



Introduction

The generally accepted historical account of the 2003 Iraq war is very clear – this was a war of choice, not one of necessity.¹ The decision to attack Saddam Hussein’s regime on March 19, 2003 was a product of the political biases, misguided priorities, intentional deceptions and grand strategies of President George W. Bush and prominent ‘neoconservatives,’ ‘unilateralists’ and ‘Vulcans’ on his national security team.² A few powerful ideologues exploited public fears (and international goodwill) in the aftermath of 9/11 to amplify Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threat as a primary justification for an unnecessary, preventive invasion.³ Disarming and democratizing Saddam’s brutal regime were viewed as moral imperatives and considered essential to the long-term security interests of the United States. These imperatives, in turn, explain why the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq was updated to exaggerate the scope of Baghdad’s WMD–terrorism nexus. To fully appreciate the causal path leading to the onset of military hostilities in 2003, therefore, we need to understand George W. Bush the person, the powerful and determined neocons and unilateralists who advised him, and the package of prejudices, emotions, beliefs and values shared by those responsible for crafting the Bush Doctrine. In essence, neoconservatives, backed by other senior members of the Bush administration, abused their control of the White House to push the country into a war of choice that would otherwise never have happened – never!

The ‘Bush-neocon-war’ thesis, which I will label *neoonism*,⁴ has emerged as the dominant narrative used to explain the US attack, essentially confirming Robert Kagan’s (2008a) prediction that it would become the generally approved

¹ Haass 2009.

² For a discussion of the role played by ‘Vulcans’ and ‘neoconservatives’ on Bush’s decision to invade, see Mann 2004. See also Halper and Clarke 2005.

³ For an excellent treatment of the distinction between pre-emptive and preventive war in the context of democratic states, see Levy 2008a.

⁴ There are risks when using the term *neoonism* to describe the ‘theory’ I critique in this book. Readers are therefore cautioned not to equate neoconservatism with ‘neoonism.’ The latter constitutes an explanation for the war that claims a Bush administration, guided by neocon advisers, constituted a necessary condition for invasion. This should not be confused with ‘neoconservatives’ or ‘neocons’ – the people neoconsists blame for these mistakes.

story in history books.⁵ It represents the prevailing consensus, theory or hypothesis running through dozens of the most popular books on the Bush administration, and hundreds of frequently cited (and widely circulated) scholarly articles, media reports and blog entries on the Iraq war.⁶ There is of course some variation in the literature regarding the administration's underlying motivations, but the different 'goals' authors identify as central to the invasion (e.g., control over oil, democratization of the Middle East, eliminating Iraq's WMD threat and links to terrorism, fulfilling global obligations associated with American exceptionalism, feeding the security industrial complex, satiating the demands of the Israeli lobby, etc.) are typically filtered through a first-image (leadership) framework that assigns most causal weight to the prominent role of neoconservatives (and their allies in the administration) who crafted, implemented and directed US foreign policy toward invasion.

For the remainder of this study, therefore, neoconism refers to all first-image (leadership) explanations of the war that highlight any (or all) of the following ideologies as the main cause of the war – neoconservatism, unilateralism, hegemonic realism, democratic realism, democratic imperialism, democratic globalism, Wilsonian or Hamiltonian revivalism, or economic nationalism.⁷ The common theme running through neoconist literature is the strong belief that something distinct about the Bush administration constituted a *necessary* condition for war. The specific descriptor one uses to define these policies, ideologies or principles is not particularly relevant to this exercise. Indeed, there are still ongoing debates over how to delineate the Bush Doctrine in relation to the expanding mosaic of ideological persuasions listed above. But these arguments are all firmly grounded in the same working assumption that some distinct (first-image) feature of the Bush administration accounted for the invasion.

Neoconism is defined further to include any other first-image theory of the war that blames Bush himself for being influenced by these powerful ideologues (e.g., because of the president's weak character, lack of intelligence or gullibility), or any related explanation that relies on Bush's idiosyncratic beliefs, religious values or decision-making style. Also included in neoconism are any accounts of the war that assign causal weight to Bush's psychological predispositions or pathologies – for example, his desire for revenge after Saddam Hussein's attempted

⁵ Kagan 2008a.

⁶ Prominent examples include Belsham Moki 2006; Bonn 2010; Buckley and Singh 2006; Burbach and Tarbell 2004; David 2010; Dodds 2008; Draper 2007; Duncan 2006, 2008; Eisendrath and Goodman 2004; Fukuyama 2006; Greenwald 2008; Heilbrunn 2008; Isikoff and Corn 2006; Kaplan 2008; Kaufmann 2004; Kellett Cramer 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2007; Mazarr 2007; Oliphant 2007; Prados 2004; Record 2010; Ricks 2007; Risen 2006; Schmidt and Williams 2008; Smith 2006; Sniegowski 2008; Tunç 2005; Unger 2007 and 2008; Weisberg 2008; Western 2005.

⁷ These ideological descriptors emerge from the neoconist literature included in endnote 6 above.

assassination of his father, or Bush's desire to prove his worth by finishing the job his father failed to complete in the 1991 Gulf war. The purpose of this book is to challenge the quality of each one of these first-image explanations, all of which encompass one or another dimension of the conventional wisdom – i.e., there was something specific to the Bush administration that, if absent, would have avoided war.

Notwithstanding its widespread appeal, however, neoconism remains an unsubstantiated assertion, a 'theory' without theoretical content, a position lacking perspective, and a seriously underdeveloped argument absent a clearly articulated logical foundation. Neoconism is, in essence, a popular historical account that overlooks a substantial collection of historical facts and relevant causal variables that, when combined, represent a serious challenge to the core premises of accepted wisdom. Yet, despite these serious deficiencies, the most popular first-image theory of the war has never been subjected to the kind of careful scrutiny it demands.⁸ The theory has never been tested against competing models, explanations or levels of analysis.

For example, among the more obvious deficiencies with neoconism is the refusal on the part of its proponents to engage a significant portion of the intellectual legacy bequeathed by hundreds of scholars, practitioners and theorists working in the fields of political science, international relations, political psychology, intelligence studies, rational choice theory, conflict and war analysis, and US foreign and domestic policy studies.⁹ In essence, the most popular explanation for the war has no significant grounding in the knowledge compiled over several decades on when, how and why powerful democracies such as the United States and Britain go to war. Almost every neoconist, for instance, assigns a remarkable measure of power and political influence to George W. Bush and a few key advisers. The only way to truly understand the onset of military hostilities in 2003, they argue, is to delve into George W. Bush's inner being, his idiosyncrasies, personality, and the unique perceptions, beliefs, values and weaknesses of key members of his team. "It should be no surprise," former

⁸ The global popularity of neoconism was demonstrated most clearly by the success of Oliver Stone's *W* and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The fact that Moore's award-winning film broke attendance and global video sales records arguably illustrates the international appeal of the 'Bush-neocon-war' thesis.

⁹ Oddly enough, neoconism has also been embraced by well respected international relations scholars who would otherwise downplay the role of idiosyncratic or domestic factors when explaining decisions to go to war. Perhaps the most notable example is Mearsheimer and Walt 2007. Apparently, despite their intellectual legacy extolling the explanatory relevance of structural factors (balance of power and state self-interests), these scholars are now prepared to discount system variables in favor of assigning significant causal weight to leadership and ideology – in this case, assigning significant influence to a few neocon leaders and a powerful domestic Israel lobby to explain the 2003 Iraq war. US self-interest, post-9/11 security threats associated with WMD proliferation and other realist, state-centric self-interests were irrelevant in this case.

Ambassador Michael Bell (2005) argues, “that the foreign policy of George W. Bush very much corresponds to the world as he sees it.” Bell goes on to offer one of the clearest expositions of the conventional wisdom:¹⁰

Bush’s is a view driven by unshakeable moral conviction that literally pits the forces of good against the forces of evil. Evangelical Christianity, with its emphasis on struggle, is the essence of his fibre, something he puts on the public record at virtually every available opportunity. He has privately confided that the Divinity had spoken to him respecting his moral obligation to liberate Iraq and he has said nearly as much publicly ... This values-laden Bush vision was reinforced by the neo-conservative Washington cabal which had been amassing over several years. These individuals, led by Paul Wolfowitz (Deputy Secretary of Defense under Bush) had been speaking of war with Iraq considerably before George W. Bush became President. They see it as a necessary step in reforming the international order based on moral principles, which closely resemble those of the Christian right. They see liberal relativism as corrupt and believe that universalist templates can be imposed, that for instance the model of Eastern European democratization can be successfully implanted in the Middle East, if there is commitment and assertive American leadership. They believe a Hobbesian world dictates hard-nosed policy to achieve these ends. They contrast hard power – American instruments of pressure, the chief of which is the military – with the soft power favoured by Europeans and Canadians and detested by them ... They champion “coalitions of the willing,” where the United States determines the course and others fall in, whether willing or coerced.

Like so many other neoconsists, Bell’s thesis fully embraces the view that leaders of large, powerful democracies have the capacity and authority to steer the ship of state in any direction they so choose, for any pathological, psychological, biological or, in this case, evangelical reason that compels them to do so. Now, consider the implications of this brilliantly conceived Machiavellian scheme – Bush’s national security team managed, in a relatively short period of time in office, to create the necessary illusions to deceive the US public, con the national media, hoodwink Congress and trick senior officials from many other governments into wasting billions of dollars (and risking tens of thousands of lives, not to mention their careers and reputations) to accommodate the neocon team’s irrational, religious and ideologically motivated package of prejudices.¹¹

But those who continue to defend these ‘leadership’ theories of the war have ignored their obligation to engage decades of excellent research in the fields of international relations and comparative foreign policy, which caution against exclusive reliance on simplistic explanatory models that privilege the

¹⁰ Bell 2005.

¹¹ Krauthammer sarcastically refers to “neocon sorcerers who magically foisted it upon what must have been a hypnotized President and vice president.” See Krauthammer 2005.

psychological predispositions of particular leaders. Neoconism minimizes or excludes many other potentially useful independent variables that might otherwise inform our understanding of what actually transpired – e.g., intelligence failures, bureaucratic politics, groupthink, public fear and opinions after 9/11, the role of the media and its general coverage of the Iraq crisis, domestic politics and congressional support for war, US–UK cooperation, US–NATO–EU alliance politics and divisions, failed inspections regimes, institutional failures (the UN), threat perceptions and misperceptions by Saddam Hussein, and so on.

Of course, neoconist authors often claim to be offering more than simple leadership explanations by including references to other causal mechanisms or levels of analysis, but these ‘theories’ are often mentioned not to provide a comprehensive account of decisions leading to the US–UK invasion, but, once again, to defend a weak first-image theory of the war. The explanatory variables they cite are simply re-interpreted by neoconists as *effects* rather than *causes* in order to retain the privileged position of their first-image explanation of events. Bush and his advisers, in other words, fabricated the ‘mistaken’ intelligence, created the illusion of a security threat to manipulate public opinion, strategically managed the media spin to guide perceptions of Iraq’s WMD, and carefully controlled the content and outcome of political debates in Congress, in European capitals and in the UN Security Council. Everything was controlled from above. In essence, neoconist theories about intelligence organizations, bureaucracies, domestic politics, interest groups, public opinion or Saddam’s misperceptions are not studied as *independent* (causal) variables to help explain the war – instead, they are viewed as *dependent* variables (outcomes) explained with references to the overpowering influence of neoconservatives, unilateralists and evangelical realists bent on shaping and controlling US foreign policy toward the goal of invading Iraq. People, organizations, bureaucracies, public opinion and allies (Tony Blair) were all manipulated by these ideologues to facilitate their Grand Strategy.¹²

¹² Consider the ‘interest group’ thesis put forward by Halper and Clarke – they argue neoconservatives were essentially a powerful interest group that succeeded in pushing the country to war. But viewing neoconservatives as the most powerful interest group misinterprets the context within which many of the key domestic political debates played out from 2001 to 2003, and misses so much of what is intriguing about which interest groups actually determined the US–UK strategies that guided behavior and actions. As will be demonstrated in Chapters 2 and 3, neoconservatives in the administration actually lost many of these debates. Moreover, Halper and Clarke’s take on the neoconservative interest group excludes from consideration so many other important groups whose competing interests were directly relevant to how events unfolded – e.g., British interests and related domestic political debates; French versus European interests; Russian interests; Saddam’s interests. In fact, a more robust, historically informed application of interest group theory would not lead to the conclusion that neoconservatives, unilateralists or hegemonic realists prevailed as the dominant groups in this case.

Unfortunately, there has been no serious effort in the literature to explore the central question of whether George W. Bush and his neocon, unilateralist advisers actually deserve the credit assigned to them, or possessed anything approaching the magnitude of political power, influence or intelligence required to successfully transform American, British, EU, NATO and UN Security Council priorities and foreign policies. These important questions are never asked or answered. And the same fundamental error is repeated in many of the most popular neoconist texts that continue to generate very high Amazon.com sales rankings – a few examples are reviewed here to illustrate the point.

Jacob Weisberg (2008: 185) has argued, for example, that “George W. Bush did not arrive in the White House determined to invade Iraq.” But Weisberg’s explanation for the war inevitably returns to the same simplistic neoconist account:

Bush’s struggle to vindicate his family and outdo his father predisposed him toward completing a job his dad left unfinished ... *[I]t was his broader attempt to develop a foreign policy different from his father’s that led him into his biggest mistake.* (Emphasis added)¹³

In his quest for ‘answers,’ Weisberg claims to have uncovered George W. Bush’s deep psycho-pathological pedigree by rummaging through the psyches of the entire Bush family, like an archaeological dig, to reveal the biological origins of the compulsions that took the world’s most powerful democracy to war. Conspicuously absent from Weisberg’s analysis is any effort to engage the larger social, political or international context surrounding the specific strategies the United States and UK adopted throughout 2002–2003. Also missing in Weisberg’s first-image neoconist account of the war is any reference to the policy-making process, or to the role played by so many other important participants who, presumably, were compelled to adopt positions because of their own distinct psycho-pathological pedigrees. Wouldn’t we now need to carefully explore the family backgrounds of Colin Powell or Tony Blair to explain their preferences, decisions and actions? Wouldn’t we have to perform the same sort of psycho-archaeological dig to understand the preferences expressed in speeches and editorials delivered at the time by Hillary Clinton, John Kerry or Al Gore? Each of these individuals strongly endorsed the policy recommendations on Iraq that were ultimately adopted by George W. Bush, Colin Powell and Tony Blair – i.e., authorization from Congress, deployment of troops and a new UN resolution (UNSCR 1441) to return inspectors with a robust inspections regime backed by a coercive military threat. These policy choices received widespread bipartisan support for very logical reasons that had very little (if anything) to do with Bush’s psychology (a point to be explained in more detail in subsequent chapters).

¹³ Weisberg 2008.

Also missing in Weisberg's account are many other important historical facts that turn his neoconist thesis on its head – George W. Bush's "biggest mistake," to use Weisberg's words, was based in large part on Bush's decision to *listen to* (and accept) the recommendations from his father and his father's former foreign and security policy advisers, James Baker and Brent Scowcroft (this is discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3). In fact, most participants at the time uniformly *rejected* the alternative policies being pushed by Vice President Cheney and neoconservatives inside and out of the administration (e.g., Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Kagan, William Kristol), who supported unilateral pre-emption and strongly favored bypassing Congress and the UN to avoid another round of endless inspections. Going back to the UN, they argued, was not in the best interests of the country. But they lost that battle when Bush, Powell, Blair and many other senior Republicans and Democrats in Congress rejected the neocons' and unilateralists' advice. In direct contrast to Weisberg's analysis, therefore, the strategy adopted by Bush to get inspectors back into Iraq (and every other decision associated with this widely supported foreign policy goal) had everything to do with a strong desire by Bush – shared by Powell, Blair, Gore and almost everyone – to re-invigorate a failing containment policy by reinforcing multilateral, UN inspections that demanded full and complete compliance.

Weisberg's version of history is essentially wrong – the crisis had nothing to do with an angry, vengeful president who, despite being afflicted by these dangerously misguided psycho-pathologies, managed to successfully convince dozens of presumably very bright, rational people (and allies) into coming along for the ride, all so he could 'outdo' his father. Leaving aside the factual errors throughout Weisberg's account, the author goes on to describe Bush's psychological profile as if these idiosyncrasies reveal all we need to know to understand why the invasion took place:

Succeeding at foreign policy was the last most important way for George W. to prove himself in relation to his father. His struggle to come up with an *original doctrine* of his own frames not just his original mistake of launching an invasion of Iraq, but the more extensive international failure of his presidency ... Act one of the Bush Tragedy is the son's struggle to be like his dad until the age of forty. Act two is his growing success over the next fifteen years as he learned to be different. The botched search for a doctrine to clarify world affairs and the President's progressive descent into messianism constitute the conclusive act. (2008: 185, emphasis added)

There you have it – no need to engage decades of research by scholars in the subfields of international relations. The answer is pretty simple: George wanted to "prove himself" to his daddy by crafting an original, revolutionary approach to US foreign policy. Had Weisberg taken the time to study the contents of Bush's 2002 US National Security Strategy (USNSS) he would have noticed the

striking resemblance to Clinton's 1999 USNSS and those of so many other presidents, replete with similar references to unilateralism, preventive diplomacy, American exceptionalism, the imperative to spread democratic institutions, the need to deal with rogue states (including Iraq) and the nexus between WMD proliferation and terrorism. These were staples of US foreign policy under Bush senior, Clinton and, now, remain central to Obama's foreign policy agenda (see Chapter 10). They will be staples of US foreign policy long after Obama leaves office. As will become clear in the Appendices of speeches and statements by senior Democrats included in Chapters 2 and 3, these principles were widely endorsed by almost everyone, including the other candidate for president in 2000, Al Gore.

As is common with most neoconist interpretations, Weisberg's account is derived from simplistic assumptions that leaders and their advisers design, construct and implement major foreign policy initiatives mirrored after their own images, personalities, beliefs and values – the country (and its allies) is somehow compelled by decree to follow these preferences regardless of the interests of the state. Societal pressures, political divisions, organizational and bureaucratic constraints, and international relations are consistently absent from these simplistic narratives of the war.

Lind's (2003) position, chastising neocons for taking advantage of "Bush's ignorance and inexperience," is another common variation on the neoconist theme, one that simultaneously slams Bush for being ignorant while assigning blame for the war on the cunning and brilliance of neocons who exploited the inexperienced president (and others) to satisfy their own agenda.¹⁴ Unlike Weisberg's thesis, this version of the story discounts Bush's role (and presumably his personal goals and ambitions) and looks for answers from those surrounding the president. According to Lind, neocons "feared that the second Bush would be like the first ... and that his administration, again like his father's, would be dominated by moderate Republican realists such as Colin Powell, James Baker and Brent Scowcroft." But Lind, like Weisberg, overlooks the fact that neocons lost many of the key battles in the period leading to war. The evidence clearly shows that Democrats and non-neocon Republicans (Baker and Scowcroft) and left-of-center allies (Tony Blair) had a much greater impact on the plans and strategies Bush adopted from 2002 to 2003 – neocons failed at many key junctures to persuade Bush to adopt their preferred strategy of unilateral pre-emption without congressional or UN endorsement.

Another popular illustration of neoconism is Mann's (2004) *Rise of the Vulcans*¹⁵ – a biographical sketch of the people advising Bush that claims to provide crucial insights into the personalities that shaped Iraq policy. Mann's intention is to present these biographical profiles as a way of explaining the war. But

¹⁴ Lind 2003. ¹⁵ Mann 2004.

another collection of personality sketches, while interesting, is never sufficient to provide a compelling, complete, theoretically informed account of the factors that led to war – it simply describes the individuals who were present at the time. The causal link between these personalities and the decision to invade is never fully explained.

Like Mann's work, the stated purpose of Isikoff and Corn's book (2006: vx)¹⁶

is to examine the beliefs and the worldview of the Vulcans, Bush's foreign policy team, by tracing the histories of six of its leading members: Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Armitage, Wolfowitz, and Rice. The aim is to try to understand *how and why* America came to deal with the rest of the world in the ways that it did during the George W. Bush administration. Where did the ideas of the Vulcans come from? Why did these six Vulcans, in particular, rise to the top of the Republican foreign policy apparatus? What was it in their background and experiences that *caused* them to make the choices they made after taking office in 2001 and after the terrorist attacks of September 11? (Emphasis added)

Bush is said to have played “only a supporting role” (2006: xix). The problem with these historical accounts is that the specific preferences defended by these Vulcans were *not* at all identical – there was no clear consensus in the administration on how to approach the Iraq impasse, or whether a renewed UN inspections regime was the right strategy. Again, as will become very clear in Chapters 2–8, both Colin Powell and Tony Blair (supported by CIA Director George Tenet) rejected key parts of the intelligence being pushed by Cheney, Rumsfeld and other central players within the Pentagon, especially distorted intelligence surrounding linkages between Saddam and Al-Qaeda (or 9/11), and aluminum tubes of uranium yellowcakes. They also successfully persuaded Bush to reject the alternative approach to Iraq recommended by Cheney and Wolfowitz – unilateral pre-emption.

What all of these neoconist texts consistently fail to reveal are the details of the case history, including the content, nature and relevance of important debates within the administration – and among senior officials from allied governments, who won and lost important political battles throughout this period. Also missing from neoconist accounts are the details of how these victories and defeats shaped the approach Bush ultimately adopted at crucial points in the crisis, and how the series of key decisions created the path-dependent momentum that led to war.

As Jonah Goldberg (2006) explains, there is a prevailing collective ignorance about history that often prevents us from finding the truth about past events: “as a culture, we have a tendency to look for our car keys where the light is good. Our usable past is the past that is illuminated to us.”¹⁷ Most treatments

¹⁶ Isikoff and Corn 2006. ¹⁷ Goldberg 2006.

of the Iraq war remain committed to collecting facts that are illuminated by simplistic theories analysts would like to validate, instead of trying to validate theories that are actually supported by an abundance of relevant facts. The focus therefore is typically (and exclusively) on Bush and the neocon leadership, which neoconsists firmly believe deserve all of the blame for the catastrophic errors that led to this war. But almost no light is ever shed on the prominent role other non-neocons played in the decisions – senior Democrats in Congress, key allies such as Prime Ministers Tony Blair and John Howard (Australia), or the previous actions against Iraq throughout the eight years of the Clinton–Gore administration. Even less light is shed on the speeches delivered by senior Democrats passionately defending the authorization to use force based on what they considered to be factual evidence compiled from a decade of inspections. And virtually no light is shed on other psychological, domestic, political, organizational or international factors that constitute the complete history surrounding the decisions leading to the final choice to invade rather than extend inspections one more time. This project is designed to illuminate that history.

The following chapters will show, through a detailed assessment of all key decisions leading to the war, why the conventional story misses so much of what makes this case such a tragedy, a far greater tragedy than the one depicted by popular neoconist myths. Indeed, the facts are far more disturbing, because almost everyone involved in this crisis – from the left and right (Democrat and Republican), across three administrations, both inside and outside of American and British governments, within the United Nations and throughout key European capitals – helped set the stage for the final set of errors, decisions and actions that created the path-dependent and irreversible momentum to war. Neoconism misses the most relevant parts of the case history.

Logical implications of neoconism

The central tenet of neoconism is very clear and consistent – a Bush administration dominated by powerful neoconservatives was a *necessary* condition for the Iraq war. Advocates are not claiming a Bush victory was sufficient for the onset of hostilities three years later, but the conventional view is quite explicit about the crucial role played by neoconservatives pushing for the war; this is the foundational principle underpinning the prevailing consensus. If we extract the neocons from this popular story there would be nothing of substance left to distinguish the explanation from dozens of others.

Every necessary condition theory is logically connected to its sufficient condition counterpart – if X (neoconservatism) was a *necessary* condition for outcome Y (a US invasion of Iraq), then the absence of X would have been a *sufficient* condition for the absence of Y, by definition. As Goertz and Levy (2007) observe, “to assert a necessary condition is simultaneously to assert a (sufficient