



MA Thesis in International Affairs

School of Social Sciences

The Second Gulf War

A Constructivist Analysis of the Bush Administration's Decision-Making Process

Vittorio Orlando

June 2019



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
STJÓRNMÁLAFRÆÐIDEILD

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MA Thesis in International Affairs
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Administration's Decision-Making Process.

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Abstract

The goal of my thesis is to analyse the causal factors behind the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. My work is based on the assumption that the war can be considered a failure, given how its outcomes were negative for the United States, and a mistake, since the US government was able to predict said outcomes. Against this background, I examine why the behaviour of the United States was in contrast with the main tenet of the rational actor model, namely that states will assess the consequences of their decision in order to maximise their returns. My theoretical proposition, based on a constructivist understanding of international relations theory, is that the US government failed to rationally assess the situation due to the role played by ideological forces during its decision-making process. In particular, I am referring to the neo-conservative ideology, the impact of 9/11 on the US security strategy, and the unilateral position occupied by the country after the end of the Cold War. I analysed said factors through the method of process tracing, concluding that in certain circumstances states cannot be considered rational actors.

Preface

In the summer of 2003, my friend Giulio Scarantino addressed a letter to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, in which he asked that Italy would refrain from participating in the Iraq War. Since then, several studies have come to the same conclusion with respect of the conflict as a whole. The purpose of this work is to investigate why the governments of the world failed to see what was evident not only to the academic community, but to an 11 year-old child.

This thesis accounts for 30 ECTS towards a Masters of Arts in International Affairs at the University of Iceland. I would like to thank my friend Brian Barr, for the many long conversations on the Iraq War. My gratitude goes also to my supervisor in this project, Maximilian Conrad, for his helpful comments and advices on my work. Finally, this thesis would not have been possible without my fiancée Tanja, and her incredible patience over the past few months.

‘Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens’

Friedrich Schiller, *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*

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1. Introduction

One of the distinctive features of states is the monopoly over the use of the military force, both within and outside their borders. In the last decades, several attempts have been made to limit this power, trying to make states accountable to the international community with regard to the use of military force. Nevertheless, as shown in the case of the Second Gulf War, there are circumstances in which the constraints imposed by international law are not sufficient to prevent conflicts. The alleged pacifying effect of institutions is not limited by their power to sanction countries responsible of illegitimate aggressions; given the political and economic costs of war, it could be expected that states will try to avoid a direct military confrontation whenever possible, but instead rely on international institutions to mediate in time of crisis. This is particularly true in the case of democracies, where political leaders are accountable to the population upon which the costs of war will fall.

These assumptions are coherent with the notion that states behave like rational actors, thus trying to maximise their utility function and avoiding unnecessary risks. However, some historical events appear to be in contrast with this premise. The purpose of this paper is to analyse what I consider a typical example of a state acting against its interests: the US invasion of Iraq, occurred in March 2003 without the support of the United Nations or even of historical allies such as Germany and France. My main theoretical assumption is that, in certain circumstances, states will act under the influence of specific ideological forces; in turn, this behaviour might lead to suboptimal outcomes, at least when compared with the ones that could have been expected after a rational assessment of the situation.

The idea that every political decision is the product of a specific historical and cultural context may appear to be an attempt at denying the value of theorisation. Indeed, a categorical implementation of this principle may lead to the paradox of denying the possibility of any systematic understanding of politics beyond the empirical level, given how any event could only be understood as the product of the unique circumstances that preceded it. For this reason, it may be useful to clarify that the purpose of this work is not to deny that states can act rationally, either in the Weberian or in the conventional understanding of the term; nor is it trying to challenge the several structural approaches to international relations theory (IR), as shown by the fact that I rely both on constructivist and structuralist studies in my analysis of the war.

Less ambitiously, my goal is to offer an explanation of the war which takes into consideration the following elements. The first one is the role played by the neo-conservative ideology in shaping the foreign policy agenda of the Bush administration. The second one is the impact that

9/11 had on American society, given how it changed the country's understanding of security and lowered the threshold of acceptable risk. The third one is the unilateral position of the US after the end of the Cold War. Through the analysis of these factors, I attempt to answer my main research question, namely 'Why did the United States invade Iraq?' Given my preliminary assumption that the war can be considered an irrational decision, I address two secondary research questions. The first one is 'Was the war desirable?' I measured the war's desirability by comparing its outcomes with the original goals of the United States, as presented in President Bush speeches in the months preceding the conflict. The second question, of central importance for determining whether a foreign policy decision is rational or not, could be summarised as "Was the US government able to predict the war's outcomes?" While failure in itself is not necessarily the consequence of an irrational decision-making process, my argument is that the Bush administration willingly ignored information in its possession in order to pursue a pre-determined strategy.

My thesis is divided into seven chapters, including this introduction and a shorter conclusive one, and each chapter is structured as follows. In the second one, I present my methodological approach. It includes an explanation of why I chose to rely on a qualitative research method, process tracing, and a discussion on my method of data analysis and collection. The third chapter contains a review of the literature on IR theory and on rational choice theory, and it is further divided into sections analysing the different theoretical approaches within the two fields. In the fourth chapter, I offer a literature review of several peer-reviewed articles on the war, thus analysing the current understanding of the conflict in the academic debate.

The fifth chapter focuses on the causal factors behind the war. I divided said factors into three macro-categories. The first category includes the ideological forces influencing the US government in its decision-making process. The second one covers elements traceable to the sphere of national security, given how one of the main justifications of the war was the assumption that Hussein's regime represented an imminent threat to the United States. In the last category, I include factors relating to the international scenario at the time of the conflict, including the role played by multinational corporations with an economic interest in the war; my understanding is that these elements had a residual, albeit not insignificant, causal impact on the war. In the sixth chapter, I look at the decision-making process of the US government in its entirety, highlighting how the interaction between the above-mentioned factors led to the outbreak of the war. As opposed to the chapter preceding it, in the sixth one I adopt a chronological approach, in an attempt to trace how the public discourse on the war developed

over the course of time. In the seventh and last chapter, I briefly summarise my findings, discuss the limits of my work, and outline some possible suggestions for future research on the topic.

2. Methodology

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the methodological framework of my dissertation, starting with its ontological and epistemological approaches. After having specified where I stand with regard to the nature and knowability of the international political system, I clarify the reasons behind my decision to use a specific historical event, the Second Gulf War, for the purpose of theory-building. Furthermore, I explain why the empirical section of my research was carried out through the method of process tracing. The last part of this chapter offers an overview of the data sources selected, and describes how I analysed the information collected.

I worked under the assumption that the rational actor model has only a limited explanatory power, when applied to foreign policy analysis. In fact, my theory is that, given the complexity of the international system and the conflicting interests of the individuals and institutions involved, the decision-making process often leads to suboptimal results, far from those that would be expected from rational actors.

I decided to use an empirical case from recent US history to support my theoretical assumptions. To this end, I have chosen to analyse the Second Iraq War through process tracing. This allowed me to answer a series of inter-related questions: firstly, can the war be considered a failure by common standards? Secondly, if that is the case, were the individuals who started it able to foresee the likelihood of similar consequences when they planned the invasion? Finally, if they were, what caused them to proceed with the invasion? Ultimately, the primary assumption of my thesis is that the rational actor model does not take account of the influences exercised by the historical and cultural context on political decisions.

2.2. Ontological and epistemological approach

It can be useful to start by mentioning the ontological perspective that I adopted in my research. With regard to political sciences, I tend to agree with the positivist assumption that the analysis of raw data can be a powerful tool to explain isolated phenomena. Nonetheless, I am sceptical of the idea that the complexity of the international system could be reduced to a set of variables and rules, as is the case for natural sciences. The difference between social sciences (particularly international affairs) and natural sciences is that the latter focuses on events reproducible under specific conditions, whereas the nature of the international system precludes a similar possibility. For this reason I tend to prefer the interpretative approach, which emphasizes the

role played by social constructs in determining how reality is perceived by individuals.¹ In my view, such an approach allows the treatment of each case as an isolated event, thus avoiding the tendency to force similarities among different situations to support a specific theoretical framework. At the same time, I am relying on elements typical of the positivist ontology. The very nature of my research question, whether the social context may lead governments to take irrational decisions, assumes the existence of an external objective reality within which a certain course of action can be considered ‘correct’ and the opposite one ‘incorrect.’ Overall, I would define my ontology as cautiously positivist: I agree with the interpretivist observation that the word (understood as the combination of systems and interactions studied by social sciences, rather than the natural world) does not correspond to our interpretation of it. Nevertheless, I believe that, in order to reach relevant conclusions in my field of study, it is necessary to accept a certain level of compromise, and consequently recognise the existence of a measurable and comprehensible external world.

My stance is similar with regard to epistemology; in absolute terms, I am under the impression that any result will be influenced by the personal characteristics of the researcher, and thus it will only partially match reality. Nonetheless, being aware of the flawed nature of knowledge should not discourage the political scientist from attempting to identify potential similarities between different cases and build a theoretical model, while remaining cognizant of its limitations. This position is reflected in the development of my work; I started by questioning the general assumption that actors can be considered rational, arguing that the concept of rationality cannot be applied to international politics.

In an attempt to answer this question I looked at a specific case, analysing its developments from the perspective of the actors themselves, and trying to explain their behaviours and preferences through their cultural context and identities. Subsequently, based on what I inferred through my analysis, I answered the original research question with respect to the Iraq War. Nevertheless, I am not in the position to determine whether my findings could be applied to different situations; given the tenets of interpretivist epistemology, I have only a limited faith in the power of abstraction.

Generalization, whilst very useful in order to gain any significant knowledge, poses the risk to underestimate, or overestimate, important features of the scenario under consideration due to the necessity of following a pre-determined system of categorization. Going back to the

¹ M. Hennink, I. Hutter, and A. Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2011, p. 15.

comparison with natural sciences, an entomologist could safely assume that two ants from the same species will be virtually identical in all relevant aspects. A political scientist making the same assumption in relation to two different states, or even the same state in different circumstances, would likely find himself in a difficult position.

2.3. Research design

In light of my preference for the analysis of individuals and contexts rather than measurable variables, it was logical to opt for a qualitative research method. This choice is mainly motivated by the primary objective of my work: to understand the reasons behind a specific policy decision, apparently in contrast with a rational assessment of the situation. However, a similar goal can only be achieved if we accept two conditions: firstly, the outcomes of the decisions were in contrast with those actors' goals, and secondly, the likelihood of similar outcomes was predictable.

I addressed both sub-questions by looking at quantitative elements, such as the war's cost in terms of human lives and its economic and strategical impacts, and at qualitative ones, namely the contrasts between the key elements of the discourse of those in favour of the war. The use of quantitative data seemed appropriate in order to evaluate the success of the war, given that the invasion of Iraq was a specific historical event with measurable consequences. Nevertheless, a purely quantitative approach would not have allowed the determination of the ideological background of the key US government officials behind the invasion, nor their expectations and assessment of the situation.

Concerning the main research question, I was working under the impression that only a qualitative research method could have provided me with the tools necessary to explore the behavioural patterns of the Republican establishment in power at the time. Moreover, the number of factors influencing the process under analysis was considerably high, while the climate of fear which followed 9/11 appears as a determining one. I also investigated the broader historical context. On account of this, I included in my analysis the ideological characteristics of the neo-conservative movement, given how exponents of said movement were widely represented in the second Bush administration. I considered the hegemonic position achieved by the US after the fall of the Soviet Union, real or perceived. I looked at how the First Gulf War led to a permanent deterioration of American-Iraqi relations. A qualitative method enabled me to classify a considerable amount of factual information by creating two conceptual categories into which I grouped the above-mentioned aspects. The first category takes into account US domestic politics; it includes the consequences of 9/11, the rise of the

neo-conservative moment, and the interests of the American military-industrial complex. The second looks at the international environment; it encompasses factors such as the perceived role of the US as global policemen, particularly after the fall of the USSR and with respect to the Middle East, the perception of the Iraqi Government as a threat to US national security, both due to the possibility that it could develop WMD and to the alleged support to al-Qaeda, and the belief that military intervention can be a suitable way to establish a democratic government. This categorisation, based on whether a factor was linked to the nature of US society or to the broader historical context has proved useful in determining the forces shaping the preferences of the actors of my study. Nonetheless, it has the same limitation of every abstract classification: it tends to simplify the complexity of reality. Specifically, given the role played by the US in contemporary history, a classification based on the distinction between domestic and foreign policy has the weakness to ignore to which extent the latter and the former are interrelated. The choice of a qualitative approach seemed inevitable, given how to answer my research question I had to consider a high number of unmeasurable variables. My methodological choice allowed me to compare and evaluate said variables in ways that would not have been possible by the use of statistical data.²

2.4. Process tracing

The next step in designing my research was to choose a qualitative method, and I found myself deciding between two options: case study and process tracing. I opted for the latter, which seemed better suited to build a theoretical model from the study of an isolated case, whilst at the same time explaining why said case was in contrast with a widely used model. Specifically, in my work I tried to explain the causal mechanism behind the US decision to attack Iraq, despite the presence of evidence that suggested how a similar course of action would have had a negative impact on the American interests. Simultaneously, I tried to elaborate a theoretical model alternative to the rational actor one, and able to explain similar cases. According to the classification elaborated by Beach and Pederson, my work was a combination of theory-building and outcome-explaining process tracing. The two authors differentiate between both based on the researcher's goals. In the case of theory building the focus is on developing a model that can be used to study similar events, whereas the other variant has a rather self-

² *Ibid.* p. 10.

explanatory name, and instead of looking for general rules it has the ambition to exhaustively explain the outcomes under analysis.³

Like in the case of theory-building, I started by collecting evidence to prove the causal mechanism behind an event; specifically, which elements led the American government to attempt regime change through military intervention in Iraq. Afterwards, I used the data collected to build hypothesis capable of explaining what I considered to be a discrepancy with the rational actor model. For instance, one of my hypotheses was that the political instability faced by Iraq after the removal of Saddam Hussein from power seemed to be relatively predictable given the Department of State (DOS) resources. However, due to the cultural characteristics of the Republican establishment in power at the time, similar considerations were overlooked in favour of the Department of Defense assessment that a war was necessary to guarantee the country's national security.

Another possibility is that regime change was deemed an attainable goal, maybe due to the positive outcomes in Europe and the Far East after WWII. At the same time, there are some elements in my work and in my approach to the case that could lead to it be classified as an example of outcome-explaining process tracing. Firstly, this is evident by my main ambition; in the previous example the focus is on creating a theory to explain a single case, whereas my aim was to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the case under analysis. For this reason, I took ample account of what Beach and Pedersen define as 'non-systematic mechanisms'⁴, for example the unique position of the US in the international system, and the almost simultaneous occurrence of two major events such as the end of the Cold War and 9/11.

In light of the above, if we choose to consider as the main distinction between the two variants the ambition to apply the research findings to similar cases, and given my goal to elaborate a model alternative to the rational actor one, I would classify my work as theory-building. However, since in order to provide with a satisfying explanation of the reasons behind the war I had to look at several case-specific aspects, I think that it would be possible to consider my thesis as an example of outcome-explaining process tracing. Perhaps the distinction between the two variants, whilst useful in theoretical terms and applicable to textbook examples, can be side-lined under certain conditions.

³ D. Beach and R. Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2013, pp. 16-19.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 35

In my view, the ambition to provide general theoretical insights from the analysis of an empirical case, and the goal to offer a comprehensive explanation of the same case should not be mutually exclusive. Moreover, my work seems to fit with the definition of Deviant Case Study, a work aimed at explaining the discrepancies between an empirical case and a theoretical claim.⁵ Moses and Knutsen notice how this kind of case study can either be used to reinforce an existing theory by proving how the case under analysis significantly diverges from the theoretical model referred to, or with the opposite aim of showing the weaknesses of it. Specifically, I attempted to argue against the rational actor model, and its main axiom that states have the ultimate goal to maximise their returns. In order to do so, I tried to identify the causal mechanism behind the decision-making process that led to the war. As mentioned in the section two of this chapter, I share the positivist axiom that the world could be theoretically understood through deterministic mechanics. Nonetheless, the study of large groups of individuals requires consideration of a number of variables so high that the final result can be indistinguishable from a stochastic system. In my view, process tracing (specifically the outcome-explaining variant) makes it possible to reconcile this contrast by allowing for a reasonably accurate theoretical approximation of the events observed on the empirical level.

With respect to the conceptualisation of the key notions used in my work, I started with the concept of ‘rationality’, drawing from the existing literature on the rational actor model. As suggested by Beach and Pedersen, I focused on the concept of rationality and its absence, rather than categorising it as an interval scale variable or trying to offer a definition of its opposite.⁶ The second concept that I defined is ‘success’, in the context of a military operation. I relied on the existing literature and on qualitative data, and unlike with the previous case, I worked under the assumption that the success of an operation can be considered as an interval scale variable. As for most works based on qualitative methods and induction, my work is vulnerable to several criticisms. It could be argued that either one, or both, of my premises are incorrect: that the government of the United States was not in the position to predict the war’s outcomes, or that said outcomes were desirable. It may also be possible that in my analysis I overlooked some fundamental variable, for instance, due to my limited knowledge of Iraqi society. Nevertheless, I do not see any particular weakness under the methodological aspect.

⁵ J. Moses and T. Knutsen, *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 134-135

⁶ D. Beach and R. Pedersen, *Ibid.* pp. 49-50

2.5. Case selection

In order to explain why I chose this case, I should start by clarifying whether my main goal was to confute the rational actor model or to explain the reasons behind the Iraq War. As noticed in the previous section, I was interested in both aspects and I am not able to offer a definitive answer to this question. On one hand, my interest for American history, and specifically military history, long predates my studies in international affairs. On the other hand, the notion that, perhaps, it is a hazardous approximation to assume that political actors behave rationally seemed increasingly convincing to me over the course of the last few years.

Consequently, I am open to the opportunity of applying some of the findings of this research to other cases. In this regard, and emphasising the theory-building aspect of my work, I might say that I chose the Iraq War because it seemed a strong example of irrationality on behalf of the American-led coalition. Nonetheless, this was not my only motivation; other factors that played a role in my decision were the considerable number of sources in English, the implication that my case has in relation to post-conflict institution building, and the fact that the war has already been analysed within the framework of the rational actor model.⁷ Moreover, whilst the Second Gulf War is not the only war fought by the US with unsatisfactory outcomes, the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan seemed to me more justifiable due to the specific historical circumstances (namely the Cold War for the former and the presence of al-Qaeda in the country for the latter).

In light of the above, the case that I have chosen seemed the best option, at least in the context of contemporary military history. However, it may be useful to explain why I decided to focus on military affairs rather than on a specific economic or political decision. This is partly due to the history of international relations theory: since the birth of this discipline, both realism and liberalism tried to describe, explain, and predict the mechanisms behind armed conflict between states. Besides, given the irreversible impact that war has on the states involved and the lives of their citizens, it would be logical to assume that governments would be extremely careful when deciding on starting a new conflict. Accordingly if, as I have argued in my thesis, this is not the case we could hypothesise that states will be even less rational when deciding on other matters.

Lastly, I believe that the situation in the Middle East had a tremendous impact on the Western world in the preceding two decades. An example of this with regard to Europe is the refugee

⁷ T. G. Jakobsen and J. Jakobsen, *The Game: A Rational Actor Approach to the US-led Invasion of Iraq*, 2003, *Strategic Analysis*, 33:5, 2009, pp. 664-666. (DOI: 10.1080/09700160903064497)

crisis that followed the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and the impact it had on the political discourse in the European Union. On account of this, I think that a work aimed at improving the current understanding of how the West sees the Middle East and interacts with it could offer some relevant insights on a current topic.

2.6. Data sources

As is often the case for process tracing, my work required me to collect a substantial amount of data. I relied on written and audio-visual sources, examined while taking into consideration the fact that for a correct interpretation of texts, it is necessary to consider the social and ideological systems that produced them.⁸ I started by looking for secondary sources in support of the two assumptions on which my research is based, namely that the Iraq War was a failure and that this outcome was predictable. To this end, I relied on scholarly work from different theoretical backgrounds, both on the Second Gulf War and on the feasibility of regime change in general. I also used quantitative data relating to the costs of the war; when available, I looked at speeches and policy documents from representatives of the US government.

In order to avoid confirmation bias, I also presented some evidence against my assumptions, looking at peer-reviewed works in support of the notion that the war was necessary and its outcomes desirable. I relied exclusively on secondary sources, although I believe it would have been extremely useful to collect data by interviewing individuals involved with the decision-making process that led to the war, as well as Iraqi citizens and ONG operators with first-hand experiences of the conflict. In fact, the lack of primary evidence may be the greatest weakness of my study, although I tried to minimise it by looking at a diverse range of reliable secondary sources.

The second part of my work was aimed at building a hypothesis alternative to the rational actor model and able to explain the irrational behaviour of the United States, and to achieve this goal I analysed the works of American academics in support of an aggressive foreign policy. Moreover, I studied the arguments in favour of the war presented by politicians and pundits using as a criterion for my selection the level of notoriety of the individuals selected. When possible, I looked at transcripts from congressional debates and at speeches; I found the latter particularly helpful, given my ambition to elaborate a decision-making framework based on social constructs such as nationalism and ideology rather than on rationality. This was probably due to the fact that the political discourse is rarely based on cost-benefit analysis, but rather on

⁸ I. Hodder, "The Interpretation of Documents and Material Culture", in Denzin, K. N. and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, Thousand Oak, Sage, 1998, p. 112.

an ideologically one-sided interpretation of reality. As for the first part I included data in support of the opposite claim, which is that the war is understandable within the framework of the rational actor theory, and I argued for the contrary.

2.7. Data analysis

Research Question	Domestic Politics	International Politics
Was the war desirable?	Data source: Quantitative data on the costs of the war. Causal Mechanism: Impact on the US economy.	Data source: Historical documents about the rise of ISIS. Causal Mechanism: Surge of anti-Americanism.
Was the US government able to predict its outcomes?	Data source: Department of State and International Institutions assessment of the situation before the war.	Data source: Academic texts on the feasibility of regime change.
Why was the war fought anyway?	Data source: Rhetoric of the US establishment at the time. Causal Mechanism: Nationalistic sentiment after 9/11	Data source: Academic texts on the hegemonic position of the US after the end of the USSR Causal Mechanism: The US government ambition to strengthen its influence in the Middle East.

(Figure 1)

In order to analyse the data collected, with the purpose of proving the two above-mentioned preliminary assumptions and answer my primary and secondary research question, I started by grouping my data in two macro-categories: US domestic politics and international politics. Afterwards, I further divided my material using as a criteria the research question to which each

source was contributing by exposing a specific causal mechanism. In Figure 1, I offer an example of my data analysis framework; the data presented in Columns 2 and 3 are not meant to be a comprehensive description of my material.

Whilst this conceptual framework was a useful tool for classifying data, I do not think that the dichotomy between domestic politics and international politics provides us with an accurate representation of reality. Nonetheless, a similar discussion is not relevant to my study, and it rather belongs to the debate on whether international relations is a subfield of Political Science or an independent discipline. Overall, in my analysis I used an inductive method comparable to traditional historical analysis, trying to account for all relevant aspects of the problem.

2.8. Summary

This chapter was meant to be a blueprint for those interested in understanding how I conducted my research. I started it by restating my research questions and the theoretical ambitions of my thesis, and in doing so I explained my position with regard to ontology and epistemology. Afterwards I presented the general design of my work, focusing on why I decided to adopt a qualitative method and how this choice was influenced both by my research questions and by my philosophical approach to knowledge.

Having established the reasons behind my qualitative approach, I proceeded to explain how I came to the conclusion that process tracing was the most appropriate method to conduct my research. In the section about process tracing, I also made some considerations on the fact that my work is a hybrid between theory-building and outcome-explaining process training, and how the two variants share many similarities. The fifth section of this chapter offers a description of why I selected the case of the Second Gulf War: the determining factors were my interest for US politics and the apparent contrast between the decision to start the war and the rational actor model. Lastly, I explained my process to select, classify, and analyse data, an aspect that I will further discuss in my literature review.

As stated before, my primary goal was to explain the inconsistencies between the behaviour of the US government and the main tenet of the rational actor model, namely that states choose their policies with the goal of maximising their preferences. At the same time, I realise how it is simplistic to assume that a state is able to clearly predict the future; therefore, a good portion of my work has been devoted to proving that in this case, it was not just a failure in predicting

a future outcome, but a deliberate choice to ignore information available to act in conjunction with a specific narrative. Finding out the reasons behind this choice was the aim of my research.

3. Theoretical Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, my thesis has the goal to analyse the decision-making process behind the Iraq War. To this end, I will rely both on empirical and theoretical sources, drawing extensively on international relations theory and foreign policy analysis (FPA). For this reason, it seemed appropriate to include two separate literature reviews; this chapter will look at theoretical sources, and the next one at studies focused on the Second Gulf War. With regard to the theoretical aspects, I divided my sources into two groups: the first one covers IR theory, the discipline studying how international actors interact with each other, while the second group includes FPA, the branch of political sciences focused on how states form and execute their foreign policy preferences.

There are considerable similarities between the two disciplines, to the extent that FPA can be classified as a sub-field of IR investigating human decision-makers.⁹ For this reason, I started by presenting the two main strands of IR, the rationalist approach and the constructivist one. In the context of positivist theories I looked at realism and liberalism, focusing on how the two theories explain the logic behind wars and the ways in which states identify and address their security threats. The next section deals with constructivism and its main assumption that states' behaviour is not pre-determined by exogenous factors, but to a significant extent a consequence of social environment. Afterwards, I discuss the rational choice theory; specifically the rational actor model, according to which states will select the course of action that, based on the information available, will allow them to maximise their profits. Lastly, this chapter will discuss an alternative approach to the rational choice theory, the social constructivist approach. This last model emphasises the role of socially constructed concepts, such as national identity and national interest, in shaping the preferences of decision-makers.

3.2. Positivist theories of international relations

The two main positivist approaches to IR, while very different in their interpretation of human behaviour and in their understanding of the forces driving it, share some relevant similarities in relation to epistemology. Both schools of thought adhere to what has been defined as scientific realism, with the word realism used to describe a positivist epistemology rather than the

⁹ V. M. Hudson, *Foreign policy analysis: Actor-specific theory and the ground of international relations*. Foreign policy analysis, 1(1), 2005, p. 21.

homonymous IR theory.¹⁰ In line with their epistemological assumptions, realists and liberals alike believe that the world works according to the causal mechanisms described by their respective theories; even so, it would be an oversimplification to assume that positivists do not recognise the limits of theory. On the contrary, perhaps due to their awareness of the world's complexity, they try to rationalise events by classifying them within theoretical categories. Alongside these descriptive and explanatory functions, positivists tend to rely on theories' predictive power. This is in line with the historical origin of international relations, a discipline developed to address policy-making issues such as war and inter-state cooperation.

On one hand, theory can be useful in addressing real world situations, on the other hand relying on a pre-determined framework presents the risk to overlook relevant aspects of the problem under analysis. This is due to theories' tendency to emphasize specific parts of reality to the detriment of others deemed marginal by the theoretical model selected. The existence of a dichotomy between theory and practical experience has been noted since the beginning of IR, and is still relevant despite various attempts to reconcile the two aspects.¹¹ Alongside the divide between theory and practice, positivists also disagree on the nature of mankind. Realists adopt a Hobbesian ontology, according to which individuals (or states in the case of IR) compete with each other in order to survive. Liberals believe in a Kantian ontology, in which human nature is to cooperate for the collective good. Whilst both theories evolved over time, generating new strands that often had little in common with the classical approaches, the different view on humanity summarised above can still be used to differentiate between these two schools of thought.

The main consequence of a Hobbesian outlook on international affairs is the assumption that states will try to maximise their influence, as long as conditions permit. In the eyes of realists, such behaviour is inevitable due to the scarcity of resources and the desire for power rooted in human nature. More recently, structural realism argued that competition amongst nations is the consequence of the state of insecurity proper of an anarchic international system, as summarised

¹⁰ J.J. Mearsheimer and S.M. Walt, *Leaving theory behind: Why simplistic hypothesis testing is bad for International Relations*. *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(3), 2013, pp. 432-433. (DOI: 10.1177/1354066113494320)

¹¹ S. Guzzini, *The ends of International Relations theory: Stages of reflexivity and modes of theorizing*. *European Journal of International Relations*, 19 (3), 2013, pp. 528-529. (DOI: 10.1177/1354066113494327)

by the security dilemma.¹² This kind of approach, definable as constructivism *ante litteram*, due to its focus on how states' preferences are a consequence of the external context, appears to be quite influenced by the political situation during the Cold War: an uncertain system characterised by two superpowers on the edge between increasing their influence and mutually assured destruction.

Realists analysed extensively the effect of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) on the international system, a relevant topic for my thesis given how one of the reasons behind the US invasion of Iraq was the presence of such weapons in the country. According to Waltz, the threat of a nuclear holocaust can contribute to a safer international environment. The American author recognises that even the prospective of a conventional war between the USA and the Soviet Union would have been catastrophic enough to dissuade the two superpowers from a direct confrontation; however, even in recent times, the father of defensive realism observed how states acquire nuclear weapons to dissuade their enemies, rather than for offensive ends.¹³ This position has been shared by classical realists, such as Gilpin who observes how the existence of nuclear weapons led states to prioritise the avoidance of total war.¹⁴ Nonetheless, in line with the above-mentioned sceptical attitude towards mankind's ability to exist in peace, he notices how a change in the nature of warfare may not be sufficient to change human nature, and thus the nature of the international system.

The other main positivist approach, liberalism, can trace its roots back to the Enlightenment. It evolved from the writings of political philosophers such as Rousseau and Kant, and is based on the assumption that men 'want to live by each other's happiness - not by each other's misery'.¹⁵ Accordingly, the various strands of liberalism emphasised the roles played by democracy, free trade, and international institutions in avoiding war.

¹² K.N. Waltz, *The origins of war in neorealist theory*. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18(4), 1988, pp. 619-620.

¹³ K.N. Waltz, *Why Iran should get the bomb: Nuclear balancing would mean stability*. *Foreign Affairs*, 2012, p. 4.

¹⁴ R. Gilpin, *The theory of hegemonic war*. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18(4), 1988, p. 612.

¹⁵ *The Great Dictator*, dir. Charlie Chaplin, USA, United Artists, 1940.

In relation to democracy, the Liberal argument is that citizens of a democracy will refrain from supporting a war, given how they would have to bear the consequences. A corollary to this argument, originally elaborated by Paine, is that democracy should be spread through military means when possible. A similar belief is reminiscent of the rhetoric behind the 2003 intervention in Iraq, even though it should be pointed out how the idea that democracy can be imposed through regime change has not been unanimously accepted by Liberals.¹⁶

The second claim of liberalism is that international trade will increase the costs of war, given how states will be economically interdependent. Similarly, the third axiom elaborated by Kant states that international institutions play a similar role by increasing cooperation, by providing forums for negotiation, and by monitoring on states' compliance with international agreements. After World War I, President Wilson (incidentally, the only US President with a Ph.D. in Political Sciences) and the other leaders of the victorious powers tried to implement empirically this theory by instituting the League of Nations, which was the forerunner of the United Nations. Today, the European Union has been identified as a successful example of how economic and political integration can prevent conflicts. Nevertheless, it has been argued that the peace experienced by Western Europe was more the consequence of the security-structure created by the United States than of trade and international institutions.¹⁷

In recent decades, the role played by international institutions has been one of the central areas of disagreement between realism and liberalism; the former sees them as tools used by states to maximise their preferences, the latter as independent actors able to exert a considerable influence.

3.3. Post-positivist IR theory

Next to the above-mentioned positivist perspectives, IR theory saw the emergence of alternative approaches characterised by the tendency to question the conventional interpretation of reality. If we choose to visualise the different ontological attitudes of IR theories in a spectrum (similar to the one used to place political parties in relation to their stance with regard to social or

¹⁶ D. L. Rousseau and T. C. Walker "Liberalism: a theoretical and empirical assessment." In Balzacq, T. and M. Dunn Cavelti, (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, London, Routledge, 2016, pp. 23-24.

¹⁷ T. Barkawi and M. Laffey, *The imperial peace: democracy, force and globalization*. *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(4), 1999, pp. 419-420.

economic issues),¹⁸ with realism and liberalism on the right end of it and poststructuralism on the left, constructivism could be considered as the *via media*. The fundamental difference between the positivist theories and constructivism is that the latter hypothesise the existence of some constants in human behaviour, whereas the former maintains that such constants are the product of specific circumstances.

In contrast, critical constructivists and poststructuralist scholars argue against the existence of universals, challenging concepts such as ‘state’ and ‘identity’.¹⁹ Instead, they focus their attention on how language simultaneously shapes and is shaped by our perception of external reality. In the same way as the roots of realism can be found in nation-states diplomacy, poststructuralism is heavily influenced by contemporary European philosophers, such as Lacan and Wittgenstein.

In this work I will mainly rely on constructivism, since I consider this theory closer than Poststructuralism to my methodological and epistemological framework. Moreover, one of my arguments is that a contributing factor in the decision to start the war was the US perception of itself as a superpower tasked with defending democratic ideals on a global level. A similar argument has been made by Hopf with regard to the Vietnam War; the constructivist scholar argued that the US refused to withdraw its troops because a similar course of action would have been in contrast with its identity as a great power.²⁰ The corollary of this assumption is that any attempt to understand or predict states’ behaviour should be based on the specific characteristics of the actors and the environment in which they operate, rather than on pre-determined structures. In my opinion, a strong empirical evidence in support of this view can be found in how the attitude of humanity towards several behaviours has changed over the course of time. For example, institutions such as slavery and absolute monarchy used to be extremely common, whilst today they are almost universally deemed unacceptable.

It is important to emphasise how I do not see constructivism as necessarily in contrast with the two positivist theories. For example, it would be difficult to ignore how classical realism is able to explain European politics accurately, at least until the first half of the 20th century. Similarly,

¹⁸ See Alexander Wendt’s 1999 work *A social theory of International Politics* for a similar, albeit different, classification of IR theories on the “holism/individualism” and “materialism/individualism” axes.

¹⁹ C. Epstein, *Constructivism or the eternal return of universals in International Relations. Why returning to language is vital to prolonging the owl’s flight*. *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3, 2013, p. 502-503. (DOI: 10.1177/1354066113494669)

²⁰ T. Hopf, *The promise of constructivism in international relations theory*. *International security* 23, no. 1171-200, 1998, pp. 172-173.

by focusing on the interactions between Western democracies in the post-war years, it is possible to observe an empirical demonstration of the pacifying effects of democracy and international institutions. A possible explanation of this could be that norms and ideas have a causal impact, leading actors to behave differently according to the different historical circumstances.²¹ If that is the case, constructivism does not seek to disprove *a priori* the validity of the claims made by other schools of thought, but rather tries to look at history from a different level of analysis.

Specifically, constructivism seeks to find out the norms shaping states' preferences, thus addressing why states and other international actors do not adhere to a fixed behavioural model. Given how said cultural norms are abstract concepts, constructivists are faced with the problem of proving their existence and their effects without being able to conduct conventional measurements; generally, this is addressed by relying on qualitative research methods such as Process Tracing and by looking at significant public statements by the political actors studied.²² Like other fields of social sciences, IR is characterised by the structure vs. agency debate. Positivists maintain that human behaviour is determined by the pre-existing structure of the international system, whereas constructivists and poststructuralists believe that actors are influenced by constantly evolving social norms and identities. If we agree on the assumption that states' actions and preferences are products of their identities, the next step is understanding how these identities are formed. According to Wendt, identities are the consequence of states' institutional roles and of their perceptions of each other.²³

I am under the impression that actors (understood here as individuals and organisations besides states) can be aware of their identities, and use them to promote specific interests. In the case analysed in this thesis, the argument could be made that after the First Gulf War and 9/11, a large portion of the American public opinion identified Arab countries as a threat to their security. My argument is that this perception was encouraged by a part of the US establishment, due both to ideological reasons and to economic interests. Furthermore, given the relational process behind the formation of identities, it stands to reason how the American intervention

²¹ J.T. Checkel, *Norms, institutions, and national identity in contemporary Europe*. *International Studies Quarterly*, 43(1), 1999, p. 108.

²² T. Farrell, *Constructivist security studies: Portrait of a research program*. *International Studies Review*, 4(1), 2002, pp. 60-61.

²³ A. Wendt, *Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics*. *International organization*, 46(2), 1992, pp. 397-398.

contributed to shape, especially in the eyes of the Iraqi citizens, the identity of the US as an imperialistic and oppressive force. As in the previous case, this identity was instrumentalised by individuals and organisations hostile to the United States, thus creating the kind of threat that the war was meant to address.

3.4. Foreign policy analysis and rational choice theory

Foreign policy analysis developed as an independent discipline in the years following World War II, in an attempt to reconcile the study of empirical cases with the more abstract findings of IR theory.²⁴ In order to do so, early FPA scholars focused on the decision-making process preceding the enactment of specific policies. Drawing from psychology and other social sciences, FPA research tried to identify and explain behavioural patterns by employing different levels of analysis, ranging from the broad social context of a country and the organisational culture of the institution investigated to the individual level.²⁵ In the context of the Cold War, the ability to predict the actions of other states brought considerable practical implications, thus attracting the interest of decision-makers outside of the academic world. This empirical potential, alongside its normative ambitions, has led to the growth of the discipline to the present day.

With regard to institutions, there is no consensus on whether they act according to optimal strategies. As noticed by March and Olsen, the simple observation that once-powerful institutions have now disappeared suggests that institutions are not immune to mistakes.²⁶ This has led to a tendency to shift the focus of political science from institutions and legislations to individuals, which resulted in the adoption by some political scientists of the rational choice model, a framework originally developed for the study of economics. This model is in contrast with the behavioural one, generally adopted in sociology. While the latter concentrates on the role played by social status and learned responses in shaping the preferences of individuals, the

²⁴ V.M. Hudson “The history and evolution of foreign policy analysis” In Smith, S., A. Hadfield and T. Dunne, (Eds.), *Foreign Policy*, 3d ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 16.

²⁵ V. M. Hudson and C. S. Vore, *Foreign policy analysis yesterday, today, and tomorrow*. Mershon International Studies Review, 39(Supplement_2), 1995, pp. 226.227.

²⁶ J. G. March, J. P. Olsen, *Rediscovering institutions*. New York, The Free Press, 1989.

former is more focused on the decision-making process itself.²⁷ According to rational theory, actors select a course of action by evaluating the consequences of their decisions and by trying to predict their future preferences.²⁸

These assumptions require the creation of a theoretical model of rationality capable of explaining how individuals identify the criteria guiding their assessment of the consequences of a specific behaviour. Several such models have been developed, which March divided into two groups. The first one consists of models whose common denominator is the assumption that actors are aware of the justifications and consequences of their decisions. It includes the following theories: limited rationality, focused on the actors' tendency to simplification; contextual rationality, which stresses the role played by the simultaneous occurrence of different factors in the decision-making process; game rationality, which emphasises competition between individuals; process rationality, which shifts the focus from the outcomes to the process itself. The second group encompasses models questioning the assumption that actors are fully aware of the ramifications of their actions, thus diverging from the traditional understanding of actors being rational. It includes the adaptive rationality model, influenced by psychology and neurosciences and focused on the subconscious aspects of decision-making; the selected rationality one, emphasising how decisions are influenced by procedures and social roles; the posterior rationality model, according to which goals are determined *a posteriori* by choices.²⁹

Each of the above-listed theories focuses on a different aspect of decision-making, and perhaps the case could be made that they are largely complementary rather than mutually exclusive. What they have in common is the attempt to explain how individuals operate in conditions of uncertainty, both in respect of an action's effects and to the desirability of said effects. Moreover, they deal with the problem of group choices: social sciences tend to analyse large groups of individuals, and FPA is no exception. Even though at times it can be useful to treat states as abstract individual entities, even the most autocratic regime's decisions will be the

²⁷ K.A. Shepsle, "Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach" In Farr, J., J.S. Dryzek and S.T. Leonard, (Eds.), *Political Science in History: Research Programs and Political Traditions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 280.

²⁸ J. G. March, "Bounded Rationality, Ambiguity, and the Engineering of Choice." In Elster J., (ed.), *Rational Choice*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986, pp. 144-145.

²⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 147-150.

product of the interactions of several people. From a purely theoretical perspective, a possible way to account for this problem is to aggregate the utility functions of the individuals involved in the decision-making process;³⁰ even so, a mathematical approach would not be particularly effective when evaluating, for example, the influence that the DOS or large energy companies had in determining the decision to start the Iraq War.

The solution offered by the rational actor model is to consider the government as a unitary decision maker, with a specific set of options, goals, and an understanding of the consequences of each course of action.³¹ While Allison recognises how strategic goals are usually not translated into utility functions, he makes the assumption that states are still able to maximise their utility intuitively. With regard to the case object of my study, the US government was faced with two alternatives:³² invading Iraq or attempting diplomacy with Saddam's government. The rational actor model would suggest that the choice of the former was motivated by a comparison of the consequences more likely to stem from the two strategies, and the effect of said consequences on national security.

A counterargument to this interpretation would be that decision-makers were biased in assessing the consequences of their actions, given how they already preferred the military option for cultural and economic reasons. Nonetheless, the rational choice may not be the one that maximises positive returns but the one that minimises negative ones. Accordingly, it could be argued that the US government deemed the potential threats caused by inaction worse than the human and economic costs of prolonged war. I am under the impression that the basic tenet of the rational actor model, the understanding of states as individual actors committed to maximise their preferences, requires to account for a large number of case-specific variables in order to avoid generalisations. Otherwise, the risk is to replace the framework offered by the model with a mere empirical assessment of the situation, loosely based on utilitarian considerations.

³⁰ I. Gilboa, *Rational Choice*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010, p. 73.

³¹ G. T. Allison, *Conceptual models and the Cuban missile crisis*. *American political science review*, 63(3), 1969, pp. 693-694.

³² Given that the purpose of this chapter is to present the rational actor model, I only listed the two main alternatives. In the following ones, I will analyse the feasibility of other possible course of action, such as regime change without military intervention.

3.5. Social constructivist approach

The main difference between the classical approaches, presented in the previous section, and the constructivist ones is in the latter's tendency to reject the assumption that preferences and expectations are exogenously determined. Constructivists make the argument that preferences are not given, but the products of the social context in which actors operate. Moreover, they challenge the belief that subjective utility is the primary criteria behind political decisions. This position is influenced by the findings of cognitive psychology, which in the last decades questioned individuals' capacity for rational choices due to their preference for simplicity and consistency.³³

In respect of simplicity, the argument could be made that decision-makers will privilege current threats and opportunities and overlook the historical background. For instance, when the US leaders decided to remove Saddam Hussein from power, they may have willingly minimised the consequences of regime change on the country's pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions. With regard to consistency, understood as a tendency to push aside data in contrast with a given belief system, Stein cites the example of the argument used by US defence experts when faced with the discovery that Iraq was not in possession of WMD. The Bush administration, whose declared purpose in starting the war was to disarm Iraq of said weapons,³⁴ nevertheless argued that the war was necessary to prevent Iraq from developing or acquiring these weapons in the future. Such behaviour may be particularly common amongst politicians, given how acknowledging past mistakes is likely to have a negative effect on the outcomes of elections.

An argument in support of the use of a constructivist framework for FPA can be made by looking at the main tenet of constructivism, which is that reality is largely a product of the actors' behaviours and choices. Similarly, the study of foreign policy deals with how states or individuals determine and implement their courses of action according to their goals, thus shaping reality in the process.³⁵ While the rational actor model limits the range of options to those maximising the actors' utility function, a constructivist approach will take into considerations a much wider array of possibilities. Instead of trying to identify the most rational

³³ J.G. Stein, "Foreign policy decision making: Rational, psychological, and neurological models" In Smith, S., A. Hadfield and T. Dunne, (Eds.), *Foreign Policy*, 3d ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 132-133.

³⁴ "Bush, Blair: Time running out for Saddam" *CNN.com*, 31 January 2003, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/01/31/sprj.irq.bush.blair.topics/>, (accessed 6 March 2019).

³⁵ S. Smith, "Foreign Policy Is What States Make of It: Social Construction and International Relation Theory" In Kubáľková V., (ed.), *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World*, New York, M. E. Sharpe, 2001, p. 38.

course of action according to a purely instrumental assessment of the situation, constructivism will seek to understand what actors deemed appropriate based on the underlying social rules and institutions influencing them.

However, such an approach is not exempt from criticisms; while it may result in interesting findings when applied to past decisions, its normative potential may be limited by the determinism inherent in the assumption that actions are a product of rules and identities. A possible answer to this criticism is that institutions are able to socialize actors, thus altering their preferences.³⁶ This argument was used by Checkel with regard to European institutions, but it could be applied as well to the influence exercised by neo-conservative media and think tanks on the Bush administration. Perhaps, as showed by Allison's use of three different models in analysing the Cuban Missile Crisis, the two approaches can coexist in different stages of the decision-making process, given how a constructivist assessment of the causal mechanism leading to a course of action may contribute to a rational evaluation of its consequences. In a world where foreign policy choices are made according to the rational actor model, analysts may be misguided by overlooking norms-influenced choices. In a constructivist world, the knowledge of states' preferences can be used to predict how they will react to a determined situation.

So far, I focused my analysis on the differences between the rational actor model and the constructivist one. It may be useful to refer also to an alternative categorisation of FPA methods, proposed amongst other by Carlsnaes. The Uppsala professor differentiates between approaches based on the international system's structure, derived from IR theory, and approaches influenced by psychology and based on the actors' decisional mechanisms. While constructivism belongs to the first group, it shares some significant similarities with the Interpretative actor perspective.³⁷ Both methods see reality as the product of inter-subjective meanings, but the second turns its focus on how social rules influence individual decision-makers. In my view, given how the two approaches have a very similar ontology and epistemology, they should be considered as complementary. Accordingly, it could be hypothesised that each of the actor-based perspectives proposed by Carlsnaes lends itself to one of the structural-based approaches: in fact, a complete analysis of a foreign policy scenario

³⁶ J. T. Checkel, *International institutions and socialization in Europe: Introduction and framework*. International organization 59, no. 4, 2005, pp. 804-806.

³⁷ W. Carlsnaes, "Actors, structures, and foreign policy analysis" In Smith, S., A. Hadfield and T. Dunne, (Eds.), *Foreign Policy*, 3d ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp-118-124.

should account for systemic mechanisms as well as for individual characteristics, since its development will be affected by both. Carlsnaes himself proposes the creation of a similar model, based on the causal interactions between different levels of analysis.³⁸

3.6. Summary

This chapter has two functions in the economy of my thesis. The first one is to list the approaches to IR theory and FPA to which I will refer to throughout this work, thus allowing a clearer analysis of the peer-reviewed sources presented in the next chapter. The second one is to clarify my standing in regard to these theories, and how I intend to rely on them in building my own hypotheses. While my study will mainly draw from constructivism, since one of my goals is to question the effectiveness of the rational actor model in explaining the Second Gulf War, it seemed appropriate to me to present said model and how it evolved through time. As I highlighted several times over the course of this chapter, I do not see theories as dogmatic systems but rather as tools to understand reality. For this reason, I also included an overview of realism and liberalism; as shown in the following chapter, the findings of both schools of thought offer interesting insights on the behaviour of the United States in the Iraq War.

I also described the ideas of role and identity in the context of Constructivist theory; these concepts will have a central role in my attempt to define the ideological forces leading the US government to the questionable decision to start the war. In respect of FPA, after a brief introduction of the discipline itself, I offered an overview of the concept of rational choice and its multi-disciplinary appeal. Subsequently, I analysed how said model has been applied to political sciences, and in particular to international affairs. In the last section I looked at the social constructivist approach, understood both as a structural and as a psychological framework to study investigate foreign policy decisions. Finally, I mentioned my stance with regard to the agency-structure problem: given how the two dimensions are constantly interacting, I see no reason to prioritise one at the expense of the other.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 127.

4. Literature Review of Empirical Studies

4.1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide with an overview of the existing literature on the Iraq War. To this end, I selected a limited number of studies that have analysed the causes of the conflict, using the frameworks offered by IR theory and other approaches. I divided the articles into four categories, corresponding to the chapter's four sections. The first one contains two works focusing on the role played by the neo-conservative ideology in starting the war; in the second section, I reviewed two studies evaluating the causal link between the invasion of Iraq and external factors such as 9/11; the third one includes two papers arguing how the war was the product of a suboptimal assessment of the situation, due to decision-making bias and ideological factors. The articles in the last section differ from the others, since they analyse the war under the profile of international law. Both studies claim that the war was against the law, an element in support of my hypothesis that the Bush administration focused on the invasion's military aspect disregarding its political and legal consequences.

The purpose of the above-mentioned categorisation was to present my sources systematically, according to the common themes addressed by them. However, the studies discussed in this chapter share other significant similarities, given how they all deal with the Second Gulf War. With regard to the causes, there is a tendency in these articles to underline two determining elements: the neo-conservative ideology, shared by several high ranking members of the US government at the time, and the unprecedented impact of 9/11 on the American society. While the weights given to these two factors vary depending on the source analysed, the studies all agree that both were necessary. In respect of the outcomes, the works referred to in this chapter share the understanding that the Iraq War failed to accomplish its goals.

4.2. Neo-conservatism

The neo-conservative movement developed within the Republican Party in the 1970s, arguably as a reaction to the two major American parties' tendency to switch their positions on social and economic issues. An in-depth analysis of these dynamics falls outside the purpose of this work; however, it may be useful to mention how the Republican Party tried to appeal to Southern voters appalled by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed by the Johnson administration. In the context of domestic politics, this new generation of Republican thinkers supported a

traditional idea of society, opposing feminism and affirmative action.³⁹ With regard to foreign policy, Khong identifies four tenets of the neo-conservative ideology: a Manichean understanding of international politics, with the US and other liberal democracies opposed to totalitarian states; the belief that the American military should maintain its strength regardless of the Cold War's end; the notion that military force should be used to accomplish political goals, including the deposition of hostile regimes; a lack of faith in international law and institutions.

In 1998, eighteen neo-conservative intellectuals sent a letter to President Clinton advocating for military action against Iraq. While the letter was ignored by the Democratic President, several of its signatories held high-ranking positions in the Bush administration, particularly in the Department of Defence (DOD).⁴⁰ Khong's argument is that the presence in the US government of individuals acting in line with the above-mentioned tenets of neo-conservatism was a determining factor in the decision to invade Iraq, combined with what he defines as 'the one percent doctrine'. This doctrine, firstly formulated by Vice-President Cheney in the aftermath of 9/11, maintains that the US should take immediate action to eliminate any potential threat to its national security.

The second work analysed in this section shares Khong's assessment of the role of neo-conservatism in starting the war, and it further highlights the differences between it and realism. It does so by listing the four tenets of the Bush Doctrine, in many ways similar to the neo-conservative ones described above. The first one is the belief that the US should maintain and increase its hegemonic position, in contrast with the balance-of-power theory supported by realists. Secondly, the Bush administration supported a doctrine of pre-emption incompatible with Waltz's argument that states seek to develop WMD as a deterrent. Thirdly, the notion that, due to its military and ideological hegemony, the US should act unilaterally when in contrast with international institutions. Lastly, the Bush Doctrine maintained that military intervention was a feasible and desirable way to promote democratic values in foreign countries.⁴¹

³⁹ Y. F. Khong, "Neoconservatism and the domestic sources of American foreign policy: The role of ideas in Operation Iraqi Freedom" In Smith, S., A. Hadfield and T. Dunne, (Eds.), *Foreign Policy*, 3d ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp.317-318.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 323-324.

⁴¹ B. C. Schmidt and M.C. Williams, *The Bush doctrine and the Iraq War: Neoconservatives versus realists*. Security Studies, 17(2), 2008, pp.195-199. (DOI: 10.1080/09636410802098990)

The last argument, which could be compared to Paine's revolutionary liberalism, seems to be heavily influenced by two historical events. The first one is the successful pacification of Western Europe and Japan after WWII. In both cases, hostile powers became permanent allies of the US after military occupation: given neo-conservatives' intense faith in liberal democracy, it stands to reason that they expected similar outcomes in Iraq, and eventually in the whole Middle East. The second event in history to contribute to the Bush administration optimism in Iraq was the fall of the USSR, and the assumption that no other ideological system could restrain the spread of American values. As noted by Schmidt and Williams, realists are extremely critical of these understanding of democracy as a pacifying force. This is due to their understanding of states' behaviour as a consequence of the international system's structure, rather than of ideological forces. Moreover, realists correctly pointed out how a foreign military occupation was likely to cause nationalistic insurgencies, as was the case with the Vietnam War.⁴²

While neo-conservatism had a significant impact in shaping the US foreign policy, historical events are a product of the combination of ideas and circumstances. The next section will look at studies examining the circumstances that allowed for the Iraq War to happen.

4.3. Systemic factors

The first study presented in this section, conducted by Miller, explains the US invasion of Iraq as a consequence of the country's security strategy, in turn determined by the external features of the international system. The article identifies four possible approaches to security, two based on realist principles and two on liberal ones. With regard to the former, the offensive realist approach is characterised by a states' pursuit of hegemony, if necessary through the use of force; in turn, the defensive realist strategy to maximise security is based on deterrence and balance-of-power mechanisms. Similarly, offensive liberalism seeks to achieve stability through imposed democratisation, whereas the defensive variant relies on trade and international institutions.⁴³

According to Miller, a state will follow one of these four models depending on the combination of two systemic conditions: the level of external threat, and its position in the international

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 206-207.

⁴³ B. Miller, *Explaining changes in US grand strategy: 9/11, the rise of offensive liberalism, and the war in Iraq*. *Security Studies*, 19(1), 2010, pp. 32-34.

system. In a multipolar system, such as the Cold War, a great power will pursue a realist strategy. In a hegemonic system, a liberal hegemon like the United States will try to promote its dominant ideology, thus adhering to one of the two liberal approaches. Furthermore, the level of external threat will determine whether a state is more likely to follow the offensive or the defensive variant of the two ideologies.⁴⁴ When applied to the Second Gulf War, this framework suggests that the United States adopted a liberal offensive foreign policy. This is reflected by the rhetoric behind the intervention, widely discussed in the previous section and based on the assumption that the instauration of a democratic regime in Iraq would have pacified the region. In Miller's view, the threat of Islamic terrorism was the independent variable leading the Bush administration to change its foreign policy preferences, and start pursuing a liberal offensive agenda. While the IR scholar recognises the extent of neo-conservatives' contribution to the formulation of the Bush Doctrine, he ultimately regards it as a consequence of systemic factors.

These findings may appear in contrast with the constructivist analysis presented in the second article. According to Flibbert, the war was caused by a common set of beliefs shared by several individuals within the US governments, beliefs powerful enough to persuade a large portion of the American population. These ideological forces are the same identified by the other articles discussed so far: an extreme confidence in an enlightened American hegemony; the understanding that the international system is based on the dichotomy of good and evil; the belief that states' foreign policy is a direct consequence of their system of government, in accordance with the tenets of liberalism; the conviction that military force was the most effective way to achieve regime change in Iraq.⁴⁵

In my view, the contrast between the two analyses is not as relevant with regard to this empirical case as it is on theoretical grounds. Miller identifies 9/11 as the underlying cause of the war, since it led the US to embrace an aggressive foreign policy. Flibbert does not deny that 9/11 had 'an enormous influence on an ideational level',⁴⁶ but he argues that the invasion of Iraq was only possible due to the ideas prevalent at the time among the American establishment. While

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 36.

⁴⁵ A. Flibbert, *The road to Baghdad: Ideas and intellectuals in explanations of the Iraq War*. *Security Studies*, 15(2), 2006, pp. 312-313. (DOI: 10.1080/09636410600829570)

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 347.

the two authors attribute a different weight to ideological and structural factors, they seem to agree that both played a significant role in the causal mechanism leading to the war.

This is suggested by the fact that both the models presented in the articles require the coexistence of both factors to explain the war. I am under the impression that, without the occurrence of 9/11, the ideological forces identified by Flitner would not have had the same impact on the Bush administration. The same reasoning applies to Miller's model: it stands to reason that, in the absence of the neo-conservative movement, the US would have reacted in a different way to the same systemic factors. This is in line with Miller's assessment of the rise of neo-conservatism as an intervening variable,⁴⁷ mediating between the independent one, the higher level of external threat, and the dependent one, namely the different foreign policy strategy which led to the war.

4.4. The war as a mistake

As stated before, one of the goals of this thesis is to challenge the application of the rational actor model to the Iraq War. In the work analysed here, Lake attempted a similar assessment of bargaining theory, concluding that it fails to provide a throughout explanation of the conflict's causes. The article starts by discussing how, prior to the outbreak of the conflict, the behaviour of the two countries was influenced by domestic and external actors alike, thus challenging bargaining theory's assumption that states are unitary actors operating in a closed system.⁴⁸ Moreover, the American scholar argues that the theory under analysis fails to account for the post-war stage, thus overlooking an important element when assessing whether to start a war or not. Lastly, Lake observes how the US and Iraq acted in contrast with bargaining theory's premise that actors are rational.

This last argument, which the article indicates as the main one, is motivated by the observation that, given the wars' enormous human and economic costs, both parties had an interest in seeking an alternative resolution of the conflict. With regard to the US, some of the possible alternatives listed in the study are containment, UN inspections, a proxy war. In all the scenarios hypothesised it would have been logical for Hussein to comply with the US requests, given how

⁴⁷ B. Miller, *Ibid.* p. 63.

⁴⁸ D.A. Lake, *Two cheers for bargaining theory: Assessing rationalist explanations of the Iraq War*. *International Security*, 35(3), 2010, pp.8-9.

the consequences of an invasion would have been the almost certain deposition of the Baathist regime.⁴⁹

Lake's conclusion is that these options were not considered because of Saddam's underestimation of the United States' will to start the war, the Bush administration biased estimate of the invasions' costs and outcomes, its unrealistic expectations in respect of the Iraqis attitude towards the coalition forces, and the influence of domestic groups who lobbied for the war. Overall, this work makes a compelling argument in favour of my assumption that the US acted irrationally. Such irrational behaviour consisted of ignoring information in contrast with a pre-determined set of preferences, and it can be explained by a combination of structural and ideological constraints.

The second article analysed in this section identifies these ideological constraints as a combination of the neo-liberal and the neo-conservative ideologies. The influence of the former, which can be inferred from an analysis of President Bush's speeches, led the US government to assume that the deposition of Hussein's regime would have resulted in the Iraqi people embracing western-democracy and the free-market. As a result, the coalition forces found themselves unprepared when faced with armed resistance. With regard to neo-conservatism, its lack of confidence in international institutions determined the decision to rely on unilateral military action to implement regime change, thus dismissing alternative approaches.⁵⁰ According to Dodge, the war's failure was caused by the contrast between reality and the above-mentioned ideological categories, preventing decision-makers from adapting their choices to the situation on the ground. This interpretation could appear overly deterministic, given its assumption that individuals act according to pre-determined ideological forces. However this is not the case: through the analysis of new information, foreign policy actors are able to adjust their strategies and modify their own analytical categories.⁵¹

In the case of Iraq, the US government was not able to do so. Dodge attributes this failure to the disproportioned influence exercised by the axioms of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. Another possible explanation could be that, whilst it is true that decision-makers can change

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 17-22.

⁵⁰ T. Dodge, *The ideological roots of failure: the application of kinetic neo-liberalism to Iraq*. *International Affairs*, 86(6), 2010, pp.1274-1276.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 1272.

their analytical framework and their preference, this process is gradual and time consuming. For instance, it could be expected that in the future, when faced with a scenario comparable to the one that led to the Second Gulf War, the US will act differently due to the lessons learnt from their past mistakes.

4.5. The war as a crime

The last aspect that I will take into account in this chapter is the conformity of the Iraqi War with the international law existing at the time. The two articles reviewed in this section argue that the US, and the other members of the coalition, acted in open violation of both the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello*. With regard to the former, the violation is due to the lack of legitimate reasons to use force against a sovereign nation. As regards the last, the breach of international law was caused by the coalition forces' conduct after the UN recognised the US and the UK as the occupying powers in Iraq.⁵²

As noted by Kramer and Michalowski, the UN Charter only authorises preventive war in self-defence from an existing or imminent threat. According to the US government, Iraq represented such a threat, due to the country's links to al-Qaeda and possession of WMD; however, both claims were later proved to be inaccurate.⁵³ Moreover, it is open to interpretation whether, even if proven to be true, they would have been sufficient to justify the use of military force against Iraq, given how the latter was not on the verge of attacking the US.⁵⁴ Paradoxically, as remarked by Simpson, the 'imminent threat' argument would have worked better if used by Iraq to justify a preventive attack against the US, due to the Bush administration's openly hostile remarks in the stages leading up to the invasion. Lastly, whilst the UN Charter gives Council the power to implement punitive measures against a state accused to violate international security, such measures should follow a progressive criterion, and were not authorised to begin with in the case of Iraq.⁵⁵

⁵² R. C. Kramer and R.J. Michalowski, *War, aggression and state crime: A criminological analysis of the invasion and occupation of Iraq*. *British Journal of Criminology*, 45(4), 2005, p. 452 (DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azi032)

⁵³ *Ibid.* pp. 448-449.

⁵⁴ G. Simpson, *The war in Iraq and international law* *Melb. J. Int. L.*, 6, 167, 2005, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁵ R. C. Kramer and R.J. Michalowski, *Ibid.* p.450

In respect of the US coalition's breaches of international law after the occupation, Kramer and Michalowski list four violations of the *jus in bello*. First, the US failure to secure the country in the years following Hussein's deposition; second, the attempt to force the country to apply the principles of market economy; third, the violations of International Humanitarian Law perpetrated while fighting the Iraqi insurgency; lastly, the torture of Iraqi prisoners held without due process by coalition forces.

While these arguments against the legality of the war have only limited practical utility, given how it is highly unlikely that the countries and individuals involved with these alleged crimes will face any sanctions for them, they still raise some interesting theoretical questions. The ease with which the US violated the principle of territorial integrity by invading Iraq, and then violated the basic human rights of Iraqi citizens, suggests that the principle equality amongst nations and individuals theorised by international law has only limited relevance.⁵⁶

From a Realist point of view, this could be explained by the overwhelming military power of the US. A Liberal analysis might suggest that Iraq, and consequentially its citizens, were outside of international law's protection due to the undemocratic nature of Saddam's regime. A constructivist take, suggested by Wendt's essay on the inevitability of a World State and related on Wallerstein's world systems theory, could be that Iraqis were dehumanised, due to the ideological forces prevailing in the Western political establishment at the time. For the purpose of my thesis, the Bush administration's determination to fight an illegal war is a further argument in support of its irrationality.

4.6. Summary

The studies discussed above examined the Second Gulf War from several perspectives. Some of them understood it as the consequences of ideological constraints, rooted in American society and favoured by the historical circumstances, whereas others emphasised the role played by 9/11 in the context of the hegemonic position occupied by the US at the time. Despite the different weight attributed to each factor, the authors examined seem to agree when it comes to identifying them. This substantial unanimity in respect of the causes leads me to believe that, while it is possible that other elements have been overlooked, the ones mentioned so far had a determining role in causing the war.

⁵⁶ G. Simpson, *Ibid.* p. 16.

All the works considered express a negative judgement over the decision to start the war, a judgement that I tend to agree with. Whilst the bias inherent to this assessment may be the greatest limit of my work, it is shared by the vast majority of scholars: realists, such as Maersheimer and Waltz; neo-conservatives like Fukuyama; constructivists, like Wendt. Over the years, the war has been condemned by political figures like former UN Secretary General Annan;⁵⁷ former British Prime Minister Blair, perhaps the fiercest supporter of the invasion outside of the Bush administration;⁵⁸ US Secretary of State at the time of the Second Gulf War Powell.⁵⁹

In my review of the literature on the topic, I included analyses from different fields: IR theory, bargaining theory, American politics, international law. I did so in order to offer a multi-disciplinary framework to understand the different causal forces behind the war. The next two chapters will be dedicated to analysing the process that led to the invasion, integrating these findings with my own observations in order to elaborate an original explanation of the conflict.

⁵⁷ E. MacAskill and J. Borger, “Iraq war was illegal and breached UN charter, says Annan”, *The Guardian*, 16 September 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/sep/16/iraq.iraq> (accessed 17 March 2019).

⁵⁸ R. Mason, A. Asthana and H. Stewart, “Tony Blair: I express more sorrow, regret and apology than you can ever believe”, *The Guardian*, 6 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/06/tony-blair-deliberately-exaggerated-threat-from-iraq-chilcot-report-war-inquiry> (accessed 17 March 2019).

⁵⁹ A. Jaffe, “Colin Powell: Invasion of Iraq ‘Badly Flawed’”, *nbcnews.com*, 6 September 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/colin-powell-invasion-iraq-badly-flawed-n422566> (accessed 17 March 2019).

5. The causes of the conflict

5.1. Introduction

While there is not a unanimous consensus on the causes of the Iraq War, the literature reviewed so far suggests several recurring factors. In this chapter I group these factors in three macro-categories. The first one deals with the ideological forces that shaped the preferences of the American government at the time. The second section analyses how the war was a consequence of the Bush administration's assessment of potential threats to national security. The last one focuses on the international environment, considering which factors external to the domestic politics of the US contributed to the Iraq War.

Each section is further subdivided into three subsections. With regard to the ideological causes, the subsections are focused firstly on the expansionistic rhetoric mainly adopted by neo-conservatives; secondly, on the widespread belief that democracy can be imposed through military intervention; finally, on the argument that the war was necessary to stop the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Baathist regime. My analysis of the war as part of the US security strategy looks at the following elements: first, the threat represented by Islamic terrorism, particularly in the climate of fear that followed 9/11; second, the later disproved theory that Saddam had access to WMD; third, the implications of the war in the context of Middle Eastern politics.

Lastly, I take into account the particular historical moment in which the war occurred, focusing on the international environment at the time. To this end, I analyse first the unipolar moment lived by the US after the end of the Soviet Union, second, the role played by the UN in trying to prevent the conflict, and third, the alleged economic interest that American multinational companies had in implementing regime change in Iraq. If that was the case, the war can be considered as part of a neo-colonialist project carried out by the US in accordance with the interests of private corporations. I included this last factor in this section given how economic interests seems to belong more to the external sphere than to the national security one,⁶⁰ although they are evidently connected to both.

I listed these causal factors in order of decreasing importance, both with respect to this chapter and within each section. This is in line with my hypothesis that ideological factors were the main variable affecting US behaviour, given how they shaped the understanding that the Bush

⁶⁰ Similarly, I do not see how the alleged interests of American companies could be included among the ideological factors.

government had of the international scenario, and its preferences with regard to the use of military force. In the framework of IR theory, one might say that the first section offers a constructivist analysis, the second section a realist one, and the third section a liberal one. However, while these categorisations are helpful for classifying and analysing information in an orderly way, it is my view that all of the elements considered in this chapter are interrelated, and the contribution that each had on the war's outbreak cannot be exactly quantified.

5.2. Ideological causes

I discussed earlier the assumption that ideas can influence the behaviour of states by changing their preferences, and how the act of transmitting new social norms can be referred to as socialisation. The hypothesis presented in this section is that in the case of the Iraq War, the neo-conservative movement successfully transmitted its norms and values to the US government. This successful socialisation was allowed by 9/11; in the aftermath of the attack, the neo-conservative understanding of international politics as a conflict between an enlightened western civilisation and undemocratic regimes gained significant traction in large portions of the American establishment. This process shows some similarities with the popularity of internationalism after the horrors of two world wars. While ideas of European integration and a supranational human rights regime existed for centuries, they were internalised by the international system only after the unprecedented devastation caused by the two conflicts.

The claim that the Bush administration's foreign policy agenda was not particularly influenced by neo-conservatism before 9/11 is supported by two main observations. Firstly, the rhetoric adopted by then-governor Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign led some observers to worry about the Republican candidate's isolationist tendencies.⁶¹ Secondly, it can be inferred from the fact that the three highest ranking officials involved with the Bush administration's foreign policy were not directly affiliated with the neo-conservative movement. Secretary of State Powell, whom after his one term in office has been quite critical about the war, has been described as a liberal internationalist.⁶² Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor (and, after Powell's resignation, Secretary of State) Rice, were collectively defined by Boot, an influential neo-conservative author himself, as 'traditional

⁶¹ A. Flibbert, *Ibid.* p. 315.

⁶² M. Boot, *Myths about neoconservatism*. Neoconservatism, New York, NY, 2004, p. 45.

national-interest conservatives'. However, several exponents of the movement had high-level positions within the administration. Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense and later President of the World Bank, is usually indicated as the highest ranking neo-conservative official involved with President Bush's foreign policy.⁶³ In this section, I will analyse how, without directly occupying any of the main positions in the Bush administration, neo-conservatives authors and policy-makers managed to shift America's foreign policy, thus making a decisive contribution to the beginning of the war.

5.2.1. Military expansionism

One of the main tenets of neo-conservatism is that the United States should maximise its military power, and not refrain itself from using it to address international crisis or potential security threats.⁶⁴ With respect to Iraq, the consequence of this assumption was the belief that the US should remove Saddam from power through any means necessary. This position was reflected by the contents of the 1998 letter addressed to President Clinton by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a Washington-based neo-conservative think tank.⁶⁵

As mentioned before, some of the letter's authors later served in the Bush administration; besides Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of State Armitage, Under Secretary of State Bolton (currently National Security Advisor in the Trump administration), and Ambassador Khalilzad were all involved.⁶⁶ However, the first eight months of the Bush presidency were characterised by the disagreement between those officials favourable to military intervention against the Baathist regime, and those supporting alternative measures, such as international

⁶³ G. Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana*. London, Routledge, 2013, p. 2.

⁶⁴W. Brown, *American nightmare: Neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and de-democratization*. *Political theory*, 34(6), 690-714, 2006, p. 697.

⁶⁵ J. Dumbrell, "The neoconservative roots of the war in Iraq", In Pfiffner, J. and Phythian, M. (Eds.), *Intelligence and national security policymaking on Iraq: British and American perspectives*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 28.

⁶⁶ Over the years, Khalilzad held several positions in the Bush administration: he was Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, and the United Nations. In 2018 he was appointed by the Trump administration as special envoy to Afghanistan.

sanctions and inspections.⁶⁷ The former's position was strengthened after 9/11; this is evident from President Bush's instructions to Secretary Rumsfeld regarding the draft of an invasion plan for Iraq. The choice of an approach based on military force rather than international sanctions is in line with two of the neo-conservative axioms discussed in the previous chapter. First a proclivity for war, seen both as the most effective means of changing undesired regimes, and as an occasion to reinforce the American military machine. Second, the belief that the interests of the United States should not be limited by international institutions. While the invasion of Iraq was carried out by a multi-national coalition, it can still be considered as a unilateral act; given the bipartisan support for the congressional authorisation for the use of force, there is every reason to assume that the United States would have initiated the war even without the support of the United Kingdom, Australia, or Iceland.⁶⁸

The process which led the Bush administration, Congress, and a large portion of the country to change their preferences regarding Iraq seems to be a textbook example of how, given the appropriate circumstances, the beliefs of a minority can spread rapidly. In the case under analysis, this process could be summarised in three steps. First, the 9/11 attacks led the American population to feel under constant threat. Second, the neo-conservative movement took advantage of this climate of fear by portraying Iraq as a menace to national security, managing to persuade the President of the necessity to end this menace through military intervention. Lastly, the President persuaded Congress and the country to start the war. If we accept this causal chain, it seems reasonable to assume that a different administration would have reacted differently to the same scenario. For instance, it is likely that Secretary Powell would not have been persuaded by the neo-conservatives' arguments had he been president at the time,⁶⁹ given how he was one of the most vocal opponents to unilateral military action within the Bush administration.

Overall, while it is not in itself a sufficient explanation of the war, the neo-conservatives' penchant for military action should be considered as one of the ideological causes behind the

⁶⁷ D. Mitchell and G. Tansa, *Anatomy of failure: Bush's decision-making process and the Iraq war*. Foreign Policy Analysis 5, no. 3, 2009, pp. 274-275.

⁶⁸ *Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq resolution of 2002*, PUBLIC LAW 107-243—OCT. 16, 2002.

⁶⁹ The choice of Secretary Powell for this hypothetical scenario is due to the fact that he was considered as a potential Republican candidate in the 1996 presidential elections.

decision to invade Iraq. The war was seen as an occasion to project power in the region, demonstrate the effectiveness of military force to achieve political objectives, topple a regime which was deemed a threat since decades.

5.2.2. Democratisation

While the belief in military force as a tool to implement regime change is mainly a prerogative of the neo-conservative movement, the notion that democracy should be promoted throughout the world is widespread amongst Western countries. According to the neo-liberal understanding of the concept, democracy is a system of government based on the following elements: first, a plurality of political parties, regularly competing in elections; second, the adoption of a capitalist socio-economic order, based on private propriety and the limitation of states' powers; and lastly, openness to international trade, which is reflected by the enactment of policies friendly to multinational corporations.⁷⁰

The rhetoric used by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair to justify the invasion highlights one of the main ideological forces behind the war; namely, the belief that the Iraqi people would have benefited from the imposition of a neo-liberal regime.⁷¹ Moreover, the coalition's leaders seemed to be persuaded that the population of Iraq would have spontaneously embraced a societal organisation inspired by the Western model, if only given the opportunity to do so.⁷² There are different possible explanations for this understanding of the situation, which was later proved to be inaccurate. Perhaps, the US was encouraged by the successful experience in democratising Germany and Italy after WWII. While it is true that the two European countries made the transition from a totalitarian system to parliamentary democracy, it would be hazardous to compare their cases with that of Iraq due to the significant differences in the respective pre-existing political institutions.

Another historical event that may have reinforced the Bush administration's trust in forced democratisation is the fall of the USSR. Later in this chapter I will discuss the geopolitical implications of the Soviet Union's end; with regard to the ideological dimension, it is understandable how the demise of the United States' historical rival reinforced the perception of democracy as the superior political system. Once again, this argument would be based on the

⁷⁰ J. Bridoux, *"It's the political, stupid": national versus transnational perspectives on democratisation in Iraq*. *The International Journal of Human Rights* 15, no. 4, 2011, p. 555. (DOI: 10.1080/13642987.2011.561987)

⁷¹ T. Dodge, *Ibid.* pp. 1269-1270.

⁷² D. A. Lake, *Ibid.* p. 39.

questionable assumption that Iraq and the USSR can be compared. Moreover, unlike in the cases of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the Soviet Union did not collapse due to external military intervention.

Alongside the historical precedents discussed above, it is likely that the coalition's faith in the power of democracy was due to philosophical reasons. Specifically the conviction that the societal model adopted by Western countries will always be preferred, given its inherent tendency to maximise collective interests. This is in turn due to two factors: first, the assumption that a free-market economy and an electoral political system will allow individual to act according to their preferences; second, the empirical observation that citizens of Western democracies are on average healthier and wealthier than citizens of totalitarian regimes. However, both notions seem to be based on a biased understanding of political systems. The concepts of electoral democracy and a free-market should be adapted to the socio-political conditions of the country analysed. For instance, in the case of Iraq, the ethnic diversity of the country should be taken into account when determining its optimal political system. Similarly, the superior living conditions of most of the Western World may be the consequences of other historical factors, such as the positive externalities generated by colonisation and neo-colonisation.

In conclusion, the idea that democracy is the optimal political system for any given country, and that it can be spread through military action, was not in itself the cause of the war in Iraq. However, it played a major role in justifying the intervention from an ethical perspective, and it influenced the manner in which the state-building phase of the conflict was handled by the occupying forces

5.2.3. Human Rights

Another ideological force that played a role in the decision to initiate the war was the notion that the international community is legitimised to end human rights' violations perpetrated by its members. This idea derives from the assumption that sovereign states have a responsibility to protect their citizens against genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.⁷³ The corollary of this principle is that military action, in this case euphemised as

⁷³A. J. Bellamy, *The Responsibility to Protect and the problem of military intervention*. International Affairs, 84(4), 2008, pp. 622-623.

humanitarian intervention, is acceptable if a state fails to protect its citizens, either by committing the above-mentioned crimes itself or due to its inability to prevent them.

Over the course of the 1990s this principle was at the root of several humanitarian interventions, from Bosnia to East Timor, and it was carried out with varying degrees of success. However, the US invasion of Iraq differs from previous operations for at least two factors: firstly, as discussed with regard to its legitimacy, it was not authorised by the UN Security Council; secondly, the government of Iraq never consented to the intervention.⁷⁴ One further difference is that in the years before the war, Saddam's regime had not committed crimes that would have justified a humanitarian intervention.⁷⁵ Lastly, given its irreversible consequences on the infrastructures and population of the country concerned, military action is understood as a measure of last resort; in the case of Iraq, especially considering how the Baathist regime did not represent an imminent threat to the local population, the US should have considered other options before launching a large scale military operation.⁷⁶

In light of the above, the general consensus seems to be that the United States did not attack Iraq because of humanitarian concerns. Particularly, as noted by Kramer and Michalowski, given the fact that the worst human rights' violations committed by Saddam Hussein happened in the 1980s, when his regime was supported by the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administration due to the war against Iran. Nevertheless, the fact that the war was not motivated by humanitarian goals does not mean that the notions of humanitarian intervention and responsibility to protect should be ignored as causal factors.

Firstly, because it is reasonable to assume that the several successful operations conducted in the decade before the war contributed to inform the American government's expectations when invading Iraq. A consequence of this could have been that the DOS and DOD were not expecting to deal with a hostile local population, given their assumption that the Iraqi people were amenable to being liberated from a brutal dictatorship.⁷⁷ Secondly, even if we assume that the well-being of the Iraqi people was not one of the Bush administration's priorities, the

⁷⁴ K. Roth, "War in Iraq: not a humanitarian intervention." In Wilson, R. (Ed.) *Human rights in the "War on Terror"*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 43-44.

⁷⁵ R. C. Kramer and R. J. Michalowski, *Ibid.* p. 451.

⁷⁶ S. N. Macfarlane, C. J. Thielking, and T. G. Weiss. *The Responsibility to Protect: is anyone interested in humanitarian intervention?* *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 5, 2004, pp. 978-980. (DOI: 10.1080/0143659042000232063)

⁷⁷ It is important to underline how I am not questioning the suffering of the Iraqi people under Saddam's regime, but rather the incorrect assessment made by the US government of their reaction to a foreign military occupation.

argument that the war was necessary to prevent ongoing crimes against humanity proved useful in legitimising the intervention. This argument was particularly convenient when the war's costs and duration proved superior to what was anticipated. Moreover, the first assumption is in line with Lake's observation that the US failed to devise a plan to 'win the peace'; the second, with the rhetoric adopted by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair when justifying the operation, especially after the claims that Saddam was linked to al-Qaeda and in possession of WMD were disproven.

5.3. National security

In the previous section, I discussed what the literature indicates as the three main ideological causes of the war. In the following pages, I analyse the structural constraints likely to have influenced the US decision-makers. I do not consider this method as alternative to the constructivist approach used above, but rather as complementary to it. While the structure vs. agency debate is a central issue in social sciences, the goal of this thesis is to describe the causal mechanisms leading to a specific war, and not to discuss social ontology. Accordingly, I consider the systemic factors addressed in this section as independent variables, in the same way as the ideological ones examined earlier.

The invasion of Iraq was part of a specific national security strategy designed by the Bush administration and heavily influenced by a neo-conservative understanding of world politics. The catalyst of this strategy was 9/11 because of how it exposed the country's vulnerability to unconventional warfare. Before the attacks, the US was prepared to fight conventional wars in foreign territory, against nuclear and non-nuclear states. After 9/11, the American government came to the conclusion that hostile regimes also represented a threat as potential sponsors of international terrorism.⁷⁸

The corollary of this new understanding of security was the notion that such regimes had to be removed from power pre-emptively, a notion already central in the neo-conservative discourse before the attacks. Moreover, in the case of Iraq the decision to start the war may have been motivated by the belief that Hussein had developed, or was in the process to develop, WMD. Lastly, it is possible that the war was meant to be the first (or, considering Afghanistan, second) step of a regional security strategy aimed at removing anti-American governments from the Middle East. While the first two causes have been often referred to by President Bush and several members of his administration, the last one appears less often amongst the official

⁷⁸ B. Miller, *Ibid.* p. 48.

justifications of the war. This is probably due to how the US wanted to avoid being represented as an imperialistic actor, while implementing its neo-colonialist strategy for the region.

5.3.1. Islamic terrorism

The alleged links between Iraq and al-Qaeda are relevant for the purposes of my research in two respects. First, I will analyse whether the ties between Saddam's regime and Islamic terrorism were used by the Bush administration to justify the intervention in the eyes of the American population. Second, I will consider them as a causal factor; although later disproved, the evidence pointing at Iraq as a potential threat to the United States' national security may have been a determining factor in convincing the American government to overthrow the Baathist regime.

My hypothesis is that the national trauma caused by 9/11 affected the country on multiple levels. On a governmental one, it changed the administration's approach to national security, lowering the threshold for pre-emptive action. For some individuals within the government, this was probably influenced by political considerations, given how it allowed for the implementation of the same foreign policy that the neo-conservative movement had been advocating for decades. However, it stands to reason that even those officials not particularly close to neo-conservative ideas were led to adopt more aggressive positions in order to avoid the national catastrophe of another terroristic attack on American soil. With regard to public opinion, 9/11 led a majority of the country's population to overcome its usual reticence over the use of military force. This phenomenon was caused by the Bush administration's strategy to frame the conflict as part of a larger 'War on Terror', aimed at preventing future terroristic attacks.⁷⁹ In order to find evidence of this process, Gershkoff and Kushner conducted a content analysis of President Bush's speeches from 2002 to 2003; their study found that, in the timeframe under consideration, references to terrorism were accompanied by mentions of Iraq and Saddam on a regular basis.

It remains to be seen to which extent the potential between the Iraqi government and al-Qaeda should be considered as one of the wars' causal factors, or as a mere rhetorical tool used to persuade the population of the need to fight said war. Given Iraq's history of conflict with the United States, the White House started investigating the existence of connections between

⁷⁹ A. Gershkoff and S. Kushner, *Shaping public opinion: The 9/11-Iraq connection in the Bush administration's rhetoric*. Perspectives on Politics, 3(3), 2005, p. 527.

Hussein and al-Qaeda immediately after the 9/11 attacks. However, the outcomes of these investigations proved less than satisfactory in establishing any connections.⁸⁰

Badie's study emphasises how President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and Secretary Rumsfeld appeared determined to invade Iraq despite the lack of solid evidence of link between the country and Islamic terrorism. Eventually, as one might expect given the apical positions held by the three individuals, their determination led the administration to regard Saddam as a threat to national security, and to act accordingly. President Bush's decision to attack Iraq despite the absence of conclusive proof of it having any ties to al-Qaeda may have been caused by his fear of being regarded by history as an indecisive leader. Whilst the invasion of Afghanistan was arguably a sufficient reaction to 9/11, the US President reckoned advisable to also overthrow Saddam's regime, due to the belief that doing so would have further reduced the threat of terrorism for his country.

5.3.2. Weapons of mass destruction

The possibility that Saddam Hussein had access to WMD was, alongside his potential links with international terrorism discussed above, the United States government's main justification for the war. The two arguments are interconnected; according to the rhetoric adopted by the Bush administration, Iraq was going to either use weapons of mass destruction against the US, or to supply such weapons to al-Qaeda in order to strike America. The hypothesis that Iraq posed a similar threat to the US was based on two assumptions: firstly, that Iraq was in possession of chemical, biological, or nuclear armaments; secondly, that it intended to use said weapons against the US, either directly or by sponsoring terrorist groups.

The validity of the second claim has already be discussed in the previous subsection with respect to Iraq's links with Islamic terrorism; with regard to the possibility of Saddam using WMD directly against the US, it is hard to see how a similar strategy would have benefited the Iraqi president. Most likely, the Baathist regime would have used said weapons as a deterrent or against its domestic opposition. This hypothesis, considered by Lake, could also explain Saddam's reluctance to openly comply with international inspectors. By doing so, Hussein would have showed his weakness to Iran and other local actors. Nevertheless, while the scenario of Saddam using WMD against the Kurdish and Shiite minorities of Iraq is undoubtedly tragic, it is hard to see why it would justify pre-emptive military action.

⁸⁰ D. Badie, *Groupthink, Iraq, and the war on terror: Explaining US policy shift toward Iraq*. Foreign Policy Analysis, 6(4), 2010, pp. 287-288.

With regard to the first claim, it is mainly supported by the fact that Saddam's regime used chemical weapons on several occasions during the war against Iran, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. While at the time of the conflict Hussein was supported by the US government, after the First Gulf War the UN Security Council forbade Hussein from using, possessing, or developing WMD.⁸¹ The role of monitoring over Iraq's compliance with the resolution was given to the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), which operated between 1991 and 1999. In 2002 the Security Council adopted Resolution 1441, due to Iraq's failure to comply with the obligations set out in the 1991 document. The new resolution required Baghdad to grant to international inspectors unrestricted access to all facilities that could have been used to develop WMD;⁸² the Iraqi government, probably aware that a refusal would have resulted in military intervention, complied with the request.

The resolution was followed by a series of inspections, conducted by the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC). According to the final report presented by UNMOVIC, there was no evidence of the 'continuation or resumption' of programmes of weapons of mass destruction at the time of the inspections.⁸³ However, the Bush administration came to the opposite conclusion; in October 2002, a report drafted by 16 US intelligence agencies (and later disputed by the US Senate Intelligence Committee) stated that Saddam was in possession of chemical and biological weapons, and in the process of developing a nuclear arsenal.⁸⁴

It would appear that, as it was the case for the ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the US government's assessment of Saddam's WMD was based more on the desire to minimise any possible risk than on concrete evidence. Moreover, it seems that the Bush administration systematically disregarded evidence that contradicted the assumption that Iraq represented an imminent threat to national security. In the case analysed before, this approach could be explained as an attempt to persuade the public opinion of the need to start the war. With regard

⁸¹ UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 687 (1991)*, 3 April 1991, S/RES/687 (1991). <https://undocs.org/S/RES/687> (1991) (accessed 29 March 2019).

⁸² UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 1441 (2002)*, 8 November 2002, S/RES/1441 (2002). <https://undocs.org/S/RES/1441> (2002) (accessed 29 March 2019).

⁸³ H. Blix, "Thirteenth quarterly report of the Executive Chairman of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission", UNMOVIC, United Nations, 2003, p. 5. <https://www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/documents/S-2003-580.pdf>. (accessed 29 March 2019)

⁸⁴ R. B. Miller, *Justifications of the Iraq war examined*. Ethics & International Affairs, 22(1), 2008, p. 46.

to WMD, it is possible that the US government was trying to frame the war as legitimate within the framework of international law.

5.3.3. Middle Eastern politics

The invasion of Iraq is arguably part of a long-term strategy for the Middle East drafted by the Bush administration, a strategy aimed at promoting the United States' influence in the region by replacing hostile governments with friendly ones. This project is in line with the tenets of the Bush Doctrine, which was in turn characterised by a combination of neo-liberal and neo-conservative elements. Due to the former's influence, the US was focused on the promotion of democracy in the area and of an economic system inspired by the principles of the free-market; because of the latter, the Bush administration was committed to weaken, and if possible weed out, antagonistic players such as Afghanistan, Hamas, Iran, and Iraq. Simultaneously, Washington had to take into account the interests of its strategic allies, countries which in turn had conflicting interests such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US was recognised as the leading power in the region.⁸⁵

Against a similar background, it would have been logical for the Bush administration not to intervene militarily without first considering the consequences of war for local political balance. However, given the position of the United States' allies with regard to the war, it seems that Washington operated without paying attention to the geopolitical balance of the Middle East. Turkey refused to join the US-led coalition in 2003, a decision likely influenced by the country's domestic conflict with its Kurdish minorities and by the fear that Hussein's deposition would have reinforced the Kurdish forces in Iraq. Similarly, Saudi Arabia opposed the Second Gulf War on the grounds that the removal of Saddam's Sunni regime would have reinforced Iran, a Shia-majority state and its main competitor in the region. Iran, despite the religious difference with Iraq and the recent conflict against Saddam, opposed the war on ideological grounds while carrying a policy of substantial neutrality.

This approach can be explained by a combination of factors: firstly, the fear that the United States would have moved against Tehran after the conquest of Baghdad, given Iran's inclusion in President Bush's infamous 'axis of evil' speech; secondly, the need to support a Muslim country, albeit from a different denomination of Islam, attacked by a coalition of infidels; lastly,

⁸⁵ R. N. Haass and M. Indyk, *Beyond Iraq-A New US Strategy for the Middle East*. Foreign Aff., 88, 2009, p. 43.

the concern that the balance of power in the region would have moved in favour of Israel had Iraq become a client state of the US.⁸⁶

Israel, at the time governed by the conservative party Likud, did not officially support the invasion. However, according to Maersheimer and Walt's analysis of the Israel lobby's activities in the US, the Jewish state was unofficially in favour of intervention.⁸⁷ If that was the case, the pressure exercised by Israel should be counted amongst the war's causes. Nevertheless, I do not think that this last element should be considered a determining causal factor: this is due to the lack of evidence supporting the claim that Saddam represented a threat to the Jewish state at the time. Overall, I am under the impression that the decision to invade Iraq was not supported by a long-term strategical assessment of the wars' consequences on the Middle East, but rather by the United States' goal to extend its influence in the area. However, this approach may have jeopardised the region's security; not only by destabilising Iraq, but also by causing other Middle Eastern governments to fear the same kind of retaliation faced by Saddam's regime.⁸⁸

5.4. The International environment

This section is devoted to the analysis of those causal factors originated from the international environment. The decision to make this distinction among domestic and external factors may raise some concerns, given how the two areas are closely linked. My purpose is not to create a strict division between the two; my understanding is that, given how the war was a unilateral decision of the US government, both internal and external elements only became causal factors due to the influence that they exercised over the decision-making process of the Bush administration.

Nevertheless, I consider my categorisation appropriate because while the ideological tenets of neo-conservatism and the United States' national security strategy have originated predominantly from the country's political elites, the three variables discussed below are related to different contexts. The fact that these factors are discussed in the last section of this chapter

⁸⁶ K. Taremi, *Iranian foreign policy towards occupied Iraq, 2003–05*. Middle East Policy, 12(4), 2005, pp. 34-36.

⁸⁷ J. J. Mearsheimer and S. M. Walt, *The Israel lobby and US foreign policy*. Middle East Policy, 13(3), 2006 pp. 54-57.

⁸⁸ F. Heisbourg, *A work in progress: The Bush doctrine and its consequences*. The Washington Quarterly, 26(2), 2003, pp. 84-86. (DOI:10.1162/01636600360569702)

is not accidental; in my opinion, when compared to the ones discussed above, they exerted only a marginal influence on the decision to start the war. Similarly, the order in which I chose to analyse them in this section reflects my view regarding their significance as causal factors. However, my understanding is that it would be impossible to determine whether the war would have happened if any of these factors did not occur simultaneously with the others.

5.4.1. The fall of the USSR

The end of the Cold War had a profound effect on the international system. Without Moscow able to balance the American military and political might, the US found itself in an unprecedented hegemonic position. At the same time, Washington had to adjust its international strategy to the new systemic conditions. During the Cold War, the American leadership was undisputed, given how the United States was the only state able to shelter Europe from the threat represented by Soviet expansionism. In the years following the conflict, the US had to find a new approach to global governance, either one based on soft-power and multilateralism or on unilateral military action.⁸⁹ The Clinton administration was more inclined towards the former, whereas President Bush favoured the latter, particularly in the case of Iraq.

I discussed before how this penchant for military action had its roots in the neo-conservative ideology, and in the appeal exercised by said ideology in the moment of national vulnerability that followed 9/11. Here I will discuss my hypothesis that if the USSR had not collapsed in 1991, the United States would have been likely to avoid the occupation of Iraq. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that the Soviet Union would have been against a large-scale US military action in the Middle East. There are two reasons supporting this assumption: first, the instauration of a satellite state in the region would have shifted the regional balance of power in favour of the US; secondly, the unilateral use of military force to overthrow a hostile regime would have represented a dangerous precedent. It is impossible to determine the final outcomes of a similar scenario: perhaps, the US would have invaded Iraq anyway, thus choosing to risk a direct confrontation with the USSR rather than to show weakness after the 9/11 attacks; more likely, they would have tried to overthrow Saddam's regime through a proxy war, not unlike the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

⁸⁹ J. Agnew, *American hegemony into American empire? Lessons from the invasion of Iraq*. *Antipode*, 35(5), 2003, pp. 880-881.

Another element in support of the hypothesis that the fall of the USSR was a causal factor in the Iraq War is that, as noticed by Miller in his article on the rise of offensive liberalism, winning the Cold War reinforced in the American political elite the pre-existing idea that the neo-liberal democratic order was inherently superior to any other system of government. This is confirmed by the textual analysis of the Bush Doctrine carried out by Dunmire. In her work, the American scholar highlights how the US national security strategy constructed after 9/11 is based on the idea that after the end of the Soviet Union it was necessary for the United States to establish and defend a new unipolar world order.⁹⁰

Lastly, it may be interesting to note how in the current decade the increasing involvement of Putin's Russia in the Middle East is affecting the US strategy in the region, specifically with regard to the Syrian Civil War, where the US goal to overthrow Assad was prevented by Russia's strong ties with the Syrian president. While a comparison between the two scenarios goes beyond the scope of this work, the behaviour of the two countries in the Syrian conflict suggests that the Iraq War was at least facilitated by Russia's relative weakness at the time of the conflict.

5.4.2. The role of the UN

A few days before the invasion of Iraq, President Bush remarked in his Address to the Nation how years of diplomatic efforts aimed at disarming the country of WMD proved unsuccessful, leaving no other option but the use of force in order to protect the United States and the world from the danger of said weapons being used by terrorists. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the role played by Iraq's assumed possession of WMD and its ties to al-Qaeda as causal factors; now I will focus on President Bush's claim that diplomacy had failed to prevent the conflict, and that said failure of a peaceful resolution was motivated by the fact that 'we are not dealing with peaceful men'.⁹¹

More specifically, I will try to answer the following question: should the failure of the UN in preventing the war be counted among the causal factors of the war? If we accept President Bush's characterisation of the Iraqi government as determined to maintain its WMD at any cost, we must accept that there was no possible UN initiative, short of direct military action, able to

⁹⁰P. L. Dunmire, '9/11 changed everything': an intertextual analysis of the Bush Doctrine. *Discourse & Society*, 20(2), 2009, pp. 209-212. (DOI: 10.1177/0957926508099002)

⁹¹ *George Bush Address to the Nation on Iraq*, 17 March 2003, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0Rgtxf6d88>, (accessed 2 April 2019).

prevent the conflict. However, if we chose to work under the assumption that Saddam's ultimate goal was to stay in power, and given how his deposition was the only possible outcome of an invasion, it seems logical to assume that there were other possible solutions.

The main purpose of the United Nations is to prevent states from using force to solve political disputes, with two exceptions: cases where military action is authorised by the Security Council itself, and situations in which the use of force is the only viable way to protect a state's security. Despite the Bush administration's attempts to frame the war as the latter, the fact that Iraq agreed to allow UN inspectors into its territory in the month preceding the invasion strongly suggests that the country was not on the verge of attacking the US with WMD.⁹² While I do not think that the UN could have convinced the US government to refrain from invading Iraq, especially in light of the neo-conservatives' scant regard for international institutions, perhaps it could have been possible to convince Hussein to act differently, thus averting the war. In his assessment of Saddam's decision-making process, Lake hypothesised that the Iraqi president was unwilling to explicitly give up his WMD due to the fear that doing so would have exposed his regime to domestic and external threats.

If that was the case, the war could have been prevented if the UN had managed to convince Saddam of the imminent threat represented by the American military intervention, thus leading him to opt for the lesser of two evils. While this hypothesis may appear quite unrealistic, the idea that international institutions can prevent conflicts by acting as mediators between states is one of the pillars of liberalism. Therefore, while the causal connection between the United Nations' behaviour and the war is only limited, it seemed appropriate to include it in this analysis.

5.4.3. Economic interests

A common argument used by critics of the war is that the Bush administration started the conflict in order to control the country's considerable oil resources. In part, this hypothesis is linked to the personal connections between several members of the administration and the energy industry; both President Bush and Vice President Cheney had been high ranking executives of oil companies. Specifically, the latter's past as CEO of Halliburton seems to be the main element in support of the theory that the war was motivated by financial considerations, given how the multinational company was tasked with building pipelines and

⁹² T. M. Franck, *What Happens Now? The United Nations After Iraq*. American Journal of International Law, 97(3), 2003, pp. 610-611.

detention facilities in Iraq after the invasion.⁹³ Moreover, the assumption is based on the considerations that by gaining access to Iraq's oil the US have reduced their dependence from Saudi Arabia, the main exporter of the product in the world.⁹⁴

In light of the above, it may be useful to look at how 9/11 affected the Saudi Arabia-United States relations. While historically the two countries experienced friendly relations, after the attacks, part of the US establishment may have questioned the Gulf Kingdom's reliability as an ally. This is due different factors, including how al-Qaeda received material support from entities and individuals based in the Gulf Kingdom.⁹⁵ Against a similar background, it is understandable how the United States could have been interested in replacing Iraq's government with a friendlier one, thus minimising the negative repercussions with regard to oil imports in the event of a diplomatic conflict with Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, even assuming that similar strategical considerations influenced the Bush administration's decision-making process, it remains to be seen whether the claim that the US government invaded Iraq as a result of pressure exercised by private companies is true. It is undeniable that American companies, particularly in the fields of energy and security, gained access to the country thanks to the liberalisation of Iraq's economy that followed Saddam's deposition. However, it could be argued that the involvement of US companies in the reconstruction of the country was a mere consequence of the neo-liberal economic system imposed by the United States in order to democratise Iraq in accordance with the ideological principles discussed before in this chapter.

Another possibility is that private companies should be counted among the war's causal factors indirectly due to their ties with the neo-conservative movement. Historically, the militarisation of the Gulf has been a great source of revenue for what President Eisenhower defined as 'the military-industrial complex'.⁹⁶ The central role played by defence companies in shaping the

⁹³ P. Le Billon., *Corruption, reconstruction and oil governance in Iraq*. Third World Quarterly 26, no. 4-5, 2005, p. 696. (DOI: 10.1080/01436590500127966)

⁹⁴ M. Renner, *Post-Saddam Iraq: linchpin of a new oil order*. Foreign Policy in Focus, 1, 2003.

⁹⁵ J. S. Duffield, *Oil and the Iraq War: How the United States Could Have Expected to Benefit, and Might Still*. Middle East Review of International Affairs 9, no. 2, 2005, p. 14-15.

⁹⁶ T. C. Jones, *America, oil, and war in the Middle East*. The Journal of American History, 99(1), 2012, p. 212.

preferences of the United States' political classes has been widely discussed by the literature.⁹⁷ In the case of the Bush administration, it is likely that similar ties between companies and lawmakers had an influence of the decision to start the war, given how increasing military spending is one of the pillars of the neo-conservative movement. However, these private interests should not be counted among the main causal factors of the conflict; the reason I considered them is that it would be impossible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the war without taking into account of the economic implications of the war.

5.5. Summary

In this chapter I analysed the causal factors of the Iraq War, in accordance with the methodological principles of outcome-explaining process tracing. In doing so, I took into account ideological factors and structural ones, focusing with regard to the latter on both the domestic and the international scenario. While all the elements discussed above contributed to influence the decision-making process of the US government, I believe that the primary cause of the war was the set of principles adopted by the Bush administration.

However, without the climate of fear that followed 9/11, it is likely that the American government would have acted differently with regard to Iraq. Two ideas in particular seem to have affected the decision to start the war. The first one, inspired by neo-conservatism, is the notion that pre-emptive war is an acceptable and effective tool to project power and advance national security. The second idea, typical of a neo-liberal and Western-centric understanding of world politics, is summarised by Vice President Cheney's statement that 'we will be greeted as liberators'.⁹⁸

Nonetheless, I also accounted for other factors: the historical American strategy in the Middle East, the unipolar system caused by the fall of the USSR, and the economic implications of controlling one of the largest oil-exporter countries in the world. I did so because, at least in the case of the Iraq war, I do not think it would be appropriate to only focus on certain variables and overlook the overall political situation. For this reason, I worked under the assumption that if any of the causal factors mentioned above had not occurred, events would have developed differently.

⁹⁷ J. B. Foster, H. Holleman, and R. W. McChesney, *The US imperial triangle and military spending*. Monthly Review, 60(5), 2008, pp. 7-8.

⁹⁸ G. Rayner, "Iraq inquiry: Pentagon was convinced Army would be greeted with 'flowers on rifles'", *The Telegraph*, 3 December 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/6717529/Iraq-inquiry-Pentagon-was-convinced-Army-would-be-greeted-with-flowers-on-rifles.html> (accessed 4 April 2019).

In the next chapter, I will discuss my hypothesis that the war cannot not be explained through rational choice theory. In order to do so, I will mainly focus on how the ideological forces discussed above caused the American establishment to assess the situation un-objectively, thus selecting a course of action which led to suboptimal results. It may be useful to underline how rational choice theory does not state that actors are immune from committing mistakes; however, it maintains that they will select the policy which is more likely to maximise their returns in a given situation. This was not the case for Iraq: due to a specific set of beliefs dominant within the Bush administration, the war's consequences were heavily underestimated, and the alternative options were discarded.

6. The US: an Irrational Actor?

6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I looked at the war's causal factors individually, assessing how each one of them influenced the choices of the US government. In this chapter, I consider the decision-making process in its entirety, with a predominantly chronological approach. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first one mainly focuses on the events occurring from the 11 September attacks until 12 September 2002, the date on which President Bush made the case for military intervention in Iraq to the UN Security Council.⁹⁹ The second part covers the preparations for war, from the above-referenced speech until the beginning of the hostilities in March 2003. Furthermore, each section contains two subsections addressing a different set of events that occurred within the considered time-frame.

I start by analysing how in the aftermath of the attacks, the neo-conservative faction within the Bush administration managed to monopolise the American security discourse. The first subsection discusses how the US government successfully spread the notion that the US was at war with Islamic terrorism, and with those states supporting it. In the second one, I discuss how after obtaining considerable domestic support, President Bush tried to persuade the international community of the necessity of regime change in Iraq, thus laying the foundations of what came to be known as the 'coalition of the willing'.

The second section deals with the preparations of the invasion, particularly with regard to the US government's assessment of the war's duration and costs. In the first subsection, I focus on how from the beginning, regime change was considered to be the only acceptable outcome. Afterwards, I briefly summarise the first two months of hostilities, and then consider the long-term economic, political, and strategical consequences of the Second Gulf War.

The central theoretical proposition behind this chapter, and this dissertation in general, is that the war cannot be explained by the rational actor model. On account of this, my analysis underlines the elements which I regard as contrasting with the behaviour of a rational actor. Firstly is the belief that Iraq constituted a concrete threat to the United States' security, a belief that led the US government to overestimate evidence in favour of this claim, while ignoring the ones in contrast with it. Secondly is the understanding that regime change was the only way to neutralise the above-mentioned threat, thus essentially excluding any attempt to solve the conflict through diplomacy. Thirdly, perhaps the most importantly given its ramifications, is

⁹⁹ G. W. Bush, 'President's Remarks at the United Nations General Assembly', Office of the Press Secretary, 12 September 2002. www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html (accessed 16 April 2019).

that the Bush administration invaded Iraq under the mistaken impression that the conflict would have been short-lived, and the state-building phase would not have presented significant difficulties.

6.2. The War on Terror

The idea that the United States was at war with international terrorism is clearly present in the speeches made by President Bush in the aftermath of the attacks. The ideological approach of the Bush administration is evident by the rhetoric used by the President while addressing Congress, on 20 September 2001. In the speech, the American President underlined how the ‘War on Terror’ was going to be a clash between ‘justice and freedom’ and ‘fear and cruelty’.¹⁰⁰ President Bush also described the role of the US in the upcoming conflict; lead the ‘civilized world’ against those nations harbouring or supporting terrorism, and thus considered ‘hostile regimes’. Moreover, he remarked how every nation in the world was going to be either ‘with us, or with the terrorists’.¹⁰¹

The use of a similar rhetoric is not irrational per se, and it could be explained by the need to show strength and stability to the country and to the world after a national tragedy. However, in the light of the foreign policy decisions made by the Bush administration in the following months, it is possible to interpret some of the elements contained in the speech as early signs of the ideological attitude shown by the US government during the Iraq War. I am referring especially to the above-mentioned dichotomy between civilized states allied with the US, and enemies supporting terrorism. It is clear how a similar understanding of the international system may have facilitated the assumption that Iraq, a state non-aligned with the US and located in the Middle East, had ties with al-Qaeda.

A few months later, President Bush mentioned Iraq in the context of the War of Terror in the 2002 State of the Union. The American President listed Iraq, alongside North Korea and Iran, among the regimes sponsoring international terrorism. However, whereas the other two states are only referred to briefly, Iraq’s alleged possession of WMD is discussed in greater depth.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ G. W. Bush, *Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress*, 20 September 2001, Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush 2001–2008, 2008, p. 73 https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecordi/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf, (accessed 18 April 2019).

¹⁰¹ G.W. Bush, *Ibid.* p. 69

¹⁰² G. W. Bush, *State of the Union Address to the 107th Congress*, 29 January 2002, Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush 2001–2008, 2008, p. 106 https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecordi/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf (accessed 19 April 2019).

In mentioning the regime's past use of chemical weapons, the speech uses emotionally charged images such as 'the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children', also underlining how Iraq has expelled international inspectors from its territory. Moreover, President Bush emphasized how the threat represented by 'the world's most dangerous regimes' was imminent, and how the US and the international community had to act quickly in order to stop it. Overall, the analysis of the 2002 State of the Union shows the first signs of the rhetoric used to justify the invasion of Iraq. This fact suggests that the US government was already determined to act militarily against the Middle Eastern state, and in the process of shaping the public opinion on the subject.

The notion that rogue states in possession of WMD constituted the greatest threat to America and the world, particularly due to the likelihood of such states equipping terrorist organisations with similar weapons, is also present in the 2003 State of the Union. With respect to Iraq, the American President stressed how the US was going to address the threat posed by Saddam's regime, accused of systematically ignoring international pressures to disarm, through the use of military force.¹⁰³ The speech still considers the possibility that Hussein will willingly abandon his WMD program; however the rhetoric used by the President, centred on the troop's heroism and on America's role in defending freedom worldwide, leaves little doubt about the administration's next steps with regard to Iraq.¹⁰⁴

I discussed before, both in the empirical literature review and in the previous chapter, how both Iraq's possession of WMD and its ties to Islamic terrorism were greatly exaggerated by the US government. In light of this, and given how a rational actor should be expected to decide on the basis of facts, the arguments used in these three speeches to justify the Iraq War represent elements in support of my interpretation of the conflict as a decision prompted by ideological factors.

6.2.1. Shaping public opinion

The behaviour of democratic states with regard to military conflicts has been extensively discussed in the literature. Liberalism claims that democracies are less likely to fight, due to the

¹⁰³ G. W. Bush, *State of the Union Address to the 108th Congress*, 28 January 2003, Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush, 2001-2008, 2008, p. 158 https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecordi/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf (accessed 20 April 2019).

¹⁰⁴ G. W. Bush, *Ibid.* pp. 161-164.

constraints faced as a result of their structural peculiarities; however, this claim has been disputed by realist scholars, according to which states' behaviour is governed by strategic considerations.¹⁰⁵ The purpose of this thesis is not to debate the democratic peace theory; nevertheless, in discussing the US government attempts to obtain the American public's support for the Iraq War, I am working under the assumption that democratic leaders will go to great lengths in order to justify military action, given how they are ultimately accountable to their electorate.

In the case of Iraq, the Bush administration tried to win the population's support by framing the Iraq war as a crusade against evil. This is especially evident when analysing the rhetoric used in the months following 9/11, where the US President heavily relied on the idea that the US was a country under attack, and willing to protect itself at any cost. It is understandable how the attacks could have been interpreted as a war declaration on the part of al-Qaeda; however, the content of President Bush's speeches seems to suggest that the 'War on Terror' was not going to end with the neutralisation of al-Qaeda's offensive capabilities, but with the elimination of all regimes hostile to the United States.

This concept, which draws from the neo-conservative understanding of international politics as a zero-sum game, has been instrumental in blurring the lines between pre-emptive wars, wars of retaliation, and wars of aggression. When the definitions between these concepts no longer mattered, the public discourse on the war's desirability changed, moving from an informed evaluation of its costs and expectable outcomes to an ideologically charged debate on whether the US had a moral right to strike its enemies.

Moreover, the normalisation of the war in the eyes of the American public should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon. In my view, it represents the final stage of a process started within the Bush administration itself. Such process began in the aftermath of the attacks, with the neo-conservative faction of the US government successful attempt at sharing their preferences with the rest of the administration. This was in turn facilitated by two factors: firstly, 9/11 represented exactly the kind of threat envisaged by neo-conservatives, thus reinforcing the idea that they had a clear understanding of the situation; secondly, the political movement already had a clear view of how the US was supposed to respond to the attacks, a view legitimised by the climate of nationalism prevailing in the country after 9/11. This analysis

¹⁰⁵ S. Rosato, *The flawed logic of democratic peace theory*. American political science review, 97(4), 2003, pp. 598-599.

is in line with the constructivist notion that ideas and structures mutually influence each other, constantly shaping the political scenario.

In the first stage of the process, the main agent was the neo-conservative faction, engaged in sharing its positions with the rest of the administration; in the second stage, the entire US government was active in trying to convince the country's political elites to invade Iraq. While only a few years earlier President Clinton brushed aside the PNAC's letter suggesting to address Iraq's threat by using every means necessary, in 2002, 40% of the Democratic Representatives and 60% of the Democratic Senators voted to authorise the use of force against the Middle Eastern state.¹⁰⁶ This bipartisan support for the war, at least in its initial stages, arguably played a significant role in convincing the American public of the necessity to attack Iraq. Such an assumption is supported by the findings of a quantitative study conducted by Voeten and Brewer, which indicates how elite discourse is one of the factors determining the public's support for the Iraq War.¹⁰⁷

The mere fact that the United States' political establishment tried to secure the public's support before starting a war is not in contrast with the rational actor model; the case of the Vietnam War is a sufficient example of the risks connected to an intense domestic opposition to a conflict. What appears to be incompatible with the behaviour of an agent determined to maximise the state's utility function is the decision to legitimise the war on the basis of claims that were subsequently disproved. There are two plausible, yet partially contradicting, explanations for this conduct. The first one is that the Bush administration tried to leverage the emotional impact of 9/11 regardless of the actual links between the al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, due to the assumption that the American public would not have questioned the necessity to punish those responsible for the attacks. The second explanation is that President Bush and the individuals advising him genuinely believed that Iraq was in the process of developing WMD, and willing to use said weapons against the US or to supply terroristic organisations with them.

The first hypothesis, namely that the Bush administration lied to the American people in order to obtain public support for an unnecessary war, is in contrast with the assumption that a state will base its decisions on a strategical assessment of the situation. Specifically, it challenges the

¹⁰⁶ Among the Democratic Senators in favour of the use of force against Iraq was also, as pointed out repeatedly during the 2016 presidential campaign, President Clinton's wife Hillary.

¹⁰⁷ E. Voeten, P. R. Brewer, *Public opinion, the war in Iraq, and presidential accountability*. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 6, 2006, pp. 826-827, (DOI: 10.1177/0022002706291054)

notion of the state as a unitary actor, suggesting instead that a small group of powerful individuals can shape a country's preferences so that they comply with their ideological or economic interests. A paper from Kellner seems to support this theoretical proposition; in his work the American philosopher exposed several inconsistencies between President Bush's and Vice President Cheney's public statements on the Iraq War and the information in their possession, theorising that the Bush administration was motivated in its actions by a combination of electoral considerations and by a desire to establish US global hegemony.¹⁰⁸

The second hypothesis is that President Bush identified Iraq as a threat, in spite of the evidence to the contrary, and that the decision-making process of the US government with regard to the war was strongly influenced by said bias. Gershkoff and Kushner seems to agree with this hypothesis, suggesting that the American President was convinced of Iraq's involvement in 9/11.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, this second scenario is also in contrast with the traditional understanding of the state as a rational actor in that it suggests that the US president made a costly decision rooted in personal opinion, and wilfully circumvented a thorough multi-criterial assessment of a volatile and consequential situation.

6.2.2. The international dimension

In the previous subsection, I looked at how the US government tried to obtain domestic support for the invasion of Iraq. Now, I will focus on the diplomatic efforts made by the Bush administration in order to form an international coalition, while simultaneously attempting to legitimise the war under the UN Charter.

The notion that the invasion of Afghanistan was only the first step of a longer campaign against international terrorism and hostile regimes, which as mentioned above seem to be almost indistinguishable according to the neo-conservative rhetoric, is clearly outlined in President Bush's speeches since the days following 9/11. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that the United States would have carried out a similar policy plan with regard to Iraq regardless of the international community's support. Nevertheless, it is understandable why the US government was seeking to invade Iraq at the head of an international coalition and with the backing of the Security Council, as was the case during the First Gulf War.

¹⁰⁸ D. Kellner, *Lying in politics: The case of George W. Bush and Iraq*. Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies, 7(2), 2007, pp. 140-142, (DOI: 10.1177/1532708606295649).

¹⁰⁹ A. Gershkoff, S. Kushner, *Ibid.* p. 526.

This appears most explicitly in the speech given by President Bush to the UN General Assembly in September 2002, in which ‘the might of coalition forces and the will of the United Nations’ are referred to as the reason why Hussein’s attempt to occupy Kuwait was stopped more than a decade earlier.¹¹⁰ The reference to the First Gulf War, and the subsequent summary of the several UN resolutions breached by Saddam in the aftermath of the conflict, serves as a preamble to the speech’s central message: not only can Iraq not be trusted, but ‘history, logic, and facts’ indicate that it constitutes a threat to ‘world peace’ and to ‘the lives of millions’.¹¹¹ The final part of the speech consists of an ultimatum for the Iraqi government demanding their cessation of support for international terrorism, and pursuit of the development of WMD.

The contents of President Bush’s speech suggest that the UN address had a dual purpose: the first, and more apparent, was to send a clear signal to the Iraqi government with regard to the United States’ intentions. While the majority of the charges listed in the speech had already been mentioned in the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, a Congressional statement of policy signed into law by President Clinton which indicates Saddam’s removal from power as the United States’ strategical goal for the region,¹¹² the repetition of similar allegations in the aftermath of 9/11, and in the presence of representatives from every country in the world, had a much stronger political impact.

The second purpose of the speech was arguably to ask for the United Nations’ support in the event of a US-led military action in the Middle Eastern country. It is debatable to what extent the United States was concerned with the United Nations’ approval: according to Dunne, both the country’s history and the unilateral approach of the Bush administration are clear signs that Washington saw the 12 September speech as mere formality.¹¹³ It is also possible to understand President Bush’s speech as a consequence of America’s ambivalent identity: while after the end of the Cold War the US was the only superpower left in the world, thus in the position to act unilaterally, a similar behaviour would have been in contrast with the country’s perceived role

¹¹⁰ G. W. Bush, *Address to the United Nations General Assembly*, 12 September 2002, Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush, 2001-2008, 2008, p. 140 https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecordi/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf (accessed 23 April 2019).

¹¹¹ G.W. Bush, *Ibid.* p. 144.

¹¹² *Iraq Liberation Act*, PUBLIC LAW 105–338—OCT. 31, 1998, Section 7.

¹¹³ M. Dunne, 2003. *The United States, the United Nations and Iraq: ‘multilateralism of a kind’*. *International Affairs*, 79(2), 2003, p. 271.

as promoter and protector of global democracy. If that was the case, perhaps the Bush administration was looking for a legal, or at least moral, justification for the war. The unanimous approval of Resolution 1441 might have had this function, at least for the US government. While Iraq's alleged violations of the Resolution are generally not considered sufficient to justify the use of military force, as already discussed in the third chapter, they still represented an element in support of the war's legitimacy.

Despite the unilateral tendencies of the US government, and its determination to remove Saddam from power without taking into consideration the possible opposition of the UN, Washington intended to rely on its traditional military partners for support during the invasion. A whole dissertation would probably not be enough to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the factors leading each member of the coalition to join the Second Gulf War; here, I will simply make some observations on how the United States successfully persuaded the governments of several democratic countries that the invasion of Iraq was in their interests.

For this purpose, I analysed a study of the British and Polish domestic debate in the months preceding the invasion, conducted by Meyer and Zdrada in 2006. With regard to Poland, a content analysis of the two main newspapers in the country showed how the vast majority of commentators substantially agreed with the US government's position on the threat represented by Saddam. However, while centre-right commentators focused on how Poland needed to align itself with the US for strategic reasons, the centre-left ones highlighted the humanitarian dimension of the war, comparing Saddam's regime with Poland's authoritarian past.¹¹⁴ In the case of the UK, most commentators featured in the two newspapers analysed disagreed with the notion that Iraq represented a threat to British national security, and those supporting the war did so due to humanitarian reasons.¹¹⁵

Despite the public opinion's perplexities on the war's desirability, and the several protests against the UK's involvement in it, Prime Minister Blair appeared determined to support the US from the earliest stages of the crisis. According to Dyson, such determination is better explained by the British Prime Minister's personality traits rather than by strategic

¹¹⁴ C. O. Meyer, and A. Zdrada, *Unpacking the 'coalition of the willing': a comparative analysis of norms in British and Polish press debates on the Iraq invasion*. *European Security*, 15(1), 2006, pp. 30-32. (DOI: 10.1080/09662830600776686)

¹¹⁵ C.O. Meyer, and A. Zdrada, *Ibid.* p. 33.

considerations on the UK's international role.¹¹⁶ Richards seems to agree with Dyson's assessment, also noting how a closer relationship with the US on security issues was part of the ideological identity of the New Labour.¹¹⁷ Given how the British government had already proved itself a reliable ally of the US in Afghanistan, it is possible that Iraq was seen by Downing Street as the next logical step. If that is the case, it could be hypothesised that Prime Minister Blair not only overlooked the validity of the arguments in support of the conflict, but also the potential consequences of it, both for Iraq and for his own political legacy.

Lastly, other states joined the war due to their leaders' ideological preferences being traditionally closer to the Republican Party. That was the case for Spain and Italy, both guided at the time of the war by centre-right parties. Accordingly, both countries left Iraq after the victory of centre-left coalitions respectively in 2004 and 2006. Overall, participation in the war was a much more divisive issue in Europe than in the United States, perhaps because the former was less affected by the trauma of 9/11. In light of this, the decision made by several European governments to join the United States appears as an irrational one. Moreover, it seems hardly justifiable by the need to comply with the preferences of the transatlantic ally, given how both Italy and Spain remained NATO members and close partners of the US after the withdrawal of their contingents.

6.3. Operation Iraqi Freedom

President Bush's address to the United Nations marks the beginning of the second stage of the preparations for the war. Given the severity of the charges brought against Saddam's regime, and the warning that if necessary Washington was prepared to address Iraq unilaterally, the adoption of Resolution 1441 by the Security Council could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid the conflict by addressing the *casus belli* itself, namely Iraq's possession of WMD. As mentioned earlier, the resolution required Iraq to support international inspections, a request to which Saddam's government answered by reopening the country's border to UN personnel for the first time since 1998.

It could be assumed that the resolution represented a setback for the United States, given how it delayed military action. Moreover, even Iraq's eventual refusal to comply with the UN's

¹¹⁶ S. B. Dyson, *Personality and foreign policy: Tony Blair's Iraq decisions*. Foreign Policy Analysis, 2(3), 2006, pp. 302-304.

¹¹⁷ S. Richards, "Why did Tony Blair go to war with Iraq? That's not even the right question", *The Guardian*, 5 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/05/tony-blair-iraq-war-chilcot?fbclid=IwAR00Df9OehMJ-_XeI3UFLERFVpoAxp0eVt6QPOF0mjhAJGpQI-5ZYCefnrw (accessed 24 April 2019).

demands would not have automatically justified an invasion under international law. However, there are elements in support of a different interpretation; I refer in particular to the content of the statement made by the US Ambassador to the UN Negroponte, who later assumed the role of Ambassador to Iraq, after the adoption of the resolution. According to the American diplomat, in the event of further Iraqi violations the United States was ready to ‘live up to its responsibilities’.¹¹⁸

Either way, Washington did not wait for the outcome of the inspections. At the beginning of February 2003, Secretary Powell reiterated in front of the Security Council the accusations already presented by President Bush the previous year. It has been suggested how the choice to send the Secretary of State, until that moment the highest ranking official in the Bush administration in favour of a diplomatic solution, was motivated by an attempt to persuade the Security Council to adopt a second resolution.¹¹⁹ However, given the opposition of several countries including permanent members such as France and Russia, the Council never voted on such resolution. Instead, President Bush openly accused Iraq of conducting a ‘willful charade’, remarking how the US ‘[when it comes to security] don’t need anybody’s permission’.¹²⁰

Overall, the behaviour of the United States in this stage does not seem to be coherent with its stated objective of disarming Iraq from WMD. This is evident by the fact that the American government decided to ignore the results of the investigations conducted by the UNMOVIC, choosing instead to focus on the narrative of Iraq as an unstable and unpredictable rogue state. Recently, Secretary Powell himself admitted how the Bush administration was more concerned with finding elements in support of said narrative than with factual evidence of the threat represented by Iraq. Moreover, the former American general went as far as to define his UN speech as ‘a great intelligence failure’.¹²¹ In light of this, my hypothesis is that, by the time the

¹¹⁸ “Security Council members say new Iraq measure contains no automatic triggers for force”, *UN News*, 8 November 2002, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2002/11/50892-security-council-members-say-new-iraq-measure-contains-no-automatic-triggers>, (accessed 25 April 2019).

¹¹⁹ D. Zarefsky, *Making the case for war: Colin Powell at the United Nations*. Rhetoric & Public Affairs, 10(2), 2007, pp. 296-297.

¹²⁰ J. King, A. Koppel, N. Robertson and R. Berke, “Bush: Iraq is playing ‘willful charade’”, *CNN.com*, 7 March 2003, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/03/06/sprj.irq.main/> (accessed 26 April 2019).

¹²¹ J. M. Breslow, “Colin Powell: U. N. Speech ‘Was a Great Intelligence Failure’”, *PBS.org*, 17 May 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/colin-powell-u-n-speech-was-a-great-intelligence-failure/> (accessed 26 April 2019).

UN adopted Resolution 1441 and probably earlier, President Bush had already decided to invade Iraq. A similar determination to forcibly remove Saddam's regime could have been rationally justifiable given two preconditions: firstly, Iraq had to represent a threat to the United States' national security; secondly, it had to be possible to win the war with acceptable losses. Any rational assessment of the situation would have been based on balancing the two factors, namely risks of action and costs of non-action. Up to this point, I discussed how the evidence in support of the first precondition was hardly sufficient to justify the operation; in the following subsections, I will focus on how the war's costs largely exceeded the US government's expectations, also looking at its long-term consequences.

6.3.1. The failure of state-building

If we accept the assumption that the Bush administration was determined to invade Iraq regardless of the international community's support, it would seem logical to expect that, in the months before the invasion, the US focused on planning how to win the war with the lowest possible number of casualties. Moreover, given its declared intention to bring 'freedom and democracy' to the Iraqi people, one would suppose that the American government had a clear plan in regard to the state-building stage of the conflict.

However not only the war's costs and duration vastly exceeded Washington's prevision, but the transition from Saddam's regime to a pacified and democratic Iraq has been defined as a failure both by internal and external observers.¹²² There are two possible explanations for this failure of the US government in stabilising the country after the invasion: the first one is that the Bush administration committed a series of mistakes that compromised the transitional process from a totalitarian regime to a democratic government; the second hypothesis is that said transition was not feasible regardless of the efforts made by the coalition forces. If we accept the first hypothesis, the US was irrational in overlooking Iraq's reconstruction, given how the importance of restoring the economic and social structures of a defeated country has been proven throughout history in several occasions, for example in the case of the Weimar Republic. If the second hypothesis is true, the US government's blunder was either to fail in anticipating the long-term consequences of the occupation, or to invade Iraq despite the knowledge that the country would not have been able to fully recover from the war.

¹²² H. Alkifaey, *The Failure of Democracy in Iraq: Religion, Ideology and Sectarianism*. London, Routledge, 2018, p. 11.

There is also a third possible scenario: that the Bush administration was in fact able to predict the war's consequences on Iraq, and to develop a plan for minimising the negative ones and ensure the instauration of a democratic regime, but failed to do so due to insurmountable obstacles posed by the cultural and ideological features of the Iraqi society. However, this hypothesis is to be discarded given how Iraq did not choose to be invaded by the US, and therefore the Iraqi people cannot be regarded as responsible for their alleged inability to conform to the American idea of democracy. As in the case of the previous hypothesis, if the country's democratisation was highly risky due to Iraq's peculiarities, the US should have taken that into account and acted accordingly. In other words, to quote the expression attributed by Woodward to Secretary Powell, 'You break it, you own it'.¹²³

A potential exception to this rationale could be based on the grounds that regime change was only a secondary goal for the US-led coalition, subordinated to the main objectives of disarming Iraq from its weapons of mass destruction and addressing Saddam's ties to international terrorism. The extent and the urgency of the threat posed by Iraq to the US have already been discussed here at some length: it might be useful to add that, even if the American national security was President Bush's primary concern, it would have been logical to ensure the political stability of the Middle Eastern state. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is sufficient evidence of the risks connected with replacing an authoritarian regime with domestic chaos.

With regard to the explanations proposed earlier, namely that Iraq's reconstruction failed either because of the occupying powers' inability to implement the measures necessary to stabilise the country or because the structural features of Iraqi society were incompatible with the societal project envisioned by the US, my theoretical proposition is that the long-lasting negative consequences of the war are due to a combination of the two. My understanding is based on the assumption that the success of regime change and state-building depends on the interaction between the actions of the occupying power and the characteristics of the occupied state.¹²⁴

In the case of Iraq, in January 2003 the United States tried to anticipate the post-war consequences by establishing the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance

¹²³ B. Woodward, *Plan of attack*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004, p. 150.

¹²⁴ W. M. Reisman, *Why regime change is (almost always) a bad idea*. Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting (Vol. 98), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 524-525.

(ORHA), tasked with administrating the country during the transitional period between Hussein's deposition and democratic elections. However, while the Bush administration repeatedly described the conflict as a short-lived humanitarian intervention, the coalition troops were faced with a different reality.¹²⁵ This was caused by the combination of several factors, both independent from the war and caused by it. Firstly, Iraq's stagnating economy in the previous decade had left the country's infrastructures in very poor condition, thus prolonging the time and cost of reconstruction.¹²⁶ Secondly, a significant part of the Iraqi population's was suspicious towards centralisation, due to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the country, and reluctant to welcome the occupying forces as liberators, especially after the several human rights abuses committed by the coalition troops.¹²⁷

According to Edelstein, the success of a military occupation can be inferred by the presence of certain factors: firstly, the occupying power's capacity to deal with the transition from the pre-occupation regime to reconstruction, with the population of countries severely damaged by previous conflicts more likely to accept the influence of a foreign power; secondly, the presence of an existential threat both to the population of the state under foreign control and to the invading forces; thirdly, a credible commitment on the part of the occupying power on restoring the other state's sovereignty.¹²⁸ As for the first aspect, while the US successfully managed to remove from power most exponents of the Baathist regime, the Coalition Provisional Authority's decision to disband the Iraqi Armed Forces contributed to further destabilise the country.¹²⁹ With regard to the second element, the main threat to Iraq's security in the aftermath of the invasion was represented by the internal struggle between Sunnis and Shiites, rather than by an external threat such as the one represented by the USSR for Germany after WWII. Lastly, any plausible strategy for withdrawal was delayed due to the country's increasing instability. Overall, I am under the impression that state-building in Iraq was an extremely difficult goal to achieve, and the choices made by the coalition forces in the aftermath of the invasion further inflamed the situation. This was due to the United States' establishment excessive confidence

¹²⁵ R. Mac Ginty, *The pre-war reconstruction of post-war Iraq*. Third World Quarterly, 24(4), 2003, p. 614.

¹²⁶ D.A. Lake, *Ibid.* p. 36.

¹²⁷ D. M. Edelstein, *Occupational hazards: Why military occupations succeed or fail*. International Security, 29(1), 2004, pp. 82-83.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 58-75.

¹²⁹ M. Thompson, "How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS", *Time Magazine*, 29 May 2015, <http://time.com/3900753/isis-iraq-syria-army-united-states-military/> (accessed 28 April 2019).

in the Iraqi people's willingness to embrace Western democracy; said confidence was in turn a consequence of focusing on the military aspects of the invasion, at the expense of the socio-cultural ones.

6.3.2. Mission Accomplished

Operation Iraqi Freedom began on 20 March 2003, after the lapse of the 48-hour deadline to leave the country given by President Bush to Saddam and his sons. Less than one month before, in a speech given to the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the American President had already outlined his administration's vision for the future of the Middle Eastern country. The speech opens, as usual, by pointing out how the United States hopes that Iraq will peacefully give up its WMD; however, the rest of the address leaves few doubts as to Washington's true intentions with regard to Hussein's regime. After a brief summary of the threat posed by Iraq to the Middle East, the United States, and global peace in general, President Bush describes how the removal of Saddam from power will end the 'nightmare world' in which the Iraqi people are forced to live. Moreover, according to the American leader the end of Hussein's regime will make it possible to build 'lasting institutions of freedom' in the country, comparing Iraq's situation with Germany and Japan after the end of WWII.¹³⁰

For the purpose of my analysis, there are two interesting elements in the speech. The first one is the fact that, even though the US was not at war with Iraq at the time, President Bush seemed to be perfectly comfortable with referring to a foreign country's head of state as a 'dictator' and a 'tyrant'. While there is no reason to question the validity of these epithets, I am under the impression that the choice of words in the American President's speech was not caused by the mere desire to remind his audience about the Iraqi President's poor human rights record, but rather motivated by the intention to remark the difference between 'democratic' leaders, worthy of the respect usually reserved to head of states, and 'illegitimate' ones, such as Hussein.

The second aspect on which it may be useful to focus is the frequent use of concepts based on a liberal understanding of international politics, specifically on Paine's revolutionary strand of liberalism. This is evident by President Bush's repeated reference to how all humans strive for freedom and democracy, with Iraq serving as an example for all the Middle East of how democracy can be spread through the use of force. On a philosophical level, the question on whether a specific system of government could be the best for all humans, regardless of their

¹³⁰ G. W. Bush, *Remarks on the Future of Iraq*, 26 February 2003, Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush, 2001-2008, 2008, p. 168-170 https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf (accessed 29 April 2019).

specific circumstances, is worthy of attention. However, on the empirical level, given the outcomes of Operation Iraqi Freedom, exporting democracy proved to be harder than expected by President Bush.

While the neo-liberal assumption that the Iraqi society would have adjusted almost automatically to the societal model proposed by the United States has subsequently been disproved by the facts, the confidence placed by neo-conservatives in the strength of the US military had proven well-founded since the first days of the war. After a series of air-strikes over military and government facilities, the coalition forces entered Iraq from its southern border with Kuwait, reaching the capital in less than a month. In the North, the Iraqi Army fought unsuccessfully against the Kurdish resistance, organised in the previous months by British and American Special Forces.¹³¹ On 1 May 2003, President Bush announced the end of major combat operations in the Iraqi War in a televised address delivered to the crew of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. Whilst the US President was not recorded using the expression ‘mission accomplished’ in the speech, the fact that the sentence was written on a banner clearly visible behind the President contributed to pass along the message that the US government considered the war almost over. Nevertheless, given how the large majority of the war’s hundreds of thousands of victims have been killed after the address, the phrase has become a symbol of the Bush administration’s overly optimistic attitude.¹³²

In May 2003 the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was granted by the occupying forces with executive, legislative, and judicial power over Iraq. The decision to appoint an American diplomat as head of the CPA, instead of an Iraqi citizen more aware of the country’s cultural context, was taken without consulting Secretary Powell and in contrast with the assessment of post-conflict issues made by the US intelligence community, and has been indicated as one of the factors leading to the outbreak of the war of resistance fought against the coalition forces.¹³³ Comprehensibly, the CPA proceeded with removing senior members of the Baath Party from the Iraqi public administration; however, the choice to also exclude low-ranking members of

¹³¹ I. J. Peltier, *Surrogate warfare: the role of US Army Special Forces*. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2005, pp. 24-26

¹³² A. Shaver, and J. Shapiro, *The effect of civilian casualties on wartime informing: Evidence from the Iraq war*. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 2015, p. 2.

¹³³ J. P. Pfiffner, *US blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and disbanding the army*. Intelligence and National Security, 25(1), 2010, pp. 77.

the party led to the dismissal of over 80,000 civil servants, thus crippling Iraq's bureaucracy and economy.¹³⁴ The second official act of Ambassador Bremer, chosen by President Bush to guide CPA, was to discharge the armed and police forces of Iraq; such a decision, taken against the advice of the US military and without consulting the Department of State, resulted in hundreds of thousands of trained and armed individuals left unemployed, arguably strengthened the Iraqi resistance prolonging the occupation's cost and duration.¹³⁵

The years following the war were marked by sectarian violence, economic recession, and internal displacement of civilians. In January 2007, President Bush announced a new strategy for Iraq, referred to in the media as 'surge', and based on increasing the number of American troops in the country and promoting a closer cooperation with Iraqi civilians. While violence did in fact decrease after the surge,¹³⁶ following the withdrawal of the American troops in 2011, Iraq was far from being the stronghold of freedom and democracy envisioned in President Bush's speeches a few years earlier. The coalition forces' failure in stabilising the country was hardly unpredictable; in 2003 General Shinseki, then Chief of Staff of the US Army, had already warned the Bush administration of how the number of soldiers necessary to control the country was higher than the one planned by Secretary Rumsfeld.¹³⁷

The tendency to underestimate elements in contrast with a pre-determined understanding of reality, already observable in the Bush administration's decision to emphasise the threat represented by Iraq, is consistent with my theoretical proposition that the US government acted irrationally with regard to the Second Gulf War. The result of this approach was the destabilisation of Iraqi society, escalation of conflicts among the Sunni and the Shia population, and the proliferation of terrorist organisation in the territory of Iraq. In 2014, ISIS, a jihadist militant group, conquered several Iraqi cities, including Fallujah and Mosul. While the government of Iraq eventually managed to reclaim the territories occupied by ISIS, the rise of the terrorist group has been linked by the literature to the collapse of the Iraqi society in the

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 79.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 82-85

¹³⁶ S. Biddle, J. A. Friedman, and J. N. Shapiro, *Testing the surge: Why did violence decline in Iraq in 2007?* *International Security*, 37(1), 2012, pp. 38-40.

¹³⁷ D. Coletta, *Courage in the Service of Virtue: The Case of General Shinseki's Testimony before the Iraq War.* *Armed Forces & Society*, 34(1), 2007, pp. 112-113.

aftermath of the war.¹³⁸ Lastly, the cost of the war was estimated at 0.8 trillion dollars, not accounting for indirect costs caused by the impact of the conflict on the US economy.¹³⁹ The figure is close to the estimate made by Nordhaus in a 2002 study, a further element in support of my assumption that the Bush administration was in the position to predict the war's consequences, but willingly chose not to do so.¹⁴⁰

6.4. Summary

This chapter treated the process leading to the Iraq War with a predominantly chronological approach in an attempt to highlight elements in contrast with the behaviour hypothesised by the rational actor model. I started by looking at how in the aftermath of 9/11 the Bush administration repeatedly promoted the idea that the United States was leading the free-world in a war against international terrorism, while simultaneously presenting Iraq as a potential enemy. This belief, already widespread among neo-conservatives circles, was internalised by the Bush administration, which in turn managed to successfully convince Congress and a large portion of the American population of the threat represented by Iraq. While earning the support of the public is the usual procedure for democratic states planning to start a war, in the case of Iraq the US government rigidly adhered to an ideologically charged interpretation of reality, ignoring any evidence contrasting with it.

After having secured domestic support for the war, the US President shifted his attention to the international community, with the objectives of building a coalition and obtaining the support of the United Nations in the upcoming conflict. Once again, this behaviour is not irrational per se; however, two elements seem to support my theory. The first is the fact that Washington relied on evidence that were later disproved in its attempt to persuade the international community of Iraq's possession of WMD; the second, that the Bush administration chose to invade the Middle Eastern country before the end of the inspections carried out under Resolution 1441.

In the second section of the chapter I discussed some of the mistakes made by the American government after the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, drawing whenever possible from

¹³⁸ T. Dodge, 2014. Can Iraq be saved? *Survival*, 56(5), 2014, pp. 11-15.

¹³⁹ N. C., Crawford, *US Budgetary Costs of Wars through 2016: \$4.79 Trillion and Counting Summary of Costs of the US Wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan and Homeland Security*, Costs of War, 2016, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ W. D. Nordhaus, *The economic consequences of a war in Iraq* (No. w9361). National Bureau of Economic Research, 2002, p. 40.

remarks and observations made by individuals previously serving in the Bush administration, most notably Secretary Powell, which publicly criticised both the justifications behind the war and the execution of the operation.¹⁴¹ In particular, I focused on the CPA's decision to disband the Iraqi armed forces and a large portion of the country's civil servants, against the advice of both the DOS and the military. My understanding is that this choice, which may have been a consequence of the Manichean rhetoric according to which all individuals involved with Saddam's government were inherently a threat to the US interests, crippled Iraq's public administration and paved the way to the ensuing insurrection.

In light of the above, and considered how several individuals both within and outside the Bush administration warned the US government about the costs and outcomes of the war, my hypothesis, that the rational actor model is not appropriate to explain the behaviour of the United States before and during the conflict, seems to be at least partially correct. In the next chapter, I will further summarise and discuss the findings of my thesis.

¹⁴¹ A. Jaffe, *Ibid.*

7. Conclusion

The aim of my work was to determine whether the rational actor model can be applied to the decision-making process of the US government with regard to the Iraq War. I used the outcome explaining variant of process tracing, working under the assumption that the United States had no valid reason to invade the Middle Eastern country; accordingly, such a decision was in contrast with the central assumption of the rational actor model, namely that a state will try to maximise its utility. I tried to account for this discrepancy by analysing the causal factors behind the war, focusing in particular on the ideological forces shaping the Bush administration's preferences.

My results indicate that the decision of invading Iraq can be explained by the interaction between three variables. The first one is the atmosphere of fear that developed in the US in the aftermath of 9/11, which in turn lowered the risk tolerance of the American population with regard to international terrorism and hostile governments. The second one is the influence exercised by the neo-conservative ideology on the Bush administration, to a large part justified by the fact that the neo-conservative understanding of the international system offered clear answers to the threats faced by the country after the attacks. The third variable is the hegemonic position occupied by the United States after the fall of the USSR, on account of which the American government deemed regime change in Iraq a feasible goal.

As I have mentioned earlier, the notion that governments may act in contrast with their own interests due to international constraints and domestic ideological forces is not new in the field of foreign policy analysis. On a theoretical level, my dissertation contributed to the social constructivist literature, addressing some of the elements that can lead states to miscalculate each other's intentions and capabilities, and ultimately act in contrast with their own security interests. From an empirical perspective, I tried to offer an explanation for one the biggest foreign policy blunders in American history. I realise how this has only a very limited practical utility, given how understanding the reasons behind past mistakes is not enough to ensure that similar mistakes will not be committed again in the future. However, my understanding of international politics is that the behaviour of states is largely influenced by their interpretation of past events. In the case of the Iraq War, this phenomenon was reflected by the Bush administration's belief that removing Saddam from power would have been sufficient to pacify the country and turn it into a liberal democracy. A similar hope was at least partially based, according to the above-mentioned speeches by President Bush, to the American success in state-building in Europe after WWII. Accordingly, it cannot be excluded that in the future the United States will take the experience of the Iraq War into consideration when assessing whether

military intervention in a third country is a feasible option. In light of the above, my findings could be a starting point for future research aimed at studying how the United States foreign policy changed after Iraq. For instance, it could be interesting to compare the Bush administration's decisions with regard to Iraq with the behaviour of the Obama administration during the Syrian Civil War.

It may be useful to point at the limits of my study. The first one is that, in order to consider all the possible causal factors behind the war, I had to compromise between the depth and the extension of my analysis, at the expense of the former. This was at least partially justified by the size limitations of this thesis, and by the relatively short time available to me. Accordingly, a possible idea for future research would be to focus on each causal factor individually. My findings are also limited by the fact that I have not collected primary evidences; future research on the subject could be strengthened by interviewing individuals involved with the decision-making process of the US government. Lastly, given how I do not speak Arabic, my thesis only looked at the conflict from an American and Western perspective. To some extent, this approach was justified with my assumption that the war was a unilateral decision by the United States; however, it could be interesting to also analyse the behaviour of Iraq in the months leading to the conflict.

With regard to methodology, the decision to rely on a qualitative research method has proven to be appropriate for the type of research questions addressed by my thesis. Specifically, process tracing has enabled me to focus on each causal factor taken individually, and afterwards to investigate how they combined leading to the war's outbreak. I am under the impression that a purely quantitative approach would not have allowed me to account for hardly measurable variables, such as the role played by a specific ideology on a foreign policy decision. Moreover, my methodological choice was based on the fact that the vast majority of the literature from which I draw upon utilised qualitative research methods; therefore, it seemed appropriate to work in continuity with previous studies.

Today, the Iraqi people are largely free from the threat of ISIS, and the country is not under an authoritarian regime anymore, but the social and economic costs of the war will affect both Iraq and the United States for the next decades. In the United States, the neo-conservative ideas which, according to my analysis, contributed to the outbreak of the conflict are less influential today than in the time period covered in this work. President Trump openly criticised the Bush doctrine in his public appearances, in particular the Iraq War. This could also be explained as an effort to distance himself from the mistakes of previous administration, but it still suggests that the US will be more careful in the future with regard to the use of military force.

Nevertheless, the central idea behind my work is that in certain circumstances states will act against their interests due to vested interests and ideological constraints; this is unlikely to lose its validity anytime soon.

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