

# The Case for War: Analytical Perspectives of the 2003 Invasion of Iraq



The media circus that accompanied the United States deployment to Iraq in 2003 largely obfuscated public perception of the motivation for war. Talk of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and references to the recent tragedy of September 11 made the rationale behind the decision to invade difficult to determine. In an attempt to explain this decision, this essay will explore two main analytical perspectives of International Relations theory – constructivism and liberalism. Some scholars might argue that my conclusions are flawed since I do not consider realism; however, I contend that realist policy prescriptions do not fit with the circumstances of the Iraq War from either the point of view of Waltz’s defensive realism or Mearsheimer’s offensive realism. Since the United States’ engagement in Iraq did little to boost America’s power – relatively or absolutely – one could hardly argue that the Bush administration employed realist thinking. In fact, the mobilization to Iraq served to weaken the state’s military capabilities (and thus weaken both its relative and absolute power) by opening another theater of war outside of the Afghanistan conflict. The oversimplified argument that the desire to acquire oil powered a realist drive to invade simply does not hold water. Liberalism and constructivism offer far clearer insights into the decision to invade, with the constructivist point of view ultimately best explaining the origins of the Iraq conflict. Overall, the decision to go to war originated in normative ideology within the Bush administration, a phenomenon supported by the constructivist model and supported by liberal ideology.

Liberalism is an analytical perspective in which there are various important actors. The liberal point of view holds that individuals, political or societal groups, states, and international institutions all play a crucial role in the international system. It stresses freedom of the individual, and states’ right to sovereignty. Additionally, the liberal point of view does not agree with the narrowly focused balance-of-power doctrine put forth by realist scholars. Walt notes three main branches of liberal thought, one that “argued that economic interdependence would discourage states from using force against each other,” one “more recent theory...that international institutions...could help overcome selfish state behavior,” and one that “saw the spread of democracy as the key to world peace.” The latter branch described by Walt reflects the ideology of republican liberalism, the form of liberal theory that most closely explains the circumstances of the Iraq War. It suggests that democratic institutions reduce uncertainties in the anarchic international system, creating “a special peace among liberal states.” Furthermore, it recommends the promotion of free trade and democracy throughout the world in order to achieve stability.

Republican liberal theory would expect this desire to spread democracy to compel the Bush administration to invade Iraq, and to some extent this represents what actually took place. Long before they reached the White House, key Bush advisers were involved in political organizations dedicated not only to the democratization of the world in general, but also to Iraq specifically. Mazarr notes that, among them, “two of the leading [propositions] were that American power ought to be vigorously asserted to bring order to a potentially disintegrating post-Cold War world, and that Saddam Hussein had to be removed from power.” Vice President Cheney, in particular, held a commitment to a “radical, pro-democracy reorientation of the Middle East.” President Bush personally reflected this commitment as well. In his second inaugural address, he stated “The concerted effort of free nations to promote democracy is a prelude to our enemies’ defeat,” clearly illustrating the doctrine of republican liberalism. This theory would also expect collaboration between liberal states against the Iraqi regime. The sharing of intelligence between the United States and the United Kingdom reflects this notion. In fact, UK-supplied intelligence on Iraqi WMDs (though ultimately unsupported by evidence of such weapons) provided a key catalyst for public support for the invasion.

Despite the various ways that the liberal point of view sheds light on the causes of the Iraq conflict, it presents an almost self-contradictory value system pertaining to Hussein's regime. Liberalism stresses the fundamental need for individual freedom and self-determination, presenting a clear case for intervention in Iraq – a state in which the dictatorial government showed complete disregard for basic human rights. On the other hand, as Doyle notes, “the basic postulate of liberal international theory holds that states have the right to be free from foreign intervention.” These conflicting motivations make it difficult to analyze the Iraq War solely from a liberal perspective. Additionally, while the example of United States collaboration with the United Kingdom does reflect the cooperation between liberal states that is expected by republican liberalism, the fact that many liberal nations did not support the invasion undermines this point to a great extent. Finally, liberalism does not examine the normative behaviors of individual actors in the United States policy-shaping community. In the case of the highly ideological Bush administration, such an analysis is of crucial importance, further making liberalism an incomplete, albeit helpful, perspective for considering the causes of the Iraq War.

The constructivist model provides a better alternative for understanding the origins of the Iraq conflict. Constructivism is often considered the most intangible of the main analytical perspectives, largely because where realism and liberalism focus primarily on material factors and visible structures, constructivism considers ideas, language, and behavioral norms, which are significantly more difficult to identify. Walt remarks, “Instead of taking the state for granted and assuming that it simply seeks to survive, constructivists regard the interests and identities of states as a highly malleable product of specific historical processes.” In constructivist theory, these interests and identities both cause and result from behavioral norms. Katzenstein illustrates how these norms are formed in a sociopolitical context, writing,

“Self-reflection does not occur in isolation; it is communicated to others. In the process of communication norms can emerge in a variety of ways: spontaneously evolving, as social practice; consciously promoted, as political strategies to further specific interests; deliberately negotiated, as a mechanism for conflict management; or as a combination, mixing these three types. State interests and strategies thus are shaped by a never-ending political process that generates publicly understood standards for action.”

As evidenced by this extract from Katzenstein's work, norms and policies can change and – as socially-driven constructs – are strongly affected by the individuals within the international system. Another important aspect of constructivism is the importance of language to state policy. Weldes notes that national interest “is created as a meaningful object, out of shared meanings through which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the state in it, is understood.” In essence, Weldes describes the process through which the use of certain terms, labels, and the implicit understandings behind them shape national interest. A final important aspect of constructivist theory is that it has no policy prescriptions like realism and liberalism; therefore, one thinking from a constructivist point of view could not expect certain actions to take place. It is strongest in retrospection, identifying normative causes that led to given effects. For example, the constructivist scholar might not have expected the Iraq War before it began, but he or she could easily identify the normative development that led to its inception.

Generally, constructivism explains the origins of the Iraq War to a great extent. The Bush administration engaged in a lengthy process of sociopolitical “norm-creation” leading up to the invasion. First, they tried to associate Hussein with a normative idea of terrorism, utilizing what were at times questionable sources of intelligence. The administration presented a two-fold case: first, that Iraq presented a danger to the international community, and second, that under UN Security Council Resolution 1441 (2002), United States military operations in Iraq were legally justified. The United States argued that the Resolution 1441 perambulatory clause recalling Resolution 678 (1990) permitted military intervention, because it “authorized member states to use all necessary means to uphold and implement its

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Resolution 660 (1990)...and all relevant resolutions subsequent to resolution 660 (1990) and to restore international peace and security in the area.” This attempt on the part of the Bush administration to gain United Nations support also illustrates normative behavior, for such backing is generally viewed as a prerequisite for military intervention. Even though the UN did not support the invasion, one could still argue that the Bush invasion took place under the administration’s conception of normative behavior, based on sociopolitical constructs within the domestic sphere. Norms had been created within the neoconservative policy community that permitted such a move. Over time, individuals within that community had developed a norm among themselves – that democratization of the Middle East and the removal of Saddam Hussein were an essential aspect of United States foreign policy. Shannon and Keller argue that the personality traits of important individuals in the Bush administration enabled internal norms such as this to supersede international ones. Through a behavioral study, they illustrate how pro-invasion advisers scored highly in distrust, task emphasis, and in-group bias. These traits established a psychological process in which internal norms were considered more important than external ones. When the neoconservative element came to power, they transmitted this normative concept to the American people. As constructivism would expect, this process relied strongly on the use of particular language. For example, in President Bush’s National Security Strategy document, the word “freedom” appears 46 times and “democracy” 12 times. The real issues inherent to discussion of the Iraqi conflict were simplified to this highly politicized and highly palatable diction. The public, still affected by the tragedy of September 11, 2001, was more likely at this time to be swayed by this language – the national interest could be easily defined. This is a clear example of what Mazarr describes as a “policy window.” He remarks,

“Ideas developed within policy communities will generally lie dormant for years, until such time as such a window opens: a crisis occurs; a new president gets elected who is interested in an issue; and a foreign government makes an unprecedented offer. Policy ideas do not migrate into the implementation phase accidentally, but make the trip through such a window of opportunity, when the time is ripe for change.”

For better or worse, the Bush administration took example of this policy window to garner support for war with Iraq, a policy that had been socially-constructed years before. Adoption of this policy and the administration’s subsequent communication of it to the American people in highly politicized language both can be well explained by the constructivist model.

Though the constructivism provides more insight to the origins of the Iraq War than republican liberalism, it too is an imperfect perspective. Despite the normative formation among the neoconservatives and their psychological inclination to favor internal norms, one cannot ignore that the Bush administration clearly violated international norms by acting against the decision of the United Nations. Shannon and Keller remark, “Lacking UN approval or credible evidence of imminent danger necessitating immediate preemptive action, the invasion’s counternormative nature was evident in the widespread condemnation of statesmen and general publics alike.” They emphasize this violation of normative standards; which, although weakened by the proposition that Bush administration actions were guided by internal norms, still detracts from the efficacy of utilizing the constructivist model to explain the Iraq War; thus, while constructivism does explain the origins of the Iraqi conflict to a great extent, it does not provide an explanation for all aspects of the situation.

I turn now to consideration of the other side of the conflict – Hussein’s regime. Unlike the case of the Bush administration, for which there exists extensive documentation and research, the inner workings of Saddam’s state remains unclear. Despite this difficulty, constructivism appears to provide the best insight into Hussein’s actions which led to the Iraq War. Realism, which would put importance on state survival above all else, does not fit; surely Saddam would have recognized the United States’ overwhelming military advantage and sought more diplomatic methods of preventing conflict. Instead, he chose to provoke the United States by maintaining anti-democratic rhetoric and pressuring UN weapons inspectors. Republican liberalism, of course, does not fit at all because it calls for democratization, something Hussein had no interest in. Constructivism, at first glance, does not seem to adequately consider Saddam’s motivations, because there is a clear international norm against the use of chemical weapons (like those used by Iraq against the Kurds in the 1980s) and normative expectations for welcoming UN weapons inspectors. On the other hand, just as the Bush administration had been acting on internal norms, Saddam likely was as well. Describing the foundation of the Ba’ath Party, Hashim notes the importance of its slogan, “Unity, Freedom, and Socialism.” He further notes that these principles “were understood as integrated elements, none of which could be attained without the other two.” Though Hussein would stray from the socialist aspect of Ba’athism, he maintained the other two (though the idea of freedom was reserved for the government, not its people). This sense of pan-Arab unity and state freedom from western interference is, in itself, a norm. It explains why Hussein would be unwilling to cooperate, or at least legitimately pretend to cooperate, with UN inspectors and why he maintained violent anti-American rhetoric before the invasion.

Overall, while I have found the constructivist model to be the most applicable to the circumstances of the Iraq War, I conclude with a caution against reliance on only one analytical perspective. Relying on a single model to explain incredibly diverse circumstances is limiting, if not altogether folly. While the application of models can be useful for understanding the complexities of the international sphere, it can also prevent broader thinking and innovation. In the case of the Iraq War – though I find constructivism more useful than liberalism in explaining its origins – both analytical perspectives explain different aspects of the situation. It is perhaps best to consider these models of international behavior with a degree of hesitancy and open-mindedness so as not to lose sight of important aspects of global problems, because each perspective may have a critical role to play in understanding our highly complex world.

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