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ABSTRACT
Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003? Most scholars cite the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), a neoconservative desire to spread democracy, or the placating of domestic interest groups as the Bush administration's objectives, but I suggest these arguments are flawed. Instead, I proffer the "performative war" thesis resting on the concepts of status, reputation, and hierarchy to explain the Iraq war. Hegemons desire generalized deterrence, such that others do not challenge their territory, preferences, or rule. However, the challenging of a hegemon's authority—as occurred on 9/11—generates a need to assert hegemony and demonstrate strength to a global audience. Only fighting a war can demonstrate such strength; no peaceful bargain, even a lopsided one, can achieve the same effect. Consistent with this framework, the United States fought Iraq mainly for its demonstration effect—defeating the recalcitrant Saddam would lead other states to fear the United States and submit to its authority and global order.

Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003? Specifically, what concrete goal was the invasion supposed to accomplish for the Bush administration? International relations scholars have proffered various answers to this question, including the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the diffusion of liberal democracy in the Arab and Muslim heartland, and the placating of domestic interest groups, such as the oil or Israel lobbies. I believe these arguments are flawed. WMD-based arguments for preventive war, especially dominant in the literature on the causes of the invasion, are dubious for two reasons. First, their evidentiary reliance on the Bush administration's public claims between 2001 and 2003 is problematic, given that during this period the administration was engaged in a public relations effort to convince skeptical domestic and international audiences of the threat posed by Saddam. We do not know that WMD actually mattered to the Bush administration, only that it formed the mainstay of its public case for war—a fundamentally different proposition. Second, the causal logic of the preventive war theory is inconsistent with the run-up to the war, especially concerning the issue of uncertainty. Aside

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from WMD nonproliferation, other purported goals, such as spreading democracy or satisfying interest groups, do not satisfactorily explain the Bush administration's decision-making either.

While a firm understanding of why the United States invaded Iraq will probably have to await the release of archived documents and memoranda in the decades to come, this article seeks to contribute to the debate. Drawing on scholarship in IR, political theory, applied psychology, and sociology for its theoretical architecture and on internal memoranda, diplomatic correspondence, memoirs, interviews, and a plethora of secondary sources for empirical evidence, I proffer the "performative war" thesis to explain the American war in Iraq. In a nutshell, my claim is that until September 10, 2001, the United States enjoyed global prestige and status commensurate with its material capabilities and social rank—America knew it was universally acknowledged as a hegemonic power. However, the attacks of 9/11 threatened its hegemony and the generalized deterrence it had established against challenge to its rule. Consequently, the United States felt the need to regain status and establish itself as an aggressive global power. To do so, it had to fight and win a war. Afghanistan in 2001 was insufficient to generate such a fearsome reputation, but the defeat of a recalcitrant foe like Saddam would serve this performative purpose. Invading Iraq would allow the United States to reassert and demonstrate its strength in no uncertain terms to a global audience, crown itself king of the hill, and reestablish generalized deterrence.

In this view, the United States fought Iraq not because of a dyadic dispute but to demonstrate to observers that it was, and would remain, the global hegemonic power in the post-9/11 era. Importantly, there was no peaceful bargain short of war for the disputants to locate. The United States was intent on attacking Iraq shortly after—and perhaps on—9/11, and there was nothing material or symbolic Saddam Hussein could have offered that would have avoided war. The Iraq war thus provides a more general lesson for IR scholars: at times, states may be insistent on a fight because certain reputation- and authority-establishing benefits only accrue to violent actors.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in four sections. I first explain my claim that the field's explanations for why the war occurred, especially those centering on WMD, are flawed. Next, I construct a theoretical framework of performative war centering on the concepts of status, reputation, and hierarchy. In the third section, I make the case that this framework accounts for the Bush administration's path to invading Iraq. Finally, I discuss this study's theoretical implications for the bargaining model of war and its policy implications for the wider American intelligentsia, body politic, and public.

Explanations for the Iraq War

As a field, IR has been surprisingly silent about the causes of the Iraq war. Five major journals in IR and security/conflict studies (*International Organization*, *International Security*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Security Studies*, and *World Politics*) have published thirty-six articles with the word "Iraq" in their title referring to the most recent US war in Iraq (as opposed to, for example, the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s). Generously considered, only six of these thirty-six articles were about the war's causes. The others focused on how the war was sold and the associated failure of the marketplace of ideas;[1] the sensitivity to casualties in US public opinion;[2] tactical and strategic issues faced by insurgents and counterinsurgents;[3] and the stability and democratic future of post-invasion Iraq.[4]

That said, the provenance of the Iraq war has certainly been the subject of scholarly attention, with three explanations especially popular: ideas, interest groups, and WMD. One argument is that the United States was motivated by a neoconservative desire to spread democracy in the Middle East.[5] "Wilsonian ideas of spreading democracy," however, are conspicuous by their absence in available pre-war documents, which more commonly refer to a "stable, law abiding Iraq" than a democratic one. Moreover, the administration only began to emphasize regime type in Iraq specifically and the Arab world generally in the spring of 2003, after the war was

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[1]See Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 5–48; Jon Western, "The War Over Iraq: Selling War to the American Public," *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 106–139; Jane Cramer, "Militarized Patriotism: Why the US Marketplace of Ideas Failed Before the Iraq War," *Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (2007): 489–524.

[2]See William A. Boettcher and Michael D. Cobb, "Echoes of Vietnam? Casualty Framing and Public Perceptions of Success and Failure in Iraq," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 6 (December 2006): 831–54; Erik Voeten and Paul R. Brewer, "Public Opinion, the War in Iraq, and Presidential Accountability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 6 (December 2006): 809–830.

[3]See Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 7–40; Colin H. Kahl, "In the Crossfire or the Crosshairs? Norms, Civilian Casualties, and US Conduct in Iraq," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 7–46; Austin Long, "Whack-a-Mole or Coup de Grace? Institutionalization and Leadership Targeting in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014): 471–512; Thomas Meyer, "Flipping the Switch: Combat, State Building, and Junior Officers in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Security Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): 222–58; Deborah Avant and Lee Sigelman, "Private Security and Democracy: Lessons from the US in Iraq," *Security Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 230–65.

[4]See Daniel Byman, "Constructing a Democratic Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 47–78; Bruce E. Moon, "Long Time Coming: Prospects for Democracy in Iraq," *International Security* 33, no. 4 (Spring 2009): 115–48.

[5]For example, see Andrew Flibbert, "The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War," *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 310–52; Brian C. Schmidt and Michael C. Williams, "The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War: Neoconservatives Versus Realists," *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 191–220; Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

underway.[6] Finally, neoconservatives' unwavering support for authoritarian regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt renders suspicious any claim that imputes to them any concern for democracy in the Middle East.

Others argue the war was fought to placate the "Israel lobby." Powerful as the lobby is, it was superfluous; the evidence is clear that leaders such as Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz were not reluctant warriors pushed into invading by forces outside the administration.[7] Still others allege that the war was fought because of the oil lobby. However, as Colgan shows, Iraq was "not a classic resource war, in the sense that the United States did not seize oil reserves for profit and control." Rather, the United States awarded production contracts to even Chinese and Russian companies.[8]

The remaining dominant argument in the literature is that the invasion of Iraq was an act of preventive war based on the threat Saddam's WMD capabilities would pose in the future.[9] There are two significant problems with this argument: the lack of positive evidence in its favor and the inconsistency of the war's run-up with its stated logic.

Saddam's WMD and Iraq as a Preventive War

IR scholars focusing on Saddam's WMD as the direct cause of war have subsumed their explanations within a bargaining framework. Specifically, Iraq's possible acquisition of nuclear capabilities would represent a rapid power shift in the future, forcing the United States to gamble against a rival relatively easier to defeat today than tomorrow. The result was a preventive war in March 2003.

One clear example of this thinking is forwarded by Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro (DM).[10] Notwithstanding their caveat—"Our purpose here is not to claim that our theory offers a definitive, or complete explanation for" the Iraq war[11]—they state simply: "The main US motivation for

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[6]Jane Cramer and Eric Duggan, "In Pursuit of Primacy," in *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq*, ed. Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall (New York: Routledge, 2012), 210–20; Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 461.

[7]John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Jerome Slater, "Explaining the Iraq War: The Israel Lobby Theory," in *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq*, ed. Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall (New York: Routledge, 2012), 105–109.

[8]Jeff D. Colgan, "Fueling the Fire: Pathways from Oil to War," *International Security* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 171, 176–77.

[9]Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); David Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/11): 7–52; Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War," *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (January 2014): 1–31.

[10]Debs and Monteiro, "Known Unknowns."

[11]Ibid., 15–16.

the war was to prevent suspected Iraqi nuclearization, which Washington thought would bring about a large and rapid shift in the balance of power in favor of Iraq."[12] Similarly operating within a bargaining framework, David Lake adopts a more nuanced position than DM on the role of WMD in the Iraq war. He writes, "Although Iraq's supposed WMD programs were the *casus belli*, they were the precipitant and not the underlying issue, and are better thought of as one source of bargaining failure." Rather, "through the eve of the 2003 war, the underlying issue between the United States and Iraq was most likely which country—and its policies— would dominate the Persian Gulf region."[13] Notably, Lake concurs with DM in claiming that Saddam's inability to credibly commit to not developing WMD in the future, along with his hostile "type," rendered any peaceful bargain impossible.[14] Finally, Robert Jervis takes as a given that the war was motivated by concerns about WMD, instead questioning how and why the intelligence community came to "fail" in 2003.[15]

As others have noted about the difficulties in debunking the preventive war argument, "it appears impossible to prove or disprove whether or not leaders sincerely feared a *possible* future threat."[16] While the claim that fears of WMD caused the war is logical, there are two reasons scholars should be skeptical of this argument pending future research. First, there is a lack of positive evidence in its favor. Second, the stated logic is inconsistent with the run-up to the war, specifically concerning the issue of uncertainty.

The Evidence

To the extent that proponents of the preventive war argument offer evidence for it, it is restricted to public statements of Bush officials between 2002 and 2003. DM, for example, merely cite four quotations in support of their thesis: (1) Bush at the State of the Union, (2) Colin Powell at the UN, (3) Ari Fleischer after the invasion was already underway, and (4) Condoleeza Rice's memoirs.

The problem with the claim that Saddam's future arsenal was a genuine concern for the Bush administration is that the United States was in the middle of a propagandistic effort to convince domestic and international audiences of exactly that notion. Consider how DM slip between the

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[12]Ibid., 16.

[13]Lake, "Two Cheers," 14–15.

[14]Others agree on this point, such as Benjamin Miller, "Explaining Changes in US Grand Strategy: 9/11, the Rise of Offensive Liberalism, and the War in Iraq," *Security Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 26–65.

[15]Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, chap. 3.

[16]Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 202.

contentious claim that WMD caused the war[17] and the inarguable one that "the case presented by the US administration had at its core concerns about a large and rapid shift in the balance of power in favor of Iraq as a result of Baghdad's WMD investments."[18] However, these two positions are hardly equivalent. One can concede that WMD were the central part of the Bush administration's case without granting that WMD represented their sincere motivations. Jervis goes further than DM: not only does he accept the idea that the Bush administration harbored genuine fears of Iraq's WMD, he also considers the intelligence failure on those WMD a function of the intelligence community, not the administration.[19]

Inattention to the possibility of strategic misrepresentation—or lying—is problematic because, as John Mearsheimer states, "Key figures in the Bush administration—including the president himself—lied to the American people in the run-up to the Iraq war."[20] The Bush administration lied because "there was not much enthusiasm for invading Iraq in the broader public. Moreover, the American military, the intelligence community, the State Department, and the US Congress were not keen for war. To overcome this reluctance to attack Iraq, the Bush administration engaged in a deception campaign to inflate the threat posed by Saddam."[21] Though the Bush administration also lied about Saddam's connections to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda and the attacks of September 11,[22] I focus here on its lies about Saddam's WMD—and especially nuclear—arsenal.[23]

Research has focused considerable attention on how the Iraq war was sold by the Bush administration, marginalizing or precluding dissent from

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[17]Debs and Monteiro, "Known Unknowns," 16.

[18]Ibid., 16–17.

[19]DM and Jervis are hardly alone in their credulity. Economists such as Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 211–36, consider the Bush administration purposely misleading the public regarding WMD evidence as a "partisan conspiracy theory," juxtaposed with beliefs that Barack Obama was born outside the United States, that 9/11 was planned by the US government, that the Holocaust did not occur, and that Lyndon Johnson was involved in John Kennedy's assassination.

[20]John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6. See also Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 202.

[21]Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie*, 49–50.

[22]Ibid., 50, 52–53.

[23]The Saddam–terrorism nexus is less important than the WMD angle because there is near-unanimity, ranging from critics to defenders of the administration, that the issue did not supply the rhetorical ammunition the administration wanted. The administration itself could not reasonably claim it was under the impression that the nexus was real. In a memo to Feith in January 2002, Peter Rodman wrote, "You asked if we'd made progress on our analysis of links between al-Qaida and Iraq. So far we have discovered few direct links." Peter W. Rodman, "Links Between al-Qaida and Iraq," memorandum to Douglas Feith, 24 January, 2002, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA): *Targeting Iraq, Part 1: Planning, Invasion, and Occupation, 1997–2004*, http://proquest.libguides.com/dnsa/iraq97. As one senior intelligence official told me on the terrorism issue, "We pushed back strongly, that never became justification for the war." In contrast, the intelligence community's pushback may not have been as forceful on the WMD issue, which ended up being a mainstay in the case of war and the resulting scholarly analyses of it. Senior US intelligence official E, interview by Ahsan Butt, February 2018.

the general public, the media, the opposition party, and its own intelligence agencies.[24] Objectively, the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war saw UN inspectors destroy "most, if not all, of [Iraq's] physical capacity to construct nuclear bombs." Combined with economic sanctions that "severely limited" the import of materials that could be used for WMD and the enforcement of a no-fly zone buttressed by satellite surveillance, this ensured that Saddam had little opportunity to develop nuclear capabilities.[25]

Indeed, in early 2002, US intelligence agencies did not even consider Iraq among their five most pressing concerns, agreeing with their British counterparts that Saddam had been successfully contained, even if they were not certain that he was fully disarmed. As Paul R. Pillar wrote, "My corner of the intelligence community produced nothing during the first year of the Bush administration that could be construed as an impetus for more aggressive action against Iraq."[26] Certainly, neither American nor British intelligence believed that Saddam was growing his arsenal.[27] Thirty relatives of Iraqi scientists reported to the CIA in 2002 that Saddam had no nuclear programs they were aware of—all had been stopped in the 1990s[28]—and a 2002 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report voiced similar skepticism about Iraq's chemical and biological weapons.[29] Moreover, pace Jervis, intelligence from countries opposed to the war—such as France, Germany, and Russia—was "very skeptical" that Iraq had rebuilt its nuclear weapons programs and wished for more clarity from the UN inspections Saddam allowed in September 2002.[30] As Richard Ned Lebow sums up, "In the absence of WMD and a useable air force, and with a poorly equipped and trained army, Saddam was more a nuisance than a threat to his immediate neighbors."[31]

However, this impression was contradicted by the Bush administration's public rhetoric between 2001 and 2003. Scholars note that there is "broad agreement among US foreign policy experts, as well as much of the

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[24]See Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation"; Western, "The War Over Iraq"; Cramer, "Militarized Patriotism"; and Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[25]James Pfiffner, "Did President Bush Mislead the Country in His Arguments for War with Iraq?," in *Intelligence and National Security Policymaking on Iraq: British and American Perspectives*, ed. James P. Pfiffner and Mark Phythian (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 69.

[26]Paul R. Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 31.

[27]Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 203; Ron Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 169.

[28]James P. Pfiffner, "Decision-making, Intelligence, and the Iraq War," in *Intelligence and National Security Policymaking on Iraq: British and American Perspectives*, ed., James P. Pfiffner and Mark Phythian (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 224.

[29]Quoted in Pfiffner, "Did President Bush Mislead," 72.

[30]Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 207.

[31]Lebow, *Cultural Theory*, 466.

American public and the international community, that the threat assessments that President George W. Bush and his administration used to justify the war against Iraq were greatly exaggerated, and on some dimensions wholly baseless."[32] These exaggerations and lies included claims that: (1) a shipment of sixty thousand aluminum tubes procured on the open market were meant for centrifuges, when both Department of Energy and Department of State experts concluded they were meant for rocket launchers; (2) Iraq had a mobile lab for biological weapons sourced to an Iraqi defector codenamed "Curveball," whose reliability his interlocutors within German intelligence warned against, and (3) Saddam was trying to procure yellowcake from Niger. This final claim, based on forged documents, was known by US intelligence to be false at the time, necessitating the lawyerly insertion of the qualifier "The British government has learned" as a prefix in Bush's 2003 State of the Union address.[33]

Some members of the Bush administration were candid about the strategy to sell the Iraq war and the place of Saddam's WMD program therein. Wolfowitz commented after the fall of Baghdad, "The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the US government bureaucracy, we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on, which was weapons of mass destruction."[34] Douglas Feith said, "My basic view is, the rationale for the war didn't hinge on the details of this intelligence even though the details of the intelligence at times became elements of the public presentation."[35] As White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card told the *New York Times*, "From a marketing point of view you don't introduce new products in August."[36]

These new PR products included speechwriters crafting rhetorical flourishes such as Rice's famous remark, "We do not want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," to resonate in a post-9/11 world.[37] Another popular tactic was to leak false information about Saddam to one arm of the media, such as a newspaper, which would publish stories based on it that could in turn constitute evidence to be cited by government officials to other branches of the media, such as Sunday talk shows.[38] The Bush administration also aggressively lobbied reluctant members of Congress timed to coincide with the first anniversary of 9/11 and the run-up to the

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[32]Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation," 5.

[33]Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 204–206.

[34]George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 60–61.

[35]Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy*, 30.

[36]Quoted in Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Random House, 2006), 33.

[37]Ibid., 35.

[38]Ibid., 36.

US midterm elections in November 2002. This pressure was exerted in an atmosphere of public fear generated in part by the administration through tactics such as announcing that Cheney had spent the night of September 10 at a secure, undisclosed location, Attorney General John Ashcroft's declaration of an orange terror alert, and the choice of Ellis Island for Bush's speech on the first anniversary of 9/11 to allow for the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop.[39] Taken together, the preventive war argument's reliance on propagandistic speeches and memoirs as unvarnished data sources is a significant shortcoming.

The Causal Role of Uncertainty

Even as the preventive war argument is hamstrung by its reliance on problematic sources such as speeches expressly designed to further the cause of war and memoirs written by legacy-conscious leaders, its proponents might respond that notwithstanding the administration's exaggerations and mistruths, it is still conceivable that the Iraq war was motivated by a fear of WMD. This argument holds that the uncertainty of Saddam's future capabilities compelled the war; thus even if the administration was wrong, it was sincerely wrong.[40]

There are two issues with the notion that uncertainty about Saddam's future capabilities compelled the invasion. First, the evidence suggests that the decision to invade led to uncertainty about Saddam's WMD capabilities, not the other way around. Second, the preventive war argument elides the Bush administration's resistance to peaceful options of uncertainty-reduction, such as International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections, raising serious questions of whether the United States' true priority was disarmament or war. This latter issue can be termed the "taking yes for an answer" problem.

First, did uncertainty about WMD capabilities cause war or did a decision to invade lead to the muddying of intelligence? Sympathetic accounts portray the Bush administration as a victim of flawed intelligence and uncertainty making a difficult decision in the face of incomplete information.[41] However, as Joshua Rovner usefully reminds us, the only basis for such a position is the government itself.[42] In fact, there is little evidence that the administration's beliefs or decision-making was complicated by uncertain intelligence.[43] In one scholar's words, "Administration

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[39]Ibid., 42.

[40]For example, Debs and Monteiro, "Known Unknowns," 18–21.

[41]Debs and Monteiro, "Known Unknowns"; Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, chap. 3.

[42]Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 141–42.

[43]Ibid., 177.

exaggerations of the Iraqi threat during 2002–03 … did not result from mistakes by US intelligence agencies. Rather, top officials knew what policy they intended to pursue and selected intelligence assessments to promote that policy based on their political usefulness, not their credibility."[44]

Several journalistic accounts support this interpretation of intelligence being a tool used not to weigh whether to launch the war (which had already been decided upon), but to sell it.[45] As the head of British intelligence, Richard Dearlove, confidentially told Tony Blair and senior members of his government in July 2002, "Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."[46] Tellingly, and damagingly for theories claiming that WMD was a sincere fear, the Bush administration never even requested a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq's WMD; one was hurriedly produced only in September 2002, having been demanded by Members of Congress in the face of emphatic—and false— claims by Cheney regarding Saddam's nuclear capabilities.[47]

Indeed, to the extent that a "certain" picture was forwarded by the US intelligence community, it contradicted the Bush administration's dire claims.[48] As Pillar wrote, "The war was launched in spite of, not because of, most of what the US intelligence community said about Iraq."[49] In 2002, the intelligence community was so much more circumspect about Saddam's capabilities than the administration that Cheney and Rumsfeld considered the CIA their major impediment to war,[50] resulting in frequent visits and a "barrage of questions" by Cheney and his aides—including Scooter Libby, who was considered "the most aggressive on intelligence related to Saddam and al-Qaeda," according to a CIA veteran.[51]

Overall, "information from intelligence analysts or other experts in or out of government that contradicted or undermined the operating assumptions of the get-Saddam crowd was ignored or belittled."[52] As one high-ranking CIA official noted, "Never have I seen the manipulation of intelligence that has played out since the second President Bush took office. I watched my staff

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[44]Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation," 9.

[45]Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 16; Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, 62; James Fallows, "The Right and Wrong Questions About the Iraq War," *The Atlantic*, May 2015.

[46]Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 82.

[47]Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 204.

[48]Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie*, 51.

[49]Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy*, 11.

[50]Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine*, 175.

[51]Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 4–6; Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine*, 168–91.

[52]Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 18.

being shot down in flames as they tried to put forward their view that Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction."[53] These efforts at misrepresentation, exaggeration, and marginalization of intelligence "changed the content and tone of key estimates on Iraqi capabilities and intentions."[54] In other words, it is likelier that the decision to invade, made in the fall of 2001, led to muddy intelligence rather than the other way around.[55]

Second, it would be strange that a government genuinely fearful of the threat of Saddam's WMD would do so little to learn about and arrest the WMD program through peaceful measures. Given that war is costly and rational actors should prefer peace to war if similar outcomes, such as reducing uncertainty, can be achieved through both, it is curious why the Bush administration was so dismissive of IAEA inspections and containment strategies in the run-up to the war. As the head of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) warned Powell in August 2002, "Assuming that the imminence of the WMD threat is the central justification for defensive pre-emption, every reasonable effort to employ UN inspectors to determine the state of Iraqi capabilities and eliminate them must first be exhausted."[56] If uncertainty was driving decisions, wouldn't the administration have welcomed the uncertainty-reducing inspections regime? According to Kaufmann, these "four months of unrestricted, essentially unhindered IAEA inspections," eliminated whatever doubt that remained about Saddam's programs, since they found "no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq."[57]

To the contrary, American and British leaders evinced little interest in the inspections or their outcome, perhaps revealing their governments' true concern with WMD. Beginning in January 2003, Saddam gave UN inspectors "the access they wanted. There would be no efforts to keep presidential compounds or other government sites off limits … even the Republican Guard was ordered to make their records available to UN monitors."[58] However, in the more than seven hundred visits to more than five hundred suspected sites from November 2002 to March 2003, UN inspectors received no help from US or British intelligence—despite "begging" for it—aside from Tenet providing the location of three dozen suspected sites that

[53]Quoted in Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 138.

[54]Ibid., 139.

[55]Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy*, 35, 13–17, 140–43. See also Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2006), 154.

[56]Carl W. Ford, "Problems of Justifying War with Iraq," memorandum to Colin Powell, 29 August 2002, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*.

[57]Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation," 25.

[58]Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 136.

yielded no weapons or signs of a program.[59] The lack of cooperation with the inspectors sufficiently perturbed Congressional leaders to write to Bush urging him to provide information to the inspectors, make public how much of that information was shared, and to "support the UN inspection process as long as the inspectors are making progress before deciding whether to take another course of action, including the use of military force."[60]

This is the "taking yes for an answer" problem: the Bush administration did not appear interested in solutions that disarmed Saddam, aside from those that promised war and regime change.[61] Colin Powell himself feared that his boss wanted war more than disarmament per se. In August 2002, in the context of advising restraint and the UN route to Bush, he told him, "If you take it to the UN, you've got to recognize that they might be able to solve it. In which case there's no war. That could mean a solution that is not as clean as just going in and taking the guy out."[62] Powell's words are extremely revealing, for they show his concern that his government was drawn to a "clean" solution of a new regime in Iraq more so than disarming Saddam.[63] In a similar vein, Feith told a senior military commander that "in crafting a strategy for Iraq, we cannot accept surrender."[64] The Bush administration rebuffed several attempts by Saddam to cut a deal through third-party intermediaries between December 2002 and March 2003, including offers to allow several thousand troops or FBI agents to comb the country—"to look wherever they wanted," in the words of an Iraqi official—as well as concessions on oil, the Middle East peace process, and banned weapons.[65]

Queried specifically on the issue of uncertainty and preventive war, a senior IAEA official I interviewed responded, somewhat colorfully, "Frankly, it's bullshit. There was *no* indication that Iraq was even on the cusp of a nuclear weapons program," adding that there "was *absolutely no reason* for that war to start. There was *no* indication of Iraq working on a program. There was *no* justification for the invasion. Iraq was in fact very cooperative with the US."[66] A senior inspections official for the IAEA

[59]Cramer and Duggan, "Pursuit of Primacy," 207–208. See similar criticism of Jervis in Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 141–42.

[60]Letter from Carl Levin to George W. Bush, 24 January 2003, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*.

[61]Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy*, 39.

[62]Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 151.

[63]On this exchange, see also Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 81–82.

[64]Ibid., 83.

[65]James Risen, "Iraq Said to Have Tried to Reach Last-Minute Deal to Avert War," *New York Times*, 6 November 2003; Julian Borger, Brian Whitaker, and Vikram Dodd, "Saddam's Desperate Offers to Stave Off War," *The Guardian*, 7 November 2003.

[66]Senior International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) official O, interview by Ahsan Butt, January 2018 (italics indicate strong emphasis by the speaker).

similarly dismissed the preventive war argument based on how defanged—and distant from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability—Iraq was at the time. "We were pointedly ignored. I don't think they [the US] had any concerns of WMD."[67] He also described Iraqi officials during the inspections process as "very, very cooperative. Whenever I asked them [about a site], they said 'now or tomorrow?'" Echoing this skepticism of the future threat argument, a former senior US intelligence official told me of the uncertainty issue, "You don't need to solve that problem with war. You can send inspectors back in, something like Iran present day."[68] He stated emphatically: "This war was not waged for WMD, that's how it was sold but not why it was fought."

The more time inspectors spent in Iraq, the clearer its future trajectory as a nonthreat became, which poses a significant problem for DM and Jervis's argument that uncertainty was driving the war. A rational actor sincerely fearing a future threat would have updated over the winter of 2002–03 to revise their preference for war downward, but the opposite took place. As one former senior US intelligence official told me, "The situation in March 2003 was much more reassuring than the previous fall. Saddam was not going to have nuclear capability," but "the administration never gave inspectors a chance."[69] Nothing in the inspectors' assessments or US intelligence assessments necessitated the urgency with which the Bush administration drove to war: "If Iraqi weapons developments were the concern, there was ample time to try other policy responses short of the drastic one of an offensive war."[70] In 2002, a Joint Intelligence Center (JIC) top secret report guardedly noted that were Iraq to escape from sanctions, a highly unlikely prospect, it would take it "at least five years to produce a nuclear device and a further two to produce a warhead."[71] In September, the National Intelligence Council (NIC) summarized that Iraq "is unlikely to produce indigenously enough weapons-grade material for a deliverable nuclear weapon until the last half of this decade [2000s]."[72] As a senior proliferation specialist in the US intelligence community told me, "In 2003, we had an effective inspections regime, we knew [WMD-involved] individuals and what they were doing."

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[67]Senior IAEA inspections official E, interview by Ahsan Butt, January 2018.

[68]Senior US intelligence official A, interview by Ahsan Butt, January 2018.

[69]Senior US intelligence official N, interview by Ahsan Butt, February 2018.

[70]Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy*, 37.

[71]Joint Intelligence Center (JIC), "Iraq: Saddam Under the Spotlight," JIC Assessment, 27 February 2002, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*.

[72]National Intelligence Council, "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs," September 2002, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*.

Overall, the preventive war argument suffers from (1) a lack of positive evidence in its favor and (2) the inconsistency between its stated logic concerning uncertainty and the administration's actions in the run-up to the war. These criticisms notwithstanding, the idea that that the Bush administration invaded Iraq to prevent the future threat of Saddam armed with WMD remains difficult to rule out, and future research may uncover more evidence in favor of the proposition. For our present purposes, however, I believe there exists enough doubt about WMD-based motives to entertain the possibility that something else was driving the Bush administration.[73]

Demonstrating Hegemony: War as a Performative Act

The end of 1878 found Sir Henry Bartle Frere bristling.[74] As High Commissioner for Southern Africa, Frere's job was to assert British imperial authority in the region. He was offended by alternative reservoirs of sovereignty, such as that enjoyed by Zululand, which embodied Kaffirdom and a lack of submission to Her Majesty's Government. His solution was simple: war. For Frere, only military defeat would bring to heel the Zulus led by King Cetschwayo, swallowing them in a British "confederation" and delivering an uncompromising message: British strength and authority in the region was not to be questioned. Importantly, Frere believed this message could only be transmitted through a fight; no peaceful bargain, however lopsided, could compare to the effects of a resounding military victory. A quick and decisive win on the battlefield against the Zulus would ensure that observers in the region would learn that resisting British hegemony was fruitless.

Frere's strategy entailed what I term a "performative war": he was chiefly concerned with the demonstration effect of British power. Drawing on scholarship on status from both IR and applied psychology, IR research on hierarchy, and work on reputation-building and authority-establishing violence in the fields of IR, political theory, and sociology, I outline the performative war thesis below. To be clear, what follows is not a theory; I am not proffering a predictive relationship between an independent and dependent variable. Rather, the analytical framework I construct is aimed

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[73]Decision-makers may have had multiple motivations for invading Iraq, but that should not preclude scholars questioning which was the central cause.

[74]This section on the Anglo–Zulu war is drawn from Eric Walker, *The Cambridge History of the British Empire: Volume VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1963), 485–86; John Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis: The Zulu Response to the British Invasion of 1879* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 7–14; Ian St John, *Disraeli and the Art of Victorian Politics* (New York: Anthem Press, 2010), 190–91; Bruce Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 104–105; Martin Meredith, *The Fortunes of Africa: A 5000-Year History of Wealth, Greed, and Endeavor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), chap. 36.

at explaining one case, albeit one with significant scholarly and policy implications: the Iraq war.

The Performative War Thesis

The cornerstone of the performative war framework is the concept of status. Unlike material power, status is conferred and "exists entirely in the eyes of others … [it] is a property of co-actors and observers."[75] Both status and its associated cousin, reputation, are therefore relational concepts.[76] To affect one's reputation or status, one must change others' perceptions of oneself and where one falls in a rank ordering.[77] A state's social role or status within such a ranking is at least partly determined by "second-order" beliefs: "beliefs that a group of observers holds some belief." For instance, prestige, the idea that "everyone thinks that everyone thinks that an actor has some good quality," is a second order belief.[78]

All states care about status, but the idea is especially important for hierarchic states.[79] Hierarchy obtains when a powerful state is deemed to have authority over subordinate states with respect to some issues. Such authority does not rely only on divergences in material capabilities between powerful and minor states, but also social recognition of the former.[80] Hegemonic states especially enjoy a degree of "voluntary deference,"[81] and such recognition of their status is crucial for the construction and maintenance of their order.

However, sometimes states experience "status anxiety"[82] or "status dissatisfaction."[83] At the individual level, "people experience status loss when

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[75]Joe C. Magee and Adam D. Galinsky, "Social Hierarchy: The Self-Reinforcing Nature of Power and Status," *The Academy of Management Annals* 2, no. 1 (January 2008): 363–64.

[76]According to Jonathan Renshon, "Status Deficits and War," *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 513–50, reputation is a first order belief (what an actor believes about another), while status is a second order belief (what an actor believes other actors believe about it). See also Marina G. Duque, "Recognizing International Status: A Relational Approach," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (September 2018): 577–92, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy001.

[77]Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996): 27–28; Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 373.

[78]Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 193; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, "Reputation and Status," 374.

[79]Paul Musgrave and Daniel H. Nexon, "Defending Hierarchy from the Moon to the Indian Ocean: Symbolic Capital and Political Dominance in Early Modern China and the Cold War," *International Organization* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 591–626.

[80]David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Ian Clark, "Towards an English School Theory of Hegemony," *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 2 (June 2009): 203–228. This authority is similar to Robert Gilpin's definition of prestige in *War and Change in the International System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 31.

[81]Gilpin, *War and Change*, 30–31.

[82]Tudor A. Onea, "Between Dominance and Decline: Status Anxiety and Great Power Rivalry," *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 1 (January 2014), 132–33.

[83]Renshon, "Status Deficits and War," 12–13.

they lose respect in the eyes of their group members."[84] For states, similarly, such status loss centers on others' views.[85] Though IR scholars generally consider status dissatisfaction with respect to rising or "emerging" powers,[86] there is no *a priori* theoretical reason to exclude dominant powers from status analysis, especially given that dominant powers can be risk-acceptant when it comes to maintaining status.[87] Indeed, at the individual level, high-status actors find status loss more self-threatening than low-status actors, mainly because the former consider status a more important component of their selves.[88] For organizations, such status loss, if especially severe, can motivate highly public efforts to reestablish identity and credibility.[89] Transferring this idea to the realm of IR, a hegemonic power can perceive a mismatch between the status it enjoys versus the status it thinks it deserves, especially after a humiliating event.[90] Because "those with high power but low status might be seen as undeserving of their power,"[91] such a disjuncture can generate an imperative for a powerful state to demonstrate its power and (re)assert hegemony so that its "deserved" status is recognized.

One of the primary ways a state can improve its status is "a focal and dramatic event such as a military victory."[92] While the emotional, cathartic effects of such wars are significant, my focus here is on the instrumental effects. A motivation to (re)establish a particular reputation[93]— or more ambitiously, the terms of a new order—can lead a powerful actor to launch war.[94] As Arendt noted, "That such a beginning must be intimately connected with violence seems to be vouched for by the legendary beginnings of our history as both biblical and classical antiquity report it: Cain slew Abel, and Romulus slew Remus; violence was the beginning and, by the same token, no beginning could be made without using violence, without violating … . The tale spoke clearly:

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[84]Jennifer C. Marr and Stefan Thau, "Falling from Great (and Not-so-Great) Heights: How Initial Status Position Influences Performance After Status Loss," *Academy of Management Journal* 57, no. 1 (February 2014), 223.

[85]Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, "Reputation and Status," 375.

[86]For example, Deborah W. Larson, T.V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, "Status and World Order," in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah W. Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, 3–5.

[87]Onea, "Between Dominance and Decline," 135.

[88]Marr and Thau, "Falling from Great Heights," 226.

[89]Tao Wang, Filippo Carlo Wezel, and Bernard Forgues, "Protecting Market Identity: When and How Do Organizations Respond to Consumers' Devaluations?" *Academy of Management Journal* 59, no. 1 (February 2016), 139.

[90]Joslyn Barnhart, "Humiliation and Third-Party Aggression," *World Politics* 69, no. 3 (July 2017): 532–68.

[91]Magee and Galinski, "Social Hierarchy," 364.

[92]Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, "Reputation and Status," 377.

[93]Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey, "Honor and War: Southern US Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation," *World Politics* 68 no. 2 (April 2016): 341, 343.

[94]Barnhart, "Humiliation and Third-Party Aggression."

whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men have achieved has its origin in crime."[95] Similarly, Machiavelli exhorts "he who wants to establish an absolute power" to "build new Cities, destroy old ones, transfer the inhabitants from one place to another, and in sum, not to leave anything unchanged in that Province, (and) so that there should be no rank, nor order, nor status, nor riches, that he who obtains it does not recognize it as coming from him; he should take as his model Philip of Macedonia, father of Alexander, who, by these methods, from a petty King became Prince of Greece."[96]

Continuing in this tradition, IR scholars have noted the reputation-establishing effects of war.[97] War reveals capabilities in a highly public, dramatic, and unambiguous fashion, which in turn influences the observers' views of the disputants' status.[98] For Gilpin, international prestige is attained "primarily through successful use of power, and especially through victory in war. The most prestigious members of the international system are those states that have most recently used military force … and have thereby imposed their will on others."[99] As research has repeatedly shown, wars fought for prestige or status, intended to impress or scare would-be adversaries, have been long-running facts of life in international politics,[100] from the Sino–Japanese war of 1894–95[101] to the Scramble for Africa,[102] from World War I[103] to the Falklands war.[104] Similarly, civil war scholars argue that since fighting hard against an ethnic group confers a "tough" reputation today, it may aid in deterring other ethnic groups from making

[95]Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 20.

[96]Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (New York: Penguin, 1517/1970), 42.

[97]Gilpin, *War and Change*.

[98]Renshon, "Status Deficits and War," 14.

[99]Gilpin, *War and Change*, 32–33.

[100]See William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 28–57; Joshua Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Barnhart, "Humiliation and Third-Party Aggression."

[101]Andrew Q. Greve and Jack S. Levy, "Power Transitions, Status Dissatisfaction, and War: The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895," *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 148–78.

[102]Joslyn Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa," *Security Studies* 25, no. 3 (2016): 385–419.

[103]Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, "Rage of Honor: Entente Indignation and the Lost Chance for Peace in the First World War," *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 662–95; Reinhard Wolf, "Status Fixations, the Need for 'Firmness,' and Decisions for War," *International Relations* 28, no. 2 (June 2014): 256–62.

[104]Thomas Dolan, "Demanding the Impossible: War, Bargaining, and Honor," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015), 528–62.

nationalist demands tomorrow.[105] In either case, force is used primarily for its status- or reputation-enhancing effects.[106]

As a consequence of such reputation-establishing wars, where violence is used for "the edification of potential opponents,"[107] states can deter would-be challenges to their territory, policy preferences, or hegemonic rule more generally.[108] Fighting one actor can establish a fear-based "general deterrence," such that a state "look[s] too tough to be pushed around."[109] This deterrence is "general" in the sense that it is "diffuse," not necessarily aimed at any one adversary or challenge.[110]

Other contexts, such as prisons, also provide illustration of this principle. Since prisons observe many of the structural conditions inherent in international politics—near anarchy, scarcity of important resources, and uncertain information about the true character (for example peaceful versus violent) of other units in the system[111]—the lessons drawn from such contexts can be relevant to IR scholars. In such environments, sociologists demonstrate, actors will often use violence against another prisoner not because they desire a good that is at dispute, but to make an example of the victim.[112] Fights erupt between prisoners keen on establishing their place in the social hierarchy, and consequently, those prisoners whose reputations are less established or more in question will face stronger incentives to fight. For instance, in prisons with a high degree of inmate turnover or where prisoners are often switched to new wings and/or cells, there will be less certain information about reputations and consequently more reputation-establishing violence. Such fighting is a "communicative act, an act aimed at shaping or modifying other prisoners' beliefs."[113] As with states, the goal is to establish a generalized deterrence, such that one's will and

[105]Monica D. Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Conflict: Identity, Interest, and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Barbara F. Walter, *Reputation and Civil War: Why Separatist Conflicts Are so Violent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[106]Such reputation-enhancing force is thus distinguished from Robert J. Art's concept of "swaggering" in "To What Ends Military Power?" *International Security* 4, no. 4 (Spring 1980), 10–11, which while assuredly serving goals such as being "taken seriously by others" or enhancing "the nation's image," is not undertaken for specific instrumental ends.

[107]Patrick M. Morgan, "The State of Deterrence in International Politics Today," *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no. 1 (April 2012), 86.

[108]Whether a tough reputation succeeds in deterring future challenges is a matter of empirical debate. See Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 473–95. What matters for our purposes is that leaders think it does.

[109]Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 80.

[110]Ibid., 82–83.

[111]Diego Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 79.

[112]Ibid., 80–91.

[113]Ibid., 91.

preferences are not questioned. In both prisons and politics, the thinking goes, life is more peaceful if one is acknowledged as the meanest bully on the block.[114]

To summarize this section, all states are concerned with their status. Hegemonic or hierarchic states are especially sensitive to status because their leadership relies upon their authority being accepted by minor powers and other observers; they are not merely interested in deterring threats to their territory but, more grandly, to their rule. When there is a mismatch between a powerful state's self-perceived status and how others consider it, especially after a humiliation, that country may choose to start a war to demonstrate its hegemony to others in the system. Certain reputational and status benefits can only be earned by violence; a peaceful bargain, no matter how lopsided, cannot produce the same effect. As such, a state will itch for a fight, and there is nothing material or symbolic the victim can offer to sufficiently assuage the aggressor; there is no bargaining range to speak of. I label this idea the performative war thesis.

The Bush Administration's Performative War in Iraq

Using recently released documents, author interviews, memoirs, and a plethora of secondary sources, I argue below that the performative war thesis can help us understand US decision-making between 2001 and 2003. Consistent with the logic of the argument, (1) there was a humiliating event that necessitated a new order, (2) the war's architects repeatedly cited reputational and signaling concerns in private, and (3) there was no plausible concession by the target that could have substituted for the reputational spoils of war. Together, these three pillars lend strong support to the performative war thesis.

9/11, Status Loss, and the Need for a New Beginning

Channeling Arendt and Machiavelli, perhaps unwittingly, George Bush justified the then-potential invasion of Iraq by invoking a grand vision: "I will seize the opportunity to achieve big goals. There is nothing bigger than to achieve world peace."[115] His close confidant, Tony Blair, wrote to him a week into the Iraq war, pronouncing, "This is the moment when you can define international politics for the next generation: the true post-cold war world order. Our ambition is big: to construct a global agenda around

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[114]This is not a pleasant-sounding logic, especially to citizens of so-called liberal democracies, which may explain why leaders of such countries, even when motivated by such thinking, cite alternative arguments that may resonate more with the public.

[115]Quoted in Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 339.

which we can unite the world; rather than dividing it into rival centers of power."[116] Where did this need to define a new world order come from?

Before 9/11, American prestige was not in question and was commensurate with its hegemonic role. For more than a decade, it had been the world's unrivalled unipolar power.[117] For close to six decades, it had been the world's most powerful state. For more than a century, it had established a hegemonic, or hierarchic, role in its sphere of influence, primarily Latin America.[118] "The United States of America today predominates on the economic level, the monetary level, on the technological level, and in the cultural area in the broadest sense of the word," France's foreign minister said in 1999. "It is not comparable, in terms of power and influence, to anything known in modern history."[119] Even its main potential state challenger, China, was circumspect and sought accommodation.[120] US hegemony may not have been popular, but neither was it challenged; a generalized deterrence held.

A sense of impregnability was necessary to sustain the idea that the United States was the region's, and arguably the world's, unipolar power. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 punctured this sense of American invulnerability and dominance in the collective thinking of the US body politic if not other observers. As Krebs asks rhetorically, "How much of a superpower could America be if 3,000 of its citizens, residents, and visitors had died in a single day?"[121] On September 11, 2001, the United States was still materially hegemonic, but its status and prestige were considerably damaged by the fact that fewer than two dozen men, a "rag-tag cabal of Middle Eastern terrorists"[122] armed with box cutters, destroyed the symbols of American capitalism and military power. After the attacks, there was a widespread view within the country that "the American mainland is indefensible."[123] Commenting on a CIA source's warning that the chance of a reprisal terrorist attack was "100 percent," the *Wall Street Journal* somberly noted, "This is the harsh reality of life after September 11, when Americans

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[116]Tony Blair, "The Fundamental Goal," letter to George W. Bush, 26 March 2003, The Iraq Inquiry Archives, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/244166/2003-03-26-note-blair-to-bush-26-march-2003-note-the-fundamental-goal.pdf.

[117]Nuno Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity is Not Peaceful," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2011/12), 9.

[118]Ahsan I. Butt, "Anarchy and Hierarchy in International Relations: Explaining South America's War-Prone Decade," *International Organization* 67, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 584–85.

[119]Quoted in G. John Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 2.

[120]Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security* 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003): 5–56.

[121]Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 149.

[122]Lebow, *Cultural Theory*, 473.

[123]Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine*, 212.

learned that their own homeland is now vulnerable to attack."[124] A fort-night after 9/11, a US senator stated, "We are not prepared for the next attack. That's all I can say, and I'll keep on saying it," while a former chair of the House Intelligence Committee pronounced Americans "extremely vulnerable to hostile attacks on our own soil."[125]

The public agreed with political elites. In an October survey, 53% of respondents predicted a terrorist attack within months as "very likely," and fewer than one-fifth said they had a "great deal" of confidence that the government could protect them from terrorism. As one respondent said, "I feel like America was a little too sure of itself, thinking that no one could touch us … . Now there are outbreaks all over the place, and you wonder, 'What's next?'"[126] This "realization of vulnerability led to an American response characterized by bafflement at having been thus attacked; anger at having been humiliated; a concern with protecting the credibility of American power; and a desire to prove the effectiveness of American power."[127]

Spurred by humiliation and keen to (re)establish its hegemonic order, US leaders felt the need for a credibility- and reputation-establishing war. Once the effectiveness of American power was proved in a war, the foundations of a new, post-9/11 era could be erected. The American war in Afghanistan, which preceded the invasion of Iraq by eighteen months, was not sufficient for these order-establishing purposes. Afghanistan was a "fair" war, in which the United States was retaliating directly for an attack conducted on its soil. As with prison bullies or drug cartels, a strike suffered could not be met with a proportionate response; a level of escalation and indiscrimination in the retaliation was necessary to send the larger message.[128]

Afghanistan was merely tit-for-tat, not adequate to convey a message of unbridled hegemony that the United States wished to send. The target was simply too weak for the victor to win the reputation for toughness it coveted.[129] As Rumsfeld privately said on the evening of 9/11, "We need to

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[124]"This War's Purpose," editorial, *Wall Street Journal* 8 October 2001.

[125]Brad Knickerbocker, "'Homeland Defense' Won't Be Easy," *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 September 2001.

[126]Richard L. Berke and Janet Elder, "Survey Shows Doubts Stirring on Terror War," *New York Times*, 30 October 2001.

[127]Evelyn Goh, "Hegemonic Constraints: The Implications of 11 September for American Power," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 57, no. 1 (April 2003), 78.

[128]For an example of such a retaliation from the Mexican drug war, see Ginger Thompson, "How the U.S. Triggered a Massacre in Mexico," *National Geographic*, July 2017. Such lashing out is subtly different from that identified by Peter Liberman and Linda J. Skitka, "Revenge in US Public Support for War against Iraq," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (September 2017): 651, since the latter is an emotional/psychological effect. By contrast, the mechanism here is instrumental: a bid to establish generalized deterrence.

[129]If one concedes that Afghanistan was not enough to establish a tough reputation, then Lake's dismissal of the reputation argument ("Two Cheers," 18) becomes much less persuasive. Lake's argument against the demonstration thesis rests on an unsubstantiated assertion: that the Bush administration "was unlikely to value the act of fighting itself more than the $50 billion it anticipated" the cost of war to be. It is not clear why Lake finds it "difficult to imagine" that the Bush administration could not value demonstration benefits

bomb something else [other than Afghanistan] to prove that we're, you know, big and strong and not going to be pushed around by these kinds of attacks."[130] For Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Feith, restricting the 9/11 response to Afghanstan was dangerously "limited," "meager," or "narrow."

On September 12, Rumsfeld's thinking was that "the Bush administration needed to demonstrate that the United States had the will to fight beyond Afghanistan."[131] According to Feith, "Rumsfeld wanted some way to organize the military action so that it signaled that the global conflict would not be over if we struck one good blow in Afghanistan."[132] Similarly, Feith wrote a memo to Rumsfeld in which he "expressed disappointment at the limited options immediately available in Afghanistan" and "suggested instead hitting terrorists outside the Middle East in the initial offensive, perhaps deliberately selecting a non-al Qaeda target like Iraq."[133]

Rumsfeld noted on September 13 that Iraq "also had substantial infrastructure and military capability [unlike Afghanistan]. In Iraq, he [Rumsfeld] noted, we could inflict the kind of costly damage that could cause terrorist-supporting regimes around the world to rethink their policies."[134] The same day, "Wolfowitz warned against focusing narrowly on al Qaeda and Afghanistan … . If we should take hasty action that produced only meager effects, he warned, it could embolden rather than discourage regimes that were assisting our terrorist enemies."[135] Feith was on the same page, writing in a memo on September 18 to Rumsfeld: "Single pronged attacks against the smallest state sponsor of the terrorist network may not be sufficient … . Such a limited attack may be perceived as a sign of weakness rather than strength."[136]

Preparing for a meeting with Bush on September 20, Rumsfeld wrote in a memo, "The President has stressed that we are not defining our fight narrowly and are not focused only on those directly responsible for the September 11 attacks … . It would drive this point home if the initial military strikes hit [targets] in addition to al Qaeda. That is one of the reasons

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sufficiently highly to cause war, but his language suggesting diminishing returns after the first Gulf War and Afghanistan in 2001 is suggestive.

[130]Quoted in Stephen Glain, *State vs. Defense: The Battle to Define America's Empire* (New York: Random House, 2012), 379.

[131]Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 11.

[132]Ibid.

[133]National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 22 July 2004, 559.

[134]Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 15.

[135]Ibid., 49.

[136]Douglas Feith, "Strategic Planning Guidance for the Joint Staff," memorandum to Donald Rumsfeld, 18 September 2001, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*.

why I still favor an early focus on Iraq as well."[137] In a memo ten days later addressed to the President, Rumsfeld intoned, "A key war aim would be to persuade or compel States to stop supporting terrorism … . If the war does not significantly change the World's political map, the US will not achieve its aim. There is value in being clear on the order of magnitude of the necessary change." To that end, "The USG should envision a goal along these lines: New regimes in Afghanistan and another key State (or two) that supports terrorism (to strengthen political and military efforts to change policies elsewhere),"[138] an unequivocally clear statement supporting the performative war thesis.

To truly mark a new era of American dominance and demonstrate to the world the extent of its power and will to use it, the Bush administration needed a quick and decisive victory against a more formidable foe than Afghanistan. Iraq fit the bill not just because of the more impressive physical targets (as Rumsfeld, Feith, and Wolfowitz identified), but also because it represented a festering symbolic wound to American pride. This was a regime that remained defiant despite a prior military defeat by American forces, with reminders that said, "I'm still here"[139]—an untenable position in a post-9/11 world where the United States had to clearly enunciate its hegemony. Indeed, that Iraq was unfinished or unsettled business for neoconservative such as Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld even before 9/11 is well known;[140] Feith noted with dismay that Saddam "emerged from the Gulf War with a strong, if perverse, sense of accomplishment."[141] The incidence of al Qaeda's attacks intensified the urgency such figures felt to settle old scores.

Reputation and Signaling as Causes of the War

Pillar, a senior official in the National Intelligence Council, wrote that one major purpose of the war "was the exertion of American power as a demonstration of the US ability and willingness to use that power, thereby increasing deference to US interests worldwide and deterring adversaries and would-be troublemakers from opposing those interests."[142] For the Bush administration, invading Iraq would "be a demonstration of American power for Syria and other wayward regimes."[143] An anonymous

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[137]Feith, *War and Decision*, 66.

[138]Donald Rumsfeld, "Strategic Thoughts," memorandum to George W. Bush, 30 September 2001, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*.

[139]Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, 10.

[140]Intelligence official E, interview February 2018.

[141]Feith, *War and Decision*, 185–86.

[142]Pillar, *Intelligence and US Foreign Policy*, 18.

[143]Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 84–85, 45, 73.

senior administration official, described by the *New York Times* as having "played a crucial role in putting together the strategy" to overthrow Saddam, revealed at the beginning of the war that "Iraq is not just about Iraq," but rather that "it was of a type," including Iran, Syria, and North Korea.[144] Wolfowitz, arguably the genesis of the demonstration effect argument, plainly saw "the military conquest of Iraq as a lesson to regimes that threaten US interests."[145] Bush told Bob Woodward, "Action—confident action will yield positive results provides kind of a slipstream into which reluctant nations and leaders can get behind and show themselves that there has been— you know, something positive has happened towards peace."[146] According to a journalistic account, Cheney and Bush believed that "a sudden blow for no reason is better than one for a good reason … . They had to do something dramatic, maybe irrational, even willful, to change the behavior of America's enemies, make them second-guess themselves, knock 'em off their game."[147] A senior intelligence official told me that Cheney and Rumsfeld subscribed to the Ledeen Doctrine—"every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business"—and thought about the Iraq invasion in such terms.[148] Another former senior intelligence official told me the run-up to the war reminded him of French involvement in the 1956 Suez crisis, which to him was intended as a demonstration effect for audiences in Algiers.[149]

Such a concern for reputation, credibility, and demonstrating power was not new for Bush administration officials. In March 1992, the *New York Times* published leaked sections of a draft of the Defense Planning Guidance, a forty-six page document written by Zalmay Khalilzad and Abram Shulsky, future members of the George W. Bush administration, commissioned by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and overseen by Undersecretary for Policy Paul Wolfowitz. According to the document, the United States needed to embrace a hegemonic role more fully in the post-Cold War world, for its benefit as well as others'.[150] In order to "prevent the re-emergence of a new rival … [or] any hostile power from dominating" Western Europe, East Asia, the territories of the former Soviet Union, and Southeast Asia (essentially the entire globe), "the U.S. must

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[144]David Sanger, "Viewing the War as a Lesson to the World," *New York Times*, 6 April 2003.

[145]Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 277–78.

[146]Woodward, *Bush at War*, 341.

[147]Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine*, 216.

[148]Senior US intelligence official A, interview by Ahsan Butt, February 2018.

[149]Intelligence official E, interview February 2018.

[150]Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, 13.

show the leadership necessary to establish and protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests … . We must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger or regional or global role."[151]

President George H.W. Bush and Pentagon leaders disavowed the document, but it was an important marker in intellectual history because of its emphasis on the demonstration effect of American power, whereby minor powers submit to an American-led global order because of fear generated by tough, forthright behavior. Writing in the spring of 2000, Wolfowitz reminded readers that the Cold War entailed "demonstrating your friends will be protected and taken care of, that your enemies will be punished, and that those who refuse to support you will live to regret having done so."[152] Similarly, journalist George Packer notes, "Writing in January 2002, [Robert] Kagan and [William] Kristol urged military intervention in Iraq as part of America's reassertion of global leadership. 'The failure of the United States to take risks, and to take responsibility, in the 1990s, paved the way to September 11.'"[153] Such views were rooted in the neoconservative camp of America intelligentsia during the Cold War, including Henry "Scoop" Jackson, Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan.[154]

Even before 9/11, Bush administration leaders influenced by such theories saw Saddam's regime through a prism of its performative potential. In July 2001, Rumsfeld argued, "If Saddam's regime were ousted, we would have a much-improved position in the region and elsewhere … . A major success with Iraq would enhance U.S. credibility and influence throughout the region."[155] A mere month into the Bush administration, he asked other cabinet members to "imagine what the region would look like without Saddam and with a regime that's aligned with U.S. interests. It would change everything in the region and beyond it. It would demonstrate what U.S. policy is all about."[156]

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[151]Wolfowitz, Paul, Lewis Libby, and Zalmay Khalilzad, "Defense Planning Guidance," in *The Iraq Papers*, ed. John Ehrenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10.

[152]Quoted in Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 17.

[153]Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, 52.

[154]Ibid., 15, 17–18. Wolfowitz and Khalilzad had their PhD theses supervised by Albert Wohlstetter, who also taught Perle, all at the University of Chicago.

[155]Donald Rumsfeld, "Iraq," memorandum to Condoleezza Rice, Richard Cheney, and Colin Powell, 27 July 2001, in Joyce Battle, *The Iraq War – Part I: The U.S. Prepares for Conflict, 2001*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 326, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB326/doc06.pdf.

[156]Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 85.

This rhetoric intensified on and after 9/11. In a message to combatant commanders on September 19, Rumsfeld outlined three strategic objectives, one of which was "opportunities to demonstrate a capability or a boldness that will give pause to terrorists and/or those who harbor terrorists and force them to exercise much greater care, at greater cost or with greater fear than they otherwise might have."[157] As one senior intelligence official told me, "Showing the consequences of defying the U.S. was uppermost in his [Rumsfeld's] mind" when it came to invading Iraq.[158] Or as Feith put it in an October memo to Rumsfeld, "Actions against Iraq could make it easier to 'confront—politically, militarily, or otherwise—other state supporters of terrorism' such as the regimes of Muammar Qadafi in Libya and Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which had a record of backing down under international pressure."[159]

On this theme, one account of Cheney, perhaps the most important decision-maker in the Bush administration, is worth quoting at length:

> The United States could not destroy every potential foe, unseat every hostile government, but tackling one would send a powerful message to the rest. Bernard Lewis, a British-born historian who was among Cheney's frequent advisers on Islam and the Middle East, said Cheney believed that "the image which we should avoid is that we are a harmless enemy and an unreliable friend." Yates, Cheney's Asia adviser, heard him say the same thing. "The vice president seems to be quite concerned about the perception of American strength," Yates said. "That is easily spent, and very slowly rebuilt." [Aaron] Friedberg said part of Cheney's calculation was to show "we are able and willing to strike at someone. That sends a very powerful message."
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> "Demonstration effect"—that was Friedberg's term for it. "The demonstration effect is not just to be a tough guy but to reestablish deterrence," he said. We had been hit very hard, and we needed to make clear the costs to those who might have been supporting or harboring those who were contemplating those acts." … Cheney, in the end, did not press for war with Iraq because Saddam really topped the list of "grave and gathering threats," as he led the Bush administration in asserting … . The war would not preempt immediate danger, a more traditional ground for war, but prevent a danger that might emerge later—from Baghdad or anywhere else in the viewing audience. Part of the point, as Voltaire explained about a public execution in *Candide*, was to "encourage the others."[160]

Several important onlookers technically outside the administration voiced a similar logic. In a September 19 meeting of the Defense Policy Board, an advisory panel to Rumsfeld, Bernard Lewis put it simply: "Iraq needs to be

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[157]Feith, *War and Decision*, 55.

[158]Senior US intelligence official N, interview by Ahsan Butt, February 2018.

[159]Ibid., 52.

[160]Barton Gellman, *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 231–32.

liberated, and Middle East nations would respect the use of force."[161] In the *National Review,* Jonah Goldberg's enunciation of the performative war thesis was refreshingly clear, citing what he called the aforementioned Ledeen Doctrine. He went on, explicitly drawing on the prison yard analogy sketched above.

> The United States needs to go to war with Iraq because it needs to go to war with someone in the region and Iraq makes the most sense. Whether or not Ledeen—a historian and student of Machiavelli—was being tongue-in-cheek when he made the suggestion, there's an obvious insight to it … . International relations is much more like a prison yard than like a college seminar at Brown.
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> […]
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> It is impossible to read about the Middle East for any length of time and not conclude that that (sic) the Arab world respects power and the willingness to use it more than anything else … . There is nothing we want to see happen in the Middle East that can be accomplished through talking around long tables festooned with bottled water and fresh fruit at Swiss hotels, that cannot be accomplished faster and more permanently through war. But there is plenty that cannot be achieved by such gabfests that can *only* be achieved through war.
>
> […]
>
> The Arab world respects winners and so does everybody else … . Fighting and winning today means not having to fight at all tomorrow—and maybe, just maybe, changing the rules of the prison yard so that it's not a prison yard at all anymore.[162]

Henry Kissinger's explanation for why he supported the Iraq war was similar, evoking the logic of disproportionate responses espoused by drug cartels, among others:

> "Because Afghanistan wasn't enough," Kissinger answered. In the conflict with radical Islam, he said, they want to humiliate us. "And we need to humiliate them." The American response to 9/11 had essentially to be more than proportionate—on a larger scale than simply invading Afghanistan and overthrowing the Taliban. Something else was needed. The Iraq War was essential to send a larger message, "in order to make a point that we're not going to live in this world they want for us." He said he had defended the war ever since. In Manhattan, this position got him in trouble, particularly at cocktail parties, he noted with a smile.[163]

The *New York Times*' Thomas Friedman, a popular foreign policy commentator, echoed this language in a televised interview with Charlie Rose: "We needed to go over there, basically, and take out a very big stick right in the heart of that world … . What they [Muslims] needed to see was

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[161]Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 20.

[162]Jonah Goldberg, "Baghdad Delenda Est, Part Two," *National Review*, 23 April 2002. Emphasis in original.

[163]Quoted in Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 408.

American boys and girls going house to house from Basra to Baghdad and basically saying 'Which part of this sentence don't you understand? You don't think we care about our open society? You think this bubble fantasy, we're just going to let it grow? Well, suck on this!' That, Charlie, is what this war was about."[164]

Alongside testimony from important players within and outside government, the interpretation of the Iraq war as mainly a performative act is further supported by a retrospective survey of foreign policy experts taken a decade after the invasion. Among thirteen possible causes ranging from oil to Israel to rights violations, the choice of "Assert dominance in a New American Century" was voted the most popular reason for each of the four actors referenced: Bush (53%), Cheney (70%), Rumsfeld (64%), and Neoconservatives (77%).[165] One respondent summarized this worldview: "Leading figures within the Bush administration … decided that the United States needed to act as a far more energetic and effective world hegemon than had been the case under George H.W. Bush or the Bill Clinton administration. Iraq was, in my opinion, chosen as a supposedly easy target for what has been called the 'demonstration effect' of American leadership, military strength, and moral superiority (through free enterprise and democratization). The alleged presence of WMD was merely a pretense for the assertion of a new supposedly benign American imperial role."[166] The organizers of the survey note that many responses emphasized that "administration officials believed that when the United States flexes its military muscle—wields a 'big stick'—it can make other states, especially 'rogue states,' behave better."[167] As one Republican critic pejoratively characterized this demonstration effect thesis, it was aimed at "teaching the Middle East it can't mess with America."[168]

War Was Not a Last Resort

The performative war thesis entails a war that cannot be avoided. Contrary to the expectations of bargaining frameworks, there is nothing the target can offer that would sate the aggressor—the fighting itself is the point. Consistent with these ideas, war was not the last resort in 2001–2003;[169] it

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[164]See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwFaSpca_3Q [last accessed December 18, 2018].

[165]Jane Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall, "Introduction: Why Did the United States Invade Iraq," in *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq*, ed. Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7.

[166]Ibid.

[167]Ibid., 9.

[168]Julian Borger, "Hidden Battle Rages for President's Ear," *Guardian Weekly*, https://www.theguardian.com/guardianweekly/story/0,12674,1168070,00.html.

[169]Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie*, 54.

was decided upon very soon after—probably even on—9/11. In the summer of 2002, Tony Blair wrote to Bush that his worry was that Saddam "drags us into negotiation."[170] In September 2002, Bush announced at a Republican fundraiser that there would be "no discussion, no debate, no negotiation" with Saddam.[171] The Chilcot Report's "crushing" verdict on Tony Blair's government, which was "fully committed to regime change in Iraq by the end of 2001,"[172] could be just as appropriately be applied to the United States: "The UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted. Military action at that time was not a last resort."[173]

Some, like Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and CIA Director George Tenet, claimed that war was never even the subject of debate or deliberation; rather, it was simply assumed into action.[174] However, to the extent that there was one decision for war, it seems to have been taken in the fall of 2001. Minutes after escaping the destroyed Pentagon on 9/11, Wolfowitz "told aides that he suspected Iraqi involvement in the attacks."[175] At an afternoon meeting that day, a Rumsfeld aide jotted in his notes as the Secretary of Defense spoke at the National Military Command Center: "Best info fast. Judge whether good enough hit S.H. at same time. Not only UBL. Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not."[176] Feith, when told by a senior military officer that "we were working hard on Afghanistan," responded: "Why are you working on Afghanistan? You ought to be working on Iraq."[177]

On September 12, George W. Bush was pushing Richard Clarke, his counterterrorism director, to investigate whether Saddam could be tied to the attacks: "I want you, as soon as you can, to go back over everything, everything. See if Saddam did this. See if he's linked in any way."[178] To Clarke's protestation, "Mr. President, al Qaeda did this," Bush, who was "very forceful" in this exchange according to a counterterrorism official present, pressed, "I know, I know, but … see if Saddam was involved. Just

[170]Tony Blair, "Note on Iraq," letter to George W. Bush, 28 July 2002, The Iraq Inquiry Archive, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/243761/2002-07-28-note-blair-to-bush-note-on-iraq.pdf.

[171]Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 115.

[172]John Bew, "Policy Roundtable 1-1 on the Chilcot Inquiry," *H-Diplo ISSF Policy Roundtable* 1, no. 1 (September 2016).

[173]Luke Harding, "Tony Blair Unrepentant as Chilcot Gives Crushing Iraq War Verdict," *The Guardian*, 6 July 2016.

[174]John Prados and Christopher Ames, *The Iraq War—Part II: Was There Even a Decision?*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 328, October 2010, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB328/.

[175]Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, 40.

[176]Ibid.

[177]Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 17.

[178]Lloyd C. Gardner, *The Long Road to Baghdad: A History of US Foreign Policy from the 1970s to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 128.

look. I want to know any shred."[179] The same day, Rumsfeld "asked if the terrorist attacks did not present an 'opportunity' to launch against Iraq."[180]

At a national security meeting four days after the attacks, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz included in their briefing three targets in the war on terrorism—al Qaeda, the Taliban, and Iraq.[181] As Rumsfeld told General Richard Meyers, the vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), "My instinct is to hit Saddam at the same time, not just bin Laden."[182] In a September 18 memo by Feith to Rumsfeld, Iraq was listed as the second target after Afghanistan, including relatively detailed avenues for attacking the country.[183] The commander in chief agreed with the overarching principle of war against Saddam, if not the precise details: "We will get this guy but at a time and place of our choosing," Bush told the JCS chairman privately.[184]

The Chilcot report reveals that on October 11, 2001, Tony Blair wrote to Bush, reporting a conversation with the leaders of an anonymous Arab country—we know he was in Egypt at the time—saying, "There is a real willingness in the Middle East to get Saddam out but a total opposition to mixing this up with the current operation [Afghanistan] … . I have no doubt we need to deal with Saddam. But if we hit Iraq now, we would lose the Arab world, Russia, probably half the EU and my fear is the impact of all that on Pakistan. However, I am sure we can devise a strategy for Saddam deliverable at a later date."[185] The content and tone of the memo suggests that Bush had tasked him with pressing friendly Arab regimes on the need to attack Saddam. Other letters from Blair also suggest that even while the war in Afghanistan was getting underway, the US and UK leaderships were on board with the idea of war against Saddam, with the only major question being how to convince skeptical allies in Europe and the Arab world of their chosen strategy.[186]

Two months after 9/11, just as Kabul fell, Bush asked Rumsfeld to "draw up a fresh war plan for Iraq and keep it a secret."[187] A classified

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[179]Quoted in Ibid., 128–29, Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 80.

[180]Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 25.

[181]Ricks, *Fiasco*, 30.

[182]*The 9/11 Commission Report*, 334–35.

[183]Feith, "Strategic Planning Guidance."

[184]Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 19.

[185]Letter from Tony Blair to George W. Bush, 11 October 2001, Iraq Inquiry Archive, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/243721/2001-10-11-letter-blair-to-bush-untitled.pdf.

[186]For example, see the following correspondence from the Iraq Inquiry Archive: Tony Blair, "The War Against Terrorism: The Second Phase," letter to George W. Bush, 4 December 2001, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/243731/2001-12-04-note-blair-to-bush-the-war-against-terrorism-the-second-phase.pdf; Tony Blair, "Iraq," letter to Jonathan Powell and David Manning, 7 March 2002, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/75831/2002-03-17-Minute-Blair-to-Powell-Iraq.pdf; Tony Blair, "Note on Iraq," letter to George W. Bush, 28 July 2002, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/243761/2002-07-28-note-blair-to-bush-note-on-iraq.pdf.

[187]Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 81.

CENTCOM Strategy Paper dated November 27, 2001 laid out plans for regime change. The paper's third bullet point, titled "How start?," posed three options: "Saddam moves against Kurds in north?," "US discovers Saddam connection to Sept. 11 attack or to anthrax attacks?," and "Dispute over WMD inspections?" This third option had its own separate sub-bullet point: "Start now thinking about inspection demands." This language strongly suggests the cart was leading the horse in terms of WMD and the decision to invade Iraq. At the time, Rumsfeld was pressing CENTCOM Commanding General Tommy Franks for war plans, happy to "contribute staff if Franks was shorthanded because of Afghanistan … . Clearly Rumsfeld was not about to let the war in Afghanistan get in the way of a new war with Iraq."[188]

By December, Franks was reviewing plans for an invasion, and Major General Victor Renuart, who joined Franks at his Washington DC meetings, noted that "there was a sense of urgency to get a conceptual plan in front of the president."[189] In a December 3 memo to Wolfowitz titled "Next Case," Rumsfeld wrote, "I have a feeling we are going to have to make our case on anything we do after Afghanistan."[190] In January 2002, Bush made his famous "axis of evil" speech, an "astonishingly bold address" for Charles Krauthammer, who correctly inferred, "If there was a serious internal debate within the administration over what to do about Iraq, that debate is over. The speech was just short of a declaration of war."[191] Like Krauthammer, Iraqi exile groups took the speech to mean that war for regime change was on the way.[192]

In February, Bush ordered Franks to begin shifting forces from Afghanistan to the Gulf. "In March, he interrupted a meeting between his national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, and three senators: 'Fuck Saddam' the president said. 'We're taking him out.'"[193] In the same month, Cheney told a group of Republican senators, "The question was no longer if the U.S. would attack Iraq, the only question was when."[194] In April 2002, just before Tony Blair's visit to Crawford, Texas, Bush told a television interviewer, "I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go."[195] After

[188]Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 25.

[189]Ricks, *Fiasco*, 32.

[190]Donald Rumsfeld, "Next Case," memorandum to Paul Wolfowitz, 3 December 2001, *Rumsfeld's Snowflakes Come in from the Cold*, National Security Archive Briefing Book No. 615, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//dc.html?doc=4357755-11-L-0559-First-Release-Bates-1-912.

[191]Quoted in Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 95.

[192]Defense Intelligence Agency Intelligence Summary for February 5, 2002.

[193]Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, 45.

[194]Battle, *The Iraq War—Part I*.

[195]Prados and Ames, *The Iraq War—Part II*.

Blair's discussions with Bush, an anonymous British official claimed that the "removal of the Iraqi dictator … had by now been 'hardwired' into the administration's thinking," and that the "'whiff of inevitability' mingled with the smell of barbeque at the Bush ranch."[196] This was also the point at which "detailed operations plans" by the US Third Army and V Corps, those that would conduct the war, were being prepared,[197] while Rumsfeld's aides were proposing "the idea of provoking Iraq to take action, which would provide Washington with an indisputable *casus belli* and avoid lengthy rounds of diplomacy, including at the United Nations."[198]

In May 2002, in a conversation with his press secretary about a journalist's questions, Bush "unleashed a string of expletives. 'Did you tell her I don't like motherfuckers who gas their own people? Did you tell her I don't like assholes who lie to the world? Did you tell her I'm going to kick his sorry motherfucking ass all over the Mideast?"[199] These were hardly the words of a leader still contemplating the decision to go to war. Indeed, Richard Haass was warned against dissenting by Rice in July 2002: "Decision's been made, don't waste your breath."[200] Pillar noted, "It was quite apparent from—certainly from, I would say, early 2002—if not that, mid-2002—that we were going to war, that the decision had been made."[201]

Haass and Pillar probably overstated the timeline. By November, if not the evening of September 11, 2001, war was inevitable.[202] Indeed, the time between the fall of 2001 and the spring of 2003 was spent debating how, not whether, the war would be fought. At first, Feith and Wolfowitz told Rumsfeld of their "disappointment with the narrowness of the options" after meeting with Joint Staff generals on September 17, reporting that "we had a useful talk about more creative approaches to Iraq."[203] These early thoughts involved arming Shias and Kurds while expanding an American presence in the oil-rich south or supporting a coup,[204] which evolved to

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[196]Ibid.

[197]Ibid.

[198]Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 56.

[199]Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 3.

[200]Quoted in Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie*, 54.

[201]Prados and Ames, *The Iraq War—Part II*.

[202]Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, 61; Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine*, 166; Prados and Ames, *The Iraq War—Part II*.

[203]Paul Wolfowitz, "War or [sic] Terror—Coordination with Joint Staff," memorandum to Donald Rumsfeld, 17 September 2001, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*.

[204]Peter Rodman, "Planning to Support any Possible Coup or Insurrection in Iraq," memorandum to Paul Wolfowitz, 20 September 2001; and Douglas Feith, "Using DoD-Controlled Humanitarian Assets to Support Campaign Objectives in Iraq," memorandum to Directors of Joint Staff and Defense Intelligence Agency, 21 November 2001, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*. Such covert strategies for regime change have precedent. According to Lindsey O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), the United States intervened in such a manner sixty-six times during the Cold War.

invasion plans that were developed through the winter of 2001–2002, guided by Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz's relentless demands,[205] continuing to the summer of 2002, by which point only the fine-tuning remained.[206]

The performative war thesis entails a war that must be fought; no peaceful bargain, however lopsided, can promise the same benefits. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that such thinking is exactly how the Bush administration conceptualized the Iraq problem in 2001–2003.

Summary and Implications

The Iraq war was one of the most significant developments in post-World War II geopolitics due to the sheer magnitude of its implications, including in part the Arab Spring, the internationalized civil war in Syria, and the creation of ISIS. I have argued that the United States's concern with status, reputation, and hegemony—more so than WMD, oil, Israel, or spreading democracy in the Middle East—drove the decision to fight. Having experienced status-loss as a result of 9/11, the United States was compelled to burnish its reputation for toughness and establish a generalized deterrence against challenges to its hegemony. Consequently, it had to fight—a lesson British colonial authorities, states fighting separatists, prison bullies, and Mexican cartels all know well. Iraq was suitable for such an exercise because it represented a festering wound to American pride and such unfinished business was not tolerable for a hegemon keen on settling debts and marking a new global order.

Theoretical implications

The most important theoretical implication of this study is its questioning of the bargaining model as suitable to explain the Iraq war specifically and a catch-all model of war more generally. At its core, the bargaining model of war considers war a mistake in that states can do better without fighting than by fighting. This is an important insight that has structured the field of security studies for over two decades. But as powerful as bargaining explanations are, they cannot account for all wars. There are circumstances under which states value fighting more than not fighting because certain benefits, such as a tough reputation or recognized authority, only accrue to actors that fight. Under such conditions, as with the Anglo–Zulu war of 1879 or the US invasion of Iraq, states will not fall mistakenly into war, but positively welcome it.

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[205]Paul Wolfowitz, "Special Military Planning," memorandum to Donald Rumsfeld, 24 January 2002, DNSA, *Targeting Iraq*.

[206]Suskind, *One Percent Doctrine*, 166.

A rejoinder from bargaining proponents might note that wars fought to establish tough reputations have been subsumed under a bargaining framework via information rather than commitment problems.[207] However, concerns remain. First, and more generally, information problems as causes of war have been called into question for logical and empirical difficulties.[208] Second, and with respect to the specific bargaining models that encompass reputation- or "honor"-based war, the problem is that their theories of war do not comport with experiences such as Iraq.[209] A disputant in these theories could conceivably stop the war from occurring or continuing by not making a challenge in the first place or acquiescing on the matter under question, such as territory, policy, or a symbolic issue such as an apology. By contrast, in my framework there exist conditions under which war is unavoidable, not because of a commitment or information problem, but because of preferences: one side insists on a fight and no amount of plausible concessions from a disputant, even if they allay honor-based concerns, will suffice. The Zulus did not challenge the British, nor did Saddam provoke the United States. Similar to victims of prison bullies, the target state happens to be caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, unable to avoid the wrath of the powerful actor sending a message to other observers. Because bargaining models cannot contend with situations where there is no viable bargaining range due to one actor's preference to demonstrate its might, it may be advisable to eschew reliance on them when building a framework of performative war.

Policy Implications

The policy implications of this study should be deeply troubling to the American intelligentsia. If the Iraq war was fought for oil or the Israel lobby, the solution would be simple, if challenging to implement: curtail the power of interest groups in domestic politics. If the war was fought due to mistaken intelligence, the obvious response would be to tighten standards of data collection and ensure better coordination across bureaucratic divides—not to mention forgive Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld of errors that any leaders under pressure could make. If the war was fought for the implementation of neoconservative ideas about the importance of democracy, then it becomes incumbent to better understand the mismatch between theory, centered on ideas such as the "End of History" and the democratic peace, and the practice of external democracy promotion.

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[207]Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*.

[208]Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 169–203.

[209]Walter, *Reputation and Civil War*; Dafoe and Caughey, "Honor and War."

If, however, the war was fought to assert American hegemony, as I argue, then there is no obvious boogeyman to blame for the war. Consider that in the 2000 election, Al Gore's campaign was more aggressive than Bush's on foreign policy, especially in asserting American responsibility to lead. Since Gore was one of the leading hawks on Iraq within the Clinton administration and his positions on Saddam and WMD were remarkably close to those of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Rice, and Bush post-9/11,[210] it is more than conceivable that, under pressure from a Republican Congress, he would have charted a similar course to Bush. Irrespective of one's judgment of this counterfactual of a Gore presidency,[211] it bears remembering that there were no significant partisan splits on the advisability of the Iraq war.[212] Democrats in Congress, including party stalwarts such as John Kerry, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, and John Edwards all voted for the decision to give Bush authorization to start a war, while supposedly liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* editorialized in favor of it.[213] Primacy, or the idea of forthright American leadership in a dangerous world, was not an ideology restricted to the Republican party or neoconservatives in 2001–2003.

As such, it is fairer to characterize the decision-making in the run-up to the Iraq war as a collective failure emanating from a nationalism that breeds, and relies on, the idea of American exceptionalism[214] and a desire to maintain the United States's global standing and hierarchic order. Such an interpretation would also beget questions for those that believe in the image of the United States as a liberal hegemon, not prone to the dark and ugly behavior of other great powers. The uncomfortable truth may be, however, that the United States behaved as a vicious, aggressive state bent on establishing exactly such a reputation.

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[210]Frank P. Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic and Evidence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[211]I disagree strongly with Harvey's narrative in parts, though not on the crucial argument of whether Gore would have stayed out of Iraq.

[212]Krebs, *Narrative*, 168.

[213]A month before the war, the *New York Times* complained about France's "wishful thinking" and the possibility of Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei playing "games of hide-and-seek," cheered Britain and the United States being "prepared to take the next step," and warned that "the time has come for the others to quit pretending that inspections alone are the solution." See "Disarming Iraq," *New York Times*, 15 February 2003. Its only complaint once the war started was that it was not fought with a wide enough coalition. See "The War Begins," *New York Times*, 20 March 2003. The *Washington Post* was more hawkish, arguing a week before the war, "In our view, military action has been made necessary by Saddam Hussein's repeated defiance of U.N. disarmament orders; we believe Mr. Bush is right to go forward despite opposition from France and other nations." See "Final Days," *Washington Post*, 17 March 2003. When it began, the newspaper reminded readers that "even if the operation does not go smoothly or fast, it must go forward. . . . The war that has now begun stands to end the single greatest threat to peace in the Middle East." See "First Strike," *Washington Post*, 20 March 2003.

[214]Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chap. 1.

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