

# why is the u.s. fighting in iraq?

*Was the Bush administration solving international problems—or domestic ones?*

The Second Gulf War has already lasted longer than U.S. participation in World War II, but the reasons for this adventure remain shrouded in mystery and controversy. The Bush administration initially claimed the war was necessary because of the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the regime's links to international terrorism, and the huge benefits of beginning a democratic transformation of the Middle East. But the administration gradually abandoned these arguments, and now it insists in circular fashion that we must press on to victory to honor those soldiers who have already died.

Given the shortcomings of the official justifications, alternative theories have filled the explanatory vacuum. One is a psychological story claiming that George W. Bush felt compelled to finish the job his father started in 1991. Back then, the father's administration allowed a defeated Saddam Hussein to crush his Shiite opponents and hold on to power. Another story explains the war as an exercise in old-fashioned imperialism. The United States invaded Iraq to gain permanent access to its huge oil reserves and to establish a military beachhead close to other important Middle Eastern oil fields. With growing competition for dwindling supplies of petroleum, the United States needs to gain greater control of a key strategic resource.

Neither story is sufficient. Great powers are not supposed to fight wars to satisfy the emotional cravings of their elected leaders, and if the war were primarily about access to oil, it is hard to understand why the U.S. occupation of Iraq has been so badly mismanaged.

Most important, the administration's rush to war in Iraq required a willful neglect of the powerful considerations that had kept George Herbert Walker Bush from overthrowing Saddam Hussein back in 1991. As late as 1999, the former president justified himself to a gathering of Gulf War veterans by exploring the hypothetical: "We're going into Baghdad. We're going to be an occupying power—America in an Arab land—with no allies at our side. It would have been disastrous." In the summer of 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell made a similar point when he invoked the Pottery Barn rule as a warning about what might happen after an invasion—"You break it, you own it."

Why did this administration deliberately disregard so many accurate warnings that an invasion of Iraq was likely

to end in chaos? We can trace both the decision to go to war and the many mistakes in the execution of the policy to this administration's peculiar foreign-policy vision, itself an outgrowth of domestic political alliances.

## domestic politics on the way to war

Frances Fox Piven was one of the first to emphasize the role of domestic politics in the Iraq War. In her 2003 book, *The War at Home*, she sought to understand the administration's enthusiasm for a preemptive war not blessed by the United Nations. She asked,

Why the turn to preemptive war and, relatedly, the cavalier treatment of the painstakingly constructed multilateral arrangements of the past half century? I don't think the question can be fully answered if the war in Iraq is regarded solely as a foreign policy strategy. The war is also a domestic strategy, rooted not only in calculations of America's global power, but in calculations geared to shoring up the Bush regime's domestic power and its ability to pursue its domestic policy agenda.

As Piven recognized, the outlines of the Bush administration's policy turn were already clear in the pronouncement of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC)—a small, neoconservative think tank with strong ties to the Israeli right—whose 1997 Statement of Principles was endorsed by Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and others who would play key roles in George W. Bush's administration. In a report published in 2000, the PNAC called for a major increase in U.S. military spending and a more forceful use of U.S. military power around the world to preempt challenges to U.S. global dominance.

It seems that the drafters of the PNAC's principles were responding to two distinct problems. Internationally, the United States was unquestionably the world's only remaining superpower, with an enormous arsenal of high-tech weaponry, but it seemed to have even less control over international events than during the years of the Cold War. It had few good options for dealing with deeply anti-American regimes like those of Iran, North Korea, and Iraq. Moreover, its ability to manage China's economic and military rise was compromised by its dependence on Chinese

purchases of U.S. bonds to finance the U.S. balance-of-payments deficits. Finally, U.S. foreign policy was encountering mounting global resistance to the neoliberal policies that it had been exporting for years.

But the drafters were also responding to a domestic problem: the internal tensions within the Republican political coalition. Beginning in the mid-1970s, that coalition was based on an unusual alliance between religious conservatives and business conservatives. The religious right provided the activists and many of the votes, while corporate conservatives delivered the huge quantities of cash needed to mount media-heavy campaigns. The Republican success in capturing control of Congress in 1994, just two years after losing the presidency to Bill Clinton, demonstrated the power and durability of this coalition.

But for all its potency, the coalition had conflicting agendas for U.S. foreign policy. Big business in the United States favors free trade agreements and the strengthening of global economic institutions like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund that have enforced neoliberal policies. Much of the religious right, however, is hostile to economic globalization and deeply suspicious of international organizations. The platform of the Texas Republican Party calls on the United States to withdraw from the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. Moreover, the militant faction of Christian nationalists within the religious right sees the United Nations as the vanguard of global secular forces. In the *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic novels widely read by the religious right, the Antichrist is employed as the Secretary General of the United Nations.

The PNAC's proposed policy was designed to handle both problems. Its drafters imagined that if the United States showed greater eagerness to use its military might, it would greatly enhance its bargaining power in the international arena. Both rogue nations and the Chinese would suddenly become more reasonable when they saw the destructive power of U.S. weaponry. Just as important, the militarization of foreign policy would help to hold the Republican coalition together. The rank and file of the religious right, deeply patriotic, would rally in support of an

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internationalist foreign policy as long as it was wrapped in military fatigues. Business conservatives could also be expected to back such a policy if the administration used its enhanced global influence to advance their interests.

Two events intervened before the PNAC's ideas could be implemented. First, there was the 2000 election debacle. While the Supreme Court decision to halt the Florida recount left liberals and progressives traumatized, the effects of the electoral tie on the incoming Bush administration were almost as severe. They recognized Al Gore's near victory as a break with recent electoral history. Conservative commentator Fred Barnes wrote immediately after the election in *The Weekly Standard*, "But it's now clear the end of the Republican lock on the White House was not a function of Bill Clinton's strength. Rather, the GOP lock was a product of the Cold War and the conservative backlash against

the 1960s. Absent those factors, it's gone."

These concerns about the Republican coalition's long-term prospects made the idea of shaking things up by implementing the PNAC's new foreign policy even more appealing. But it was the attacks of September 11th, 2001, that created the political opportunity for moving full speed ahead

toward a militarized and preemptive foreign policy. As early as the evening of September 11th, 2001, Donald Rumsfeld was talking about the necessity of taking down Saddam Hussein.

The administration's first move was to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but it quickly started to plan for an assault on Iraq. When support for a UN Security Council resolution authorizing war fell short, the United States announced its intention to move ahead with its smaller international "coalition of the willing." Despite massive antiwar demonstrations around the world, the administration launched its attack on Iraq.

Mark Danner has recently argued that the Bush administration waged a "War of Imagination" against Saddam Hussein. "In that War of Imagination victory was to be decisive, overwhelming, evincing a terrible power—enough to wipe out the disgrace of September 11 and remake the threatening world." Danner goes on to quote from Ron Suskind's book, *The One Percent Doctrine*: "The primary impetus for invading Iraq, according to those attending NSC briefings on the Gulf in this period, was to make an example of Hussein, to create a demonstration model to guide the behavior of anyone with the temerity to acquire destructive weapons or, in any way, flout the authority of the

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United States.” In a word, the War of Imagination was the culmination of the PNAC plan; it marked the decisive militarization of U.S. foreign policy.

### how long a war?

Here the story gets complicated. A demonstration war would use U.S. technological superiority to win a fast and decisive victory followed by a quick departure of most U.S. troops. Rumsfeld, particularly, wanted to get in and out of Iraq rapidly with a small, mobile force to drive home the point that the United States could easily and suddenly do the same thing to other defiant regimes. That is why he pressed the Joint Chiefs to abandon Colin Powell’s doctrine that the United States should only go to war with overwhelming numbers. While some in the Pentagon believed the United States would need between 400,000 and 500,000 troops to stabilize postwar Iraq, Rumsfeld insisted on going in with fewer than 140,000.

Rumsfeld’s civilian deputies had a plan that was designed to make it feasible for U.S. forces to exit Iraq quickly. They favored handing power in Iraq to a council of exiles, presumably to be led by Ahmed Chalabi, an Iraqi Shiite who had tirelessly agitated for the U.S. invasion and was a favorite of Washington’s neoconservatives. With the backing of a modest U.S. presence, these exiles would take over the existing Iraqi state agencies and begin the process of constructing a post-dictatorship Iraq. However, this plan



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was ultimately vetoed by the White House, which rejected the idea of empowering an unelected exile council. But those who did the vetoing apparently lacked a backup plan that would support Rumsfeld’s vision of a quick war.

Moreover, not everybody in the White House was enthusiastic about Rumsfeld’s vision of a short, triumphal war. All of the politicians remembered that the president’s father had won a quick and decisive victory over Saddam Hussein in

early 1991 that temporarily pushed his approval ratings above 90 percent. However, during the economy’s slow recovery from recession, the senior Bush’s approval rating fell to the low 30s by July of 1992, leading to electoral defeat that November.

Moreover, Karl Rove had demonstrated in the 2002 midterm elections the power of the war issue to solidify the Republican coalition’s electoral position. Some Democrats had opposed the president’s request for Congressional authorization for the war in September 2002. In November, the Republicans mercilessly attacked *all* Democrats for cowardice and timidity in the face of the terrorist threat. Senator Max Cleland, a triple-amputee veteran of the Vietnam War, lost his Senate seat when his opponent questioned his patriotism. The Republicans regained control of the Senate and added seats in the House.

As Rove and others looked to the president’s reelection campaign in November 2004, they pondered the best possible backdrop to the campaign. The 2002 results suggested the advantages of waging the reelection campaign with an actual hot war going on in the background. As long as the number of U.S. casualties could be kept relatively low, an actual war would make it easier to question the patriotism of Democrats, while combining the Republican base with enough moderate voters to win a decisive reelection.

That is what actually happened in 2004. The Iraq War was still going on 18 months after the initial invasion. Despite a feverish mobilization by Democrats to defeat the president, Rove and his lieutenants were able to cast doubt on the Democratic ticket’s determination to fight U.S. enemies abroad. Moreover, they mobilized even more religious-right voters than in 2000, while still retaining the loyalty of secular and moderate Republicans.

The long-playing war also helped the administration avoid effective oversight by the legislative and judicial branches of the government. Starting with Vice President Cheney’s refusal to divulge information on his energy task force and continuing with the imprisonment of enemy combatants at Guantanamo, the torture policy, the NSA surveillance programs, and the presidential “signing statements,” this administration has fought ferociously to expand the power and prerogatives of the executive branch. Without an actual shooting war, their campaign to expand the scope of executive authority would not have been as successful.

### why rumsfeld did not get his short war

While Rumsfeld, Bush, and General Tommy Franks all envisioned a short, triumphal war followed by a rapid departure of most U.S. troops, what happened instead was a prolonged military engagement that proved electorally useful in

the 2004 campaign. This radical shift resulted from deep flaws in the way the administration made decisions and the abysmal quality of many of the resulting policy choices. Here is a brief summary:

1. During the period immediately before and after the invasion, there was apparently no effective coordination within the executive branch. The problem was so extreme, according to Bob Woodward, that the secretary of defense refused to return phone calls from Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security advisor, whose job is to coordinate key foreign-policy officials.

2. Just a month and a half before the start of the invasion, control over postwar Iraq shifted from the State Department to the Pentagon. Those who took charge at the Pentagon were not allowed to include the State Department's leading Iraq expert as part of their team.

3. The White House vetoed the Pentagon's plan to hand over power to an exile council led by Ahmed Chalabi, but there was no backup plan that could facilitate a quick U.S. exit. Apparently, some civilian leaders in the Pentagon imagined that the Chalabi option might be reconsidered later if other plans failed.

4. Immediately after Hussein's fall, the United States lacked sufficient firepower in Iraq to halt the looting of government offices. The State Department's planning had anticipated the outbreak of looting, but the Pentagon was apparently taken by surprise. The resulting collapse of order made the rebuilding of the Iraqi state infinitely harder.

5. The two successive civilian heads of the Coalition Provisional Authority—the occupation government—reported directly to the Pentagon, as did the general in charge of the Iraqi theater. This meant there was no unified command on the ground in Iraq, which led to chronic and unproductive conflict between the civilian and military leaders.

6. Paul Bremer, chosen by the Pentagon to head the Coalition Provisional Authority, issued two critical decrees almost immediately after his arrival in Baghdad. The first mandated the exclusion of all former members of the Baath Party from holding government offices. The second dissolved the Iraqi army. Apparently these decrees were not debated within the Bush administration, but they pushed thousands of Sunnis into the arms of the anti-U.S. insurgency.

7. The heavy-handed tactics used by the U.S. military in the first year of the war, including mass imprisonment and abuse of prisoners, meant that ordinary Iraqis lost any confidence in the occupying forces.

The mistakes of the U.S. occupation expanded the opportunities for the Sunni insurgency to flourish, and its escalating attacks led to a vicious cycle of sectarian polarization and reprisals that blocked any effective process of

economic or political reconstruction. Many within the U.S. government warned that the administration's policy processes were flawed and its decisions disastrous, but these warnings were systematically ignored.

The standard argument is that these disastrous mistakes resulted from arrogance, incompetence, and intense bureaucratic infighting. But this is hard to square with the accumulated Washington and foreign-policy experience of the administration's top officials. A more speculative hypothesis must be considered: that a high-placed official within the administration preferred a long war and influ-



*"We're from the F.B.I., going from house to house making sure that everyone is scared shitless."*

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enced key policy decisions to assure an extended engagement in Iraq.

This speculation points to Vice President Cheney, whose office has wielded unprecedented power in the Bush administration. While most of Cheney's machinations are still shrouded in secrecy, his rhetoric has consistently emphasized that the war against Islamic terrorism will be a generation-long task. Weeks after the president's famous "mission accomplished" appearance on the aircraft carrier in May 2003, Cheney said in a speech at West Point,

The battle of Iraq was a major victory in the war on terror, but the war itself is far from over. We cannot allow ourselves to grow complacent. We cannot forget that the terrorists remain determined to kill as many Americans as possible, both abroad and here at home, and they are still seeking weapons of mass destruction to use against us. With such an enemy, no peace treaty is possible; no policy of containment or deterrence will prove effective.

In a word, Cheney had little use for the "quick fix" of a single demonstration war, no matter how persuasive the victory.

To be sure, even if Cheney believed that a long war in Iraq was necessary to keep the nation's attention focused on this larger war on terrorism, he certainly shared Rumsfeld's confidence that U.S. military superiority would allow it to remain in control of events. Moreover, whatever disagreements might have existed within the administration about the ideal duration of the war, all of these key policymakers seem to have drawn inspiration from Machiavelli's advice to the Prince five centuries ago: "Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with."

The administration's leaders recognized that in the dangerous, post-9/11 world, they had no policy option that would simultaneously earn the love of foreigners and retain the support of its political base—the xenophobic voters of the religious right. Since love "must be dispensed with," they gambled everything on establishing the United States as a power that others would fear. Both the invasion of Iraq and the mishandling of the occupation flowed from a mistaken confidence that a visible display of ruthlessness was the shortest path to greater security.

But, as the proverb goes, a little learning is a dangerous thing. Had they continued to read Machiavelli's text, they would have noticed the following qualification: "Nevertheless, a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred." Machiavelli recognized, as the United States learned once again in Iraq, that hatred breeds rebellion.

## aftermath

While the continuing Iraq War contributed to George W. Bush's reelection in 2004, it became a major liability for the administration and the Republican coalition during 2005 and 2006. With violence intensifying in Iraq, in 2006 the war's unpopularity helped put the Democrats in charge of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1994. Rove tried, once again, to use the Iraq War as a polarizing issue to paint Democrats as appeasers, but this time it did not work. Despite the gerrymandering of districts, the huge benefits of incumbency, and the Republican's continuing advantage in fund-raising, the public conveyed a powerful vote of "no confidence" in the administration's foreign policy.

The message was reinforced in December 2006, when the Iraq Study Group (ISG) issued its call for a dramatic shift in U.S. policy in Iraq. This bipartisan group, led by James

Baker, secretary of state for the current president's father, laid out proposals for extricating the United States from Iraq. The ISG's report reasserted business internationalism with its call for the United States to negotiate directly with Iran and Syria and to restart efforts to forge a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Ironically, the election results and the intensifying debate about U.S. foreign policy could bring to the surface the deep tensions between the foreign-policy preferences of internationally oriented U.S. businesses and those of the religious right that militarization was supposed to paper over.

Ultimately, the Iraq War is another chapter in the long history of regimes seeking domestic political advantage through foreign adventures. George W. Bush responded to the 9/11 attacks by shifting U.S. foreign policy toward the unilateral exercise of military force. He insisted that his plan for attacking Iraq be accepted on faith because his distinguished foreign-policy team had years of experience and access to the best intelligence available. Congress, the media, business, and other elites abdicated their responsibility to question the administration's claims. Now the United States is neither loved nor feared abroad; in many places it is both mocked and reviled.

## recommended resources

Fred Block. "Understanding the Diverging Trajectories of the United States and Western Europe: A Neo-Polanyian Analysis." *Politics & Society* 35 (March 2007):3–33. Examines the strains in the Republican coalition.

Rajiv Chandrasekaran. *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (Knopf, 2006). A powerful account of the U.S. occupation in Iraq.

Mark Danner. "Iraq: The War of the Imagination." *New York Review of Books*, December 21, 2006. Danner gives an overview of the Bush Administration's mindset.

Frances Fox Piven. *The War at Home: The Domestic Costs of Bush's Militarism* (New Press, 2004). This is a pioneering analysis of the domestic side of Bush's Iraq policy.

Thomas Ricks. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (Penguin, 2006). A blow-by-blow history of what went wrong in Iraq.

Bob Woodward. *State of Denial* (Simon and Schuster, 2006). Washington's official chronicler tells the inside story of the Iraq War.