

Introduction

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the worst US foreign policy blunder since the Vietnam War. Between 2003 and the departure of US combat forces in 2011, a total of 4,410 American military personnel died in Iraq and 31,957 were wounded, according to the Department of Defense.¹ In the aftermath, Iraq descended into a civil war that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians.² Although the “surge” of US troops in Iraq from 2007 to 2008 helped tamp down this violence, the Iraqi state continued to be dominated by corrupt Shia parties that rigged elections, hoarded resources, and abused the Sunni minority.

The persistence of these political tensions and the civil war in Syria set the stage for the rise of the Islamic State, which seized several major cities in Iraq in 2014 and perpetrated horrible atrocities. The United States and its allies were forced to reengage in fighting in Iraq and Syria and to counter a global resurgence of Islamic State-inspired terrorism.³ The US Army’s official history of the Iraq War, published in 2019, concluded that “an emboldened and expansionist Iran appears to be the only victor” of the war in Iraq, as the war destroyed one of Iran’s main geopolitical rivals and installed in its place a weak, corrupt, and

¹ US Department of Defense, “Operation Iraqi Freedom U.S. Casualty Status,” February 5, 2019, [dod.defense.gov](https://dod.defense.gov/News/Casualty-Status/), accessed February 5, 2019, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Casualty-Status/>.

² “Iraqi Deaths from Violence 2003–2011,” January 2, 2012, iraqbodycount.org, accessed February 5, 2019, www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2011/; Amy Hagopian et al., “Mortality in Iraq Associated with the 2003–2011 War and Occupation,” *PLoS Medicine* 10, no. 10 (2013), <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1001533#abstract1>.

³ On the rise of the Islamic State and its global reach and appeal, see Daniel Byman, “ISIS Goes Global,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 2 (March/April, 2016): 76–85; Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Doubleday, 2015); Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (New York: Random House, 2017); Martin Smith, “Confronting ISIS,” October 11, 2016, [pbs.frontline.org](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/confronting-isis/), accessed November 5, 2016, www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/confronting-isis/.

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compliant regime.⁴ Meanwhile, in US domestic politics, the failure to find significant weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs and the poorly handled occupation undermined public faith in basic governmental competence. The cost, length, and brutality of the war, moreover, created what one political scientist called an “Iraq Syndrome”: a weakening of Americans’ willingness to assume global leadership that has empowered anti-interventionist wings of both major parties.⁵

With this dismal outcome in mind, it becomes essential to understand how alternatives to war were discredited. The primary alternative to regime change was the policy of containment, which the United States imposed on Iraq following the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Under this policy, the United States and an international coalition applied economic sanctions, weapons inspections, no-fly zones, and occasional military strikes on Iraq. Containment sought to keep Iraq militarily weak, prevent it from threatening its neighbors and vulnerable internal minorities, destroy its WMD, and, if possible, create the conditions for Saddam Hussein’s downfall. Many commentators who predicted these outcomes have declared that the United States should have stuck with containment, which they claim managed the Iraqi threat at reasonable cost. Nonetheless, most of these scholars have not asked tough questions about why an ostensibly effective policy became so unpopular in US politics by the late 1990s.⁶

Over the course of the 1990s, a consensus formed in US political and intellectual circles that the United States and its allies could not contain the Iraqi threat and had to remove the Baathist regime and establish democracy in Iraq. Critics of containment believed this policy was unsustainable because Saddam’s personality and the totalitarian nature of his regime made Iraq immune to “management” strategies like containment. Saddam would never cease his pursuit of WMD and regional domination, and as the pillars of containment inevitably weakened, he would break out of this “box,” rebuild his WMD, and again threaten regional stability. Before 9/11, few supporters of this consensus called for invasion, but they did see containment as a failure and regime change as the only realistic solution.

⁴ Joel Rayburn and Frank Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007–2011* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2017), 639–640.

⁵ John Mueller, “The Iraq Syndrome,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November, 2005): 44–54.

⁶ See David Cortright and George A. Lopez, “Containing Iraq: Sanctions Worked,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 4 (July, 2004): 90–103; James Bamford, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America’s Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 382; Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 269; Richard Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 269.

The concept of Iraq as a totalitarian state played a crucial role in the arguments against containment. Containment's critics claimed that Saddam's absolute control over Iraq meant that there were few social or political points of leverage that containment could exploit to compel his moderation or removal. They even viewed a coup against Saddam as an inadequate solution. Real regime change, especially for neoconservative and liberal advocates, required uprooting the entire Baathist system and ideology. Only democratization could ensure that Iraq would no longer seek WMD, threaten its neighbors, or mistreat its people. By the late 1990s, most regime change advocates had come to believe that containment had deteriorated and that the United States should not waste time and resources trying to restore a strategy that was bound to fail.

I call the interpretation of the Iraqi threat outlined in the preceding paragraphs the "regime change consensus." This book documents how a political and intellectual coalition formed after the Gulf War around this set of ideas. This coalition had neoconservatives at the helm, but it also drew significant support from Republicans and Democrats, liberal intellectuals, and left-wing and religious anti-sanctions activists. At times of intense focus on Iraq, these actors functioned as a united political coalition against containment, while at other times they formed a general base of common thinking about the Iraqi problem. This broad coalition made the regime change consensus the dominant viewpoint on Iraq in US politics by the end of the 1990s. Their signal achievement was the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, which declared regime change in Iraq as an official US foreign policy goal. President Bill Clinton pursued containment to the end of his term, but the decisive shift toward the regime change consensus had occurred before he left office in 2001, leaving containment with few public defenders.

The Regime Change Consensus focuses not just on official policy-makers but also on a broader political and foreign policy establishment that, in political scientist Stephen Walt's words, "actively engage[s] on a regular basis with issues of international affairs."⁷ These actors include legislators, intellectuals, academics, activists, experts, members of the media, and other public figures. They tried to create consensus on Iraq by writing books, reports, and articles, testifying before Congress, appearing in the

⁷ Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 95. See also Christopher Layne, "The U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment and Grand Strategy: How American Elites Obstruct Strategic Adjustment," *International Politics* 54, no. 3 (May, 2017): 260–275; Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring, 2018): 9–46.

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media; and creating lobbying networks; among other methods. Elite members of this establishment also act as gatekeepers by shaping what people and ideas will find broad audiences, who will be legitimized as mainstream or expert, and who will be marginalized.⁸ While there were dissenters, these foreign policy and political elites discredited containment and established the regime change consensus as the dominant interpretation of the Iraqi threat.

Containment and the Causes of the Iraq War

The existing body of research on the causes of US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 focuses on two major explanatory pillars: neoconservatives and the September 11 terrorist attacks. While these factors were crucial, this framework does not explain how a wide swathe of Americans, including many legislators, media figures, intellectuals, and much of the public, came to support the war. Had President George W. Bush's push for war met a political brick wall from this broader establishment on the grounds that his administration had generated little new evidence of Saddam's WMD or that containment was an adequate policy, it is conceivable that Bush would have backed down. The political establishment's support for the war was neither immediate nor unqualified, but it was crucial for paving the road to war.

Bush and the neoconservatives may have put Iraq on the table after 9/11, but why did so many Americans seem primed to buy his argument for war? Why, moreover, did so few Americans argue that the United States should use the urgency and international sympathy of the post-9/11 moment to reinvigorate containment rather than invade Iraq? Why did so few members of this establishment, including many with deep reservations about the war, not promote containment as a viable alternative?

Answering those questions requires us to map the spectrum of debate about Iraq in this time period, particularly the discrediting of containment and the rise of the regime change consensus within the broader establishment. As Bush and other Iraq hawks pressed for invasion in 2002, a number of skeptics raised doubts about the push for war. These included Secretary of State Colin Powell, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Congressional leaders like Senators Chuck Hagel and Joe Biden, and influential former policy-makers like James Baker and Sandy Berger. Following what I call the "Powell–Blair approach," they contended that the evidence of Iraq's WMD and links to al-Qaeda were weak, that the

⁸ Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*, 91–93.

administration had not prepared adequately for occupying Iraq, and that Bush should build a coalition before going to war.

However, the fact that members of this Powell–Blair approach had abandoned containment to varying degrees prior to 9/11 illuminates why they focused on shaping how the United States pursued regime change as opposed to whether it should do so. The arguments of Powell, Blair, and others were largely tactical; they convinced Bush to give inspections and diplomacy more time and to build a coalition. However, they conceded the point that the United States should pursue regime change if these measures failed because they too saw no end point for Iraq other than Saddam’s overthrow. Because the dominant perceived lesson of the 1990s within the US political and policy establishment was that Saddam would never accept complete inspections nor abandon the pursuit of WMD, members of the Powell–Blair approach held little faith in inspections when they were renewed in late 2002. Thus, when Bush prematurely declared that diplomacy and inspections had failed in early 2003, the majority of the political establishment either supported the war or offered no alternative. This book shows how the terms of debate on Iraq since 1990 developed in such a narrow way that it gave Bush a fundamental advantage in building a wide base of domestic support for invasion, especially after it made a cursory effort to address the problem peacefully.

Understanding the actions and perspectives of this group of leaders requires a stronger grasp of why containment became so broadly disfavored in the 1990s. If figures like Blair, Powell, or key Democratic leaders had rallied around a new containment strategy, they could have, for example, blocked Bush’s efforts to attain Congressional approval for military action against Iraq. Indeed, there were influential policy-makers, intellectuals, and politicians who still believed that a reinvigorated containment strategy could prevent Saddam from building WMD, keep his military weak, and stymie his regional ambitions. Figures such as former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, national security expert Richard Haass, and political scientist John Mearsheimer consistently held that Saddam did not directly threaten the United States, that containment had kept Iraq weak, and that with some adjustment containment could manage his threat to US interests in the region.⁹

This book’s explanation for the discrediting of containment from 1990 to 2003 improves upon the other main explanations for the Iraq War,

⁹ Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2002, A12; Haass, *War of Necessity*; John Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy* 134 (January–February, 2003): 52–53.

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neoconservatives and 9/11, and offers a more complete grasp of the roots of the US decision to invade by showing how alternatives to regime change were discredited across the political spectrum. Numerous scholars have traced how neoconservatives and other Iraq hawks fixated on overthrowing the Baathist regime after the Gulf War. By the 1990s, neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz and the writers William Kristol and Robert Kagan had come to define themselves as “conservative internationalists, with a strong commitment to vigorous American global leadership, to American power, and to the advancement of American democratic and free-market principles.”¹⁰ Policy scholars Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay usefully define neoconservatives as “democratic imperialists.”¹¹ They believed that the United States has a unique right and responsibility to use its overwhelming military power to create a “benevolent global hegemony,” in Kristol and Kagan’s terms.¹² This meant that the United States would maintain strategic primacy in key areas of the world and use that power to spread democracy and capitalism.¹³ Neoconservatives exercised tremendous influence on the Republican foreign policy establishment and the broader foreign affairs discourse in magazines such as *Commentary* and *The Weekly Standard*, think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, and political action networks such as the Project for a New American Century.

Nonetheless, not all Iraq hawks were neoconservatives. Daalder and Lindsey distinguish between neoconservatives and “assertive nationalists” like Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney. Assertive nationalists share the neoconservative belief that the United States should use its military supremacy to eradicate threats and maintain its status as the world’s undisputed superpower. Both groups are unilateralist in their skepticism of international laws and institutions that might restrain US power.¹⁴ Assertive nationalists, however, prefer to

¹⁰ Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “Introduction: National Interest and Global Responsibility,” in *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*, ed. Robert Kagan and William Kristol (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), viii.

¹¹ Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), 46–47.

¹² Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 75 (July/August, 1997): 20.

¹³ Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 15, 45–48; Gary Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 26, 126–128; Jacob Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 161–227.

¹⁴ Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 15; Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neoconservatives and the Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11.

pursue more narrowly defined national interests and are skeptical of democratization, human rights, and nation-building. Bush himself haphazardly blended neoconservatism and assertive nationalism. He entered office committed to a more unilateralist foreign policy but later embraced both democratization abroad and the preventive use of force.¹⁵

During the 1990s, neoconservatives and assertive nationalists combined with other groups to lead the campaign against containment. Many of these committed Iraq hawks then assumed key positions inside the George W. Bush administration, including Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and numerous others in the Defense Department and on the vice president's staff.¹⁶ Although they had different motives, this group intervened with Bush immediately and persistently after 9/11 to promote the idea that Iraq should be the focus of the US response. They based this argument on the idea that rogue states like Iraq might hand WMD to terrorists to use against the United States.¹⁷ This “nexus” between WMD, rogue states, and terrorists negated containment and deterrence and necessitated a “preventive” response. Bush became convinced of this argument at some point in late 2001 or early 2002.¹⁸ His administration then took this argument public in 2002, using selective and exaggerated

¹⁵ Michael Mazarr explores the contradictions between Bush's hope for democratization and his disdain for nation-building. See Michael Mazarr, *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America's Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), 191–193, 222, 245–246. For more on how Bush's foreign policy views fit aspects of neoconservatism and assertive nationalism, see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), xii–xiii, 255–257; Daalder and Lindsay, *America Unbound*, 36–40, 123; Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 134–135; Frederick Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), 115–117, 137–142.

¹⁶ Gary Dorrien identifies twenty neoconservatives who served in top positions in Rumsfeld's Defense Department or Cheney's staff, including Wolfowitz, Elliott Abrams, Kenneth Adelman, John Bolton, Douglas Feith, Zalmay Khalilzad, Scooter Libby, William Luti, Peter Rodman, Paula Dobriansky, Stephen Cambone, and David Wurmser. Of the twenty-four signatories of PNAC's original statement of principles, eight served in high-ranking positions in the Bush administration. See Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 2.

¹⁷ After the war, Wolfowitz said in an interview that “the one issue that everyone could agree on” was “weapons of mass destruction as the core reason,” suggesting that neoconservatives and assertive nationalists in the Bush administration had different motives for supporting the Iraq invasion but coalesced around the WMD rationale. See Paul Wolfowitz, interview by Sam Tannenhaus, *Vanity Fair*, May 9, 2003, accessed April 15, 2020, <https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2594>.

¹⁸ Michael Mazarr contends that while there was no single meeting in which President Bush made the decision to invade, between September 11, 2001, and the start of 2002, the administration had “irrevocably committed itself to the downfall of Saddam Hussein, whatever that would require.” Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 12, 140.

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intelligence, fear-mongering, and the post-9/11 psychological need for action to build political momentum for the war.¹⁹

Some scholars have dismissed the importance of neoconservatives in bringing about the war, often because of the broader political establishment's hard line on Iraq. The long-standing hawkishness of Al Gore, for instance, and his top advisors on Iraq ostensibly renders the neoconservatives unnecessary for explaining the Iraq War.²⁰ Consider, however, that after 9/11 there was no sudden outcry from Congress, the public, or key US allies for war with Iraq. As this book explains, many within those groups had been primed to support a regime change argument by their pre-9/11 abandonment of containment. However, the crucial initial impetus for invading Iraq came from mostly neoconservative Iraq hawks within the administration, including Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, and Douglas Feith, all with a long-standing desire to topple Saddam. The role of neoconservatives thus remains essential if insufficient to the overall task of explaining why the United States invaded Iraq.

The second pillar stressed in current scholarship on the causes of invasion is the effect of the September 11 terrorist attacks on US foreign policy. 9/11 drastically altered the strategic risk calculus of the administration's top policy-makers, who felt a deep sense of shock and responsibility for stopping future attacks. The attacks significantly expanded Americans' willingness to support a massive military campaign against both the perpetrators and a larger set of actors, including rogue states with possible WMD programs. 9/11 also created political and intellectual space for the neoconservatives to argue, both within the government and in public, that seeking regime change in Iraq and democratization in the Middle East would destroy the root causes of terrorism. Absent 9/11, the war almost certainly would not have happened given that virtually

¹⁹ Prominent examples of neoconservative-focused interpretations include Paul Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 15–20, 55; John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 229–262; Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 288; Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right*, 6; Todd Purdum, *A Time of Our Choosing: America's War in Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2003); Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*; Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*; Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 201–210; William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “The Right War for the Right Reasons,” *The Weekly Standard*, February 23, 2004, 20–28.

²⁰ Frank Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic and Evidence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–22; Mazarr, *Leap of Faith*, 9–10, 85–86; Steven Hurst, *The United States and Iraq since 1979: Hegemony, Oil, and War* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2009), 1; Sheila Carapico and Chris Toensing, “The Strategic Logic of the Iraq Blunder,” *Middle East Report* 36, no. 239 (Summer, 2006): 6–11; Max Boot, “It's Time to Retire the ‘Neocon’ Label,” *Washington Post*, March 13, 2019.

no one in the political establishment was calling for a ground invasion of Iraq beforehand despite the broad consensus on the need for Saddam's eventual overthrow.

9/11 and the rise of neoconservatives are vital but insufficient factors for understanding the causal road to the Iraq War. The hitherto overlooked story of the delegitimization of containment must also be incorporated as an essential factor. These three elements worked in tandem: the fear and anger generated by 9/11 functioned as a massive Overton Window for the spectrum of acceptable foreign policy initiatives.²¹ In turn, well-placed neoconservatives with a fixation on Iraq seized this opportunity, literally before the dust of the Twin Towers had settled, to reorient the response to 9/11 toward Iraq. The fact that containment, the main alternative to regime change, had been so discredited across the wider political and intellectual spectrum meant that Bush was pushing on an open door when he made the public case for war. He faced an establishment that basically agreed with the necessity and morality of regime change and mostly limited its critiques to the means of achieving this end in large part because its members had already dismissed containment.

Most scholarship and memoirs on Iraq pass the 1990s by with little commentary on containment, while other works contend that containment became delegitimized simply because it failed as a policy.²² This claim of failure played a central role in the regime change consensus. Architects of the war like Rumsfeld have claimed since 2003 that “[w]hen the second Bush administration came into office in January 2001, the Iraq ‘containment’ policy was in tatters.”²³ Too many scholars of the Iraq War have echoed this viewpoint, which renders the history of containment into

²¹ An Overton Window refers to a sudden, rapid widening of the range of acceptable ideas, policies, or actions, often because of a shocking event. See Maggie Astor, “How the Politically Unthinkable Can Become Mainstream,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2019.

²² For studies that ignore containment, see Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 288; Christian Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand: Why We Went Back to Iraq* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); Peter Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 67–69; Lawrence Freedman, “Iraq, Liberal Wars, and Illiberal Containment,” *Survival* 48, no. 4 (Winter, 2006): 51–65. For studies that seek to explain the origins of the Iraq War but offer little explanation for the decline of the containment policy, see Lloyd Gardner, *The Long Road to Baghdad: A History of U.S. Foreign Policy from the 1970s to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2008); Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Purdum, *A Time of Our Choosing*; Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “The Case for Bush Revisionism? Reevaluating the Legacy of America’s 43rd President,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2 (2018): 1–41. The most thorough, nonideological case that containment failed was Kenneth Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002), 211–243.

²³ Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), 416–418; Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 194–200.

a nonquestion. Moreover, for intellectuals and public figures who now regret their support of a disastrous war, there is little incentive to challenge the assumption of containment's failure.

This assumption of the manifest failure of containment is overdue for challenging. Certainly, key planks of the policy weakened over the course of the 1990s. The coalition's willingness to enforce sanctions and support punitive military strikes on Iraq faded over time, allowing Saddam's regime to access more resources and brazenly challenge inspections. In addition, Saddam expelled the inspectors in December 1998, undermining the coalition's ability to control his WMD production. Finally, by the mid-1990s Saddam had survived a series of internal challenges and reestablished his control over Iraq, thus presenting the possibility that containment might have to stay in place for decades.

However, despite these problems, containment succeeded in many ways, at least in terms of the limited goals originally established by George H. W. Bush. The Iraqi military and economy remained weak. Iraq made few threats to its neighbors after the Gulf War, and when it did, it quickly backed down in the face of US threats of retaliation. UN weapons inspectors destroyed the vast majority of Iraq's WMD programs, and after 2003 it became clear that Saddam had neither large WMD stockpiles nor active programs.²⁴ In addition, no-fly zones in the north and south meant that Saddam's control was limited or nonexistent in about 40 percent of Iraq's territory. While Saddam remained in power until the end of the decade, containment's strictures forced him to focus on internal control over external expansion.²⁵

Given its underappreciated successes, the claim that containment became discredited in US politics because it "failed" as a policy is neither self-evident nor sufficient. The idea that containment simply collapsed over time is particularly unhelpful in explaining why numerous politicians, intellectuals, and policy-makers opposed containment virtually from its inception, well before the crises of the late 1990s. In reality, the view that containment had failed was an interpretation of an ambiguous policy with numerous successes as well as some shortcomings. The ideas that critics of containment advanced combined with events to push more Americans to believe that containment had failed and that regime change was the sole alternative.

²⁴ See section on "Regime Strategic Intent" in Volume 1 of Department of Central Intelligence, Iraq Survey Group, *Key Findings*, September 30, 2004, cia.gov, accessed July 15, 2018, www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/.

²⁵ Joshua Rovner, "Delusions of Defeat: The United States and Iraq, 1990–1998," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (June, 2014): 482–507.