

# The US invasion of Iraq: failings and consequences

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/01/why-did-the-united-states-invade-iraq-in-2003-and-what-went-wrong-with-the-subsequent-occupation-what-impact-has-the-war-had-on-us-foreign-policy/>

ANON, AUG 1 2011

### **Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003 and what went wrong with the subsequent occupation? What impact has the war had on US foreign policy?**

#### **Introduction**

“How have we got to this point, where two western governments take us into an illegal and immoral war against a stricken nation with whom we have no quarrel...an act of aggression opposed by almost everybody..?” (Pilger 2003 p23).

This paper will argue that the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was a manifestation of the neoconservative agenda, which was well established before the Bush junior administration and was able to emerge at the forefront due to the atmosphere of fear created by 9/11. This will be illustrated first by looking at how the neoconservative agenda to invade Iraq was evident before the events of 9/11 and George W Bush's administration. Second it will be argued that the events of 9/11 and the atmosphere of fear was clearly manipulated by the neoconservatives to push through an unrelated war with Iraq. Finally by contrasting neoconservative and realist thought and looking at the unfolding events leading up to the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, it is clear that it was the neoconservative agenda that prevailed over the realists.

The significant contrast between the expectations and the reality of the unfolding Iraq war provoked a debate on why the war went wrong (Hendrickson and Tucker 2005). In 2006 Bush was finally persuaded that the situation was not going well and it was evident that a civil war was occurring (Dodge 2007). This pessimism was encapsulated in the publication of the Iraq Study Group (ISG): “the situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating. There is no path that can guarantee success” (Dodge 2007 p85). Several common explanations have been argued in relation to what went wrong. These include lack of post war planning, lack of troops, problems with the US's political policies in Iraq, problems with bureaucracy, and the consequences of burning bridges with the international community. However, overall a more convincing argument states that the reason for failure was an inevitable consequence of the flawed and controversial decision to invade Iraq in the first place (Hendrickson and Tucker 2005).

The United States' decision to launch a preventive attack on Iraq in 2003 resulted in significant international resentment, plummeting approval ratings of the Bush administration and domestic disenchantment which manifested itself with subsequent election results. This was exacerbated by failure to find weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the horrific mistreatment of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison, and the problematic occupation. All this has had an impact on future foreign policy. Notably this impact has steered away from neoconservatism reverting back to a more realist approach.

#### **Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003?**

It is important to note that regime change in Iraq has been pursued by neoconservatives before the events of 9/11 and the George W Bush administration. The US had supported and provided arms for Saddam Hussein throughout the Iran-Iraq 1980-8 conflict, despite his oppression of the Iraqi people (Dunne 2003). The only reason this changed

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is because Saddam made the mistake of threatening US interests, when he decided to invade Kuwait in 1990. This shifted his status from regional ally to threat, especially for Israel (Khong 2008). This led to the George H W Bush administration launching 1991 Operation Desert Storm under the banner of the UN (Dunne 2003), along with the imposition of sanctions which only domestically strengthened Saddam's position and had a catastrophic effect on the Iraqi people (Chomsky 2003b). After the 1991 Gulf War, Bush senior's administration made the significant decision not to remove Saddam from power (Khong 2008). Realists believed it to be a success, indicated in Bush senior's ideas about a New World Order, where the US would dominate with broad international consensus (Dolan and Cohen 2006)

However neoconservatives saw it as a wasted opportunity to assert US hegemony, which would not naturally emerge as the realists believed. Their opposition was illustrated in the document *Defence Planning Guidance* in 1992 (Dolan and Cohen 2006 p43) which stated that the US should take advantage of the collapse of the USSR to assert its dominance through increase in defence spending and destroying any power which would attempt to counter it. Furthermore the US would only create "coalitions of the willing" (Dolan and Cohen 2006 p43) meaning that others could join them but could not stop them. Significantly the notion of preventive war was advocated in this document (Dolan and Cohen 2006).

Two second generation neoconservatives; William Kristol and Robert Kagan, also sent a letter to President Bill Clinton in 1998 under the organisation Project for the New American Century (PNAC) (Khong 2008). This letter argued that the current policy of containment of Iraq was not sufficient to eliminate Saddam Hussein's use as a security threat (Dolan and Cohen 2006). This document was co-signed by fellow neoconservatives, including: Elliott Abrams, John Bolton, Francis Fukuyama, Robert Kagan, Zalmay Khalizad, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz (Khong 2008). Even in 2000 the PNAC published a report reiterating the neoconservative agenda for the new administration (Kellner 2004). Clearly, neoconservatives had taken the opportunity in times of calm to establish their agenda; all that was needed was an event that would push it to the forefront (Kellner 2004).

Significantly Bush appointed several of these signatories into his administration: Wolfowitz, Abrams, Bolton, Khalizad, Perle, all known as neoconservatives, along with Lewis 'Scooter' Libby and Douglas Feith. Other key appointees were Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, who have a more ambiguous ideological status, however many agree that their ideological outlook is similar (Khong 2008). These appointments indicate a revival of neoconservative agenda, which was last visible in Ronald Reagan's administration (Kellner 2008). However the appointment of neoconservatives was balanced by the same realists who served under Bush senior and Clinton, often seen as exercising the voice of constraint. These individuals included Colin Powell, Richard Armitage, Richard Haas, Dennis Ross, James Baker, Lawrence Eagleburger, Brent Scowford and Condoleezza Rice (Dolan and Cohen 2006).

Consequently tension in the executive emerged pre-9/11 as those from the two different ideological perspectives attempted to steer the new administration in their direction. Arguably, Bush initially began with a realist outlook: heavily influenced by Rice's teachings (Dolan and Cohen 2006). Many have argued that if it was not for the vulnerable atmosphere which was created as a consequence of the tragic events of 9/11, Bush would not have been able to use military force to pursue regime change in Iraq (Schmidt and Williams 2008).

The neoconservative founder, Leo Strauss, taught that the elite should promote myths in public. This would enable the elite to move the mass in the direction they saw fit, the use of fear was fundamental to this (The power of nightmares 2004). Chomsky (2003a) highlights that in the run up to the invasion of Iraq, there was a clear repetition of tactics used by the Reagan administration of using fear as a tactic to push through controversial policy. Indeed it was the manipulation of the atmosphere of fear that neoconservatives promoted to push through their long held aim of an unrelated war with Iraq (Schmidt and Williams 2008). There was an effective strategy to link Saddam Hussein to 9/11 and the 'war on terror', reflected in the fact that by 2002, 66% of the population believed he was involved in the attacks on the twin towers (Kellner 2004 p3). Fear was exacerbated by the promotion of the fear that due to Saddam's hatred of the US, coupled with possession or intent to possess weapons of mass destruction (WMD's) he could provide stateless actors with weaponry or use them himself (Dunne 2003).

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To understand the disagreement between the two ideological outlooks one can identify key aspects of the neoconservative stance, and contrast these with realism (Schmidt and Williams 2008). By identifying key aspects of neoconservative and realist thought and looking at the unfolding of the US decision to invade Iraq, it is clear that it was a result of neoconservative agenda prevailing over the realists.

The first tenet of neoconservative ideology is about moral clarity; imposing a dichotomy of good and evil. Accordingly good would be represented in supposedly liberal western democracies such as the US, whilst evil would be incorporated in what were condemned as tyrannical regimes such as Iraq (Khong 2008). These inherent characteristics of states would always express themselves in their foreign policy, therefore states which are not liberal democracies should be seen as a threat. Importantly this means that morality and interests, for neoconservatives are always consistent with each other (Khong 2008).

In contrast it is accepted that generally classical realists are cautious of injecting morality into foreign policy (Khong 2008). Realists are driven by a pragmatic, often ruthless, search for power (The power of nightmares 2004). Foreign policy is driven by national interest only, therefore morality and interest are kept separate (Khong 2008). Democracy promotion and nation-building are seen as unwise, as realists put their faith in nationalism (Schmidt and Williams 2008).

On 17 September 2001, Bush signed a secret order to invade Afghanistan which notably included a subsequent invasion of Iraq (Dolan and Cohen 2006). Therefore after war had already been decided a campaign was launched to promote this dichotomy of good and evil, in relation to Iraq, a campaign that was opposed by the realists (Schmidt and Williams 2008). This can be seen with the intense demonization of Saddam Hussein, promoting the fear that he was "inherently aggressive and expansionist. Often drawing comparisons to Hitler" (Schmidt and Williams 2008 p201), and that he could not be contained or deterred from using WMD as irrational other (Schmidt and Williams 2008). The most explicit form of morality being injected into foreign policy was Bush's State of the Union Address, when he placed Iraq in the so called "axis of evil" with Iran and North Korea (Dunne 2003 p270). Again this clear neoconservative push for war could be seen in the Bush administration's claim that stated that there would be "no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those that harboured them" (Dolan and Cohen 2006 p47) which derived from the Congressional Joint Resolution 23 (Ralph 2009).

The second premise of neoconservative thought on foreign policy, is that the US should preserve military pre-eminence. As an exemplar of liberal democracy the US should use its might to work towards US hegemony in the international arena, creating superiority in power and influence (Khong 2008). This contrasts slightly with the realist conception of power. Although they believe in maintaining power, they do not believe a situation of preponderance power will ever last. This is because other states will always dislike that power and try to counter it with coalitions. This is what is known as the realist balance of power theory (Schmidt and Williams 2008). This victory for the neoconservatives could be seen in the emergence of the Bush doctrine post 9/11, which represented a clear shift in US foreign policy (Kellner 2004, Ralph 2009). Fundamentally it encapsulated the belief that the US should be the sole superpower in the world (Schmidt and Williams 2008).

Although many cite WMD and self defence as a reason for war, this cannot be so as it was clear that whether weapons were found or not, the US would still attack (Kellner 2004). Furthermore Cheney's one percent doctrine, which focused solely on an enemy's intent rather than their realistic capability created doubt about the reason of self defence (Ralph 2009). This was further exacerbated by the politicisation and manipulation of intelligence about Iraq's possession of WMD's, illustrated by the Plame Affair (Ralph 2009).

It would be more accurate to highlight that it was more about the transformation of Iraq into a submissive client state (Dunne 2003). Dunne (2003) argues that "what we have seen since 9/11 has been the blending of the particular concerns of the United States, first to control Saddam Hussein and his Iraq within a larger Persian Gulf strategy, both to protect oil supplies and advance more general American interests in the region as a whole" (Dunne 2003 p275). Notably, in the Gulf region, Iraq is second only to Saudi Arabia in estimated oil reserves (Dunne 2003), and oil proves a tempting prize for former oil executives in the administration (Kellner 2004). This again fits into the neoconservative agenda of US hegemony showing how the decision to invade Iraq was due to neoconservative influence. Although

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this would be in the interests of realists also, it would be argued that the negative consequences would be far greater.

Another important aspect of neoconservative thought is the belief that the US should be willing to use its military force to pursue idealist foreign policy goals (Khong 2008). This is due to the ideologies awe of the US's military power, but is also linked to the first feature of neoconservative thought, as if one is seen as the ultimate 'good', then it would be morally wrong for them to not intervene when they saw 'evil'. Therefore if necessary, force will be used to carry out 'democracy promotion' (Khong 2008). In comparison Realists similarly have no problem using military force to pursue their interests and for them "war is an ever present possibility in an anarchical environment" (Schmidt and Williams 2008 p193). However they specifically refuse to link it to morality, and are therefore reluctant to use it when it is not perceived to benefit the national interest.

Again the upper hand of the neoconservatives pushing for the invasion of Iraq can be seen in the Bush doctrine which controversially claimed the right to preemptive force: "we must deter and defend against a threat before it is unleashed" (Schmidt and Williams 2008 p196), meaning the US could attack who it pleased, notably Iraq, as long as they could dictate that it had the potential to be a threat. The Bush doctrine also asserted the need for 'democracy promotion' reflecting "Wilsonianism with teeth" (Schmidt and Williams 2008). All these ideas were "euphemisms for raw military aggression" (Kellner 2004 p4) in line with the neoconservatives and distinctive from past as it was now explicit official foreign policy (Chomsky 2003a).

In the course of the intervention the US's war aims noticeably changed. Despite Bush's early claims that the administration was "not into nation-building" (Chesterman 2004 p102) there was later a clear shift towards it, when the justification of WMDs was proven to be false. Nation-building was now promoted as tool in the 'war on terrorism' (Chesterman 2004). This significantly highlights the growing influence of the neoconservatives in the administration, pushing Bush from an initially realist approach.

Chomsky (2003a) and (Kellner 2004) argue that one aspect of the reason for war was so that the US could establish a new international norm of preventive war, which was laid out explicitly in the National Security Report in September 2002. This doctrine states that in effect the US has a right to attack any country that attempts to challenge its hegemony, the US will remove this threat before it becomes a challenge. Chomsky (2003a) argues that the reason Iraq was chosen was it was an: "extremely easy, totally defenceless target" (Chomsky 2003a p1), therefore it was assumed that the society would collapse and regime change would be easy. This was necessary as it was the first exercise of the official doctrine of preventive war, therefore it needed to be successful in order for the new international norm to be established (Chomsky 2003b).

Neoconservatives have a high disregard for international law and believe in unilateralism (Khong 2008). Similarly realists are highly dismissive of international law and institutions, pessimistic of their ability to achieve stability (Khong 2008). However, in the context of the 'war on terrorism', realists advocate a need for multilateralism: "make no mistake, we simply cannot win that war without enthusiastic international cooperation" (Dolan and Cohen 2006 p40). Realists stated that without it, an image of US imperialism would emerge which would only lead to further attacks against the US (Dolan and Cohen 2006).

Importantly although neoconservatives clearly had the upper hand there was still a realist influence on this decision. Powell persuaded Bush not to unilaterally impose war without additional UN inspections, as without this the US would be disadvantaged due to the overwhelming international opposition to the war (Dolan and Cohen 2006, Kellner 2004). This supposed authorisation emerged out of UNSC resolution 1441 (Dunne 2003). Although there is a wide consensus that this did not provide legal authorisation for the US to invade Iraq (Dunne 2003) and it was clear that Bush's administration was adamant on war despite the results of UN investigation (Dunne 2003), it is important to note that the fact that it was debatable was enough for the US (Dunne 2003). It was clear that underlying this process, neoconservatives had already began to 'beat the war drums' (Kellner 2004), making it clear that they were intending to act unilaterally: "if [other governments] do not act, America will" (Dunne 2003 p271). This indicates the neoconservative influence which pushed for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

## **What went wrong with the subsequent occupation?**

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Though the plan to topple Saddam was successful, it has been argued that the post war planning was extremely insufficient. This reflects the neoconservative awe of the US's military power, and their naive assumption that the Iraqi people would welcome the US as saviours after Saddam was removed (Chesterfield 2004). This is further illustrated in Rumsfeld's emphasis on quick military victory, whilst downplaying the aftermath as "untidy" (Chesterman 2004 p106). Hendrickson and Turner (2005) also argue that this reveals a shallow view of warfare- where force protection overrode any concern for mounting Iraqi casualties- which only sacrificed the broader strategic mission.

Indeed a common criticism is that the US did not provide a sufficient amount of troops to achieve stability after the invasion. They also significantly failed to prevent looting (Bremer et al 2008). Some evidence even suggests that the US purposely did not stop the looting as they wanted to capture the symbolism of Iraqis attacking the last part of Ba'athist regime (Hendrickson and Tucker 2005). However Hendrickson and Tucker (2005) argue that this criticism exaggerates the numbers and types of forces that would ever be available for war. It would always be impossible to generate the amount critics suggest is needed. Furthermore they claim that due to the nature of the operation and its flaws from the very decision to carry it out, anarchy was inevitable. Dodge (2007) also opposes this criticism about a need for more troops. He highlights that although Bush finally accepted the need for more troops which some have argued was successful, it fails to appreciate that the underlying causes of the civil war are not a matter of coercion.

Hendrickson and Tucker (2005) argue that the political policies carried out by the US inflamed tension, they again say this was inevitable due to the fact that the US had placed itself in the middle of a deeply divided society. Whilst this holds some truth Dodge (2007) is highly critical of this view as it gives in to the temptation of primordialist interpretation. He claims that civil war which has plagued Iraq since 2003, was a consequence of the US's inability to reconstruct the Iraqi state after it was subsequently destroyed in the invasion and the quick disbanding of the Iraqi army. This has created a security vacuum, and a society living the Hobbsian nightmare, where security and life can only be guaranteed by aligning and identifying oneself with a group. This had been exacerbated by the US's policy of de-Ba'athification, which needlessly antagonised and marginalised Sunnis, pushing them into insurgency (Dodge 2007). Furthermore in contrast to Bremer et al (2008) who have a less critical view of the US's political policy in Iraq, Dodge (2007) argues that it has not healed any group conflict by the US putting an Iraqi elite in power: "a small group of inexperienced, formerly exiled Iraqis long absent from the country" (Dodge 2007 p93) and establishing an electoral system that only divides the spoils rather than unites opposing groups (Dodge 2007). Therefore although Hendrickson and Tucker's (2005) make a good point about the US naively occupying a country with a history of conflict, Dodge (2007) quite rightly highlights the impact of the US's policy in creating a divided society which led to civil war.

The Bush administration's obsession with control throughout the occupation and the increasing death toll greatly soured its relations with the international community. Having also invaded Iraq despite widespread opposition, and without Security Council authorisation, the US was unable to convince the international community to help once the subsequent occupation proved problematic (Diamond 2004). This chance was further reduced due to the attack on UN headquarters in Iraq in 2003, which killed Dergio Vierra de Mello, an experienced peace-builder (Diamond 2004). This has proved particularly detrimental and contributes to understanding why the occupation went wrong.

The Bush administration was also too slow at getting funding and had a dysfunctional bureaucracy (Hendrickson and Turner 2005). This was partly due to the notorious tensions between the Department of State and the Department of Defence (Chesterman 2005). Additionally there were complaints that there was not enough communication between working level staff and their superiors. At its extreme, some officials had to communicate their British counterparts, hoping that it would feed through back to their own departments (Chesterman 2005).

Bremer et al (2008) argue that the US has been able to establish stable societies in the past through 'democracy promotion'. However Chesterman (2004) disagrees and argues that failure in Iraq is due to its attempt to colonise Iraq under the banner of nation-building. He convincingly argues that the failure of the occupation stems from the biggest mistake made by the US: the assumption that the failure of past nation building efforts was a consequence of the ineptitude of the United Nations. This concealed the reality of the "inherent contradictions in building democracy through foreign military intervention" (Chesterman 2004 p101).

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Similarly and more convincingly Hendrickson and Tucker (2005) argue that the basic problems are not a consequence of mistakes made along the way. They argue the common criticisms do not contribute to a fundamental understanding of why the occupation went wrong. Rather the occupation went wrong as a result of the enterprise itself: "when you enter a one-way street the wrong direction, no matter which way you turn, you will be entering all the other streets in the wrong way" (Hendrickson and Turner 2005 p24) therefore "Rather than "do it better next time", a better lesson is "don't do it at all"" (Hendrickson and Turner 2005 pvii).

## What impact has the war had on US foreign policy?

The damage created by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the problematic subsequent occupation has had a significant impact on the future of foreign policy. Its unpopularity has created an "Iraq syndrome" (Mueller 2005), drawing a parallel to the impact that Vietnam had on future US foreign policy (Mueller 2005). However, significantly Graubard (2009) highlights that it is an exaggeration that no other time has been more dangerous than the present, as Bush junior claimed. Rather the impact of the Iraq war on US foreign policy has led to a revert to a realism which fits into the ongoing waves which usually occur in US foreign policy (Hunt 1987).

Lieven (2008) argues that as a result of the catastrophic foreign policy involved with Iraq and Afghanistan, the US will now be more cautious when it comes to radical actions or especially intervention. However, he specifically argues that this does not mean that it will learn from past mistakes, but rather it will "drift" (Lieven 2008 p434) until a major crisis occurs that demands action. Mueller (2004) supports this by noting that after Vietnam, congress reduced the ability of the White House to go on even modest anti communist ventures, with the exception of Latin America. This highlights a shift back to realism.

Mueller (2005) argues that the next president will portray himself as stark contrast from the Bush administration, more specifically a distinction away from the Bush doctrine. This means away from unilateralism, pre-emption and preventive war. Indeed the Bush doctrine which underpinned the invasion of Iraq created damage in relations between the US and the international community. Graubard (2009) argues that the US will now have to use the international forum for it to deal with other threats such as Iran. This means to deal with threats collectively with allies using economic and political pressure. Again this shows a clear move away from neoconservatives to re-establish the US's international position.

Another notable move away from neoconservatism is Graubard's (2009) claim that the US after Bush: "would do well not to show greater discipline in its habits of lecturing other governments including those who are obviously unfriendly but pose no threat to the United States" (Graubard's 2009 p3). This reflects more the relativism practiced by realists.

In conclusion, the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was a result of a long held agenda by those politicians who identify with the neoconservative ideology. Indeed neoconservatives tried to persuade Bush senior to remove Saddam, then under Clinton there was another attempt, and finally when Bush junior came into office, before 9/11, there was still a consistent lobby to invade Iraq. It is clear that the events of 9/11 were then manipulated by neoconservatives to push through their long held objectives. Furthermore the argument that the invasion of Iraq was due to the neoconservatives prevailing over the realists, can be illustrated in the run up to the invasion.

The subsequent occupation went wrong partly due to the US's policies which created or exacerbated tensions within Iraq leading to civil war, and also because of the consequence of the US creating hostile relations with the international community who were then reluctant to help. Overall Hendrickson and Turner's (2005) argument proves most convincing when they claim that the problems which have arisen are the inevitable consequence of the enterprise itself. Finally the impact of the war on Iraq is that it has led to a revert back to realism, away from neoconservatives.

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