voted to authorize the Iraq War but later regretted this decision, said in July 2003, "They seem to have captured the heart and mind of the President, and they're controlling the foreign policy agenda." Frank Harvey convincingly argues that these narratives are not only simplistic but provide cover for the many political groups who supported what became an unpopular war.¹⁰²

Harvey, Leffler, and others argue that neoconservatives were either irrelevant or of secondary importance in causing the Iraq War. Harvey

94 Thanks to Theo Milonopoulos for this insight about future paths for Iraq scholarship.

95 "Report of the Iraq Inquiry," House of Commons, July 6, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry>.

96 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 103–04.

97 Butt, "Invade Iraq," 279.

98 Butt, "Invade Iraq," 279–80; and Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 153.

99 Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2–5, 20.

100 Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 12, 221. Vaisse also calls neoconservatives "democratic globalists."

101 Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 2.

102 For the Biden quote and Harvey's discussion of "neoliberalism," see *Explaining the Iraq War*, 1–10.

takes an extreme position here, arguing that they were totally extraneous and, in fact, lost most of the debates on Iraq before the invasion.¹⁰³ Leffler and Mazarr argue that, although there were neo-conservatives in the Bush administration, neither Bush nor the top echelon of decision-makers were neoconservatives.¹⁰⁴ Leffler downplays the role of neoconservatism or any other ideology in the administration's decision-making, focusing instead on security motives.¹⁰⁵

Without these ideas, Flibbert concludes, invading Iraq would not have made sense, making the actions of neoconservatives essential to explaining the war.

Daalder and Lindsay argue that Bush and most of his top advisers were “assertive nationalists,” or “traditional hard-line conservatives willing to use American military power to defeat threats to U.S. security but reluctant as a general rule to use American primacy to remake the world in its image.”¹⁰⁶ Jane Cramer and Edward Duggan contend that Bush, Rumsfeld, and Cheney, the three most important decision-makers in the administration, were not neoconservatives but “primacists” and consistent hard-liners who had never shown concern for democratization or human rights in their long careers.¹⁰⁷ In his history of Bush's war cabinet, journalist James Mann contends that Bush relied mainly on the “Vulcans” — like Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Armitage, and Dov Zakheim — for foreign policy guidance, few of whom were neoconservatives. Rather, these Vulcans “were focused above all on American military power” and maintaining U.S. primacy, especially after the Vietnam debacle.¹⁰⁸

These authors agree that neoconservatives like Wolfowitz may have pushed for regime change, but

their presence in the administration was not vital for making this war happen.¹⁰⁹ Mazarr also minimizes the role of neoconservatives — but not ideology in general. He contends that “many aspects of the neocons' foreign policy assumptions reflected the prevailing conventional wisdom in the U.S. national security community,” including primacy, exceptionalism, and the universality of democracy.¹¹⁰

Some scholars in the realist hegemony school agree with this analysis. Butt dismisses the role of neoconservatives, arguing that they provided an ideological gloss for a war that was really about power.¹¹¹ Oddly enough, some neoconservatives concur with the minimization of their own roles. Kagan, for instance, contends that security concerns drove decision-making and that the war “can be understood without reference to a neoconservative doctrine.”¹¹²

Many scholars, especially in the liberal hegemony school, argue instead that neoconservatives played an essential role in causing the Iraq War. For them, neoconservatism helps to address a key question: Why, after 9/11, did the United States invade a country that had not attacked it?

As Andrew Flibbert argues, neoconservative policy entrepreneurship closed the conceptual gap between Iraq and terrorism. Figures like Wolfowitz, Doug Feith, and Scooter Libby interpreted 9/11 through a “larger ideational framework” about America's role in the world and acted as policy activists inside the administration and in the public discourse. They helped to set the post-9/11 agenda with a focus on Iraq, at a time when figures like Rice and Powell seemed skeptical of such a focus. They advanced a host of arguments for war: the nexus threat, Saddam's brutality, protecting U.S. interests in the region, advancing democracy, transforming

103 Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War*, 19, 126.

104 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 6, 70; and Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 30–32.

105 Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 20.

106 Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 15. See also Miller, “Offensive Liberalism,” 51; Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 32; and Deudney and Ikenberry, “Realism, Liberalism,” 8.

107 Cramer and Duggan, “Pursuit of Primacy,” 201–03.

108 James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), x–xiv.

109 Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 47; Hurst, *United States and Iraq*, 1; Leffler, *Confronting Saddam* 98; and Cramer and Duggan, “Pursuit of Primacy,” 237.

110 Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 70.

111 Butt, “Invade Iraq,” 252.

112 Robert Kagan, “Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism, c. 1776,” *World Affairs* 170, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20672819>. See also Max Boot, “It's Time to Retire the 'Neocon' Label,” *Washington Post*, March 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-time-to-retire-the-neocon-label/2019/03/13/11cc2714-45a2-11e9-aaf8-4512a6fe3439_story.html.



the Middle East, asserting U.S. power, and even improving Israeli-Palestinian relations. Without these ideas, Flibbert concludes, invading Iraq would not have made sense, making the actions of neoconservatives essential to explaining the war.¹¹³

The hegemony school naturally focuses on the role of neoconservatives in constructing a liberal hegemonic war. Pillar argues that “[t]he chief purpose of forcibly removing Saddam flowed from the central objectives of neoconservatism,” the core of which is “the proposition that the United States should use its power and influence to spread its freedom-oriented values.”¹¹⁴ Walt and Mearsheimer concur: “The driving force behind the Iraq War was a small band of neoconservatives who had long favored the energetic use of American power to reshape critical areas of the world.”¹¹⁵ Gary Dorrien notes that this band was in fact quite large: Over 20 neoconservatives held high-ranking positions in the Bush administration, forming an activist core for pushing war with Iraq.¹¹⁶

Vaisse adds that in 2003 Cheney ordered 30 copies of the neoconservative *Weekly Standard* to the White House every week.¹¹⁷ He notes that, while Bush may have campaigned as a restraint-minded realist, he and Rice essentially adopted a neoconservative worldview after 9/11, speaking often of a U.S. obligation to topple tyrants and spread liberal values.¹¹⁸ Other analysts show how neoconservatives led the way in promoting damning, if dubious, information about Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction programs and links to al-Qaeda that would help sell the war.¹¹⁹

Journalistic accounts of the Iraq War also tend to stress the role of neoconservative networks and personalities in clearing the path to war. They effectively demonstrate the close personal contacts of neoconservative intellectuals and Iraqi exiles

like Ahmad Chalabi with top Bush administration officials. While they sometimes do not make systematic arguments about the war, they certainly show that neoconservative influence was swirling around the administration and the foreign policy establishment at the time.¹²⁰

The neoconservative issue is germane to larger questions about the Iraq War and recent U.S. foreign policy. Was ideology a fundamental motivator of the decision to invade or a justification that was developed to sell the war? Is the way to restore balance and restraint to U.S. foreign policy after Iraq simply to purge neoconservatives, or is more profound change needed? Are neoconservatives simply a new expression of America’s exceptionalist identity and missionary impulses dating back centuries, or are they a discrete and modern ideological movement?¹²¹ These are crucial issues for locating the Iraq War in the larger history of ideas and intellectuals in U.S. diplomatic history.

Iraq War Scholarship and U.S. Foreign Policy

The Iraq War’s long and costly nature has shaped discussions about what lessons it holds for U.S. foreign policy, but the competing interpretations of the war’s origins are also relevant for these debates. The majority of scholars in the security and hegemony schools agree that Iraq was a mistake, if not something worse. But they disagree on its consequences for U.S. foreign policy.

Security-centric explanations of the war lend themselves to a less condemning portrayal of the Bush administration and the foreign policy establishment. Hal Brands and Peter Feaver refer to an “empathy defense,” arguing that “greater sensitivi-

113 Andrew Flibbert, “The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War,” *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 309–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410600829570>. For similar arguments, see Mearsheimer and Walt, *Israel Lobby*, 246–49; Russell Burgoes, “Origins of Regime Change: ‘Ideapolitik’ on the Long Road to Baghdad, 1993–2000,” *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 221–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802098693>; and Stieb, *Regime Change Consensus*, 4–9.

114 Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 17.

115 Mearsheimer and Walt, *Israel Lobby*, 238.

116 Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 2.

117 Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 227.

118 Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 243–44. For my own similar arguments, see Stieb, *Regime Change Consensus*, 210–13.

119 Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 96–175; and Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 5–48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137546>.

120 George Packer, *The Assassins’ Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005); Richard Bonin, *Arrows of the Night: Ahmad Chalabi’s Long Journey to Triumph in Iraq* (New York: Doubleday, 2011); Aram Roston, *The Man Who Pushed America to War: The Extraordinary Life, Adventures, and Obsessions of Ahmad Chalabi* (New York: Nation Books, 2008); Michael Isikoff and David Korn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007); Craig Unger, *The Fall of the House of Bush* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008); and Fred Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (New York: Wiley, 2008).

121 Vaisse argues that neoconservatism is an expression of American nationalism. See *Neoconservatism*, 278–79. Jacob Heilbrunn contends it is “in a decisive respect a Jewish phenomenon, reflecting a subset of Jewish concerns.” See Jacob Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York: Anchor, 2009), 11. Kagan contends that neoconservatism fits seamlessly in the American foreign policy tradition of liberalism, expansionism, and exceptionalism. See “Neocon Nation,” 7–10.

ty to constraints, alternatives, and context can lead to a more favorable view of decisions taken in Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11.” In this reading, Bush faced an unprecedented security threat after 9/11 and launched a mistaken war riddled with errors in intelligence, planning, and execution.¹²²

Those errors, however, do not mean that the United States needs to drastically rethink its position of global leadership.¹²³ Many conservatives, neoconservatives, and liberal internationalists have concluded that the lesson of Iraq is not to abandon an active and engaged global posture, but rather to eschew ambitious nation-building and democratization projects.¹²⁴ Brands argues that “the Iraq hangover” should not make U.S. leaders “strategically sluggish just as the dangers posed by great power rivals were growing.”¹²⁵ America’s defense of the liberal international order, they contend, has been overwhelmingly positive for U.S. interests as well as global democracy, prosperity, and peace.¹²⁶ The United States can continue to play this role while avoiding obvious mistakes like the Iraq invasion.¹²⁷ Nor does this war mean that the foreign policy establishment must be overthrown.¹²⁸

U.S. leaders seem to agree with this view of the lessons of Iraq, including those like President Barack Obama, who opposed the war originally. Obama, President Donald Trump, and Biden all criticized the Iraq War and have demonstrated skepticism toward nation-building interventions. Trump’s 2017 *National Security Strategy*, for example, states, “We are also realistic and understand

that the American way of life cannot be imposed on others.”¹²⁹ Nonetheless, their national security strategies all affirm the indispensability of engaged U.S. leadership and military primacy. For these scholars and leaders, the lesson of Iraq might be summed up as “Don’t do stupid shit,” as Obama once quipped. Instead, the country should carry on as the fulcrum of the liberal world order.¹³⁰

It should surprise no one that these figures prefer Leffler’s security-focused narrative of the Iraq War. Figures like Brands, Kagan, John Bolton, and Eric Edelman, Cheney’s deputy national security adviser, favorably blurbed or reviewed Leffler’s book, which does little to critique U.S. grand strategy.¹³¹ Bolton, a neoconservative architect of the war, praises Leffler for recognizing that “Bush was not eager for war ... his advisors did not lead him by the nose ... they were not obsessed with linking Saddam to 9/11,” and “their objectives did not include spreading democracy at the tip of a bayonet.”¹³² Brands, who has labelled the Iraq War a “debacle” and “tragedy,” nevertheless calls Leffler’s book “the most serious scholarly study of the war’s origins” for many of the same reasons as Bolton.¹³³ Scholars in the hegemony school could not disagree more about the Iraq War’s lessons. They contend that the war signals the bankruptcy of the overly ambitious and hyper-interventionist grand strategy of primacy. Primacy, as Wertheim argues, requires the United States to maintain U.S. forces around the globe and prevent the rise of

122 Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “The Case for Bush Revisionism: Reevaluating the Legacy of America’s 43rd President,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 2 (2018): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1348944>; See also David Frum, “The Iraq War Reconsidered,” *The Atlantic*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/03/iraq-war-us-invasion-anniversary-2023/673343/>.

123 Brands and Feaver, “Bush Revisionism,” 4–5, 33. See also Eli Lake, “The Iraq War, 20 Years Later,” *Commentary*, March 2023, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/eli-lake/iraq-freer-than-20-years-ago/>.

124 Robert Kagan, “Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire,” *The New Republic*, May 26, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/117859/superpowers-dont-get-retire>; Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 224–41; Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/2013): 7–51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41804173>.

125 Hal Brands, “Blundering Into Baghdad: The Right – and Wrong – Lessons of the Iraq War,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 28, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/iraq-war-lessons-blundering-into-baghdad-hal-brands>. For a similar argument, see Kori Schake, “Learning too Much from Iraq,” *National Review*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2023/04/03/learning-too-much-from-iraq/>.

126 Peter Feaver and Hal Brands, “Correspondence: The Establishment and U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 197–99, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_c_00347; and Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home,” 33–50.

127 Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home,” 32–33; Brands, “Blundering Into Baghdad;” Dominic Tierney, “The Obama Doctrine and the Lessons of Iraq,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 2012, <https://www.fpri.org/docs/media/201205.tierney.obama-doctrine-iraq.pdf>.

128 Hal Brands, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden, “In Defense of the Blob,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-29/defense-blob>.

129 *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

130 Wertheim, “Pathologies of Primacy.”

131 See “Reviews and Awards,” Oxford University Press, Feb. 1, 2023, <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/confronting-saddam-hussein-9780197610770>.

132 John Bolton, “Confronting Saddam Hussein’ Review: ‘Bush’s War,’ or America’s?” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 21, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/confronting-saddam-hussein-review-bushs-war-or-americas-b12d7525>.

133 Brands, “Blundering Into Baghdad.”



great-power challengers, all while fueling a sense of messianic exceptionalism. He concludes that “the invasion of Iraq emerged from this logic,” and that, if the United States fails to fundamentally rethink its global role, it will rush headlong into more unnecessary conflicts.¹³⁴

For these critics, the Iraq War also demonstrated the myopia and conformism of the bipartisan policy establishment and its seeming addiction to an expansive global mission. This establishment, they argue, remains committed to a hegemonic role that has brought unnecessary wars, stunning human and monetary costs, balancing behavior by rivals, and the discrediting of U.S. leadership at home and abroad.¹³⁵ Deploying the Iraq War and other errors as a wedge, they aim to challenge the narrow, stultified conversation of the policy establishment and push U.S. grand strategy toward “realism and restraint,” in Walt’s words, while focusing more resources on preserving democracy and prosperity at home.¹³⁶

In sum, competing interpretations of the war’s origins are entwined with debates about its lessons. It is proper that scholars contest how this war should inform the future of U.S. foreign policy. Nonetheless, partisans in this debate risk filtering history through ideological prisms and using it to win arguments. Still, this article suggests that even as the United States refocuses toward great-power competition, the meanings and lessons of the Iraq War remain hotly contested and highly consequential for America’s global role. This is especially true as the generation that fought the Iraq and Afghanistan wars enters leadership positions in the military and politics. Their interpretations of that conflict will matter immensely for how they think and act, just as competing viewpoints about the Vietnam War mattered for that generation.

Cultural and Global Turns for the Iraq War

This paper’s core claim is that scholarship on the causes of the Iraq War can be usefully organized into security and hegemony schools. These categories simplify a wide range of analysis, but they also permit a bird’s eye look at the field 20 years after the war began. At this point, the hegemony school probably has more adherents among scholars of the war, although the war’s architects gravitate to the security school.

The security-hegemony debate is not merely “academic.” It is a distinct interpretive divide that shapes how scholars approach their sources and leads to competing answers about other key questions. This divide also informs ongoing debates about U.S. foreign policy, with each school suggesting different lessons from the war. The polarization of the debate is real, but not ideal. Scholars should keep trying to synthesize these perspectives. Historians are particularly well suited for this task because they prioritize holistic, narrative, and multi-variable analysis rather than an insistence on parsimony and generalizability that is typically found among political scientists.

One way to challenge the security-hegemony binary may be to adopt new methodological approaches to the Iraq War. The security-hegemony divide operates largely within traditional approaches to the study of war. Hahn describes these methods as focusing on “the exercise of power, the conduct of diplomacy, the practice of international politics, the interest in domestic politics and public opinion, and the application of military strength by U.S. government officials who calculated the national interests and formulated policies designed to achieve those interests.”¹³⁷

New approaches could refresh this seemingly entrenched binary. The global turn in Cold War historiography, for example, broke up a debate focused on orthodox and revisionist accounts of the Cold War’s roots. The conversation refocused itself on how the Cold War reshaped global history and intersected with trends like decolonization, as well

134 Wertheim, “Pathologies of Primacy.” See also Mearsheimer, “Imperial by Design,” 16–17; and Bacevich, *Age of Illusions*, 59–89.

135 Stephen Walt, “The End of Hubris and the New Age of American Restraint,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/end-hubris>; Andrew Bacevich, “The Reckoning that Wasn’t: Why America Remains Trapped by False Dreams of Hegemony,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 28, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/andrew-bacevich-the-reckoning-that-wasnt-america-hegemony>; Patrick Porter, “Correspondence: The Establishment and U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 203–04, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_c_00347.

136 Walt, “End of Hubris.” See also Emma Ashford, “Strategies of Restraint: Remaking America’s Broken Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 24, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/strategies-restraint>.


137 Hahn, *Missions Accomplished*, xiii.

as how the agency of smaller powers influenced the superpower struggle.¹³⁸ Some scholars have already advanced more global accounts of the Iraq War by digging into Iraqi sources, the role of the United Nations, and the regional politics of the Iraq conflict.¹³⁹ Until more sources are available on decision-making in the Bush administration, this may be a more productive route than further entrenchment in the security-hegemony divide.

In addition, a cultural turn may be constructive for Iraq War scholarship. The cultural turn in diplomatic history led to more attention on how cultural factors like race, gender, religion, language, and memory shape policy and strategy.¹⁴⁰ Discussion of ideas and interests took a back seat to construction, imagination, narratives, symbols, and meaning in elite and popular culture.¹⁴¹ The transnational turn, moreover, highlighted the role of nonstate actors as important forces in the global arena. Scholars in this vein showed how a broader set of actors challenged the nation-state, formed networks, and exchanged ideas across borders, thus casting national politics in a global context.¹⁴²

There has indeed been interesting work in history, anthropology, and post-colonial studies on the role of culture in the Iraq War and the “War on Terror.” Andrew Preston and Lauren Turek examine how religion shaped Bush’s worldview and foreign policy.¹⁴³ Melani McAlister and Deepa Kumar explore how media and popular culture portrayals of the Middle East helped justify the use of force there to domestic audiences.¹⁴⁴ Edward Said, Zachary Lockman, and others argue that the Iraq War should be understood in the context of Orientalist beliefs about supposedly backwards, dangerous

Arabs and Muslims in need of the disciplining hand of Western rule.¹⁴⁵

Unfortunately, this work has often been stove-piped from the mainstream scholarship on the Iraq War’s causes. Many of these scholars have not consistently integrated cultural factors with the study of foreign policy or the causes of war.¹⁴⁶ More traditional scholars, in turn, often overlook culture, race, gender, religion, and other factors. Students of the Iraq War and all of post-9/11 foreign policy should close these gaps by asking how culture interacts with and shapes policy, the perception of rivals, and decision-makers’ understanding of themselves and America’s role in the world.¹⁴⁷ There is considerable room for this kind of synthesis as scholarship of the Iraq War moves forward. 

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138 Odd Arne Westad, “The New International History of the Cold War: Three (Possible) Paradigms,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (October 2000): 551–65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24914139>; Federico Romero, “Cold War Historiography at the Crossroads,” *Cold War History* 14, no. 4 (2014): 685–703, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2014.950249>; and Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War’s Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: Harper Collins, 2019), 1–6.

139 Braut-Hegghammer, “Cheater’s Dilemma”; and Helfont, *Saddam Against the World*.

140 Sarah Maza, *Thinking About History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 187–89; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 187–89; and Susan Smulyan, “Review: The Cultural Turn in U.S. Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 3 (June 2009): 539–40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44214031>.

141 Melvyn Leffler, “Presidential Address: New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations,” *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (March 1995): 173–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CB9780511609472.005>; and Robert Griffith, “Review: The Cultural Turn in Cold War Studies,” *Reviews in American History* 29, no. 1 (March 2001): 150–51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30031041>.

142 Akira Iriye, “The Transnational Turn,” *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 3 (June 2007): 373–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00641.x>.

143 Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 603–04; and Lauren Turek, “Religious Rhetoric and the Evolution of George W. Bush’s Political Philosophy,” *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 4 (November 2014): 975–98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24485600>.

144 Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire: Twenty Years after 9/11* (New York: Verso Books, 2021).

145 Edward Said, “A Window on the World,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 1, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/aug/02/alqaida.higher-education>; and Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

146 On the disinterest of many cultural historians in exploring causation, see Maza, *Thinking About History*, 196; and Leffler, “Presidential Address,” 180–81. On how many political scientists and diplomatic historians ignore culture, see Hunt, *Ideology*, 7–10.

147 Hunt, *Ideology*, xi–xii.