

# Explaining the Case for Invading Iraq from a Neo-conservative Perspective

Written by Lucie Parker

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## Explaining the Case for Invading Iraq from a Neo-conservative Perspective

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/06/29/explaining-the-case-for-invading-iraq-from-a-neo-conservative-perspective/>

LUCIE PARKER, JUN 29 2014

### **Explain the Case for Invading Iraq as Part of the Post-9/11 'Global War on Terror' from a Neo-conservative Perspective, Drawing on Policy Statements by Members of the George W. Bush Administration.**

The idea of 'a pre-emptive strike against an uncertain threat is perhaps the most radical new security notion of the post Cold-war era' (Kellner, 2004). It triggered deep divisions within the international community, as citizens worldwide questioned America's justification for a pre-emptive attack on Iraq as part of their post-9/11 national security strategy. 'The Bush administration persistently represented the Iraq war as integral to the war on terror, seeking to establish it within the US as part of the justified response to the original 9/11 attacks' (Rogers, 2012: 343), regardless of the absent link between Saddam Hussein and September 11. The issue at stake here is not only our understanding of *how* the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration wove Iraq into their war on terror rationale; we must also seek to recognise *why* Iraq became the target of US pre-emption. This is not only to grasp a holistic awareness of the Iraq war, but also to understand the logic of a neo-conservative worldview that was influential enough to execute regime change in Iraq.

Neo-conservatism established itself as a philosophical movement during the 1960s. Its exasperation with the realist *realpolitik* inability to connect with 'the values and identity of the American people' (Schmidt and Williams, 2008: 213), as well as its perception of liberalism as 'detrimental to American strategic interests' (George, 2005: 184), both culminated in a worldview categorised as 'Wilsonianism with teeth' (Schmidt and Williams, 2008: 199). It propagates 'an idealist strand and a power strand: Wilsonianism provides the idealism, an emphasis on military power provides the teeth' (Schmidt and Williams, 2008: 199). Neo-conservatives view themselves as existing in 'a world of Hobbesian state-of-nature primitivism and conspiracy where perpetual militarised competition for ascendancy is the norm' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 12). Their conceptual response to this anarchical world is formulated from an ideology comprised of three themes. Neo-conservatives treasure the religious conviction that the human condition is a choice between good and evil, because of their ardent belief in the importance of 'the general contribution that religious values make to the health of society and the human character' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 55). Secondly, they assert that relations between states are solely conducted through military power, placing militarism at the core of their foreign policy. Finally, they focus primarily on the Middle East as the arena for American interests (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 11). 'Israel's role as a staunch ally during the Cold War and its aftermath' (Dodge, 2012: 209) established US interests in the region because of America's obligation to protect democratic Israel from Middle Eastern volatility.

Neo-conservatism enshrines this ideology into practical policy by adopting a theoretical toolkit. It is vital to note that these tools have been rendered ideologically appropriate as based on the neo-conservative perception of American power. Thus it is to this we first must turn. The fundamental premise of the neo-conservative worldview is American exceptionalism; never before has there been 'a system of sovereign states that contained one state with this degree of dominance' (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002: 23). The post-Cold War world is dominated by American unipolarity and hegemony; America 'is the only country with the military, diplomatic, political, and economic assets to be a decisive player in any conflict' (Krauthammer, 1990: 24). To gain some perspective, California's economy is the fifth largest in

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the world. In terms of values, exceptionalism is built upon the sacrosanct notions of freedom and democracy; practically this means 'an American mission of promoting freedom and democratic rights throughout the world' (Nuruzzaman, 2006: 249).

This exceptionalism determines that the US 'has no rival in any critical dimension of power' (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002: 23) and thus possesses boundless freedom; following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is the only state with the 'unique capability to project power around the globe' (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002: 21). Accordingly, 'if America wants stability, it will have to create it' (Krauthammer, 1990: 29) because 'with power come responsibilities' (Kristol: 2003). America has the *responsibility* to pursue a global leadership role and must aim to shape international relations in line with US interests and values. Kagan argues that the 'benevolent hegemony' exercised by America is good for the international system because 'a world without US primacy will be a world with more violence' (1998). This demonstrates their worldview to be 'one in which the United States asserts its might and promulgates its ideas, embracing its "unipolar" status' (Tanenhaus, 2003) to create peace.

This essay will now explore the neo-conservative toolkit that US exceptionalism inspires. To create an ethical foreign doctrine, neo-conservatives adopt a messianic rhetoric, analysing 'international issues in black-and-white, absolute moral categories' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 11) and framing international relations as a struggle to 'promote freedom and stop tyranny' (Mufson, 2001). This good versus evil rhetoric is underpinned by American exceptionalism: the notion that America alone holds the moral high ground is a continuation of the Straussian belief that the US must 'illustrate its exceptionalism by going beyond liberalism in order to impose a harder, more coherent moral code on itself and on the world' (George, 2005: 181). Thus America's moral purposes are identical to its national interests. Alongside this rhetoric comes the dissemination of American values, with Kristol stressing that 'no nation is exempt from the true and unchanging principles of liberty and justice' (2002). The neo-conservative faith in America's exceptional purpose, which is to promote these consecrated concepts, immortalises the active promotion of this idealism at the heart of its foreign policy.

Support for these principles is gained through exercising American influence (Kristol and Kagan, 1996: 28); this is accomplished through 'a military that is strong and ready to meet both present and future challenges' (PNAC principles, 1997). Neo-conservatism radiates a 'steadfast faith in the power of the American military' (Schmidt and Williams, 2008: 199) as the only option capable of establishing the 'standard of a global superpower that intends to shape the international environment to its own advantage' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 17). Their underlying belief in the militarist interaction between states results in a pre-emptive promulgation of America's 'incredible military superiority' (Kristol, 2003) as the *only* tool to achieve their aims with. The strength of neo-conservative militarism creates 'a tendency toward unilateralism' (Kagan, 2008), with the confidence to employ this tool shining through the lens of American exceptionalism.

Thus neo-conservatism is an 'ideological representation of America's exceptionalism' (George, 2005: 176). The foreign policy that results from this worldview is as follows: a fundamental focus upon the Middle East, where militarism is:

'inextricably bound with morality in advancing a policy that combines America's moral obligations to Israel with the objective of imposing market democracy on the entire region' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 24).

A democratic Middle East is the first step towards their vision of a 'global pax Americana' (George, 2005: 190); it is here where the association between Iraq and neo-conservatism materialises. Wolfowitz, the embodiment of neo-conservatism in the Bush administration, asserted that the road to democracy 'runs through Baghdad, Damascus [and] Tehran' (History Commons), applying neo-conservative logic to stipulate that America must 'exert its moral and military might to eliminate the brutal dictators in the region and replace them with Western-style democratic leaders' (History Commons). The anti-democratic evil that *Iran* above all others propagated made it the ultimate neo-conservative target; however Iraq was 'the most feasible place' (Gaddis, 2002: 54) to initiate democratisation. The justification was that it was trapped in the grasp of the 'butcher of Baghdad'—Saddam's barbaric regime remaining 'a festering problem' (Rumsfeld, 2011: 416) since the unresolved end of the 1991 Gulf war. Consequently to comprehend the link made between Iraq and the war on terror directly after 9/11, it is *vital* to identify the neo-

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conservative theory that a free Iraq would trigger a democratic domino effect all the way to their arch nemesis of Iran: this cemented Iraq to their agenda from 1979.

In 1979, Wolfowitz 'directed a secret assessment of Persian Gulf threats that marked Iraq as a menace to its neighbors and to American interests' (Keller, 2002). His motives were later enshrined in his 1992 'Defence Planning Guidance', which highlighted the need to preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to American interests (Wolfowitz, 1992), namely the Persian Gulf. A 1998 PNAC[1] letter to Clinton equated Iraq as 'a fundamental national security interest', calling for 'the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power' (PNAC, 1998). This is particularly striking because out of the 18 people who signed the letter, 10 became part of Bush's administration (George, 2005: 190). Finally, the 2000 PNAC document, 'Rebuilding America's defences', emphasises 'the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf' (Mackay, 2002). Two vital points must be reinforced. Iraq was the first target for neo-conservative democratisation and because of this, they were willing to use military force in Iraq from 1998. Their ideology and conceptual tools had formed a foreign policy blueprint for regime change in Iraq which remained in the 'political shadowland' (Tanenhaus, 2003) for years, despite these zealous attempts to enact it.

9/11 drastically altered this landscape, striking at the heart of American exceptionalist equilibrium. America became vulnerable and this uncertainty left an open void in policy. Bush's election in 2000 provided an inexperienced president who was receptive to the neo-conservative viewpoint; they both shared a muscular sense of moral righteousness, and 9/11 accentuated this. As 'Bush did not enter the White House with a fully scripted playbook' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 131), this void became the opportunity needed by the neo-conservatives to take control of foreign policy. Wolfowitz jumped into this vacuum headfirst. Bush needed 'an answer, a way of looking at America and its place in the world' (Tanenhaus, 2003), and the neo-conservative template was 'ready for operational deployment' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 137). Wolfowitz advanced the long-cherished objective of an almost exclusive focus on the Middle East and the use of military force for pre-emptive reasons (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 139).

This aim became government strategy due to the pivotal articulation from Bush hours after 9/11: 'we will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them' (Bush in Perle, 2001). This key sentence verbalised an entirely new and extremely broad concept: the war on terror. Known as the 'Bush doctrine', this concept enlarged the American national interest with the formulation of its two objectives: 'to break the network of terrorist states' (Wolfowitz, 2001) responsible for 9/11, and 'to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction' (Bush, 2002). Bush set the parameters of the strategic landscape; neo-conservatism provided the strategy.

We have reached the point where neo-conservatism's 'long desired goal of regime change in Baghdad coincided with the president's political need for a powerful response' (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 205) to 9/11. This correlation resulted in the claim that 'confronting the threat posed by Iraq is crucial to winning the war on terror' (Bush, 2002); the logic underpinning this being the 'rogue state' argument. The Bush doctrine asserts that rogue states:

'brutalise their own people...display no regard for international law...are determined to acquire WMD...sponsor terrorism around the globe...and hate the United States and everything for which it stands' (NSS, 2002: 14).

As a result, these states 'constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world' (Bush, 2002). They are 'antagonistic towards the existing society of states' (O'Reilly, 2007: 298) and thus, in a panicked post-9/11 environment, were the logical target for the Bush doctrine.

Iraq was slotted neatly into the war on terror because it held an enduring rogue state reputation, from Rice's (2000: 60) claim that 'Iraq is the prototype' of a rogue regime to Cheney's (2002) reminder that Saddam had 'been on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism' since 1990. Thus 'the regime's links to individual terrorists and terrorist groups earned Iraq its place on the "axis of evil" list' (Rumsfeld, 2011: 421). As a result, neo-conservatism was able to insert Iraq into the broad formulation of the Bush doctrine, with Bush's 2002 state of the union address formally connecting Iraq to the war on terror. Neo-conservative Perle used three factors to vindicate the contextualisation of Iraq as a rogue state into the war on terror: Saddam Hussein hates the United States; he has an

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array of chemical and biological weapons which have been used against his own people, and dreams of a nuclear arsenal; and he has engaged directly in acts of terror and given sanctuary to terrorists, e.g. he attempted to assassinate George H. W. Bush and gave refuge to Abu Nidal (2001).

Neo-conservatives argued that 'if anyone fits the profile of support for terror, it is Saddam Hussein' (Perle, 2001) because he was 'harbouring terrorists and the instruments of terror' (Bush, 2002). The fact that he chose to 'build and keep these weapons despite international sanctions [and] UN demands' (Bush, 2002) meant that he was in a position to threaten America and 'dominate the Middle East' (Bush, 2002), jeopardising the lifeblood of neo-conservatism—American exceptionalism and everything it represents, both interests and values, their vision of a democratic Middle East and their alliance with Israel. As a result, Iraq was a symbol of *evil*; an *imminent* threat that neo-conservative morality and militarism couldn't ignore. Containment was impossible 'when dictators obtain weapons of mass destruction' (Cheney, 2002), as 'we cannot wait for...the smoking gun...in the form of a mushroom cloud' (Bush, 2002). Thus pre-emptive invasion as part of the war on terror was unavoidable for neo-conservatives.

The neo-conservative toolkit was perfect for tackling this threat and was replicated in the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS). It purported a two point strategy: pre-emptive militarism and the promotion of democracy to end terror and advocate peace. Justified by the argument that WMD could be passed to terrorists and detonated in America, 'killing millions, bringing our economy to a halt, and effectively suspending our country's cherished civil liberties' (Rumsfeld: 2011, 423), the Bush administration embraced the idea of 'acting pre-emptively' (NSS, 2002: 6) to counter the imminent threat of Iraq. Neo-conservative logic was evoked to reinforce that, because America possesses unequalled strength and influence in the world (NSS, 2002: 1), it has the capacity to execute pre-emptive militarism. Inextricably bound with pre-emption is the emphasis that America 'will not hesitate to act alone' (NSS, 2002: 6) against Saddam Hussein. Neo-conservatism further reared its head in the vow to 'actively work to bring the hope of democracy...to every corner of the world' (NSS, 2002: IV), espousing moral rhetoric to frame the war on terror as a struggle to 'overcome evil with greater good' (Bush, 2002).

Iraq as a rogue state was an asset to terrorism, so pre-emptive regime change to eliminate Saddam would prevent him from contributing to the war on terror with his WMD, as well as rid the world of a sponsor of terrorism. The argument was that 'there can be no peace if our security depends on the will and whims of a ruthless [dictator]' (Bush, 2002). The neo-conservative dream of a 'pax Americana' was threatened by Iraq. As neo-conservatism dictates that America holds 'the responsibility of defending human liberty against violence' (Bush, 2002) by using force, invading Iraq was the only option for achieving peace. The void left by Saddam must be filled with American values to truly achieve peace; a democratic Iraq would liberate the people and inspire other states to become democratic themselves, stabilising the principal arena of neo-conservative interests.

On reflection, many contend that Iraq was only invaded because of neo-conservatism. However, this is a shallow assessment of American foreign policy. 9/11 lowered America's threat tolerance, with Rumsfeld arguing that it 'compelled our government to make terrorism a focus of intense attention' (2011: 421). A new threat was in play thus America required a new response: 9/11 would have forced this chaotic policy re-evaluation upon *any* administration, *regardless* of their ideology. Secondly, neo-conservatism embodies principles that *all* of America holds sacred. The Hamiltonian idea of promoting American interests abroad, the Wilsonian vision of a 'universal moral order [linked] to the concrete needs of the American hegemony', the Jeffersonian emphasis on 'the preservation of American democracy in a dangerous world', and the Jacksonian belief that 'we must fight pre-emptive wars' (Mead, 2002: 246) are all part of neo-conservatism. Yet these beliefs stem from deeply rooted historical foreign policy schools across the ideological spectrum. Furthermore, Iraq was not exclusive to the neo-conservative agenda prior to 9/11. In 1998, for example, Clinton changed his Iraq policy 'from containment to regime change' (Kagan, 2008). Conclusively after 9/11, retaliation to terrorism was required to defend an exceptional America under attack: America's vulnerability to *all* threats could have resulted in another administration drawing on similar tools and the same target, causing an Iraq invasion *without* neo-conservatism.

Neo-conservatism is the embodiment of US exceptionalism, possessing a foreign policy that embraces militarism, morality, and a desperate craving for a democratic Middle East. The holy grail of neo-conservatism, a democratic Iran at the heart of a pax Americana, placed the democratisation of Iraq at the heart of their agenda. 9/11 provided

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the opportunity to enact this strategy by threatening American self-identity and the neo-conservative democratic utopian vision. It was the neo-conservative belief that it was America's duty to preserve itself and the world against this threat. The newly enlarged national interest by Bush allowed neo-conservatives to do this, drawing Iraq into the war on terror discourse. The argument was that Iraq was a rogue state whose WMD and support for terror both threatened the US and disrupted the moral democratic peace that American exceptionalism propagated. The neo-conservatives provided their long-awaited grand strategy that Bush needed to vanquish this threat, adopting a policy of pre-emptive regime change and the instillation of moral peaceful values. Although it can be argued that 9/11 would have evoked the same pre-emptive retaliation from a different administration, the Iraq invasion by the Bush administration was fundamentally a story of neo-conservative ideas about the role of America in the world (Packer in Kagan, 2008).

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*Written by: Lucie Parker*  
*Written at: University of York*  
*Written for: Nick Ritchie*  
*Date written: April 2014*