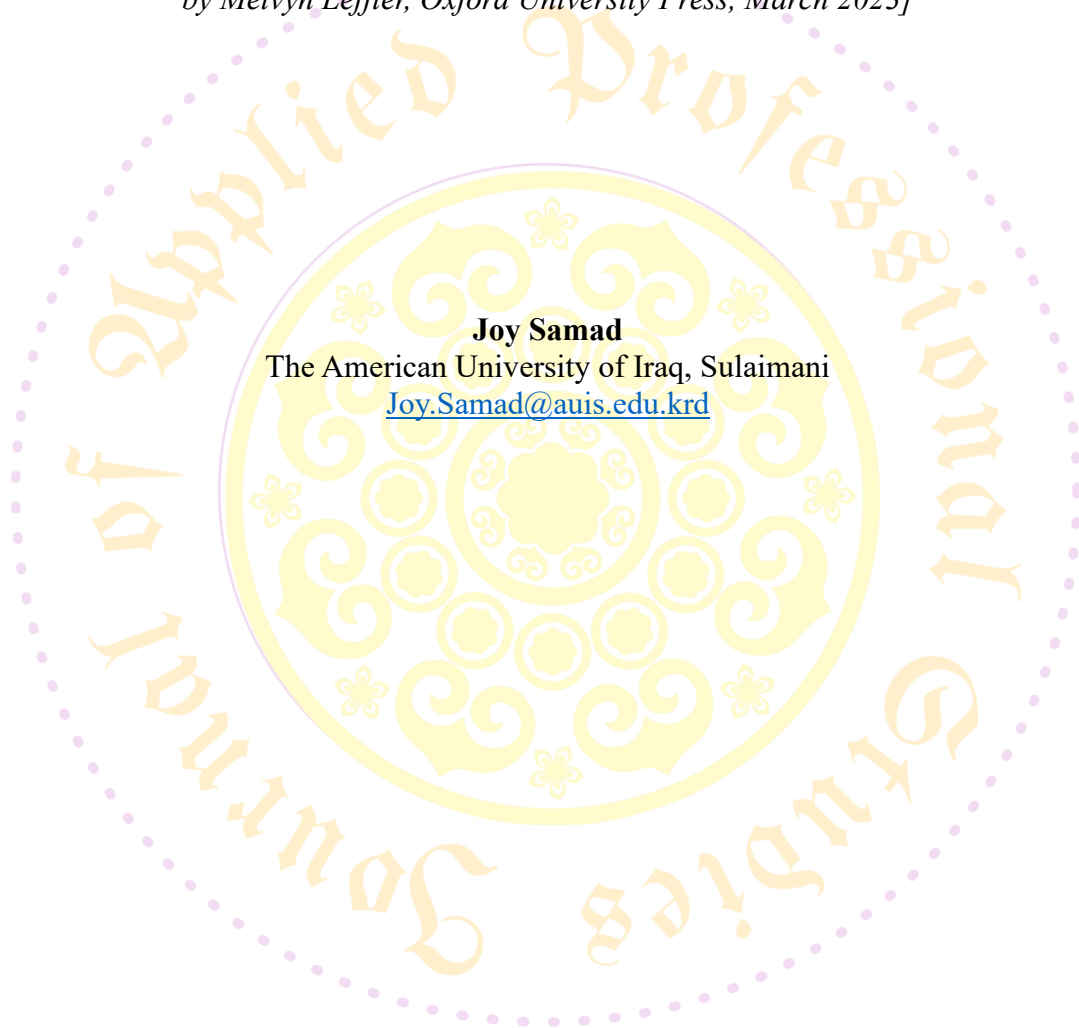


“Mission Awry”

Re-examining America’s Invasion of Iraq after 20 Years

*A Review Essay on Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq,
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Abstract

The causes of all the problems with the American invasion of Iraq have been often misidentified: the war did not begin with lies and deception, but overconfidence about American abilities, inadequately understood intelligence, and a failure to plan for the challenges America would face in post-Saddam Iraq. Lack of co-operation and co-ordination among the principal policymakers only aggravated these shortcomings.

Keywords: Iraq, George Bush, Saddam Hussein

Introduction

In his preface Leffler declares that his commitment to complete his book was “sustained by my growing conviction that too much of the history of the Bush administration has been entwined with partisan, personal, and ideological battles that have made it difficult both to empathize and criticize. I try to do both. Too many accounts that stress the lying, the manipulation, and the preconceived predilections of officials obfuscate the real lessons of the tragic intervention in Iraq” (xviii). A great virtue of the book is that the writer does succeed in both empathizing and criticizing – indeed, his sympathetic portrayal of the hard choices¹ Bush had to navigate makes his restrained criticism² even more damning in the end. Even if Leffler’s desire to carefully examine the decision to invade Iraq from the point of view of Bush and his chief advisers³ leads him to pull his punches when he describes Bush’s failure to provide the leadership needed at crucial moments during the Iraq war (such as his failure to supervise and question the actions of his subordinates Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Bremer after the toppling of Saddam), his book provides the fullest account to date of all the considerations that led to war.

1. America and Iraq before 9/11

Saddam Hussein quickly and ruthlessly propelled himself to the top of Iraqi politics after a July 1968 coup brought the Ba’th Party to power. Anyone who stood in his way, and even many who were merely perceived as potential opponents, were either exiled or killed. The spike in oil prices that followed the 1973 Arab Israeli war led to a huge increase in Iraq’s oil revenues, and Saddam “used this money to modernize and diversify the economy of Iraq” (6). In addition to building schools and hospitals, steel, fertilizer and chemical plants, huge sums were spent to “purchase armaments abroad and to develop an arms industry at home,” and Saddam “turned his personal attention to acquiring and developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) –

¹ “The truth of the matter is that it is hard to garner accurate information and to assess it objectively. It is hard to measure threats. It is hard to deal with unpredictable, brutal, defiant tyrants. It is hard to balance means and ends. It is hard to temper predilections and prejudices” (p. xviii).

² His criticism is infrequent and offered only after a long and careful presentation of all the relevant facts.

³ National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz.

chemical, biological, and nuclear – and the means to deliver them.” His goals remained constant throughout his time in power – achieve personal greatness by building a powerful Iraq that would dominate the Middle East and be a major player in global politics (20). He felt threatened by the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, as most Iraqis were Shi’a, and decided to take advantage of the chaos caused by the revolution to launch an attack on Iran in September 1980. This foolish war did not go well; Saddam avoided defeat in the war against the larger and more populous Iran by using chemical weapons against the Iranians and the Iraqi Kurdish population in northern Iraq.

The eight year Iran-Iraq war left over 100,000 Iraqis dead and twice as many wounded, and made the “great economic and social progress of the 1970s ..[seem]..ephemeral” (11); Iraq lost its gold reserves and acquired a foreign debt of almost \$ 50 billion, much of it owed to the oil-rich Gulf Arab states. Seeking a way out of his problems, he invaded tiny oil-rich Kuwait in August 1990, but kept control of the country only for a short time, as a large international coalition assembled and led by the US under President George HW Bush attacked and expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait in January-February 1991. The coalition forces did not proceed to Baghdad and remove Saddam from power, but he had to sign a ceasefire that required him to “recognize Kuwaiti sovereignty, restore the war booty, disclose and eliminate his weapons of mass destruction, and accept IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and UN inspectors (UNSCOM) to monitor Iraqi compliance” (14).

The aftermath of the war proved much more vexing than the war itself. When two rebellions – a Shi’a rebellion in southern Iraq, and a Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq – broke out against Saddam in March 1991, he used helicopter gunships to massacre rebel fighters and civilians to quell the uprisings. President Bush, despite having urged Iraqis to overthrow their dictator, at first did nothing to help the rebellion, but the US and the UK were forced by public opinion to institute “no-fly zones in the northern part of the country (and subsequently in the south) to enforce the UN mandate barring Hussein from mistreating his own people” (15). UN inspectors “entered Iraq in May 1991 and immediately faced obstruction. Hussein created a concealment committee” (14) and only grudgingly complied with efforts to find and destroy his WMD.

Leffler is particularly good at explaining the reasoning behind Saddam’s reluctance to clearly and unambiguously renounce his WMD programs: “he deemed these weapons to be vital to the survival of his regime, the fulfilment of his goals, and the affirmation of his power. In his view, he had employed chemical weapons effectively to repress the Kurds, subdue the Shi’a, punish the Iranians, and deter the Israelis. Even with a small nuclear arsenal, Hussein thought he could affect the behavior of foes and friends and redraw the map of the region” (15). Knowledge of Iraq’s WMD programs was vastly increased in August 1995 when Hussein Kamil, Saddam’s son-in-law and “minister in charge of military industrialization” (17) fled to Jordan and cooperated with Western intelligence agencies.

We can draw the following conclusion from the story Leffler tells *as long as Saddam Hussein remained in power, a persistent and ineradicable knowability problem would surround Iraq’s WMD*. The UN inspectors could not certify that all of Iraq’s WMD programs were closed without full transparency from Iraqi officials, but Saddam felt full transparency about WMD would put the survival of his regime at risk, so a cat-and-mouse game between Iraqi officials and UN inspectors continued for many years, until Iraq expelled the inspectors in late 1998.

Meanwhile, UN sanctions on Iraq continued because they were supposed to be lifted when Iraq fully complied with UN resolutions, and the resulting suffering of the Iraqi people undermined

international support for the sanctions, and the larger containment policy built around the sanctions. America and its allies rightly feared that Iraq would resume producing WMD as soon as the sanctions were lifted. Regime change in Iraq became official US policy in 1998, when the US Congress passed, and President Clinton signed, the Iraq Liberation Act (regime change was supposed to happen through US support of Iraqi opposition groups, and not through direct US military action against Iraq).

George W Bush became the Republican nominee for President in 2000; during the campaign he focused mostly on domestic issues and did not display much knowledge of international affairs⁴. “But Iraq was on Bush’s radar screen... [he] knew that the coalition that his father put together in 1990—and that Clinton had tried to sustain—was falling apart. He emphasized that sanctions were faltering, and the inspectors were gone. He acknowledged that he did not know whether Saddam Hussein was still developing [WMD, but] ..warned that there would be serious consequences if he were doing so.” His solution to this problem was the development of “an anti-missile system... to be able to say to the Saddam Husseins of the world...don’t dare threaten our friends” (31).

Bush’s first military action as President in February 2001 was air strikes on five military targets in Iraq, in response to missiles and anti-aircraft fire against US and British planes enforcing the no-fly zones in Iraq. Discussions about Iraq policy heated up in the late summer of 2001, when Rumsfeld circulated a memo to his colleagues on 27 July, outlining three options: first, end the no-fly zones before a pilot “is killed or captured,” and then monitor Hussein’s behavior from a distance; second, push America’s Arab friends to support regime change; or third, open a dialogue with Saddam Hussein (45-46). The State Department under Colin Powell put forward a policy of “smart sanctions,” a proposal for modifying sanctions to focus on limiting Iraqi “import of items with military capabilities” (44). Discussions continued, but “high-level officials could not agree on a policy toward Iraq” before 9/11 (47).

2. Coercive Diplomacy and the Road to War

For many years after 9/11, it was commonplace to say 9/11 changed everything. A true grasp of the problems which guided decision making requires that we identify more precisely what changes in American policy and official thinking occurred after 9/11. The first change Leffler identifies occurred in the President: Michael Morell, a CIA official who frequently briefed the president on intelligence, observed how he saw Bush transform, “from a president who really didn’t have a strong agenda... to somebody who almost instantaneously” knew he had a mission to protect the country. The president’s “tone impressed ...others as well. Bush conveyed a new sense of purpose, of destiny” (54).

Leffler clearly states what he concluded from his interviews with numerous top officials:⁵ Bush was in charge after 9/11, and was not being manipulated by neo-conservatives, or by Cheney and Rumsfeld. “Nobody around him thought anyone but he was calling the signals in the immediate aftermath of 9/11” (60). “Bush’s number one goal” became preventing another attack. For a long time, Condi Rice felt that “every day since has been September 12;” Cheney’s national security adviser Eric Edelman recalled how everyone felt a sense of responsibility, “not again on our watch” (62-64). While Bush and his advisers “believed they could not have

⁴ “When asked on the campaign trail about the Taliban, Bush did not seem to know who they were” (30).

⁵ “Most of Bush’s advisers were eager to talk and inform. They seemed exceptionally willing to explain important and complex decisions to an academic who they regarded as open-minded” (xv). The long list of people Leffler interviewed for his book include Cheney, Powell, Rice, and Wolfowitz.

done anything to prevent the attack on 9/11... they knew they were deeply vulnerable politically should another attack occur;” Jack Goldsmith, a top Justice Department official, noted how “the White House was obsessed with preventing the harsh blame that would come after the next attack” (65-66). In short, preventing another attack created a perfect coincidence between the public good and the private interest of administration officials.

There was agreement that “defense meant going on the offensive... that weakness invited aggression.” Insufficiently tough responses to previous attacks on the World Trade Center in 1993, on US troops at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996, on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and on the destroyer USS *Cole* in 2000 invited further attacks (62). Important changes were therefore made in American calculations and policy: a willingness to take greater risks (“if *previously hesitant*, Bush and his advisers *now felt* they had to reshape the global security environment that permitted terrorist networks to fester and flourish” [62-emphasis added]), and an expansive rhetorical justification of the more aggressive actions required to tackle the terrorist threat.

Leffler makes it clear that he found no evidence that Bush was obsessed with Iraq: he “made the decision to focus initially on Afghanistan” (66) and Pakistan (“he and his advisers assigned far more importance to Pakistan than to Iraq” [73]; see also 57, 60, 79 and 83). What Leffler objects to is Bush’s rhetorical framing of the war on terrorism in these early days: he repeatedly declared that the terrorists “hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble” (59).

By using such rhetoric, Leffler correctly argues, “the president obfuscated as much as he illuminated. Terror, after all, is a tactic, not an enemy. Jihadist fury, moreover, did not emanate from hatred of American values. Nor were all terrorists focused on America; many had local objectives... They were assailing American deeds, not its freedoms” (76). Leffler also notes “the dark side to the global war on terror”—as the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan overthrew the Taliban with the aid of US forces in October and November 2001, Cheney “waged a tenacious campaign inside the administration to deny captives the rights guaranteed them by the Geneva Convention... [and] to permit the rendition and torturous interrogation of enemy captives in CIA prisons abroad” (75).

Why did the administration begin to shift its attention to Iraq after the fall of the Taliban? Bush had already made it clear in several press conferences that “he could not tolerate Hussein’s possession of weapons of mass destruction at a time when it was becoming clearer that terrorists were seeking such weapons (83; CIA personnel in Afghanistan found evidence “that al Qaeda leaders had a deep interest in developing biological weapons ... for a mass casualty attack” in the US [84 and 106]). What this meant is short-term concerns about Iraq were added to pre-existing long-term concerns that predated the 9/11 attacks.

In the short-term, as Cheney explained, “if you had to identify somebody who was likely to provide a connection between terrorism on the one hand and weapons of mass destruction on the other, who is a more likely prospect than Saddam Hussein?” (98; similar statements were made by Rice [92] and Joint Chiefs of Staff Vice Chair General Peter Pace [87]). Not everyone agreed on the existence of this kind of imminent threat – Richard Clarke, a senior counter-terrorism adviser to presidents Clinton and Bush, said that Iraqi “possession of weapons of mass destruction is not in and of itself a threat to the United States,” but for Bush “the risk calculus had changed dramatically after 9/11” (91).

Iraq was the only Arab Muslim country that did not condemn the 9/11 attacks (86), and statements coming out in Iraqi state-controlled newspapers even constituted “gloating over the 9/11 attacks” (82). In 2002 the Second Intifada, or Al-Aqsa Intifada was at its height, and Saddam Hussein was actively supporting Palestinian suicide bombers. Worrying intelligence reports kept coming in about Iraqi intentions and actions.

A defector named Curveball spoke about “mobile biological warfare production plants” (84), Czech intelligence thought that 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta had met an Iraqi intelligence officer in April 2001 (86), other intelligence reports suggested that “Iraqis were training terrorists for hijacking and demolition operations against US naval vessels” (86), analysts “began debating the meaning of Iraq’s acquisition of aluminium tubes” (84), “news circulated that some [jihadists fleeing Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban] ... were moving into an area of northeastern Iraq outside of Hussein’s control” (107; “was he aware of it? Probably. Was he welcoming it? Uncertain”), and Iraq was suspected of having “sought uranium from Niger” (107). Some of this intelligence turned out to be false; even at the time they were publicly discussed in 2002-2003, there was heated controversy surrounding some stories, such as the alleged Iraqi search for uranium in Niger.

In retrospect, not enough attention was paid to the fact that some of these reports were based on intelligence that the CIA’s Michael “Morell [later] acknowledged, was circumstantial, flimsy, and suspect” (85). At various places in his book Leffler characterizes the intelligence reports on Iraq as “partial, elusive and portentous” (84), “both murky and ominous” (149), and “murky, leading to contentious assessments, conflicting judgments, worrisome contingencies, and uncertain recommendations” (159).

Leffler’s book presents us with all the information we need to peel the layers of the onion – to uncover all the factors that led Bush to decide in 2002 that the time had come to decisively confront Saddam Hussein about WMD – to force him to either make it clear to all that he had no WMD or face possible war. We can begin with moral considerations, as they played a more significant role in this case than is usual in international politics. As Leffler notes in his Preface, “I came to understand how much the two leaders – Bush and [British PM Tony] Blair—detested Saddam Hussein, and how much their view of his defiance, treachery, and barbarity affected their calculations” (xvi). There were other rogue states with WMD, but their leaders did not evoke the same kind of fear or moral disgust in Western leaders.

In his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, Bush had singled out Iran, Iraq and North Korea as three states that constituted “an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world” (110), but the fact is that not all rogue states with WMD were equally evil or equally dangerous. Some were worse than others. Even British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who privately urged Blair to resist American desires to find a way to remove Saddam Hussein from power, had to concede this point, as Leffler notes: “although he believed that Iraq had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11, Straw knew that Iraq was different than other rogue states: Iraq had invaded its neighbors [Iran and Kuwait], used WMD, and breached UN resolutions” (128).

To the pre-9/11 concerns that Iraq would wriggle out of sanctions, rebuild its military and WMD programs, and once again threaten American interests and allies in the region, while its increased power would limit American options and restrain American willingness to confront Saddam Hussein (39, 89), the worrisome intelligence reports after 9/11 added another layer of concern about possible co-operation between al-Qaeda and Iraq. Even though the DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) and the CIA did not believe that Iraq had anything to do with 9/11, and

even though they denied the existence of “any formal collaborative relationship” between Iraq and al-Qaeda, they had to acknowledge that “mutual antipathy...would not prevent tactical, limited cooperation” (107). If US agencies were too complacent before 9/11, it seems that in 2002 hyper-vigilance and the constant imagination of worst-case scenarios was the order of the day. After 9/11 “officials in one department after another –Energy, Interior, Transportation, Justice—highlighted the vulnerabilities of the nation’s infrastructure...its susceptibility to even more damaging attacks on nuclear plants or water systems” (243).

In October 2001 letters with anthrax circulated in Florida and Washington DC (68-69, 243), and “officials began taking the anti-biotic Cipro.” In December 2001 “two militant organizations allied with al Qaeda in Pakistan...tried to blow up India’s parliament” (105-106), while in October 2002 a bombing in Bali, Indonesia killed over 200 people (169); Leffler fails to mention the April 2002 bombing of the centuries old Ghriba synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, that killed 19 people. This was the dangerous climate in which the president and his advisers had to interpret all the ambiguous, incomplete, and worrisome intelligence about Iraq.

Working with murky intelligence, “administration hawks thought they were using their imagination –*exactly what they had been accused of not using* prior to 9/11—to envision worst-case scenarios” (157; emphasis added), the “president was seeking to imagine things he had not imagined before 9/11” (172), and after being charged with failing “to connect the dots before 9/11,” he felt (as 2002 progressed) that he saw “even more dots suggesting the necessity of gaining control of Hussein’s presumed WMD or changing the regime itself” (245).

The effect of the moral disgust Bush felt for Hussein showed up in the options that were not considered: the president did not consider “positive inducements to elicit Hussein’s cooperation, like terminating sanctions or abandoning regime change as official policy. Hussein’s record of duplicity and brutality discouraged such thinking” (184). Bush was feeling confident about America’s ability to tackle Saddam Hussein in 2002: “the use of air power, special forces, and new technologies to expel the Taliban from Kabul reinforced his sense of power. America’s reach appeared to have no bounds” (245).

In both Washington DC and London there was a sense of “now is the right time” to deal with Iraq. Leffler outlines what Tony Blair told his cabinet: “if the United States and the United Kingdom did not challenge Hussein now, when they had the opportunity and justification to do so, “we would have to deal with him eventually and in tougher circumstances.” By then, Blair feared, “we would have lost our nerve”” (142; see also 88 and 132 for similar thinking in America). What about promoting democracy? Wasn’t the lack of freedom in the Middle East the root cause of terrorism? Leffler repeatedly states that Bush’s most hawkish advisers, in the defense department and the vice-president’s office, “were not inspired by missionary fervor or idealistic impulses,” and were moved to act by a desire to save American lives and maintain America’s freedom of action abroad. Bush too put these concerns first, which is why he “averted talk of “regime change” or democracy promotion in his public comments” (97-98).

This of course leaves open the possibility that democracy promotion was at least a secondary concern for Bush, and Leffler is forced to point in this direction later: “if he went to war, he wanted to help give birth to a free Iraq. Inspired by religious conviction, convinced that God wanted all humankind to be free, and recalling the joy expressed by East Germans, Poles, and

Hungarians when the Berlin wall came down, he thought in terms of a liberation strategy” (203)⁶.

The summer of 2002 brought some particularly worrying intelligence: Abu Musa al Zarqawi “arrived in Baghdad, ostensibly for medical treatment.” Zarqawi was “a Jordanian jihadist who had fought in Afghanistan, conspired against the monarchy in Jordan, ... met with bin Laden, and managed his own training camps in Herat. He was already celebrated for his toughness, radicalism, and barbarity” (134-135).

In July 2002 a CIA team infiltrated into northeastern Iraq and reported that “al Qaeda loyalists, seemingly under the leadership of Zarqawi, had located in the village of Sargat, not far from the town of Khurmal. There, Zarqawi took over a building and began experimenting with biological and chemical agents that terrorists could put in ventilating systems for mass casualties.” Even though this part of Iraq was outside of Hussein’s control, for “Wolfowitz, it defied reality to think these developments could be occurring without Saddam’s support or forbearance” (139-140).

Leffler thinks Bush must have had this information about Zarqawi in mind when “the president *overstated* the evidence he had Hussein’s a threat, Bush said, “because he is dealing with al Qaeda.” That was an *exaggeration*” (172; emphasis added). In his concluding chapter Leffler again writes “*exaggerating* the likelihood of an attack on the United States—sponsored by Hussein—and *inflating* its consequences, he thought military intimidation might force Hussein to allow inspections, disclose his WMD, or flee, or alternatively, it might spur disaffected military officers to overthrow him” (246; emphasis added).

Leffler understands when no WMD were found in Iraq after the American invasion, Bush’s fiercest critics accused him, with great success, of lying the American people into supporting the war—in a footnote he points out that in “February 2008, 53 percent of Americans polled said the administration had “deliberately misled the American public” about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction” (310, n.36). Bush’s true failings were elsewhere, as we shall see, and Leffler is correct to use “exaggerate” and “overstate” and “inflate” here, instead of “lying.”⁷

As he notes, “nobody told Bush that Hussein did not have WMD” (85); domestic and foreign intelligence all agreed that Iraq must have retained some WMD, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told General Tommy Franks, the overseer of American operations in Iraq, “I tell you the truth. Saddam, he has the WMD. He told me he will use it on you” (168). Richard Hass, the Director of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department, noted “if the emperor had no clothes, no one thought so or was prepared to say so” (167), and this extended even to Saddam Hussein’s top advisers, for when he “told them in late November and December 2002” that he had no WMD, “many of his associates did not believe him” (177).

As noted, *as long as Saddam Hussein remained in power, a persistent and ineradicable knowability problem would surround Iraq’s WMD*. He felt his survival depended on others believing that he had WMD, and was not willing to tell the truth in public.

⁶ “Bush read the UN Human Development Report on the Arab world that appeared in 2002 and thought that he would be redressing one of the three key deficits –the freedom deficit—that had contributed to the region’s dysfunctionality, turbulence and backwardness.” When he began making frequent public statements about promoting democracy in Iraq in late 2003, his “rhetoric grated and seemed insincere—an excuse for his failure to locate the WMD he had dwelled on” (246-248).

⁷ For a recent strong statement of the case that Bush lied, see David Corn’s essay in *Mother Jones* (Corn 2023).

In the late summer of 2002 many of Bush's military and civilian advisers favored military action against Khormal, but Bush ultimately decided against unilateral action (150) in order to keep the focus on obtaining a UN resolution requiring Iraq to fully co-operate with UN inspectors and disclose all information about his WMD programs, while at the same time building up US military forces in the Persian Gulf, thus making it clear to Saddam Hussein what consequences he might suffer if he refused to cooperate.

When told by national security adviser Rice that academics called this type of maneuver "coercive diplomacy," "the president loved that terminology" (111). This was the course recommended by Tony Blair, who pointed out in a letter to Bush in late July that public "opinion in the US [which supported a war to remove the Iraqi threat] is quite simply on a different planet from opinion here, in Europe, or in the Arab world" (143).

Bush and Blair wanted a strategy to build a coalition against Saddam Hussein, and agreed that "if the UN route worked, then it worked. We would have to take yes for an answer" (129). A verifiable disarmament by Iraq would mean no war. Everyone agreed that a military buildup alongside a UN Resolution was needed to avoid war: as the British minister of defense observed, "the clearer we are that we would use force, the likelier it may be that we don't have to." Hans Blix, the Swedish head of UN inspectors in Iraq, French president Jacques Chirac, and Russian president Vladimir Putin all agreed (162).

The US Congress in October approved a resolution by large margins authorizing the president to use military force in Iraq (171), and in November UN Security Council Resolution 1441 was passed; it did not guarantee military action if Iraq refused to cooperate, but "it did lay down a set of expectations, a demand for information, an inspection process, a rigorous timetable, and a reminder that the regime already was in material breach of past resolutions, thereby providing justification for the United States to take unilateral action if it chose to do so" (173).

Once UN inspections resumed the Iraqis went back to their cat-and-mouse game. A declaration, submitted in December 2002 to the UN by the Iraqi state, about its WMD, looked to Blix "like a repetition of old, unverified data ... [that did not solve] any of the unresolved disarmament issues" (181), and this was followed in late January by a presentation by Blix to the UN Security Council. While carefully "avoiding any allegations that Iraq possessed WMD, Blix emphasized that the regime failed to demonstrate it did not have them" (191).

This kind of double negative report created divergent views at the UN, with the US and the UK holding that "the burden of proof was on the Iraqis and they were not delivering" (as Cheney told Jack Straw during a private meeting), while other states must have felt that without conclusive proof that the Iraqis were hiding WMD, a second UN resolution justifying force was not warranted; on 22 January France and Germany announced their opposition to a second resolution, thereby making "war more likely rather than less, since Saddam would have a reduced incentive to cooperate and comply" with UN inspectors (189-191).

After a last-ditch attempt by Colin Powell to change minds at the UN failed on February 5, 2003, Bush waited for one more month before issuing an ultimatum on March 17: Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours, or war would follow. Blix and the countries opposed to war kept asking for more time for the UN inspectors, but it was clear that America could not indefinitely maintain its armies in an attack posture in the region, as their "readiness would decline" with the approach of summer, while "Arab partners in the region were growing

impatient, communicating their uncertainty about US resolve” (194-195, 199-200). American credibility was on the line.

3. The Troubled American Occupation of Iraq

Military action began on 19 March, and in “less than three weeks, the war seemed won” – Iraqi resistance collapsed, American forces reached the center of Baghdad, an enormous statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled by Iraqis and American soldiers, and the dictator and his sons fled (216). People were celebrating in the streets of Baghdad the day the statue came down (April 9th), but that day proved to be the highpoint of the American occupation of Iraq during the rest of the Bush presidency.

Things went downhill quickly, and an examination of why so much turmoil followed reveals a great deal about the flaws of the president and his top advisers. In a video message to Iraqis on 10 April the president announced the ending of “a long era of fear and cruelty... Coalition forces will help maintain law and order so that Iraqis can live in security” (216). Instead of law, order and security Iraqis experienced violence and chaos: “Anarchy reigned in Baghdad.” Looters did their work unopposed; seventeen of twenty-three ministry buildings had their contents stolen, including electrical wiring from walls and much of the plumbing, and then the buildings were set on fire.

Individual looters “morphed into organized theft by gangs,” and people broke into banks and stole millions of dollars in cash. US commanders in Baghdad had neither the manpower nor a plan on how to handle this situation. “They did not know how to deal with looters, dissidents, and violent demonstrators.

They had tanks and artillery, but insufficient military police, engineers, and contractors.” General William Wallace, commander of US Army V Corps, explained: “When we decapitated the regime, everything below it fell apart. The regime officials had gone; the folks that provided security of the ministry buildings had gone; the folks that operated the water treatment plants and the electricity grid were gone” (217-218). Charles Duelfer, who worked with UN inspectors in Iraq in the 1990s, was in Baghdad in April and May 2003, described the situation: “there was no authority.

There was complete freedom –to do absolutely anything, good or bad... There was no penalty for committing crimes and there was no reward for going to work” (230). Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld “remained committed to a light footprint” regardless of the situation on the ground. He continued withdrawing US forces from Iraq even after it became clear that the restoration of order in Baghdad required more, not fewer, military personnel.

Leffler does not mention the infamous comment Rumsfeld made (“stuff happens”⁸) when he was asked about the looting that gripped Baghdad, but the callous indifference of the defense secretary to suffering caused by the breakdown of law and order is clearly visible in his description of what Rumsfeld was doing after the fall of Saddam Hussein. One or more kinds of serious disorder (looting, sectarian fighting between Sunni and Shia, an insurgency⁹, terrorist

⁸ “Freedom’s untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things,” Rumsfeld famously told reporters. “Stuff happens.” (Graff 2023)

⁹ Where did insurgents get weapons to kill Iraqis and Americans? During the post-invasion chaos and lack of security “munitions depots around the country were raided; thousands of tons of munitions disappeared” (218).

attacks, sabotage of oil pipelines and electricity grids) continued for over three years because of insufficient troops on the ground to quell them and ended only in 2007 after the surge of American troops in Iraq, under a new defense secretary (Robert Gates) and a new commander of multinational forces in Iraq (General David Petraeus).

Why was the US occupation of Iraq marred by such violence and disorder for over three years? Various departments of the US government had been thinking about “the nature and composition of a post-Saddam government” in Iraq in the months before the war began, but Bush “worried that too much publicity on this issue would undermine his efforts to conduct coercive diplomacy; too much talk about a postwar government would divert attention from inspections and disarmament” (206).

So careful planning for a post-Saddam Iraq was delayed, and a National Security Presidential Directive was issued only on January 20, 2003, barely two months before the start of hostilities, to identify and address problems that would confront a liberated Iraq and coordinate all the planning from all the different departments. This led to the creation of the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), housed in the Department of Defense, and Rumsfeld appointed Jay Garner, a retired general who had worked with the Kurds in northern Iraq in the 1990s, as head of ORHA (208-209; 301note20).

Garner soon realized that Rumsfeld did not grasp “the magnitude of the issues” that would confront a liberated Iraq; perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Rumsfeld was opposed to doing anything to understand or address these issues. As he wrote in his memoir, “I did not think [that] resolving other countries’ internal political disputes, paving roads, erecting power lines, policing streets, building stock markets, and organizing democratic governmental bodies were missions for our men and women in uniform.”

Many of the things Rumsfeld mentions should indeed have been handled by Iraqis instead of Americans, but what about basic security, a capital where looters, armed gangs and saboteurs did not have total freedom to do as they wished? Could anyone, Iraqi or American, get much done in circumstances that General Petraeus described as a Hobbesian world?

The Defense Secretary’s attitude recalled General George Casey, “corroded postwar planning” (207-209). Rumsfeld and his subordinates made Garner’s work such a low priority that he had “great difficulty just getting into Iraq,” and did not arrive in Baghdad until April 21. Tasked with “securing key Baghdad institutions including ministry buildings, the Central Bank, and the Iraqi Museum, ... [Garner found that] by the time he arrived most ministry buildings had been destroyed. More than that, the files, and records that he was told to secure already had vanished.

Employees did not show up for work; indeed, there was nowhere for them to go. Worse yet, there was no way for OHRA officials to reach the Iraqi employees.” Garner knew nothing could be done in this “lawless environment,” and asked Rumsfeld to stop pulling out US troops; “Rumsfeld listened politely and did nothing” (219-220). The president knew what was going wrong: “why isn’t anybody stopping the looters?” he asked his top advisers at a late April meeting.

“By the fall of 2003, the insurgency—made up of former regime elements and disbanded soldiers—was in full swing” (Graff 2023).

When he “asked his defense secretary if there were enough troops on the ground, Rumsfeld assured him there were.” It seems that whenever this issue came up, instead of probing further, “Bush deferred to his defense secretary” (217, 232).

Not only did Rumsfeld not act himself, but he also prevented others from taking part in postwar planning. He “did not want various State Department people from working for Garner; he wanted to pick and choose” (210)¹⁰. Leffler’s book is mostly narrative, with little bits of commentary here and there, which allows room for the reader to draw his own conclusions; after reading his description of Rumsfeld’s behaviour, one is forced to conclude that the defense secretary sowed discord wherever he went. “From the moment he entered the Pentagon, Rumsfeld pushed relentlessly to shake things up...tough, relentless, demanding, and often contemptuous...[he] often [did] not realize how his own attitude and behaviour reinforced opponents of change. People respected his intelligence and his drive, but they often abhorred his manner.

General Hugh Shelton, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, detested Rumsfeld.” As Christopher Lamb, a high-level civilian in the Pentagon who often supported Rumsfeld’s objectives, observed how in his “entire professional career, I’ve never been in an environment that was so politically charged or just filled with animosity” (39-40). “Rumsfeld’s contempt for Rice was widely recognized” (306n114); he “antagonized other colleagues needlessly, perhaps inadvertently;” “from day one, he embittered [Deputy Secretary of State Richard] Armitage when he interviewed him to be his deputy and treated him with condescension...More important, Rumsfeld irked Powell on a trip to Australia with little digs and caustic comments” (95-96).

Frequent leaks from the Pentagon “reflected the acrimonious climate among high-level military and civilian officials” serving under Rumsfeld; his behavior ended up “reinforcing the poisonous atmosphere that he had nurtured since his first months in office” (113). Consensus on issues between different departments was not possible when Defense officials “treated the interagency process with an abiding animosity” (114). “In mid-April 2003, the vitriol among Bush’s advisers in Washington made it difficult to address the chaos in Iraq. In Kuwait and Baghdad, OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] and State Department representatives barely talked to one another” (223).

Something had to be done about the chaos in Baghdad: “unwilling to acknowledge how the inadequacy of his military planning...and his cap on troop numbers were causing the turmoil [in Baghdad]...Rumsfeld removed Garner” (222). Paul Bremer (a former ambassador and protégé of Henry Kissinger) was chosen to lead the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which would replace ORHA¹¹. During a lunch with Bush on May 6 Bremer made it clear “he felt more troops were needed for security— “to stabilize Iraq we’ll probably need an awful lot more troops than we now have;”” Bush said Powell was negotiating with other governments for troops (troops which never arrived). Bremer arrived in Iraq on May 12, and found that conditions were worse than he had been told or could imagine: “no trash disposal, no portable

¹⁰ As Garrett M Graff reports, “the State Department had spent most of 2002 drawing up its own extensive postwar plan... [this] effort, known as the Future of Iraq Project...[was] overseen by Thomas Warrick... Garner said later that he was told by Rumsfeld to ignore the Future of Iraq Project. His request to add Warrick to his team was denied” (Graff 2023).

¹¹ “In a sign of the shoot-from-the-hip decision-making of that time, when the Bush administration established the CPA, it never bothered to issue an actual order closing ORHA; the office just functionally ceased to exist” (Graff 2023).

water; schools and universities were closed; hospitals were in shambles; malnutrition was widespread. Looters had machine guns, and even rocket-propelled grenades. The cops were home guarding their families” (223-225)¹².

Bremer wanted to begin with “high-octane orders,” recalled [Larry] Di Rita, a Rumsfeld aide, who temporarily roomed with Bremer in Baghdad (Graff 2023). Two of the highest-octane orders were CPA Order # 1 (about de-Baathification of the Iraqi state, announced on 16 May) and CPA Order # 2 (disbanding the Iraqi Army, announced on 23 May). Order # 1 had been “fully vetted through the NSC [National Security Council] interagency process” (227), but it had to be applied carefully, because many people had joined the Iraqi Baath Party not out of conviction, but simply to get jobs.

Removing large numbers of Baath Party members would exclude too many experienced people from government and make them enemies of the new regime. During its implementation, the de-Baathification process was taken over by exiles like Ahmed Chalabi, who applied it unevenly and unjustly, to settle scores and trade favors (Graff 2023).¹³ Order # 2 “had not been agreed upon in inter-agency discussions in Washington” (228). Before the war official American plans saw the Iraqi army as a much-needed force: Garner had a mandate to “mobilize Iraqi soldiers for the purposes of preserving order and expediting reconstruction. The Iraqi army, however, did not surrender; it disintegrated and evaporated...soldiers took off their uniforms and fled with their arms” (220).

Rumsfeld and a few other Pentagon officials knew about Order # 2, but Rice and Powell read about it in the newspapers. The order was shocking because suddenly disbanding the army and not paying the soldiers and officers would make a lot of people unhappy, and most analysts agree that Order # 2 created new recruits for the insurgency. Even though some Pentagon officials argued that the army had “self-demobilized” when the soldiers and officers went home instead of going back to their barracks, “Garner, [General] McKiernan, [General] Petraeus, and other local commanders and ORHA officials were in the midst of contacting, recruiting, and reassembling army units for reconstruction and security” (229).

The absence of law and order in large parts of Baghdad (outside the “Green Zone,” where the CPA administrators were housed) continued without additional American troops, without other nations sending soldiers, and with a demobilized Iraqi army. Bremer grasped the consequences: as US-led coalition “failed to preserve order, protect people, and ameliorate economic conditions, the confidence of Iraqis in America waned, and the resolve of Iraqi insurgents and foreign terrorists increased” (234). Bremer asked the president and Rice for more troops, without success.

The top American generals in Iraq “were unwilling to fight with Rumsfeld. They knew he was determined to ratchet down the numbers” (230-231). Leffler ends his story in August 2003: the August 16 bombing of the Jordanian embassy, and the August 19 bombing of the UN

¹² 20 years later, Bremer described the situation as follows: “When I arrived, looters had been pillaging for three weeks. Iraqi police had deserted their posts. Looters destroyed many government buildings. The crucial Ministry of Finance had room for only half of its civil servants. The violence had caused economic damage equal to half Iraq’s pre-war GDP.” (Bremer 2023)

¹³ He quotes a US official: “In practice, it was abused, and it was used as a device to get rid of people, like school superintendents in mid-size cities” (Graff 2023). Bremer seems to agree: “My mistake was assigning the program’s implementation to Iraqi politicians who tried to broaden the decree’s effect. I should have set up an Iraqi judicial panel to oversee implementation” (Bremer 2023).

compound in Baghdad, which killed Sergio Vieira de Mello, the very able UN Special Representative for Iraq. Most UN personnel, and other international agencies and NGOs pulled out of Baghdad, making reconstruction more difficult.

4. **“Victory” at Too High a Price**

“Something was wrong,” Rice concluded, “when a decision of that magnitude” [CPA Order #2] could be made without input from many top advisers. Leffler adds: “something was wrong; the president knew it was wrong—but he did not intervene” (229). Why did the president, for so long, tolerate decisions by subordinates, especially Rumsfeld, that he must have known were undermining his objectives in Iraq?

Some partial answers can be found in Leffler’s text. Our author concludes that Bush “delegated too much authority and did not monitor implementation of the policies he approved” – a curious quality in a graduate of Harvard Business School who had been involved in several business ventures in his career. He should have known that successful delegation requires careful supervision from a book he claimed he was reading – Eliot Cohen’s *Supreme Command*¹⁴. Cohen argues that civilian leaders must constantly question and probe the strategies chosen by their military commanders, and demonstrates how Lincoln, Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben-Gurion closely supervised military officers to ensure that they used the right means to achieve the political goals set by civilian leaders.

Bush delegated this role to Rumsfeld, who succeeded in at most half the task assigned to him – the overthrow of tyrannical rulers (the Taliban and Saddam Hussein) but made very serious errors in the period after the regimes collapsed¹⁵. In Afghanistan Rumsfeld’s insistence on a light military footprint meant the loss of a golden opportunity to kill Osama bin Laden, when he was on the run after the fall of Kabul and cornered in a complex of caves in the mountainous region of Tora Bora, near the Afghan-Pakistan border. More American boots on the ground in Tora Bora might have led to the capture or death of bin Laden, who was finally killed by US forces 10 years later.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cohen 2002. NPR reported that the book was on Bush’s summer reading list in August 2002 (the author was interviewed on the program “All Things Considered” on August 27, 2002); for other reports on Bush supposedly reading this book in the summer of 2002, see Donnelly 2008 and Garrity 2013.

¹⁵ As Leffler observes, Rumsfeld “scrutinized the combat phase of the mission again and again, asking for iteration and iteration of the [military] attack plan [against Iraq], but showed scant interest in the stability operations following the end of hostilities. He insisted on ramping down troop numbers after combat” (236). Eliot Cohen made a similar point in a 2005 interview: “I could not imagine...that the civilian and military high command would treat...the post-combat period that has killed far more Americans than the “real” war—as of secondary importance to the planning of Gen. Tommy Franks’s blitzkrieg” (Garrity 2013).

¹⁶ For a thoughtful essay on this lost opportunity, see Peggy Noonan’s article in *The Wall Street Journal* (Noonan 2021). As Noonan notes, “American commandos were on the scene [in Tora Bora], fewer than 100, but everyone knew more troops were coming. Bin Laden expected to die. He wrote his last will and testament on Dec. 14 [2001]. But calls for reinforcement to launch an assault were rejected, as were calls to block the mountain paths into Pakistan, which bin Laden could use as escape routes...The most wanted man in the world, the reason those poor souls jumped from the high floors of the twin towers, the man whose capture was an integral part of the *point and mission* of the war was allowed to . . . disappear. The American presence descended into a muddle of shifting strategies, unclear purpose, and annual reviews.”

Leffler continues: Bush “did not order people to do things or criticize them for their failures. He did not insist on rigorous process...He was indifferent to the nasty bickering among his subordinates, acrimony that went well beyond personality conflicts and adversely affected his policies” (244). This still does not explain why he tolerated Rumsfeld for so long, while he was willing to let Powell resign at the end of his first term; Rumsfeld was fired only in late 2006, after calls for his removal became a daily occurrence during the 2006 midterm election campaigns.

The Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal in 2004, caused by the shortage of soldiers and lack of security in Baghdad, led to many calls for Rumsfeld’s resignation. Rumsfeld himself twice offered his resignation at the time of the scandal, but the president refused to let him quit (Burns 2005). As Bush’s first term ended, fresh efforts were made to remove the defense secretary by prominent supporters of the war, like neoconservative intellectual William Kristol and Senator John McCain, who said he had “no confidence” in Rumsfeld (Kristol 2004), (Purdum 2004).

Privately, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card urged Bush to remove Rumsfeld in late 2004 and around Thanksgiving 2005 (the second time with the support of first lady Laura Bush), and April 2006 saw the “general’s revolt,” as several retired generals, including some “who were involved in the invasion and occupation of Iraq under the defense secretary’s leadership, called for his removal” (Hamilton 2006; Cloud and Schmitt 2006; Kaplan 2006). As far as I know, Bush’s stubborn and disastrous attachment to Rumsfeld has not been adequately explained in the literature on the Iraq War. An Iraqi government strong enough to defend the country was created only after the surge of American troops into Iraq in 2007, and this government was able (after many mistakes and three years of fighting [2014-2017]) to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

I do not mean to suggest that all would have been well had Bush removed Rumsfeld and ensured there were adequate troops on the ground to maintain full control of Baghdad. There is no way to answer such “what if” questions about a complex multi-faceted war.¹⁷ All we can do is add up the successes and failures of the war and look at its long-term impact (this is the subject of Leffler’s final chapter). We can consider the long-term impact of the war on Iraq, on America, and on the international politics.

Writing in *Commentary* in March 2023, Eli Lake focused primarily on how the war changed Iraq: “Iraq is better off today than it was 20 years ago. In [the years since] 2003.....several measures of quality of life, from literacy rates to life expectancy, have gone up...Despite two Sunni Jihadist insurgencies, ...Iraq has held six consecutive parliamentary elections since 2005. Its representatives have drafted and its people have ratified a constitution. And while Iraq’s political system is blemished by corruption and sectarian demagoguery, the country’s elections are competitive...[because] the outcome is not known in advance...are Iraqis freer in 2023 than they were under Saddam Hussein’s tyranny? Without question,

¹⁷ I will therefore avoid the sort of sweeping judgment made by Garrett M Graff at the end of his essay: America’s problems in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime were part of a “larger problem: the nearly impossible challenge that the United States had taken on in choosing to invade Iraq. The collapse of Saddam’s regime demanded some sort of replacement, and the process of devising a replacement would inevitably involve endless hard choices, unexpected obstacles, and unintended consequences—no matter how much planning Washington did. Although the slapdash planning and undersized U.S. military footprint certainly left no margin for error, wiser decisions might not have been enough. ... a chaotic policymaking process .. led to a war that was both needless and poorly planned. In truth, the Iraq war was doomed before the first American soldier crossed the border.” Graff, “Orders of Disorder” (2023).

they are. In 2023, Iraq still has much work to do. And yet its current condition represents a historic achievement that has not been recognized” (Lake 2023).

Leffler’s statements on how the war changed America are just as emphatic as Eli Lake’s observations on how the war changed Iraq: “the war in Iraq demoralized the American people, intensified their partisan divisions, and shattered trust in their government” (xvii). Both Lake and Leffler are correct: almost a decade of teaching at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, has made it clear to me that my Iraqi students enjoy freedoms that were unavailable to previous generations who lived under Saddam, such as the freedom to criticize and demonstrate against their corrupt but democratic government, while Leffler correctly argues that even though Bush removed a monstrous dictator from power and succeeded “at preventing another major attack on American soil,” he “did *not* achieve his goals at acceptable cost” (249; emphasis added).

As America’s troubles in Iraq grew, Bush’s “critics flourished, often mocking his naivete, stressing his dishonesty, minimizing his leadership skills, and ridiculing his new zealotry in behalf of a free Iraq and a democratic peace.” All these attacks had a profound long-term effect: a majority of Americans came to believe “that Bush and his advisers had lied about their motives and then had acted incompetently, [so] Americans grew more disillusioned with their leaders and their institutions” (248, 250). This disillusionment ultimately gave rise to the populism of the right and the left (Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders) that has played such a significant role in recent American politics.

Most striking to this writer has been the declining belief in American exceptionalism, especially in younger Americans. A core element of Bush’s character, one that played an important role in his foreign policy, was “a sense of [America’s] exceptional goodness and greatness.” This core belief had advantages and drawbacks, since it gave Bush the confidence to eloquently articulate American values, and a determination to defend them, but it also meant he “never quite grasped that the anti-Americanism coursing through the Islamic world was not a result of Arabs hating American values but a consequence of their resentment of American deeds” (251). Just how far many Americans have moved away from such a confident belief in American exceptionalism can be seen in the response of the next Republican president, Donald Trump, when he was asked in an interview why he refused to condemn Vladimir Putin: “you think our country’s so innocent?” (Tatum 2017).

The ineptitude of the American occupation of Iraq, combined with the doubts about capitalism raised by the financial crisis of 2007-8, had a significant negative effect on the global prestige of American liberal democracy. “Rather than enhancing the spread of liberty, the president and his advisers left office witnessing the worldwide recession of freedom” (250). Most Americans, including most writers on this topic, have yet to come to terms with the true causes and consequences of the American invasion of Iraq. Leffler convincingly brings to life the complex considerations of domestic and international politics that went into the decision to confront Saddam Hussein, the feverish atmosphere in which decisions were being made, and the tangle of personality conflicts that hampered planning for a postwar Iraq. His book will be of great help to those who wish to arrive at a reasoned and sober understanding of the most seminal event in international politics in the first two decades of the 21st century.

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