

President Bush and the Invasion of Iraq: Presidential Leadership and Thwarted Goals

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The 2003 Iraq War is a case study in winning the military battle but losing the war. President George W. Bush demonstrated impressive political skills in taking the country to war, despite the reservations of former generals, members of his father's administration and the doubts of contemporary military leaders. But President Bush's political victory in taking the country to war and the quick military defeat of Saddam's army were undercut by a long post-war insurgency in Iraq, the rise of Iran's influence in the Middle East, and the establishment of ISIS in a broken Iraq. This case study will examine President Bush's campaign for war, his use of intelligence to make his case, and the longer-term consequences of the war.

Many factors determine a decision to go to war, and in the United States, the personality and character of the president as leader of the country and commander in chief of the armed forces, are particularly important. To be sure, Congress is constitutionally the institution that must "declare war," but political and governmental dynamics most often favor the president. The president has the advantage of being a single decision maker directing the many bureaucracies that gather intelligence and prepare for war. Virtually all intelligence available to Congress originates in executive branch agencies. Publicly, the president can command the attention of the media and strongly shape public perceptions of the national security situation of the United States.

In the case of the Iraq war of 2003, several characteristics of President Bush strongly influenced his war decisions. 1) his disdain for an orderly policy process by making decisions without informing his top national security advisers. For instance, he never held a NSC meeting to consider the pros and cons of his decision to go to war in Iraq; 2) his self certainty reinforced by his religious convictions. In 2004 he declared "I'm a war president,"¹ He wanted to "rid the world of evil."² "This is what I was put on earth for. I'm here for a reason."³ This moral certitude served him well in convincing the country to go to war with Iraq, but it led him to dismiss advice about the potential consequences of the US war. 3) his refusal to consult with his top military and civilian officials before making key decisions, for instance, his decisions to appoint Paul Bremer as his viceroy in Iraq and reverse two important NSC decisions;

This chapter will first examine President Bush' public campaign to convince the nation that war with Iraq was necessary. It will then examine his use of intelligence to support his arguments. Finally, it will explore the longer term consequences of the US war in Iraq.

I. Early Planning and Building Support for War

Immediately after the atrocities of 9/11, President Bush deliberated with his war cabinet, and decided to go to war in Afghanistan to retaliate against al Qaeda and to defeat the Taliban, which had harbored al Qaeda as it plotted its attack on the United States. They also considered attacking Iraq, despite its non-involvement with the 9/11 attacks. The decision to go to war in Afghanistan was made in full consultation with his advisers, in contrast to the decision to invade Iraq, which was made over the course of more than a year and was characterized by incremental and fragmented decision making.

But President Bush also decided shortly after 9/11 to begin planning for war with Iraq. In a secret order on September 17 he ordered Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to begin to plan for war to depose the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein.⁴ In December 2001, as the US invasion of Afghanistan was beginning, Bush ordered US General Tommy Franks to work on plans for war with Iraq. Franks was surprised because he thought that the war in Afghanistan was not yet won and that the US would be stretched thin fighting two wars at once. But the president insisted, and Franks did what he was told, briefing President Bush several times on war plans in the spring of 2002. The US then began to divert material, personnel, intelligence, and resources from Afghanistan to prepare for a war with Iraq. Despite Bush's declarations that "I have no war plans on my desk,"⁵ in March he told National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice, "Fuck Saddam. We're taking him out."⁶

President Bush began to prepare the American public for war with Iraq in his State of the Union speech in January 2002 when he raised the specter of an "Axis of Evil" comprising Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. He argued that these were rogue nations that sponsored terrorism and had to be stopped. The next major public pronouncement by the president on national security and Iraq came at the June 1, 2002 commencement address he gave at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. The president said: "the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy. . . ." ⁷ Bush was signaling a shift in US national security policy so that it would not be necessary for a military threat to be imminent, in which case a preemptive war would be justified. The US would now use preventive war to assure that an enemy would not be able to get to the point where war would be imminent. "If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long."⁸ This is the sense in which the Iraq war has been called a "war of choice," rather than of necessity.

Bush had been urging British Prime Minister Tony Blair to join the US in its war with Iraq, and in July 2002, Richard Dearlove, director of British foreign intelligence (MI6), wrote a memo of a secret meeting he had with his US counterparts. He wrote: "Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. . . . There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action."⁹

Although the wisdom of attacking Iraq was not the subject of any full NSC meeting, Bush did receive warnings about the negative consequences of going to war. In July of 2002, director of policy planning at the State Department, Richard Haas, went to Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security adviser, to express his concern that the president was moving

toward war with Iraq and that it would be a mistake. Rice told him that “the president had made up his mind.”¹⁰ In August, Secretary of State Colin Powell, had dinner with the president to warn him about the dangers of war with Iraq. Powell warned that a war would destroy the Iraqi government. “There will be no government. There will be civil disorder. You break it, you own it. . . . You’ll have twenty-five million Iraqis standing around looking at each other.”¹¹

Public warning also came from Anthony Zinni, retired former Marine and commander of CENTCOM who continued to consult with the CIA. Zinni was skeptical of Bush’s claims that Saddam was stockpiling WMD. “In my time at CENTCOM, I watched the intelligence and never – not once – did it say ‘He had WMD.’”¹² Even Brent Scowcroft, National Security Adviser to George H.W. Bush (41) and James A. Baker, Bush 41’s Secretary of State wrote op-ed article urging caution. Scowcroft wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Don’t Attack Saddam,” in which he argued that it would be “very expensive” and that “there is a virtual consensus in the world against an attack on Iraq at this time.”¹³

But President Bush was not convinced by their entreaties or Colin Powell’s warning. On August 26, 2002, Vice President Cheney told the Veterans of Foreign Wars, “Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon. . . . There is no doubt he is amassing [WMD] to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us.”¹⁴ In the fall of 2002 the White House began a strong public push for war with Iraq, organizing the White House Iraq Group (WHIG) to prepare the American public for war. Chief of Staff Andrew Card explained the timing of the public push. “From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.”¹⁵

The arguments for war were based on Saddam’s possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), referring to chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. It was not unreasonable to believe that Saddam possessed such weapons. He had been working on them in the 1980s, and he had used chemical weapons on Iraqis who opposed his rule. When UN weapons inspectors went into Iraq after the US victory over Saddam in the Gulf War of 1991, they found stores of chemical and biological weapons and discovered that he was well on the way to building a nuclear bomb. The weapons inspectors then destroyed all of his WMD before leaving Iraq.

Thus the president and his administration were not unrealistic in asserting that Saddam had reconstituted his weapons of mass destruction. The problem was that there was very little evidence for their claims, which will be examined in the next section.

In a major address on October 7, 2002, President Bush told the nation that Saddam had WMD and was preparing to use them on the United States. Iraq “possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons. . . . The evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program. . . . it could have a nuclear weapon in less than a year. . . . we cannot wait for the final proof – the smoking gun – that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.”¹⁶ His speech came a month before the congressional elections of 2002, and the president wanted to put pressure on Congress to adopt a resolution to authorize him to go to war against Iraq. Bush was successful, and within two weeks, Congress passed a joint resolution authorizing the president to go to war in Iraq.¹⁷

Secretary of State Colin Powell had convinced Bush to seek approval of war with Iraq from the United Nations Security Council. In his address to the Security Council on September 12, Bush urged them to take action. After his address, he framed the issue as a clear obligation of the UN to support the United States, “I’m a patient man. . . . But if they cannot bring themselves together to disarm Saddam Hussein, then we will lead a coalition to do just that.”¹⁸ If the UN did not back the US plan, Bush said it would be “an ineffective debating society” that will be “irrelevant.”¹⁹ The Security Council issued the strongly worded Resolution 1441 on November 8 that ordered Iraq to account for its WMD and allow UN inspectors to ensure they were gone.

As the administration continued to advocate war against Iraq and the military began to deploy troops and assets for the coming war, the UN inspectors went into Iraq. In December Iraq issued a report on its weapons, but National Security Adviser Rice called the December Iraqi account of its weapons a “12,200 page lie.” She argued that the declaration was “intended to cloud and confuse the true picture of Iraq’s arsenal. . . . and constitutes a material breach of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441. . . .”²⁰ As the initial reporting date for the UN inspectors (January 27, 2003) approached, the Bush administration became increasingly impatient with the inability of the UN inspection team to locate evidence of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.

The UN weapons inspector, headed by Hans Blix, had virtual carte blanche to search Iraq, and they presented four reports to the UN, all concluding that no WMD could be found. Their final report was made on March 7 with negative results. These reports were rejected by President Bush who declared “Inspection teams do not need more time or more personnel.”²¹ On March 17 President Bush insisted that the UN inspectors “should leave Iraq immediately.”²²

The lack of any comprehensive deliberation in the Bush administration about war in Iraq was striking. Paul Pillar noted “. . . the absence of any identifiable process for making the decision to go to war.”²³ CIA Director George Tenet agreed: “There was never a serious debate” about options for continuing to contain Iraq.²⁴

On March 19, the war began.

II. The use of Intelligence

In their efforts to take the country to war with Iraq, President Bush and Vice President Cheney made a number of claims about US intelligence findings. Some of these claims were supported by US intelligence agencies and some were not. The most important claims turned out not to be true. Arguably, they seriously misled the US public in their quest for war. This section will examine the most important claims that convinced Congress and the American people that war with Iraq was necessary. The president claimed that there was a close link between Saddam and al Qaeda; that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons that he intended to use against the United States, and that Saddam had an active nuclear program under way. In addition, intelligence was politicized in the sense that it was used to support the president’s preferred policy outcome rather than being used to inform policy choices.

Asserted Link with al Qaeda

Immediately after the attacks of 9/11, President Bush believed that Saddam Hussein was connected to the attacks; after making this claim repeatedly, a majority of the American public believed it. The problem was, that there was virtually no evidence of this link, and the CIA argued that there was no active link. Within 24 hours of the attacks, President Bush told Richard Clarke several times to look into “any shred” of evidence that Saddam was behind the attack, despite Clarke’s report that the intelligence community had concluded that al Qaeda perpetrated the atrocities.²⁵ The administration’s argument for going to war in Iraq was based in part on its conclusion that Saddam was allied with al Qaeda – a conclusion that was explicitly challenged by the intelligence community, especially the CIA and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the State Department.

CIA officer Paul Pillar, who was in charge of coordinating the intelligence community’s assessment of Iraq from 2000 to 2005 concluded: “the greatest discrepancy between the administration’s public statements and the intelligence community’s judgments concerned . . . the relationship between Saddam and al Qaeda. The enormous attention devoted to this subject did not reflect any judgment by intelligence officials that there was or was likely to be anything like the “alliance” the administration said existed.”²⁶

On October 7, 2002, in his major speech about the need for war, President Bush said, “We’ve learned that Iraq has trained al-Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gasses.”²⁷ The main source of this claim was the interrogation of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, a Libyan captured in Pakistan, who had been a senior member of al Qaeda. However, in February of 2002 the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) had judged that al-Libi’s statements were suspect because he could not provide credible details about the types of weapons involved, the Iraqis he dealt with, or the location of the meetings. In addition his claims were made under torture.²⁸

Chemical and Biological Weapons

Suspicious that Saddam had significant quantities of chemical weapons in 2002 were based on the facts that he had large quantities of chemical munitions in the 1980s and that he had used them internally against the Kurds and in his war with Iran. Saddam’s chemical and biological warfare capacity formed much of the basis for the Bush administration’s argument that Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction were a threat to the United States. President Bush said on September 26, 2002 that “the Iraqi regime possesses biological and chemical weapons. The Iraqi regime is building the facilities necessary to make more biological and chemical weapons.”²⁹

A report by the Defense Intelligence Agency from September 2002, however, voiced some skepticism and pointed out that the WMD were destroyed after the 1991 Gulf War. It stated: “There is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons, or where Iraq has – or will – establish its chemical warfare agent production facilities.”³⁰ After searching Iraq for WMD, Inspector David Kay reported that with respect to chemical weapons, “Iraq’s large-scale capability to develop, produce, and fill new CW munitions

was reduced – if not entirely destroyed – during Operations Desert Storm and Desert Fox and 13 years of UN sanctions and UN inspections”³¹

The primary, contemporary evidence for the biological weapons and mobile labs claim that Colin Powell asserted in his February 5 UN speech was Curveball, who was an Iraqi defector held by the Germans.³² Despite doubts about his reliability, the CIA assured Colin Powell before his UN speech that the sources were multiple and credible. Yet senior German officials of the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) said that they had warned U.S. intelligence officials in the fall of 2002 that Curveball was unreliable. After hearing the U.S. claims about chemical and biological weapons, the Germans said “We were shocked. Mein Gott! We had always told them it was not proven. . . .It was not hard intelligence.”³³

In May 2003, after the initial military phase of the war, the U.S. sent nine bioweapons experts, each with ten years professional experience, to examine two trailers that had been found that were thought to be mobile biological weapons labs. After a careful examination, the technical team reported back to the CIA on May 27, 2003 that the trailers were not designed for bioweapons production but rather for producing hydrogen for weather balloons.³⁴

Thus, although the premise that Saddam possessed chemical and biological weapons was plausible, there was no hard evidence for it, and policy makers ignored several warnings that undercut their convictions.

Nuclear Weapons

Although Saddam’s supposed participation in 9/11 was a strong political argument for revenge against Iraq, the argument that Saddam was close to obtaining nuclear weapons was the most compelling argument for war. Even those most skeptical about the need for war and its consequences had to be shaken by the possibility of Saddam with nuclear weapons. Therefore, the administration played the nuclear card with significant effects in its public campaign for war.

The suspicion that Saddam was in the process of reconstituting his nuclear capacity was not unreasonable. After the 1991 Gulf War, it was discovered that Saddam had made much more progress toward a nuclear capacity than either the U.N. or the CIA had suspected. That capacity was destroyed by U.S. forces in the war and by U.N. inspectors after the war. Given Saddam’s record, it seemed reasonable that he would again seek nuclear weapons. The problem was that the main evidence upon which the administration relied was dubious: Saddam’s attempted purchase of yellow cake (uranium oxide) from Niger and Saddam’s attempted purchase of aluminum tubes that the administration claimed were intended to be used as nuclear centrifuges.

In his State of the Union speech on January 28, 2003, President Bush said “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium [necessary for nuclear weapons] from Africa.”³⁵ The claim was also included in the CIA’s National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of early October 2002. The State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, however, wrote in the NIE: “the claims of Iraqi pursuit of natural uranium in Africa are, in INR’s assessment, highly dubious.”³⁶ George Tenet had previously warned that the Niger story was probably not true, and had convince the president’s advisers to take it out of the president’s October 7 speech in Cincinnati.³⁷

The problem was that the documents used as evidence were forged and not authentic. The letter-head of one letter was from the military government that had been replaced before the 1999 date on the letter, and the signature on the letter indicated the name of a foreign ministry official who had left his position in 1989. The forgery was made public on March 7, 2003 by Mohamed El Baradei who was director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) who reported the findings to the U.N. Security Council.³⁸

In early 2001 a CIA analyst discovered that Iraq tried to buy thousands of highly specialized aluminum tubes. An April 10, 2001 CIA report asserted that the tubes “have little use other than for a uranium enrichment program.”³⁹ The Energy Department, however, said that the tubes were the wrong size for centrifuges and that the openness of the solicitation by Iraq indicated that the tubes were intended for conventional weapons. In June of 2001 a shipment of the tubes was seized in Jordan, and the United States assigned its best nuclear centrifuge engineers to examine the case. The Energy Departments (and British) experts concluded that the tubes were meant for conventional weapons purposes, though the CIA still maintained that they were intended for nuclear centrifuges.⁴⁰

On September 8, 2002 the story of the tubes was leaked to the *New York Times*, but without any of the reservations expressed by the nuclear experts. Cheney and Rice, who expressed certainty that the tubes were intended for nuclear purposes, quickly confirmed the validity of the leak. Rice confirmed that the tubes “are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs.”⁴¹ The claim that the aluminum tubes were intended to be nuclear centrifuges was included in the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of early October, and played an important role in convincing members of Congress to vote for the AUMF in October 2002. But the Energy and State Departments both dissented in the NIE and said the tubes were not likely meant for nuclear purposes played

Politicizing Intelligence

In its pursuit of public support for regime change in Iraq, Bush administration may also have tried to politicize the intelligence process by putting pressure on intelligence analysts to arrive at the conclusions favored by the administration. During the summer and fall of 2002 Vice President Cheney made multiple visits to CIA headquarters in Langley in order to ask sharp questions about CIA analysis of intelligence relating to Iraq. Senator Rockefeller, ranking minority member of the Senate Select Intelligence Committee, concluded that there was an atmosphere of “intense pressure in which the intelligence community officials were asked to render judgments on matters relating to Iraq when the most senior officials in the Bush administration had already forcefully and repeatedly stated their conclusions publicly.”⁴²

Confirmation that pressure was applied to the Intelligence Community with respect to the claimed link between Saddam and al Qaeda came in a special report by a team headed by Richard J. Kerr, former deputy director of central intelligence. With respect to the claimed link between Saddam and al Qaeda, the Report concluded:

In the case of al-Qa’ida, the constant stream of questions aimed at finding links between Saddam and the terrorist network caused analysts to take what they termed a “purposely aggressive approach” in conducting *exhaustive and repetitive*

searches for such links. *Despite the pressure*, however, the Intelligence Community remained firm in its assessment that no operational or collaborative relationship existed.⁴³ [emphasis added]

Perhaps the most authoritative evidence that policy makers tried to politicize intelligence prior to the Iraq War is the testimony of Paul R. Pillar. Pillar was the national intelligence officer who had responsibility for Middle East intelligence from 2002 to 2005 and directed the coordination of the intelligence community's assessments of Iraq. In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Pillar charged that 1) "official intelligence analysis was not relied on in making even the most significant national security decisions; 2) "intelligence was misused publicly to justify decisions already made; and 3) "the intelligence community's own work was politicized."⁴⁴

David Kay, who had led UN WMD inspectors after the Gulf war in 1991, led the Iraq Survey Group of 1,400 inspectors in 2003 to find the WMD that had been the justification for the US invasion. On January 28, 2004, in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Kay said, "Let me begin by saying that we were almost all wrong." about the presence of WMDs in Iraq.⁴⁵ A follow-up search led by Charles Duelfer came to the same conclusion.

In summary, President Bush argued that there was a link between Saddam and al Qaeda, despite CIA evidence and arguments to the contrary. Although there was little contemporary evidence that Iraq possessed chemical weapons, President Bush and allied government believed that he did. Although Saddam had used biological weapons before the 1991 Gulf War, there was little evidence that he still had that capacity. The only evidence for Saddam's possessing nuclear weapons were claims about yellowcake and aluminum tubes, and the administration used those claims with much more confidence than the intelligence warranted. Overall, the Bush administration used misleading evidence in an overconfident way to convince Americans that Saddam was a serious threat to the United States, when he was not.

III. Military Victory, Occupation, and Insurgency

The off-the-shelf previous plans for war in Iraq called for many more troops than the US used in its initial invasion. Previous planning for a U.S. invasion of Iraq had been conducted by General Anthony Zinni who oversaw the development of plans for a U.S. war with Iraq which called for 380,000 troops and an occupation of up to 10 years.⁴⁶ General Tommy Franks had been involved with preparing the troop levels for the plans and told Rumsfeld in December 2001 that 385,000 troops would be necessary for a successful war in Iraq.⁴⁷ Colin Powell had also advised Bush that more troops would be necessary.⁴⁸ Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, however, wanted to change the paradigm for war fighting and accomplish more with fewer troops by maximizing mobility, intelligence, and the use of new technology. Rumsfeld thought that a much smaller force would be sufficient for military success.⁴⁹

Bush overruled the generals and the US ended up invading with 67,700 troops plus allied forces.⁵⁰ The number of troops was sufficient for the initial military victory, but was woefully inadequate for the following occupation. After attacking Iraqi air defenses with 600 cruise missiles and 1,500 air strikes on the first day, US troops moved into Iraq and pushed on to

Baghdad, defeating Saddam's military. Though there was resistance, and US forces took casualties, many Iraqi troops abandoned their defensive positions.

Paul Bremer Appointed

President Bush then made the fateful decision to replace Jay Garner, the experienced former general who had been appointed to conduct Phase IV of the war, that is, returning the country to normal functioning after the military victory. With command experience at the end of the Gulf war of 1990-91, Garner was well qualified to do the job. But Bush decided to replace Garner with Paul Bremer, who had State Department experience but who had never been in Iraq. Bush made the decision at lunch with Bremer at the White House and was to meet with his advisers to consider the appointment. He immediately announced his decision, and when his top aides joined them, Bush said, "I don't know whether we need this meeting at all. Jerry and I just had it."⁵¹ Colin Powell recalled "I was stunned," "the plan was for Zal to go back. He was the one guy who knew this place better than anyone." There were 'no full deliberations. And you suddenly discover, gee, maybe that wasn't so great, we should have thought about it a little longer.'⁵²

Bremer was appointed to direct the Coalition Provisional Authority, and have control of all US policy in Iraq, military and civilian. He considered himself to be responsible only to the president and, in effect, the US viceroy in Iraq. Bremer thought that the Iraqi state was in chaos and that it would take some time before a new political system was able to govern Iraq democratically. Bremer said that Bush had told him in a private meeting on May 6 that "we're going to take our time to get it right."⁵³ In effect, this changed the US role from liberator to occupier. The decision to extend the US presence in Iraq was made without consultation with Condi Rice, Colin Powell or Donald Rumsfeld (who objected after the fact).

Coalition Provisional Orders 1 and 2

Bremer then made two decisions that would have seriously negative consequences for the United States: de-Baathification of the government of Iraq and disbanding its army. A National Security Council meeting on March 10, 2003 had come to the consensus that the top levels of Saddam's government had to go, but that mid-level managers and technicians had to stay in their positions to run the technical infrastructure of the country. The military understanding of the purge was that it would apply to the top two levels of the Baath party, those who were clearly leaders and close to Saddam, which amounted to perhaps 6,000 people. But when Bremer issued CPA Order Number One, he interpreted the de-Baathification policy to exclude the top four levels of the Baath Party as well as the top three levels in each government ministry.⁵⁴ This decision effectively eliminated the leadership and top technical capacity for universities, hospitals, transportation, electricity, and communications. Although Bremer said that the order would affect only about 20,000 people, the total amounted to 85,000 to 100,000 people.⁵⁵ According to George Tenet, this included "forty thousand schoolteachers, who had joined the Baath Party simply to keep their jobs."⁵⁶

Others in the administration did not believe that there was any consensus or even knowledge of the change in policy. CIA Director George Tenet said, "In fact, we knew nothing about it until de-Baathification was a fait accompli . . . Clearly, this was a critical policy decision, yet there was no NSC Principals meeting to debate the move."⁵⁷ The CIA station chief

of Baghdad, when he learned of the decision, warned Bremer that he (Bremer) was about to fire the key technicians who operated the electric, water, and transportation infrastructure of the country. He told Bremer, “By nightfall, you’ll have driven 30,000 to 50,000 Baathists underground. And in six months, you’ll really regret this.”⁵⁸

Bremer put Ahmad Chalabi in charge of de-Baathification. Chalabi was a Shiite Muslim with close ties to Iran, and took a hard line against former Sunni members of the government by installing Shia Muslims in their places. This began the suppression of Sunnis, many of whom would join the insurrection against the US occupation and eventually join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In a NSC meeting on 12 March 2003 there was a consensus that the U.S. forces would use the Iraqi Army to help provide internal and external security in post-war Iraq.⁵⁹ Yet on 23 May, CPA head Paul Bremer issued CPA Order Number Two that “dissolved” the Ministry of Defense and the military services. The security forces included 385,000 in the armed forces, 285,000 in the Interior Ministry (police), and 50,000 in presidential security units⁶⁰ Of course those in police and military units that were Saddam’s top enforcers (e.g. the Special Republican Guard) had to be barred from working in the new government. But many officers in the Army were professional soldiers, and the rank and file enlisted soldiers constituted a source of stability and order. The disbanding threw hundreds of thousands out of work and immediately created a large pool of unemployed and armed men who felt humiliated and hostile to the U.S. occupiers. According to one U.S. officer in Baghdad, “When they disbanded the military, and announced we were occupiers – that was it. Every moderate, every person that had leaned toward us, was furious.”⁶¹

How did this crucial reversal come about? In a NSC meeting on May 23, Bremer “informed the president of the plan [de-Baathification] in a video teleconference.”⁶² President Bush did not formally decide to reverse his decision of 12 March, but Bremer interpreted his lack of questions as approval. Importantly, Colin Powell was out of town when the decision was made, and he was not informed about it, much less consulted. “I talked to Rice and said, ‘Condi, what happened?’ And her reaction was: ‘I was surprised too, but it is a decision that has been made and the president is standing behind Jerry’s decision. Jerry is the guy on the ground’ And there was no further debate about it.”⁶³ This was Bremer’s first time in Iraq, and he had been ‘on the ground’ for only 11 days when he gave the order.

The order had not been cleared through any normal policy process, nor had Bremer consulted the CIA, State Department, or NSC leaders.⁶⁴ General McKiernan’s (then head of coalition forces in Iraq) said that he was not consulted. “I never saw that order and never concurred.” Central Command in Florida was also surprised by the decision.⁶⁵ Paul Pillar, National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia, said that the intelligence community was not consulted about the decision.⁶⁶

In addition to the dismantling of Iraqi security forces, the decision bred resentment among the Iraqi Army Officer Corps, many of whom had been trained in US professional military training programs. Before the US invasion, US military and intelligence representatives had told senior Iraqi military commanders that if they did not join the resistance to the US

invasion, they would be taken care of and would have military roles in the post-Saddam Iraq. When CPA Director Paul Bremer disbanded the Iraqi Army, US military leaders were appalled. But more importantly, the Iraqi officers felt outraged, betrayed, and angry. They then joined the resistance to the US occupation.⁶⁷

Both of these key decisions fueled the coming insurgency by: 1) alienating hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who could not support themselves or their families; 2) undermining the normal infrastructure necessary for social and economic activity; 3) ensuring that there was not sufficient security to carry on normal life, and 4) creating insurgents who were angry at the United States, many of whom had weapons and were trained to use them.

Rise of the Insurgency

After the military victory, Donald Rumsfeld and military leaders expected that after the military victory over Saddam that the US would begin drawing down the US troop presence in the Iraq and would turn Iraq over to an indigenous government. But when President Bush declared “mission accomplished” on the aircraft on May 1 he declared “the transition from dictatorship to democracy will take time.”⁶⁸ In making this declaration, Bush was signaling that the military would not leave Iraq as planned, but would stay to ensure that the new government was a democracy. Bush made this decision without conducting a NSC meeting and without consulting Powell or Rumsfeld.⁶⁹ US military and intelligence planners had predicted the rise of an insurgency, but their warnings were ignored by Rumsfeld.⁷⁰

One of the first signs of trouble after the US military victory was the looting of the National Museum by Iraqi looters and the failure of US troops to stop the looting. This signaled that the US was seemingly not concerned about law and order or preserving the historical heritage of Iraq. Donald Rumsfeld dismissed the looting as “stuff happens.”⁷¹

The broader context of these initial decisions was the bitter enmity that had developed between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq. Sunnis were a minority in Iraq (about 20% of the population), but Saddam and the Baath Party ensured that they controlled the government completely and kept down the Shiites, who composed about 60% of the Iraqi population. (Kurds, who were also Sunni but wanted independence from Saddam’s government, made up the other major ethnic/religious portion of the population.)⁷² With Saddam gone, the Shiites saw an opportunity to rule the country and turn the tables on the Sunnis. After elections that the Sunnis boycotted, Shiites dominated the legislature, and Nouri al-Maliki Maliki became Prime Minister. The US was backing the government of Iraq, which was now dominated by Shiites. The US pressured Maliki and the Shiites to create a government open to Sunnis and not extract revenge for years of oppression, but sectarian hostility was stronger than US admonitions.

With Sunnis regarding US soldiers as an occupying force, they began an insurgency to drive the US out of Iraq. At first, Rumsfeld denied that there was any insurgency, but in the fall of 2003, after many US casualties, it became clear that a major insurgency, using guerilla tactics, was under way. Over the next two years, US casualties continued to mount, and it became clear that the US was not “winning,” but was under continuous attack by the mostly Sunni insurgents.

Iraq Sunnis resented Maliki and the Shiite-dominated government, which was taking revenge for years of oppression. During this guerilla warfare period, Sunni extremists in northern Iraq and southern Syria declared themselves al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), though they were denounced by the original al Qaeda in Afghanistan. The AQI vicious attacks on the Shiite government and the infamous destruction of the Golden Mosque of Samarra, succeeded in provoking the Shiite government to take more repressive measures against Sunnis. AQI calculated that the predictable Shiite repression of Sunnis would drive moderate Sunnis into the arms of AQI as their only protection against Shiite repression.⁷³

In 2006, the war dragged on, with the US continuing to take casualties and the US public opinion turning against the war. President Bush decided to reevaluate US options and calculated that that US efforts could be salvaged by increasing the number of US troops. After replacing Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense, he appointed General David Petraeus to replace General Casey in Iraq to implement a counterinsurgency strategy (COIN). This approach stressed providing more security to the Iraqi civilian population and closer interaction of US troops with Iraqis. Petraeus was given additional 20 to 30 thousand troops to implement his strategy in 2007, bringing total US military forces up to more than 165,000 (with 155,000 contractors, 26,800 of them American).⁷⁴

As he was pursuing the counterinsurgency strategy, Petraeus was able to recruit Sunnis to support the US by paying them well and convincing them that AQI had to be defeated. This was called the “Anbar Awakening.” The Sunnis were so enraged by the violence and atrocities of AQI, such as beheadings, that they decided to side with the US against AQI extremists. In addition, the Shiite religious leader, Moqtada al-Sadr decided to stop his Shiite follows in Baghdad from persecuting Sunnis.

These steps led to a sharp decrease in US casualties and Iraqi civilian deaths. This gave President Bush the breathing room to announce a gradual drawdown of US troops in Iraq. In implementing this drawdown, President Bush signed a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Prime Minister Maliki, in which he agreed that all US forces would leave Iraq by the end of 2011. Maliki refused to agree to a SOFA provision that would ensure that any US soldiers accused of a crime would be tried in a US justice system rather than Iraqi courts. Without such a SOFA, President Bush would not agree to extend the US presence in Iraq. President Obama fulfilled the agreement that Bush had made by withdrawing US troops by the end of 2011. Critics of President Obama, however, criticize him for fulfilling Bush’s pledge and not convincing Maliki to allow US troops to stay in Iraq after 2011 in order to thwart the rise of ISIS.⁷⁵ But if 165,000 US troops could not stop Maliki from suppression Sunnis, it is not clear how a much lower level of troops could have succeeded.

Without the presence of US troops, Prime Minister Maliki did not keep his agreement to conduct his government in a way that was open to Sunni citizens; rather, he allowed his government officials to purge Sunnis from the government and vigorously oppress them in other ways.⁷⁶ This persecution of Sunnis by the Shiite government of Iraq led to the resurgence of AQI, which, in 2013 declared themselves the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS began to occupy territory in northern Iraq and southern Syria and claimed to establish a new Muslim

Caliphate. ISIS recruited former Sunni military leaders by presenting itself as the only protector of Sunnis from the depredations of the Shiite government of Iraq.

ISIS began to hold territory and act as a proto-state, rather than merely insurgents. It ruled its territory viciously and undertook terrorist attacks in Europe and the US. After ISIS committed many atrocities and acts of terrorism, in 2014 President Obama began to send US troops to aid the coalition of forces fighting ISIS; in 2016 there were more than 4,000 US troops aiding the Iraqi government's fight against ISIS.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates the importance of the individual personality and character in presidential leadership. If Vice President Al Gore had been elected in 2000, it is highly unlikely that he would have invaded Iraq. Gore was not committed to regime change in Iraq as was President Bush and his neoconservative advisers, particularly Vice President Cheney. Gore did not see the 1991 Gulf War as a failure because US forces did not drive to Baghdad. Gore would probably have ordered military clashes with Saddam's Iraq in enforcing the no-fly zones, but he would most likely have heeded the warnings and advice of top US military and national security leaders that a US invasion of Iraq would lead to a quagmire and disaster, as predicted by President George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft in their book, *A World Transformed*:

Trying to eliminate Saddam, extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq, would have violated our guideline about not changing objectives in midstream, engaging in "[mission creep](#)," and would have incurred incalculable human and political costs.⁷⁷

Despite the large national security bureaucracies in the executive branch, President Bush was able to overcome their skepticism about invading Iraq by appointing people who shared his world view and ensured that his political appointees imposed their will on the career professionals in their agencies. This is the way the American executive branch is designed to work, for good or for ill.

After more than 4,000 US deaths, 30,000 wounded, and more than 200,000 Iraqi deaths at the end of the Bush administration, the United States withdrew from Iraq.⁷⁸ Thus the US invasion of Iraq resulted in the rise of ISIS, a much greater threat to the United States than Saddam ever was. In addition, the removal of Saddam (a Sunni) and the subsequent takeover of the Iraq government by the majority Shiites, eliminated Iraq as a major counter-weight to Shiite Iran as a major power in the Middle East.⁷⁹ A war that was intended to protect the United States by removing Saddam resulted in the rise of ISIS, which threatened to dominate Iraq and increased the influence of Iran, which President Bush had declared a member of the "Axis of Evil."

Military scholar David Kilcullen, who had been an advisor to Secretary of State Rice and Senior Counterinsurgency Advisor to David Petraeus in Iraq, concluded that the US invasion of Iraq was "the greatest strategic screw-up since Hitler's invasion of Russia."⁸⁰ Historian Jean Edward Smith concluded in his biography of President Bush, with a focus on the Iraq war: "Rarely in the history of the United States has the nation been so ill-served as during the

presidency of George W. Bush. . . . his decision to invade Iraq is easily the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president.”⁸¹

ENDNOTES

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- ⁶ George Packer, *The Assassins’ Gate: American in Iraq* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 45.
- ⁷ Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, *Administration of George W. Bush, 2002*, “Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York” (1 June 2002), pp. 944-948.
- ⁸ Smith, *Bush*, p. 307.
- ⁹ “IRAQ: PRIME MINISTER’S MEETING, 23 JULY,” From Mathew Rycroft (a Downing Street foreign policy aide) to David Manning S 195 /02, “SECRET AND STRICTLY PERSONAL – UK EYES ONLY,” printed in TIMESONLINE, May 1, 2005, accessed 21 June 2005. According to James Risen, on July 20, 2002 Dearlove spent the day at CIA headquarters in Langley, VA and spoke alone with George Tenet for 90 minutes. James Risen, *State of War* (NY: Free Press, 2006), p. 114. Dearlove also met with National Security Adviser Rice, Glen Frankel, “From Memos, Insights Into Ally’s Doubts on Iraq War,” *Washington Post* (June 28, 2005), p. 1, A10
- ¹⁰ Smith, *Bush*, p. 308.
- ¹¹ Smith, *Bush*, p. 340.
- ¹² Smith, *Bush*, p. 313.
- ¹³ Smith, *Bush*, p. 311.
- ¹⁴ Vice President Cheney, Remarks at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention (August 26, 2002).
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- ²² Smith, *Bush*, p. 354.
- ²³ Paul Pillar, “The Right Stuff,” *The National Interest*, Vol. 91(Sept/Oct 2007), p. 55.
- ²⁴ Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, “Ex-CIA Chief, in Book, Assails Cheney on Iraq,” *New York Times* (April 27, 2007).
- ²⁵ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies* (NY: Free Press, 2004), pp. 30-33.
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- ²⁷ President Bush Outline Iraq Threat, Remarks in Cincinnati, Ohio, October 7, 2002.
- ²⁸ The unclassified statement of the DIA report (DITSUM#044-02) is contained in the letter from Senators John Rockefeller and Carl Levin to Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby (October 18, 2005), <https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/11/DIAletter.102605.pdf>.
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- ³⁰ Kevin Whitelaw, "We Were All Wrong." *U.S. News & World Report* (February: 24, 2004); Bruce B. Auster, Mark Mazzetti, and Edward T. Pound, "Truth and consequences." *U.S. News & World Report*, June 9, 2003) p. 17.
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- ³⁶ Central Intelligence Agency. 2002a. "Key Judgments [from the October 2002, NIE]: Iraq's continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction." Declassified excerpts published on the CIA website; www.odci.gov/odci/pubs/research.
- ³⁷ Paul Pillar who coordinated the intelligence community's analysis of Iraq said, "U.S. intelligence analysts had questioned the credibility of the report making [the Niger] claim, had kept it out of their own unclassified products, and had advised the White House not to use it publicly. But the administration put the claim into the speech anyway. . . ." (Pillar. 2006: 6).
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- ⁴⁶ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II* (NY: Vintage, 2007), p. 26.
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