

The Causes of the Iraq War: Implications for Morgenthau, Wendt, and Waltz

Written by Bleddyn E. Bowen

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I: Approach

Why did the US and the UK go to war in Iraq in 2003? Whilst the interpretation of the causes of the Iraq war are used to (in)validate some theoretical principles, it is not to say that those particular aspects of the IR theories chosen are automatically (in)valid in the close scrutiny of other events. The primary actors recognised here are states and senior individuals within governments, even though the events of 11th September 2001 was brought about by non-state actors.

The Iraq War became possible because of the commitment of the Bush administration to neoconservative ideas which included the determination to use *preventative* war against potential foes before 'another 9/11' happened, and the White House's ability to impose its will on the organs of the state. The British followed the Americans as a result of the strength of Blair's convictions, providing a means of 'paying the price' for the 'special relationship', and Blair's executive dominance over the British decision-making system. These conditions made it easier for Washington and London to develop a new threat perception of Iraq after the events of 9/11. The tolerated threat threshold from Iraq had lowered and Saddam Hussein was deemed to be a menace too dangerous to live with. These historical factors tacitly imply that classical realism is useful to illustrate how the war came about in 2003. As a corollary, the emphasis social constructivism places on ideas is very much at home when discussing what 'national interest' is, and goes hand-in-hand with Morgenthau's classical realist conceptions. As a result, the Waltzian conception of the international structure[1] is criticised if it is treated as an objective factor of international politics due to its neglect of matters such as identity and motives that constitute interests which are not universal to all states of the system, and overemphasis on material capabilities as *the* variable in the international system's dispositions. The essay follows the template above: it examines each factor in the Bush and Blair governments in greater detail before imposing an interpretation of that history of the Iraq War decision upon classical realism, social constructivism and neo(structural)realism.

II: The Bush Administration

The US government came to be dominated by neoconservative individuals after the 2000 presidential election. Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz were crucial in formulating George W. Bush's policies; the President presided, the Vice President guided, and the Secretary of Defense implemented.[2] The only major opposition potential to the neoconservatives in Washington was Colin Powell. However, he was considered 'weak' by the then-Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) director George Tenet and Undersecretary for Defense Policy Douglas Feith.[3] If the neoconservatives were influential in decision-making, we must identify what neoconservatism is. Flibbert categorised the reasons for the Iraq War along the lines of neoconservative ideas: first, the benevolent nature and necessity of US hegemony; second, a Manichaeian conception of politics; third, the belief in regime type as a determinant of policy; and fourth, confidence in the efficacy of military force.[4] These four ideas are found in Schmidt's and Williams' discussion on neoconservatism as well.[5]

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We can attach these ideas to an understanding of the guiding principles behind the Bush administration with a certain degree of confidence after 9/11, epitomised by the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS).[6] The 2002 NSS promotes the proliferation of American values such as political and economic liberty as a universal public good in the context of a war of 'values' and 'ideas' against 'terrorism' and 'rogue states' which support them and pursue 'weapons of mass destruction' (WMD).[7] The use of 'WMD' here refers to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons.[8] Erroneously, the NSS uses the term *preemptive* to describe what it undertook in practice as *preventative* wars and expeditions.[9] The NSS characterises 'terrorism' and 'rogue states' as 'imminent' threats, when they were in actuality potential, or latent, threats, on the scale of destruction envisaged by the 'smoking gun' of a mushroom cloud.[10]

The neoconservative ideology was hardly new in 2001. Neoconservatives had been pushing for regime change in Iraq throughout the 1990s, with two letters sent to President Clinton and the eventual passing of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998.[11] The Project for a New American Century (PNAC), a neoconservative think tank which was established in the early 1990s, had been pushing for a Reaganite assertion of US power and specifically targeted Iraq, Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This was labelled the Wolfowitz Doctrine.[12]

There is general recognition of 9/11 acting as a catalyst for long-standing views of neoconservative individuals to come out into the open and directly shape US policy. Ricks believes that 9/11 provided an 'opening' for Wolfowitz to push his Iraqi agenda,[13] Dunn wrote that Bush became more engaged with his pre-existing beliefs in unilateralism, amongst other things, after 9/11,[14] and Freedman claimed that the Iraq War was *not* an intelligence-driven crisis – 9/11 changed policy on Iraq (from containment to war) because the terms of the security debate had changed: potential threats had to be dealt with before they became actual. A power shift occurred within Washington and strengthened those who favoured regime change in Iraq.[15] Prior to 9/11, Bush's incoming administration looked as if it would have been an isolationist response to Clinton's relative activism.[16] Schmidt and Williams assert that the neoconservatives used the climate of fear in the wake of 9/11 and a 'half-baked' strategic plan to go to Iraq.[17]

The fear effect after 9/11 may have made it extremely difficult for 'ideational dissenters' to challenge the discursive hegemony imposed by the neoconservatives in Washington. Such an environment may well have given traction to such ideas and discourse.[18] The fear of the mushroom cloud-shaped smoking gun drove US policy towards a more assertive posture in going out into the world to attempt to stem what the neoconservatives thought the causes of 'terrorism' were in a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The central ideas behind neoconservatism had existed since the early 1990s, and 9/11 acted as a catalyst for the realisation of those ideas for shaping policies.

The neoconservatives in office had a great degree of influence over Washington's organs. Perhaps the most striking example is how George Tenet claimed that the White House's standard procedure was to discredit opponents, not engage with their views.[19] For example, Wolfowitz reportedly attempted to undermine Hans Blix, the United Nations' (UN) chief weapons inspector, due to his inability to provide sufficient evidence to support Washington's claims about Iraqi WMDs. He was allegedly angry when the CIA failed to find sufficient evidence to undermine Blix's authority.[20]

The instinct of bureaucratic, or an individual's professional, survival may predominate certain agencies in circumstances where the cost of defying one's paymasters carry the cost of 'reform' or dismissal. George Tenet may have been attempting to safeguard his professional or the CIA's interests, and to do so he may have fit the CIA's 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq into the contours set by Cheney and Rumsfeld.[21] Ryan seconds this opinion by portraying Tenet as a 'lonely Democrat' who protected the CIA by fitting it into the White House's policy.[22] However, Freedman notes that the declassified excerpts of the 2002 NIE had an unusual number of qualifying footnotes to the claims made about Iraq's nuclear weapons programmes, with particular emphasis on the aluminium tubes and African uranium source issues.[23] One can only speculate as to how much dissenting opinion there is in the full classified NIE. Despite claims of institutional politicisation, the CIA, according to Jervis, cut against the grain from Washington when the agency was largely against an invasion of Iraq and stringently denied the claimed links between Saddam Hussein's regime and Al Qaeda.[24]

It was not only the CIA that felt the weight of Washington. The civilian masters had the military on a short leash.

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Rumsfeld has been characterised as an “indomitable bureaucratic presence” armed with the belief that the US military needed an even stronger civilian oversight; his ‘war aim’ was for complete control of the Department of Defense, his battleground was the Pentagon.[25] The issue of the troop numbers for the Iraqi mission epitomises the point that the Bush administration had exercised dominance over the state’s organs and official dissent was unwelcome in such an environment. General Newbold’s OPLAN 1003-98, the ‘contingency plan’ for a war against Iraq, demanded 500,000 troops. Rumsfeld did not like this figure, and is claimed to have said that there was no need for more than 125,000 troops. Newbold has since had regrets for not speaking out against Rumsfeld at this critical juncture.[26] Rumsfeld insisted on a ‘force cap’ for no sound strategic reason, military dissent never went public and Rumsfeld equated dissent with ignorance on the part of the dissenters.[27]

This is not to challenge the general strategic principle that the military should be subordinate to the civilian government. Clausewitz admits that sometimes ‘policy’ can make an unreasonable demand on the military, and there is no such thing as a ‘political problem’ in a military strategy. Instead, the problem would be with the policy or the government’s demand itself. [28] The fascination of Rumsfeld with the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) may have predisposed him to favour a smaller military force. This may explain the general emphasis on small high-technology forces to topple Saddam’s regime quickly, and the belief that victory in battle provides strategic success.[29]

To clarify, the point here is that this would have been the best time in strategic terms (perhaps not for professional survival) for the military to challenge the government (specifically Rumsfeld). Sun Tzu allowed for this eventuality – he cautioned against a militarily-ignorant government and allowed for the possibility of disobeying an order from the government.[30] Over the critical issue of troop numbers for the occupation of Iraq and in estimating Iraqi WMD programmes and weapons, the US military and the CIA were hamstrung, prevented from constructively criticising Washington’s policies and attitudes. A government must harmonise the bureaucratic interests of the state,[31] but not to the detriment of constructive criticisms and engagement. Such bureaucratic and discursive dominance made it easier for the White House to pursue its neoconservative agenda.

III: The Blair Government

This period saw the congruence of neoconservative language and general interests with Iraq and Tony Blair’s pre-existing convictions. Blair had been a ‘willing partner’ in the Iraq Liberation Act, he had become enamoured with the idea of Britain as a ‘force for good’ in the world, and in the wake of 9/11 he had adopted value-drenched language and the GWOT terminology.[32]

Blair inherited the Iraq policy from John Major’s preceding government, and it had changed little after New Labour came into office.[33] Kettel reinforces the general literature above that 9/11 provided an opportunity for Bush to reframe pre-existing security threats; Blair’s ‘messianic zeal’ found a good opening to flourish in after successes in Sierra Leone and Kosovo.[34] The British Government had adopted the belief that Operation DESERT FOX had been ineffective and the containment of Iraq was failing after 9/11, even though the infamous 2002 Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) Dossier failed to explain why containment was not working.[35] Nevertheless, Blair appeared firm in his conviction that Saddam was too dangerous to contain.[36]

A part of Blair’s convictions was the belief that joining the United States in its GWOT was “massively in [Britain’s] self-interest”. [37] With an assertive and unilateral US emerging from 9/11, it would perhaps have indeed served Britain’s ‘special relationship’ with the world’s lone superpower well, even though this strained the ‘transatlantic bridge’ between the US and Europe.[38] The appearance of Blair following Bush on the Iraq issue led to memorable characterisations of Blair as Bush’s poodle. There is ample room for debate over how much influence the ‘special relationship’ had on Blair’s calculations of whether to support the US or not. Did Britain have much choice in following the US, given that the neoconservatives were establishing a Manichaeian worldview? Or was Britain drawn into using the special relationship as a way of tempering a (re)vengeful United States and secure its own interests? The more holistic approach taken here precludes an in-depth analysis of the special relationship. Suffice to say, Blair appeared to have adopted 9/11 as a British crisis and “universalised its significance” (there were more British casualties on 9/11 than on 7/7/05), and as a result participating in the Iraq War was a requisite of maintaining, and perhaps enhancing, the special relationship in the GWOT and advancing British policy in Palestine. [39]

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Blair found greater open dissent against his anti-Iraq behaviour than did Bush. The former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook resigned as the Lord President of the Council and the Leader of the House of Commons in protest against Blair a few days before the outbreak of war in March 2003.

“The legal basis for our action in Kosovo was the need to respond to an urgent and compelling humanitarian crisis. Our difficulty in getting support this time is that neither the international community nor the British public is persuaded that there is an urgent and compelling reason for this military action in Iraq.”[40]

Such a high-profile resignation was symptomatic of general discontent and anger at the possibility of war in Iraq, perhaps the most memorable moments of opposition to Blair being the massive protest march in London (and other European capitals) and a Labour rebellion of 139 MPs in the Commons. Despite such opposition, Blair managed to impose his will on the British state, much like Bush and his fellow neoconservatives. Coates and Krieger believe that the Kosovo war increased Blair’s influence and role in foreign policy.[41] Buoyed by success, it is not unsurprising for any leader to be tempted to repeat a successful intervention – even more so if one is lost in visions of being a ‘force for good’. Kettel writes an extensive argument over the paucity of checks and balances in the British political system over executive power as a direct enabler of Blair’s military adventurism. New Labour had continued the centralised management of the executive (a Thatcherite import) and marginalised the Cabinet to a ratification body.[42] Blair ‘dominated’ foreign policy in London, his style in communicating his foreign policy ambitions was characterised as being direct, personal, and informal.[43] In the absence of constitutional constraints,[44] or a ‘Sir Humphrey Appleby’ to discourage Blair from undertaking such a ‘courageous’ policy; the inability of the British intelligence community (IC) to effectively counter Blair’s perceptions through selective ignorance at Downing Street and the JIC;[45] Blair was able to send the UK into the Iraq War despite an approximate 50% of the British public remaining unconvinced by the infamous Iraq Dossier and 70% standing opposed to war without the blessing of the UN.[46]

IV: Morgenthau, Wendt, and Waltz

Sections II and III show that both the American and British governments were able to impose their wills on their states’ organs and quell official dissent. “Ideational dissenters were unable to break the grip of the newly emergent hegemonic discourse”.[47] By default, government leadership is needed for the state to function with coherent policies that all sectors of the state can work towards. However, this period saw the breaking down of constructive criticisms and engagement with differing opinions and threat perceptions. In the United States, an overweening Pentagon faced down a weak National Security Council, Congress failed in its oversight duties and mass media failed to provide alternate sources of information about Iraq.[48]

A government imposing its will on its state organs is no revolutionary statement. However, this hybrid of the first and second levels of (Waltzian) analysis gives weight to the individual beliefs of Bush and Blair, and the environment in which they operated (shaped by domestic institutions, senior officials and their ideas). These ideas helped frame the GWOT for Bush and Blair, and provided a new way to interpret threats in the wake of 9/11. The strictly material dimension between the US, UK and Iraq had changed little since the late 1990s and 2002. Prior to 9/11, the JIC had determined that most Iraqi WMDs had been eliminated by the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Furthermore, in summer 2001, the JIC also concluded that the intelligence picture in Iraq was patchy, limited, and unclear, and there was no evidence of weaponised CBRN material.[49] Acknowledging that the material conditions (taken to mean military capabilities) had changed little, given the evidence above and with hindsight knowing that no CBRN materials or weapons of major significance were found in Iraq, it appears that ideational and social factors – in shaping threat perceptions and the purpose of grand strategy – explains why a war occurred in 2003, and why one did not before 9/11. Even if the Iraq War could fall into a pattern depicted by a consistent US grand strategy, it fails to tell us why or how a war occurred in 2003, and not before or after.[50]

Schmidt and Williams portray the neoconservative victory over the realists in the debate over the Iraq issue in the run-up to the war as a result of the neoconservatives’ ability to attach values to foreign policy. ‘Realism’, by contrast, was apparently value-less, contributed to the decay of virtue at home, encouraged cynicism, and would fail to mobilise the resources needed by the nation to meet its objectives.[51] It appeared that the American ‘realist’ critics had failed to

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instil 'rational logic' against a government fixed upon removing Saddam. If the realists failed to prevent the war through their appraisal of American national interest, logically speaking, realism would fail to explain the war.

However, that the Iraq War buttresses some assumptions made by Hans Morgenthau, a classical realist, to the detriment of Ken Waltz's material-dominated neorealist theory. This is not an extensive engagement of the entirety of their works. The historical factors above have some suggestive implications for Morgenthau's, Wendt's and Waltz's key philosophies. The key concept is the national interest: Morgenthau's and Wendt's general approaches allow for the existence of values or ideas (alongside material concerns) as determining factors in shaping interests, as opposed to Waltz's narrow conception of material capabilities and the number of actors in the system as the *only* major determinants of national interest.[52]

Morgenthau had incorporated non-material factors into his conceptions of interest and policy motivations. Morgenthau defined the concept of interest in terms of power. He referred to motives as an elusive kind of psychological data. Warning against the expectation of states to always follow 'rational' policies in their national interests, Morgenthau presaged that some states could be under the influence of 'subjective interests', democratic control, and popular emotion. Consequently, expecting the state to always act in an unemotional manner is foolish.[53] He put forward an ideal of a rational foreign policy: one which maximises benefits and minimises risks. This was not accompanied by the caveat that states did not or could not live up to such ideals. Morgenthau presented a rational theoretical ideal, admitting that it did not represent reality in its entirety, which was imperfect.[54]

Morgenthau's third principle of political realism appears to take what is known today as a significant 'constructivist' bent. Rebounding off the Weberian notion that ideas can constitute interest and interest determines action, Morgenthau wrote that the concept of interest (and power) was fluid, not at all fixed in its meaning.[55] Taking in identity in making foreign policy, Morgenthau clearly makes classical realism valid after the examination of the Iraq War above. For Morgenthau, interests and ends are constructed from a set of life experiences and national history; the construction of national interest is an on-going practice "that links history with moral purpose".[56]

Wendt believes that ideas can act as determinants of power and interests and are not merely derived from them. Ideas can be a causal factor in bringing about wars because they can constitute material causes.[57] Shared ideas can shape state perceptions, identity, and interests; culture lurks immediately behind interest.[58] The most relevant passage from Wendt for this essay is his claim that sometimes deliberation within states can cause 'preference reversals' even while structural conditions remain constant.[59] This is evident above in how the threat perception of Iraq changed due to the reaction of 9/11 and neoconservative influence in deliberations.

If a war can occur as a result of a state's internal deliberations and reaction to a particular event and the social construction of a threat[60] when the material environment has changed little or none at all, where does this leave Waltz's neorealism? Waltz's structure argument would mean that new Iraqi capabilities could have warranted a war to remove a threat to the United States' position:

"The structure of the system changes with changes in the distribution of capabilities across the system's units. And changes in structure change expectations about how the units of the system will behave and about the outcomes their interactions will produce."[61]

To be fair, the neoconservatives had been pushing for the toppling of Saddam since the early 1990s, but 9/11 saw a marked shift in the prominence of this attitude among, but not exclusively, senior Bush administration officials. Iraq did not develop significant new capabilities to warrant a change of American policy based on material factors alone. The dubious nature of British and American intelligence shows that Iraq was not a materially significant threat. Robin Cook was, and still is, most pertinent in highlighting the fallacy of focusing on material factors alone to explain this war:

"Ironically, it is only because Iraq's military forces are so weak that we can even contemplate its invasion... we cannot base our military strategy on the assumption that Saddam is weak and at the same time justify pre-emptive action on the claim he is a threat."[62]

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Waltz did write that a state's policy "is determined by its goals and by its relation to other states."^[63] But this does not go further than the motivation of self-help in anarchy.^[64] But to determine whether Iraq was a threat to American survival, as opposed to Russia (which has the *actual* capability to destroy the United States) requires an analysis of threat perception based on the social interaction between and within the states in question. Waltz carefully warned that "theory will not predict the outbreak of particular wars."^[65] It appears that his theory does not *explain* this particular war either. If a theory cannot explain why a war occurred, the war in question will serve as an anomaly to the theory in question. Understanding the distribution of capabilities does not help us to understand why the US and UK went to war in Iraq in 2003. That factor effectively remained the same during 1998-2003, what changed was the American and British governments' threat *perception*. Perception has little place in Waltz's theory – Iraq proved to be no credible threat to the US, but following 9/11 it was thought in Washington and London that Saddam was a threat that had to be removed. The neoconservatives had solved the 'dilemma of interpretation' over Saddam's (wrongly believed) possession of (near)weaponised CBRNs.^[66] Using's Waltz's own method of analysing a theory's worth, two variables were introduced (George Bush's victory in December 2000 and 9/11's effect on the administration) whilst others were kept the same (the major one being the distribution of capabilities).^[67] Even if one were to incorporate Waltz's structural theory with an agency-based theory, Waltz' perspective on the significance of material capabilities says nothing about why the United States or Britain went to war against Iraq.

V: Conclusion

What does the historical reading of the decision to go to war against Iraq mean for Morgenthau, Waltz and Wendt? By quelling internal dissenting opinion both London and Washington were able to push through a new threat perception of Iraq based on the framework of the GWOT. The GWOT, laden with ideas and values, is implicitly suitable with Morgenthau's conceptions of how power and interest come about to guide the actions of a state. Wendt's initial opinions on the significance of ideas in constituting interests are similar to Morgenthau. By signifying the importance of the individuals involved in the Bush and Blair governments, one can consider whether things may have been different had Al Gore been the president reacting to 9/11, or what would have happened had the entire British Cabinet resigned in the face of Labour's centralisation of executive power. There are no conclusive answers to these questions, but are interesting to highlight how we believe different people with different ideas react to crises, and given the prominence of ideas and values in the GWOT and the neoconservatives, they are not irrelevant counterfactual histories to ponder. Whilst these counterfactuals would vary wildly on the side of agency, it is hard to imagine the material distribution of capabilities in the international structure changing. This seriously limits Waltz's ability to explain the Iraq war. Such an approach misses the importance of threat *perception*, and it is difficult to know where one stands in the relative strength between states.^[68]

The justifications for war oscillated between the WMD issue, Saddam's links to Al-Qaeda and humanitarian intervention. Their validities changed too.^[69] However, the constant end of Washington and London was to remove Saddam Hussein's regime. That was brought about through the executive domination of the state's organs by the governments' ideational fixation on Saddam Hussein as an intolerable threat in the GWOT. This shows the potential power of ideas to restrict critique and dissent. Some classical realist and constructivist principles on the construction of interest allow us to make sense of the agency involved in bringing about the Iraq War, but a neorealist fixation on the distribution of material capabilities in the international structure does not. This is not to say that changes in the distribution of capabilities don't matter – but, against Waltz's insistence, neorealism cannot explain why every war can occur due to its inability to account for the Iraq War.

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[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3, 5-6, 13-14

[8] The term WMD is kept here, even though that WMD definitionally misses out on some massively-destructive 'conventional' weaponry, and that not all CBRN weapons are inherently massively-destructive.

[9] US Government, 'The National Security Strategy...', p. 15

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[15] Freedman, 'War in Iraq...', pp. 38-39

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[20] Ryan, 'Inventing the 'Axis of Evil'...' p. 65

[21] Jervis, 'War, intelligence and honesty...', p. 655

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