

The Iraq Invasion: the Neoconservative Perspective

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The Case for Invading Iraq as part of the post-9/11 Global War on Terror from a Neoconservative Perspective Drawing on Policy Statements from the Bush Administration.

Introduction

The 2003 invasion of Iraq remains one of the most controversial interventions of the 21st century, in which the primary justification was arguably provided by the 'Bush Doctrine', a collection of foreign policy principles that became most apparent in the National Security Strategy (NSS) published by the White House National Security Council (NSC) in 2002. Connections with the neoconservative ideology and the Bush doctrine are clear to see, so much so that Krauthammer (2005) described the doctrine as "a synonym for neoconservative foreign policy" (p.22). This paper will explain how an out of favour neoconservative ideology became central to US foreign policy, and how it presented its case for the 2003 military intervention of Iraq.

This essay starts by briefly explaining the key tenets of a neoconservative foreign policy within a US context, before then looking at how the 9/11 attacks led to the adoption of neoconservative principles in US foreign policy, more specifically within the 'Bush doctrine'. Next, it looks at how the Bush doctrine transformed the threat presented by Iraq, and became the primary justification for war. Four key principles of the doctrine are then considered in explaining how the neoconservative case for an invasion of Iraq in 2003 was created: unipolarity, pre-emptive war, unilateralism and democracy promotion. Finally, the essay concludes that neoconservatism's faith in the power of democracy may have led to the undoing of an unprecedented global social-engineering project.

Neoconservatism

Neoconservatives promoted an activist foreign policy, based on ideological grounds, supported by global military dominance. They believed in American exceptionalism – that America's unique ideological commitment to democracy, liberty and free enterprise which are "universally embraced" (PNAC, 2000, p.4), offered a blueprint for societies around the world, and contended that backed by the US' hegemonic power position, the US had the opportunity and responsibility to further these ideals. These in turn would safeguard America's national interest. The global hegemony that the US could operate would be a benevolent one, with prominent neoconservative, and future Senior Director on Bush Jnr's NSC, Elliott Abrams describing the US as consistently "the greatest force for good among the nations of the Earth" (2000).

The Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a neoconservative American think-tank with the goal of promoting "American global leadership" (PNAC, 2000, p.1), presented a 'Statement of Principles' (1997) which provided four immediate recommendations for US foreign policy: "Significantly" increase defence spending; challenge regimes "hostile to our interests and values"; promote the cause of "political and economic freedom"; and extend an international order friendly to US "security", "prosperity" and "principles". However, these suggestions failed to exert much influence on US administrations until the events of 9/11.

9/11 – Catalyst for the 'Bush Doctrine'

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PNAC and neoconservative scholars had tried with minimal successes to influence previous administrations. The Reagan administration identified with neoconservatism when proposing head on confrontation with the USSR's "evil empire" (Reagan, 1983). However, the two seemingly parted ways as Reagan shifted towards 'détente' upon the arrival of the reformist Mikhail Gorbachev. Similarly, Bush Senior rejected neoconservative calls for the removal of Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War, and open letters written by PNAC to Bill Clinton calling for the removal of "Saddam Hussein and his regime from power" (PNAC, 1998) were shunned. Neoconservatives were dismayed with the US' continued use of realist containment and deterrence policies towards undemocratic regimes in the pursuit of stability. Finally, they were to be given their opportunity to influence foreign policy upon the election of George Bush Junior in 2000.

Neoconservatives were recruited into the government in droves, as Bush surrounded himself with numerous signatories to the 1998 PNAC letter to Clinton, and their 1997 Statement of Principles, including Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz. Leading neoconservatives now had prominent foreign policy positions, and their unilateralist influence began to reveal itself as the administration "refused to be a party to the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court" and "decided to move ahead with the National Missile Defense Program ignoring vigorous domestic and international opposition" (Nuruzzaman, 2006, p.245). However, it was the 9/11 attacks that "immediately opened the door to a full-fledged neoconservative foreign policy" (Davidson, 2009, p.68).

The events of 9/11 confirmed "the base notions held by neoconservatives within the Administration...of a vast and growing danger" that was "represented by global terrorism and autocratic dictatorships" (Smilie, 2012, p.4). Realist voices within the Bush administration were "seemingly drowned out by the post 9/11 urgency to construct a more aggressive policy to deter the threat of terrorism" (p.4), and what emerged was the 'Bush Doctrine', primarily in the form of the NSS published in 2002, and Bush's earlier 'State of the Union' address, delivered just five months after 9/11. The Bush administration radically transformed the threat posed by Iraq, and the response needed of the US.

The New Iraqi Threat

In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush labelled Iraq as part of an "axis of evil". The reasons for which included "seeking weapons of mass destruction", supporting terror, murdering Iraqi citizens and flaunting "hostility toward America" (Bush, 2002a). This showed clear continuity with the threat construction of the 'rogue-state' doctrine, where 'rogue states' had to commit four transgressions: "pursue weapons of mass destruction, support terrorism, severely abuse its own citizens, and stridently criticise the US" (NAN, 2014). However, neoconservative influence led the 'Bush doctrine' to break with tradition, arguing that "the US can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past" because of "the inability to deter a potential attacker" (NSS, 2002, p.15). Iraq was therefore transformed into an 'evil' state, where deterrence was impossible because of the irrationality of Saddam Hussein, who was willing to "gamble with the lives" of his citizens and "the wealth" of his nation (p.15).

Bush stated that "the fundamental problem with Iraq remains the nature of the regime, itself" (Bush, 2002b). Crucially, the 2002 NSS cites an "overlap between states that sponsor terror and those that pursue WMD" (p.15), connecting Iraq to the 'war on terror' by linking its rogue behaviour to the global terrorist threat, in particular the risk that Iraq may provide terrorists with WMD. The NSS also argues that the concept of an "imminent threat" must be adapted as "rogue states...rely on acts of terror and, potentially, the use of weapons of mass destruction weapons" that can be "used without warning" (p.15). This rhetoric, combined with (now dubious) intelligence evidence of Iraq's WMD development allowed the Bush administration to present the Iraqi regime as part of an "imminent, multifaceted, undeterrable and potentially calamitous threat to the US" (Record, 2003, p.6), requiring an unprecedented response. Key to this response would be the first of four clear neoconservative principles providing the foundations for the Bush doctrine: a policy of pre-emption.

Pre-Emptive Force

Undoubtedly the most controversial policy of the Bush doctrine, the 2002 NSS stated that "the US will, if necessary, act pre-emptively" (p.15). Neoconservatives foresaw scenarios of undeterrable rogue states and terrorists armed with WMDs, willing to attack the US whenever possible, and this fear was embodied in the belief that the US must

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“defend against the threat before it is unleashed” (p.14). Article 51 of the UN Charter states that nothing shall “impair the inherent right of...self-defence if an armed attack occurs” (UN, 2014). However, pre-emption, or ‘anticipatory self-defence’, is generally lent legitimacy “on the existence of an imminent threat” (NSS, 2002, p.15). We have seen that the definition of ‘imminent threat’ was adapted by neoconservatives in the NSS, arguing that because Saddam Hussein was not deterrable, it was inevitable that Iraq posed a threat to US security. Therefore, the US had a legitimate case to use pre-emptive force against Iraq.

However, much of this neoconservative thought has been heavily criticised. Mearsheimer and Walt (2003) carried out extensive study of Saddam Hussein’s rule, to conclude that he was “eminently deterrable” because above all, Hussein wanted to “stay alive” and “remain in power”. Terrorist organisations may see death as martyrdom, and be able to evade the US, making deterrence tactics impossible, but Saddam Hussein had a ‘return address’. In risking use of WMDs against the US, or providing one to a terrorist organisation, Mearsheimer and Walt argue Hussein “would have little to gain and everything to lose”, since any “US response would be swift and devastating”. This undermines the neoconservative position that pre-emptive force was required, because deterrence was impossible. It also highlights a fundamental difference in neoconservative and realist perspectives on international security, as neoconservatives refute the realist idea that stability equates to security.

Unipolarity

Neoconservatives are open in their antipathy for traditional realist ‘balance of power’ politics, as they believe that this only hinders the pursuit of American national interest. Their belief in US exceptionalism, and therefore their own benevolent hegemony, implies that weaker states have nothing to fear from US power, and results in a preference for a ‘preponderance of power’ and an acceptance of ‘bandwagoning’ logic: that “rather than attempting to check the power of a more powerful state” as realism would argue, “weaker states actually join forces with it” (Schmidt and Williams, 2008, p.196). The underlying assumption of bandwagoning “is that if a state is badly outgunned by a rival, it makes no sense to resist its demands, because the adversary will take what it wants by force anyway” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.163).

The 2002 NSS states that the US must maintain “defenses beyond challenge”, claiming “our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the US” (p.30). Clearly, Bush had adopted the grand strategy of primacy backed up by the global military dominance long advocated by neoconservatives. Jervis (2004) has argued the commitment to establish American primacy “is the element of the Bush Doctrine that ties all of the others together” (p.14). Many neoconservatives felt Iraq was crucial to establishing this primacy, with Kagan and Kristol (2002) stating that once Iraq and Turkey are “both in the pro-western camp, there is a reasonable chance that smaller powers might decide to jump on the bandwagon”. It was believed by neoconservatives that a transformation of Iraq would produce a bandwagoning effect, and may have been a tempting opportunity for a government pursuing global hegemony.

Again, these core neoconservative principals suffer heavy criticism from realists, who argue that although the logic of realism suggests a hegemonic position to be ideal, “to maintain U.S. hegemony is self-defeating because it will provoke other states to balance against the US, and result in the depletion of America’s relative power” (Layne, 2000, p.126). Primacy is therefore self-defeating and costly, whilst ‘bandwagoning’ is unrealistic. Pape (2005) has shown that ironically, largely due to Iraq and the Bush doctrine’s commitment to unilateralism, global opinion of the US as a benign hegemon was undermined, and resulted in the ‘soft balancing’ of other states against the US.

Unilateralism

The neoconservative commitment to unilateralism follows naturally from the commitments to unipolarity and pre-emption, because, as evidenced by Iraq, there will always be a challenge in achieving multilateral approval for pre-emptive action. We have discussed the neoconservative’s disdain for previous administration’s multilateral approaches, and how the US began to act unilaterally with Bush making decisions such as rejecting the Kyoto agreement. Iraq provided the most striking example of this commitment, as the US defied the UNSC, and showed the world that the US “would override strenuous objections from allies if this was necessary to reach its goals” (Jervis,

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2004, p.13). The neoconservative confidence in their unilateralist approach hinged upon the US' military dominance, and in particular, the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA).

Neoconservatives "believed that the US could rely on stealth technology, air-delivered precision-guided weapons, and small but highly mobile ground forces to win quick and decisive victories", and that the US "would swoop down out of the sky, finish off a regime, pull back and reload the shotgun for the next target" (Mearsheimer, 2005). This would produce the 'bandwagoning' effect, as states saw the immense power of the US and kept themselves in check, allowing the US to operate a form of 'big-stick' diplomacy. The confidence in RMA may have led neoconservatives to see Iraq as an easy target to initiate this 'bandwagoning' effect amongst challenger states.

Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz dismissed the claim made by then US Army Chief of Staff, General Shinseki, that the US would need "several hundred thousand troops" to occupy Iraq due to "ethnic tensions" (USA Today, 2003). Realists, such as Posen (2002), foresaw the bloody insurgency and difficult urban warfare that the neoconservatives were blind to. RMA may have allowed the US to quickly destroy the Iraqi army, but it offered no help with "reconstruction, occupation" and the "asymmetric warfare" that ensued (Schmidt and Williams, 2008). The ground troops and finance committed to battle these challenges ultimately undermined the US' ability to 'reload', taking 'bandwagoning' off the table as the world witnessed the limitations of US military might. Why did neoconservatives fail to predict such a difficult insurgency? Many realists have argued that it is down to their idealistic view of democracy.

Democracy Promotion

At the heart of Neoconservatism, is a belief in the Kantian 'Democratic Peace Theory', that a world of democracies would be a peaceful world as democratic states are highly unlikely to war with each other. The terrorist threat emerging from the Middle East was argued to be caused by "the almost complete absence of democracy in the middle east" (Mearsheimer, 2005). The 2002 NSS opens by stating America "will actively work to bring the hope of democracy...to every corner of the world" (p.3), as not only would this safeguard America's security, but promote liberal values such as free markets that protect America's economic interests. This goal of democracy promotion has long been symptomatic of US foreign policy, and was expected to be achieved through the 'Domino' effect sought during the Cold War.

Neoconservatives believe that democracy is "the most powerful ideology on Earth" (Mearsheimer, 2005), and once 'exported' to the Middle East, it would 'domino' throughout the region. Bush (2003) was explicit in this belief, stating "Iraqi democracy will succeed, and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Teheran, that freedom can be the future of every nation" and that "the establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution". Removing Saddam Hussein would supposedly allow democracy to develop in Iraq, removing the perceived security threat, and triggering the spread of democracy throughout the region. Using military power to achieve this spread of democracy has led to Mearsheimer (2005) describing neoconservatism as "Wilsonianism with teeth".

Democratic Peace Theory has its critics. Rosato (2003) has argued that pacifism occurs not because of democracy, but because of similarity, supported by Raknerud and Hegre (1997) who showed the potential for 'Autocratic Peace'. However, neoconservatives have been more closely criticised for their idealism in believing that the ideology of democracy could trump the risks of nationalism realists proposed in Iraq. Bush contended that US forces would be seen as liberators (BBC, 2003). In fact, as Mearsheimer (2005) puts it, "occupation stokes nationalism, which leads to insurgency, which undermines any hope of making bandwagoning logic work, which undermines big-stick diplomacy". Morgenthau (1949) noted that no state could "pursue without discrimination such a policy of universal democracy without courting disaster; commitments would outrun resources and failure would ensue" (p.10), a prophecy that seemed to ring true.

Conclusion

Neoconservatism previously struggled to influence US administrations, however, when Bush brought multiple neoconservatives and members of PNAC into powerful foreign policy positions in 2000 that they were given their

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greatest opportunity. 9/11 and the immediate security environment that followed it, allowed these neoconservatives to create the 'Bush doctrine' as a proactive solution to the global terrorist threat. This doctrine linked Iraq to the global war on terror by citing the overlap of states seeking WMDs and terrorism. It argued that due to the difficulty in foreseeing these new threats, the definition of an 'imminent' threat had to be adapted to permit the use of pre-emptive self-defence. Evidence was presented of Hussein's pursuit of WMDs, and Iraq's links to global terrorism to present Iraq as an undeterrable, and immediate security threat to the US, requiring the pre-emptive use of force. However, the Bush doctrine showed clear influence of much greater neoconservative thought at play.

Neoconservatives, with the Bush doctrine, sought to maintain American unipolar power, believing in the exceptionalism of the US and their benign role as global hegemon. Crucial to this was the maintenance of their global military dominance, which would create a 'bandwagoning' effect as states sought to keep themselves in order with the US, for fear of its wrath. This military dominance would allow the US to act unilaterally whenever it needed to, and RMA would ensure quick and decisive victories that would strike fear in to any challenging regimes, and force compliance.

The entire project rested on the perceived utility of democracy in maintaining global security and US interests, yet it was perhaps such a firm belief in the power of democracy and its attainability, that blinded neoconservatives to the risks of nationalism and ensuing insurgency. The demands placed upon the US to combat these challenges fundamentally undermined their military flexibility, and so the whole neoconservative expectation of 'bandwagoning'. US troops continue to protect a brittle democracy in Iraq, which was perhaps intended to be the first stepping stone in a grand vision that started a "global democratic revolution" (Bush, 2003), but never intended to be the last.

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