The 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Constructivist Explanation

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The 2003 invasion of Iraq is considered one of the most perplexing and ridiculed American military adventures in recent history. Considering the complex factors and people behind the decision, perceptions and ideational goals appeared consistently and seemed to set the tone and drive the Bush administration to launch a preventative war against Iraq. Andrew Flibbert writes, "Ideational factors ... alone deemed the Iraq war necessary and appropriate to the circumstances, and they alone tell us why the administration wanted a war that seemed reckless to many outside the pro-war ideational community."[1] The ideas and factors behind the decision consisted of a demonstration of power and credibility after the Gulf War and 9/11, the promotion of democracy, human rights, and American values in contrast to an evil regime, and the preservation and reassertion of American unipolarity and hegemony. While in some ways these ideas are distinct, their combination that drove the decision to invade reveals many similarities in their reasoning. The interplay of these ideas, perceptions, and norms, each supported by different facets of the Bush administration, demonstrates that the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 should be viewed in a constructivist light.

After the end of the Cold War, America's military might seemed to far surpass any other country in the world. Throughout the latter half of the 1990s, the US enjoyed a relative safety with only minor military engagements abroad, causing the perception of threat and challenge to American firepower to be ignored. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 not only proved America to be vulnerable to attack, but also portrayed the country as weak for not being able to thwart a $500,000 attack by a terrorist network.[2] Col. Paul Hughes, who was working at the

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[1]Flibbert, Andrew. "The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War." *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006), 349.

[2] McNeill, Daniel. "Why Was Iraq Invaded in 2003?" *Undergraduate Journal of Politics and International Relations*, March 13, 2018, 7.

Pentagon that day, bluntly states "We got our ass kicked" and compares the feeling of that day to the embarrassment Union generals felt after the Battle of Bull Run.[3] 9/11 challenged the widely held notions of American military strength, and US officials felt destined to combat this newfound perception of weakness. Richard Clarke writes, "Bush personally went to war chiefly to prove that the United States was undeterred by 9/11, that we could take combat casualties without running away."[4] Only attacking the culprits behind 9/11, al-Qaeda hiding in Afghanistan, would be the assumed response to such an attack on the country. However, the constructivist framework demonstrates that combatting the perception of weakness as the global hegemon is more important than simply retaliating for the attack. A major military engagement was needed to demonstrate America's will to use force to correct the new perception, demonstrated by Markus Heinrich's statement, "[Afghanistan] was not the awe inspiring hammer blow which the US wanted to demonstrate its power."[5] Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld discussed hat Afghanistan did not have enough targets and that the campaign there was relatively less aggressive than he wanted America's response to be, thus demonstrating that the constructivist approach explains the demonstration of force even against an enemy not directly implicated in the terrorist attacks. The hawks within the Bush administration "hankered to invade Iraq not because Saddam was strong and dangerous but because he was weak and vulnerable, not because he was implicated in 9/11 but because he looked like an easy mark."[6] This response in Iraq strongly contrasts the realist view, first because "the pre-war balance of power favored the United States by an

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[3] Ricks, Thomas E. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, (NY: Penguin Press, 2006), 30.
[4] Record, Jeffrey. *Wanting War: Why the Bush Administration Invaded Iraq*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2010), 94.
[5] Heinrich, Markus Nikolas. "One War, Many Reasons: The US Invasion of Iraq." *E-International Relations Students*, March 9, 2015.
[6] Record, *Wanting War,* 80.

overwhelming margin" and because the invasion of Iraq was precipitated on combating a negative and weak perception, not a demonstrated threat.[7] Markus Heinrich claims that US officials considered the demonstration of force "necessary to deter others and to dispel any appearance of weakness following 9/11."[8]

Besides 9/11, the unspectacular victory in the 1991 Gulf War that failed to remove Saddam Hussein from power provided another perception of weakness and the lack of complete force for the United States. "The seeds of the second president Bush's decision to invade were planted by the unfinished nature of the 1991 war," Thomas Ricks writes.[9] There is no mention that failing to kill Saddam and destroy the Ba'athist regime in 1991 made the regime more powerful and thus warranted a second war. In fact, the regime was heavily weakened after 20th-century wars with Iran and the United States, proving that the failure to defeat the regime in 1991 simply gave a weak perception of American military credibility, and *that* provided the sense of unfinished business vis-a-vis Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Jeffrey Record writes, "the defiant Iraqi dictator's very survival represented an embarrassing strategic defeat for the United States."[10] His description of an "embarrassing" defeat further cements the weak perception of the global hegemon. Further, "the sense of the need to correct a mistake became all the more potent after 9/11," demonstrating that the combination of unfinished business in 1991 and the attack in 2001 combined to devalue America's perceived strength and commitment to use force, a perception the Bush administration believed could be reversed by invading Iraq.[11]

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[7] Flibbert, "The Road to Baghdad", 332.
[8] Heinrich, "One War, Many Reasons"
[9] Ricks, *Fiasco*, 5.
[10] Record, *Wanting War*, 39.
[11] Hanson, Victor Davis. "Why Did We Invade Iraq?" *National Review*, March 26, 2013.

The strong demonstration of force with a more nimble and efficient fighting force comprised an ideational transformation of military purpose and power spearheaded by Secretary Rumsfeld even before the 9/11 attacks. Gordon and Trainor recount, "when he arrived at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld made clear that his goal was nothing less than to remake the U.S. military to fashion a leaner and more lethal force" and Cramer & Duggan state "it appears Rumsfeld merged this goal of 'proving transformation' with the goal of invading Iraq.[1213] In addition to combating the weak perception after 9/11, Rumsfeld wanted to show off his revamped military and project American power simply to prove a point. "The whole point of military transformation, as [Rumsfeld] saw it, was to demonstrate that America could project power and topple rogue regimes with a small, light force and that, therefore, it could do so repeatedly, anytime, anywhere, at low cost and little effort."[14] Rumsfeld held a belief that America's ability to demonstrate force with little effort was part of its identity in the post-Cold War system. This idea is explained by constructivist thought because it focuses on perceptions of the identity of a country in the global order, not simply focusing on balancing power and threats and playing a role in institutions. Michael Ledeen, in a speech at the American Enterprise Institute, bluntly highlighted this conception, saying "every ten years or so, the US needs to take some crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show we mean business," using military force as a way to ensure hegemonic credibility.[15]

While the hegemony provided a perceived notion of the superiority of American strength and commitment to upholding that system, several events throughout the 1990s and early 2000s

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[12] Gordon, Michael R., and Bernard E. Trainor. *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 3.
[13]Cramer, Jane K., and A. Trevor Thrall, eds. *Why Did the US Invade Iraq?*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 217.
[14] Record, *Wanting War*, 126.
[15] Ibid., 94.

put cracks in that credibility, such as the bombings of US embassies in Africa in 1998 and the USS Cole in 2000, which elicited weak and failed responses. These terrorist attacks, which occurred during the Clinton administration, seemed to prompt Bush officials to fix the credibility problem they faced. Bush, reiterating a previous statement by Vice President Cheney, states "this is an administration that when we say we're going to do something we mean it … and we're not going to miss the opportunity to make the world more peaceful and more free," emphasizing in a post 9/11 society that America would no longer be bullied by terrorists, and that terrorists would face serious consequences.[16] This desire to promote a credible commitment to US security, hegemony, and way of life reveals another constructivist aspect behind the decision to invade because the security aspect here is more about the reputation that America responds to attacks on its citizens, and not necessarily to just physically prevent them from happening again. Oliver Roy concurs, stating, "the invasion was largely aimed at demonstrating America's political will and commitment to go to war," a will that had been severely lacking (besides minor aerial engagements) since 1991.[17]

Throughout the invasion planning process, a notable disagreement was the number of troops needed to be successful, with military leaders pushing for far more than Rumsfeld desired. The key factor in this difference of opinion stemmed from their motives. The military was primarily concerned with winning, as that is the organizational culture of an organization designed to fight, while Rumsfeld, a civilian who formed part of the president's cabinet, was concerned with proving to the world that America could do more with less. Bob Woodward

[16] Woodward, Bob. *Plan of Attack*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 113.
[17] Ahmad, Muhammad Idrees. *The Road to Iraq: The Making of a Neoconservative War*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 164.

recounts these discussions, stating "the guidance to [General] Franks seemed to be: Keep it small, the smallest you can get away with."[18] The military and Rumsfeld were committed to emphasizing priorities that were in line with their identities and roles, highlighting the constructivist approach in their decision making. While the different actors disagreed on how to best accomplish the task, the goal of many deeply involved was a demonstration of US power. Invading Iraq "presented an attractive option. Iraq was weak [and] it was led by a notoriously cruel and demonised figure," demonstrating the next ideational reason the US invaded Iraq: to topple an evil dictator and in turn promote democracy, human rights, and American values. [19]

While the demonstration of power and military efficiency was mainly spearheaded by Rumsfeld, the moral response of installing democracy was the primary driver for President Bush. First, Bush advocated for freedom and democracy in a moral sense of human dignity, not merely to promote democratic peace theory and provide more safety and stability. Bush described freedom as "the non-negotiable demand of human dignity" and "God's gift to everybody in the world," injecting a sense of morality and religion.[2021] While Bush's advisors, such as Rumsfeld, pushed the invasion for their ideational goals, Bush's predisposition to act based on his moral and religious views made him easier to win over for support of the invasion. In fact, he states "I believe we have a duty to free people," demonstrating a strong personal commitment to spreading democracy.[22] However, while his personal values did lean him toward this approach, his realist foreign policy that existed prior to 9/11 limited its implementation, demonstrating that 9/11 played a major role in changing the way various ideas were portrayed and considered.

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[18] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 80.
[19] Ahmad, *The Road to Iraq,* 163.
[20] Record, *Wanting War*, 35.
[21] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 88-89.
[22] Ibid., 89.

Jeffrey Record writes, "George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice, who before 9/11 embraced the realist approach to foreign policy and its attendant elevation of stability over democracy, became committed converts to the messianic 'freedom' mission only after 9/11," describing the dramatic shift to constructivism after the Bush administration realized that placation in the face of evil acts was no longer an option. Bush began to focus on human rights as a result of observing the effects of oppressive groups such as al-Qaeda, and "wondered how the U.S. could reform such societies, and wanted to advocate the promotion of democracy and women's rights in the Muslim world."[23] This new way of thinking is rooted in constructivism, as Bush's ideas and beliefs about what people, not just his own citizens, deserve as human beings guided his foreign policy choices. He once simply stated, "there is a human condition that we must worry about," which goes against the standard discussions of security, power, institutions, and global cooperation that dominate realist and liberal thinking, instead putting focus on values, specifically ones central to Bush's belief system and the American way of life.

Bush slowly started to see the benefits of pursuing a constructivist foreign policy in relation to his faith. He believed he could justify the new demonstration of American force by tying it to the betterment of societies. Flibbert comments on the shift in policy by explaining, "power was to be used not just to manage international problems, but to change the world for the better."[24] Bush's dramatic shift from realism is also shown by his speech to West Point graduates in 2002, stating "we have a great opportunity to extend a just peace by replacing poverty, repression and resentment around the world with a hope of a better day," which Bob Woodward explains by writing, "the goal was not only an absence of war but a just peace which included

[23] Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* 89.
[24] Flibbert, "The Road to Baghdad", 332.

moral purposes, democracy, free markets and the rights of women."[25] While Bush did launch wars on specific terrorist organizations, he collectively launched a war on terror and political/radical Islam, two related ideas that connect to the constructivist approach of ideational thinking and goals. He effectively sought to change the social and political structure of the Middle East for moral reasons, something that departs from most foreign policy thinking. While a democratic Middle East certainly would have its material and diplomatic benefits for the US, Bush's goal of "pulling the plug on [Saddam's] toxic regime" and "[transforming] the sick political culture of the Middle East" was grounded in his personal perceptions of good and evil, a dichotomy that Bush increasingly used after 9/11 and in the run-up to the 2003 invasion.

Not since the Cold War had a president so consistently used vocabulary involving morality in relation to foreign policy matters. In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush referred to anti-American states, including Iraq, as constituting an "axis of evil," language that painted the three countries as morally backward.[26] Not only were these states threatening to the safety of American citizens and the security and stability of the international system, but they were inherently wrong in their nature, according to Bush. This introduction of morality into foreign policy discussion follows a constructivist explanation of ideas and norms, with the norms being American values of freedom and democracy, something North Korea, Iran, and Iraq all lacked to an extent. Additionally, Bush's religious guidance on foreign policy matters, especially combating what he viewed as evil after 9/11, displays another constructivist explanation for his impulses to go to war with Iraq. Muhammad Ahmad argues that "for Bush … the chief motor was his simplistic, messianic belief in fighting what he considered an 'evil' regime," showing

[25] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 132.
[26] Bush, George W. "2002 State of the Union Address." Speech.

that Bush believed he had a duty as a Christian to fight Saddam, which Jeffrey Record describes as Bush "[believing] he was doing God's will as president."[2728] Thus, "Bush, who regarded terrorism as evil and Saddam Hussein as a terrorist, saw the war against Iraq as a war against evil," allowing him to be convinced by prominent advisors, who were also driven by ideational factors, to go to war.[29] Bob Woodward goes further in his description of the Iraqi leader, writing "it was almost as if Saddam was an agent of the devil."[30] Combining Bush's personal vendetta with Saddam for the attempted assassination of his father with his religious duty to rid the world of evil, created an ideological impulse for Bush to authorize a war with Iraq that many experts considered non-vital to national security.

Bush's desire to change societies fit into neoconservatives' desire for regime change, although their motives differed in various ways. Bush, guided by his faith, pursued goals of human rights and free societies, while neoconservatives argued for the export of American values due to their notion of inherent American exceptionalism. The desire to preserve and reassert American hegemony was justified by this concept of inherent exceptionalism and the idea that it was thus appropriate for the US to launch wars against revisionist states who challenged the unipolar system. In some ways, this factor of the decision to invade is similar to Rumsfeld's desire to project force, but this neoconservative argument is broader in its belief of American *political* supremacy, instead of simply focusing on the military. Record states "the invasion … was designed to perpetuate [American] hegemony by intimidating those who would challenge it."[31] This reveals the interconnectedness between demonstrating force and preserving

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[27] Ahmad, *The Road to Iraq*, 167.
[28] Record, *Wanting War*, 138.
[29] Ibid., 137.
[30] Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* 87.
[31] Record, *Wanting War*, 24.

hegemony in that neoconservatives believe that force was a valid means of maintaining American dominance in the system. The neoconservatives' ambition to maintain a significant level of hegemony coincided with their larger emphasis on unilateralism than the Clinton administration had emphasized. Flibbert states that "the drive for hegemony contrasts sharply with the liberal institutionalist view that multilateralism in foreign policy is more efficacious," revealing a departure from Clinton's liberal view for a more constructivist and ideational view of world politics grounded in American hegemony and exceptionalism.[32] Record sums up this transition by arguing, "it was about showing the world, friend and foe alike, who was boss. It was about supplanting realism and multilateralism with value exportation and unilateralism."[33] The neoconservatives believed the US to be too constrained in its foreign policy decisions, something they deemed inappropriate considering the level of respect it deserves in the international system. This criticism is not one of power because the US physically had the power to act in its interests, but of the conception that in a world of norms and institutions, the US should be acknowledged as justified in acting as a hegemon. The neoconservatives "consciously decided to use Iraq as the first step of a wider design intended to eventually enable the United States to act unilaterally anywhere around the world with relative impunity," essentially using Iraq as an assertion of their perceived appropriate role of the US.[34] The conception of American exceptionalism and its aspect of the logic of appropriateness further show the constructivist explanations behind the invasion and served as the neoconservatives' primary impetus for war with Iraq.

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[32] Flibbert, "The Road to Baghdad", 331.
[33] Record, *Wanting War*, 147.
[34] Cramer & Thrall, *Why did the US Invade Iraq?*, 7.

The neoconservatives' belief in American exceptionalism is interconnected to the two aforementioned reasons for invading: the demonstration of force to combat a perception of weakness and the moral drive to liberate the oppressed. Neoconservatives believed that the US had an inherent moral primacy that justified the continuance of US hegemony. Flibbert writes, "the United States, unlike any other great power in human history, was deemed capable of playing a dominant but entirely benevolent role in world politics, since U.S. intentions were believed to be irreproachable," causing neoconservatives to moderately rebuke the liberal international system in favor of their ideational tendency to support some form of unilateral action.[35] Markus Heinrich claims that the US policy in Iraq "derived from …. Manifest Destiny," an idea that neoconservatives believed extended far beyond the American West and into the realm of domination in international politics.[36] This unilateral behavior is entirely constructivist because it has nothing to do with balancing power and entirely rebukes the liberal adherence to multilateralism. Flibbert explains, "the [Bush] administration authored its unilateralism with America's unique identity, not as a form of self-help in a world of anarchy."[37] And, although the US did attempt to receive a UN resolution to justify its action, "Bush was going to tell the UN either they solve the Saddam problem or the US would."[38] The belief in American exceptionalism allowed suppression of the criticism from allies such as France and Germany, allowing invasion planning to continue, driven by the aforementioned ideational factors. Proponents of the invasion believed that "a hegemonic America served as keeper of the global order and was entitled to defend its primacy from both latent threats and open acts of defiance,"

[35] Flibbert, "The Road to Baghdad", 332.
[36] Heinrich, "One War, Many Reasons"
[37] Flibbert, "The Road to Baghdad", 334.
[38] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 181.

fully showing the constructivist approach in its reference to defiance, acts that do not necessarily constitute a security threat, but a threat to the global *perception* of the United States.[39]

As stated by Steven Metz, the "rationale for military intervention against Iraq… was always a polyglot of ideas and themes."[40] The ideational objectives of the various actors combined into a decision that began to comprise an element of groupthink, arguably making invasion the "obvious" choice at one point. The recurrence of the concern with perception and a sense of obligation to change the world and preserve American identity shaped the decision-making more than any consideration of power balancing or maintaining the legitimacy of multilateral institutions. The unique prevalence of these ideas shaped the entire discussion of invasion from the beginning, and also provided a legitimacy of the decision to Bush administration officials. Without ideational prevalence, it is likely that an invasion of Iraq would not have been agreed upon so quickly. Thus, in order to understand why Iraq was invaded with a relatively small amount of time to discuss it, one must view the decision in a constructivist light, to uncover the drive and rationale of a foreign policy decision that cost thousands of lives and still haunts the United States to this day.

[39] Flibbert, "The Road to Baghdad", 332.
[40] Record, *Wanting War*, 145.

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