Original Article

# Coming face to face with bloody reality: Liberal common sense and the ideological failure of the Bush doctrine in Iraq

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**Abstract** A conventional technocratic wisdom has begun to form that blames the failure of the US led invasion of Iraq on the small number of American troops deployed and the ideological divisions at the centre of the Bush administration itself. This paper argues that both these accounts are at best simply descriptive. A much more sustained explanation has to be based on a close examination of the ideological assumptions that shaped the drafting of policies and planning for the aftermath of the war. The point of departure for such an analysis is that all agency, whether individual or collective, is socially mediated. The paper deploys Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'Common Sense' to examine the Bush administration's policy towards Iraq. It argues that the Common Sense at work in the White House, Defence Department and Green Zone was primarily responsible for America's failure. It examines the relationship between the 'higher philosophies' of both Neoconservatism and Neo-Liberalism and Common Sense. It concludes that although Neoconservatism was influential in justifying the invasion itself, it was Neo-Liberalism that shaped the policy agenda for the aftermath of war. It takes as its example the pre-war planning for Iraq, then the disbanding of the Iraqi army and the de-Ba'athification of the Iraqi state. The planning and these two decisions, responsible for driving Iraq into civil war, can only be fully explained by studying the ideology that shaped them. From this perspective, the United States intervention in Iraq was not the product of an outlandish ideology but was instead the high water mark of post-Cold War Liberal interventionism. As such, it highlights the ideological and empirical shortcomings associated with 'Kinetic Liberalism'.
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## Introduction

> Treating obscure bureaucrats as expressions of the Zeitgeist has far-reaching metaphysical implications. It implies that vested ideas, rather than vested interests, are the great determinants of human behaviour; it denies that men can see complex things – societies, economies, polities – 'as they really are', without invoking elaborate theories to explain their chaotic impressions; and it dismisses 'common sense', the last refuge of the pragmatist, as low-grade ideology: a rag bag of rules of thumb, culled from forgotten thinkers. (Dewey, 1993, pp. vii–viii)
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> From the dawn of the Cold War through the twilight of the twentieth century, US policy makers insisted time and again that Islamic radicals, Israeli prime ministers and Iraqi dictators had merely misunderstood America's good intentions and that better understanding would produce better relations. Over the years, however, critics from Tel Aviv to Tehran have retorted that they understood those intentions all too well and that the peculiar blend of ignorance and arrogance that characterised US policy would effectively prevent America from ever truly understanding the region and its people. (Little, 2002, pp. 2–3)

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was placed at the heart of the Bush doctrine. Iraq was meant to offer both a proving ground but more importantly a launching pad for one of the doctrine's core concepts (Krauthammer, 2003). As the president argued on the eve of the war, 'a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region' (Bush, 2003b). George Bush repeatedly committed his government to spreading democracy throughout the Middle East before and after the invasion. Bush stated that 'it would be reckless to accept the *status quo*' and developed 'a forward strategy of freedom'. This move was designed to boldly distance his government from previous US policy in the Middle East (Bush, 2003c). The Realist approach adopted by his predecessors that had historically supported dictators across the region in the name of stability was dramatically jettisoned. The policy aim was to transform governing systems throughout the Middle East, if necessary using American military power to democratize the region. The central claim of the Bush doctrine was that idealism would shape interests, US power was to make the Middle East safe for democracy.

The rise of the Bush doctrine in the aftermath of September 11 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, certainly represented the heaviest blow to state sovereignty in the developing world since de-colonization (Dodge, 2004). However, viewed from a wider historical perspective, this approach did not signify the radical departure that the president, his Neoconservative advisers

and indeed his liberal and leftist critics claimed. The intellectual origins and empirical aspirations of the Bush doctrine are more accurately sourced within a sweep of history that began in the late 1970s, with the rise to prominence of Neo-Liberal economic doctrines. From this perspective, the Bush doctrine is not the progeny of an outlandish or new ideology but the product of continuity, the peak in influence of a Liberal discourse increasingly influential from the 1980s onwards. The Bush doctrine did not mark a watershed in international relations, instead it is better understood as a conscious attempt to codify and advance already influential dynamics at work within the post-Cold War system. The Bush doctrine's aim was to recognize, institutionalize and expand the political effects of attacks on economic sovereignty that had taken place under the Washington Consensus of the 1980s and demands for Liberal good governance in the 1990s.

The testing ground for this codification and advancement of Bush's Liberal international norms was Iraq after regime change in 2003. If the invasion and its aftermath had proved to be successful, it may have resulted in a coherent model for post-Cold War international relations.[1] However, even the most die-hard supporters of regime change cannot now claim it as a success. Those who drove the United States to war with talk of 'cake walks', liberation and troops being met with 'sweets and flowers' (Adelman, 2002; Dodge, 2003, 2006, p. 161) have come face to face with the costs of the democratic imperialism at the heart of the Bush doctrine. With over 4000 US troops killed and anything between 150 000 and 654 000 Iraqis dead as a direct result of the invasion, the US president and his advisors have come face to face with the bloody realities of the Bush doctrine's adventure in the Middle East (Burnham *et al*, 2006; O'Hanlon and Campbell, 2008, pp. 4, 16). However, explanations for this US foreign policy debacle have yet to move beyond the descriptive and recriminatory.

## The Ideational Roots of Failure

From the veritable tidal wave of material that has been written about Iraq since the invasion, something approaching a conventional wisdom explaining the failure has emerged. This puts the explanatory weight on various forms of US government incoherence and incompetence. According to this narrative, the founding sin of the occupation was its chronic lack of personnel and coercive capacity. The earliest pre-invasion exponent of this position was the then US Army chief of staff, Eric Shinseki in a Senate testimony. Shinseki called for 'something in the order of several hundred thousand soldiers' to control Iraq after regime change. This unsettling insight caused the secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld to sack him (Engel, 2003; Rich, 2007). A frequently cited

RAND study on state-building published just after the invasion concluded that occupying forces would need 20 security personnel, both police and troops, per thousand Iraqis to impose order. These figures have been extrapolated to suggest that coalition forces needed between 400 000 and 500 000 soldiers to control Iraq (Dobbins *et al*, 2003). Instead, the United States had 116 000 soldiers in the country in the middle of the invasion, with a total of 310 000 personnel in the theatre as a whole (Woodward, 2004, pp. 8, 36, 406). Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the body that ran Iraq for the first year of the occupation, relies on the RAND study in his attempts to shift the blame for failure away from himself (Bremer and McConnell, 2006, p. 10). For those pursuing this line of enquiry, there is little doubt where the guilt lies for this chronic shortage of troops. In the run-up to the invasion, Donald Rumsfeld continually harassed the war planners, driving down the numbers of troops involved to a bare minimum (Woodward, 2004, p. 80). The counter factual conclusion of this argument is that if only the United States had gone to war with the right number of troops, if the Powell doctrine of overwhelming force had been applied, then victory in Baghdad would have been achievable.

The second favourite explanation for why Iraq moved first into a bloody insurgency and then onto civil war, was the internecine conflict at the heart of the United States government. On one side of what is portrayed as both a personal and an ideological battle, was Donald Rumsfeld as the head of the Defence Department surrounded by a trusted band of Neoconservative aids led by his deputy Paul Wolfowitz. Across the battle lines stood combat veteran and Realist Colin Powell, backed up by the supposedly level headed and experienced diplomats staffing the State Department he ran. Where the blame lies for this discord at the heart of the American government depends upon which side each narrator has greatest empathy with.

The increasingly beleaguered Neoconservative case is forcibly made by Rumsfeld's under secretary for policy, Douglas Feith. For Feith, both the CIA and the State Department are to blame. They colluded to slander Ahmed Chalabi, the Neoconservative's candidate to run post-Baathist Iraq. Secretary of State, Powell then went on to fight numerous needless 'turf battles' to defend his department's interests, thus undermining government coherence for petty and personal reasons. State Department personnel continually over-stated the 'root causes' of Middle Eastern terrorism, trying to undermine the feasibility of Feith's proposed solutions (Feith, 2008, pp. 170, 239, 245, 246).

For those on the other side of this bitter division, the problem was not the lack of planning before the war but the fact that those in the Pentagon deliberately ignored the State Department's preparation and excluded it's Middle East experts from post-war Baghdad (Diamond, 2005, p. 30; Phillips, 2005, pp. 5, 6). The jettisoning of plans and the exclusion of expertise was all

undertaken to ensure the 'coronation' of the totally unsuitable Ahmed Chalabi, once the US military had removed Saddam Hussein. Both sides of this rancorous debate draw the same conclusion, if the US administration had not been undermined by their ideologically deluded opponents then the invasion and occupation would have proceeded as planned and would have met with success.

Undoubtedly, the technocratic arithmetic focusing on troop numbers captures the empirical fact that the US military were unable to impose order on Iraq once the initial task of regime change had been achieved. The amazing public fights that divided the Bush administration into two warring camps in the run-up to the invasion also make for fascinating reading. Being escorted through the corridors of power as author after author dishes the dirt on their rivals for the president's ear and affection, provides a wealth of insight into the personal dynamics underpinning the deployment of power. It also confirms long held suspicions that policy making during the Bush presidency verged on the farcical. However, as revealing and entertaining as these sources are, the emerging conventional wisdom about the causes of failure in Iraq are on closer examination little more than a description of how events unfolded and the personalities involved. A much more sustained explanation, underpinned by a deep analysis of what went wrong, would have to be based on a close examination of the ideological assumptions shaping the whole exercise. It would not simply describe the development of poor policies or their incompetent application. Instead, it would examine why Iraq was invaded in the first place and what shaped the drafting of policies and planning for the aftermath of the war.

The point of departure for such an analysis would be the argument that all agency, whether individual or collective, is socially mediated. Individuals and groups, be they the president or the diplomats and the soldiers that he employed, do not react to neutral 'objective' situations. Instead, they make choices shaped by an assessment of possibilities. This assessment is based upon perceptions about the world in which they live. The social perceptions of individuals, the 'concrete intersubjective space of symbolic communication' within society, are constructed through the shared understanding of significations (Zizek, 1994, p. 10). These are the evolving, collectively understood symbols and myths through which society represents itself and more importantly in this case understands other societies. For this approach Antonio Gramsci's understanding of ideology is of particular use. For Gramsci, a war of position results in the rise to dominance of an 'organic ideology'. This is a synthesis of differing interests and concepts within society, cemented together or given coherence by the dominant class and their ideological aims and objectives. So the consciousness of individuals within society is not given but constructed by the dominant ideological system the individual exists within.

From the president downwards, policy towards Iraq would have been created within and hence shaped by the dominant ideological system operating at the time.[2]

From this position Gramsci then develops a detailed understanding of the influence of various ideational forms within the dominant ideology by building his approach to 'Common Sense'. The different levels of ideology are ordered according to the internal coherence and complexity of a discourse and given overall consistency by their dominant position within the hegemonic ideology. Philosophy appears at the higher end of the scale because 'the features of individual elaboration are the most salient' (Gramsci, 1998, p. 327). At the lower end and by far the most accessible is Common Sense, 'it is the diffuse, uncoordinated features of a generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment' (Gramsci, 1998, p. 330). Common Sense is the structure of everyday thinking through which the majority of any population live the greater part of their lives. It is within Common Sense that the hegemonic ideology exists in symbiotic dominance with its vanquished predecessor, securing its own influence by assimilating the more salient parts of the other. So the study of decision making in the Bush administration, from the Oval Office to the Green Zone, has to map the inter-relationship between Philosophy and Common Sense. In this case it would be the influence that Neo-Liberalism and its cousin Neoconservatism had on the Common Sense decision-making of American government functionaries on the ground in Baghdad.

That ideology should have such an overt influence within Bush's White House should come as no surprise. Bush and his advisors are among the most unapologetically ideological politicians to occupy the Oval Office in American history. Repeatedly in a number of speeches from 2001 onwards, Bush places his commitment to what he terms 'liberty' at the centre of his whole approach to foreign policy. In December 2003, 9 months after the invasion of Iraq, Bush told an interviewer, 'it's very important … for you to understand that I have a set of beliefs that are inviolate: faith in the transformative power of freedom and belief that people, if just given a chance, will choose free societies' (Woodward, 2008, p. 433). With such strong overt beliefs shaping policy, external advisers constructed their own message to suit the President's concerns. Kanan Makiya, a long exiled Iraqi intellectual, told Bush just before the invasion 'you're going to break the mould … You will change the image of the United States in the region. Democracy is truly doable in Iraq' (Woodward, 2004, p. 259).

Few, if any, of the senior politicians, military planners and diplomats making and executing policy on Iraq had ever visited the country before the invasion, let alone been involved in extended studies of its state structures or society. From George W. Bush downwards, Iraq policy was constructed from

within the collective Common Sense that shaped their perception. The effects of the ideologically structured vision made the empirical realities of Iraq disappear. Instead, the country became the screen on which the US administration could project its vision of how the world should be and would be upon the application of American power. So in order to grasp what went so badly wrong with US policy in Iraq, the dominant Common Sense and its relationship to Philosophy has to be examined in detail.

## Neoconservatism, Liberalism and Common Sense

Chantal Mouffe has argued that although Common Sense presents itself as a spontaneous collective reaction to reality, it is in fact the 'popular expression of 'higher philosophies'' (Mouffe, 1979, p. 184). This echoes and expands upon Gramsci's own argument that 'every philosophy has a tendency to become the common sense of a fairly limited environment (that of all the intellectuals)' (Gramsci, 1998, p. 330). So to investigate the extent to which ideology is to be blamed for the Iraq debacle, the dominant ideational influences working on government officials have to be uncovered and their influence delineated. This involves tracking the dominate Common Sense back to its origins within 'higher philosophies'.

Uncovering these influences at work within the Bush administration is not as straightforward a task as it appears. In the election campaign that resulted in Bush's first presidency and in the early stages of his first term, there is a strong case for the president and some of his senior advisers pursuing a straightforwardly Realist approach. Condoleezza Rice, in a piece explaining Republican foreign policy during the first presidential campaign, argued for the promotion of 'national interests' above all else (Rice, 2000). After the election, key members of Bush's inner cabinet argued that there was to be no 'foreign policy as social work', no extended forays into state building like those that bogged the Clinton administration down in far flung countries that were of little direct interest to the United States (Hirsh, 2002, p. 24).

However, it was the attacks of September 2001 that transformed Bush's approach or as Dorrien argues, 'it was not until 9/11 that George W. Bush fully joined his own administration' (Dorrien, 2004, p. 2). There is a convincing case that in times of profound uncertainty, where empirically anchored accounts appear to lose their explanatory capacity, ideology becomes more overtly influential, 'ideas are 'switchmen' that determine the tracks along which those actors pursue their self-interest'. 'In the wake of international shocks, ideas have a great impact … through the process of agenda-setting' (Dueck, 2004, pp. 521, 523). It was after 9/11 that Bush, struggling to make policy in a deeply disturbing and rapidly moving international situation, which he perceived to be

unpredictable, reached for the certainty of a clear and apparently unambiguous ideology. From the end of 2001 onwards, the President's public statements on foreign policy began to build towards 'a plausible rendering of a sophisticated ideology' (Smith, 2007, p. 14).

Against this background, Owens is right to argue that 'the dominant ideological justification for the United States invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 was provided by neoconservatism' (Owens, 2007, p. 266). However, the ideology behind the Bush doctrine and its application in Iraq has dual doctrinal origins within the higher philosophies. The Neoconservative approach of key advisers in Washington was certainly a factor in providing the moral justification for the deployment of force. But the more widely influential approach of Neo-Liberalism, with its long developed policy proscriptions for the reform of errant states and societies came to dominate both tactics and strategy on the ground in Baghdad. In order to weigh the role and influence of both, the two have to be disentangled and their key claims examined.

At first glance, Neoconservatism and any form of Liberal ideology look like very uneasy bedfellows. In the domestic American sphere, Neoconservative activists focus the majority of their anger on the manifold vices of what they label 'liberalism' (Williams, 2005, p. 311). This in part springs

not only from Leo Strauss' extended and largely negative interaction with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but also from deep unease felt by Neoconservatives about the socio-political dynamics unleashed by capitalism and celebrated by specific forms of Liberalism. One of the doctrine's founding father's, Irving Kristol, argued that although capitalism was successful in delivering wealth and liberty, in doing so it unleashed destructive dynamics which could render society asunder (Drolet, 2007, p. 252). The Liberal celebration of individual rationality offers very little community cohesion. The Liberal state, on this reading, fosters value pluralism, directly undermining the ability to develop communal ties and protect the cultural consensus based on a specific set of Protestant values that have given ideational cohesion to the American nation (Williams, 2005, p. 312; Drolet, 2007, p. 253).

It is this search for a uniting ethos to counteract the negative effects of capitalism that led Neoconservatives to focus on the international and it is here that their direct influence on the Bush doctrine can be found. Drolet has argued that Neoconservatives deploy the 'politics of security' in order to negate the tension between their celebration of capitalism and their deep ambiguity about its effects on community cohesion. It is 'a symbolic politics of fear and enmity which then allows for a sovereign intervention to establish what constitutes the common good and to keep conflict over values out of both the public and the private sphere' (Drolet, 2007, p. 266). The citizen is

re-moralized and the cultural homogeneity of the nation re-established by focusing on the immanent possibility of conflict with an external enemy whose model of the good life is diametrically opposed and threatening to America's.

Williams argues that key to the homogenizing role that the international plays for Neoconservative philosophy in the domestic arena is the idea of 'national greatness'. In addition to the prevalence of a homogenizing external threat, cohesion is also delivered by an understanding that the United States represents a progressive force in world history that has embarked upon a mission to spread its own domestic success universally. Within this understanding, the United States is certainly exceptional but not unique. Its role then becomes the promotion of virtuous government (Rhodes, 2003, p. 138; Williams, 2005, p. 318). Here we can begin to see the fusing of Neoconservative with Neo-Liberal ideas at the international level. The United State's historic mission is to universalize its own success, based as it is on democracy and free-market capitalism.

These two strands of Neoconservative thought, the politics of security and a proselytizing national greatness are clearly central to the Bush doctrine but not at all incompatible with Neo-Liberalism. National greatness leads to a deep unease with multilateral diplomacy or any multi-member alliance system that hinders the use of American power. The politics of security lent themselves very well to 9/11. Instead of a terrorist incident similar in logic if not scale to those frequently experienced across Europe, the attack on the twin towers quickly became an existential battle between two ideologically driven foes with the potential use of weapons of mass destruction raising the stakes to hitherto unimaginable levels.[3] The answer to such a threat became the combination of overwhelming military power against the perpetrators and a transformationalist agenda to bring the benefits of the American system to the long oppressed residents of the Middle East.

However, there is a lacuna at the heart of the Neoconservative's foreign policy agenda. The 'symbolic politics of fear' and 'national greatness' have been constructed to meet the needs of a distinctly national policy agenda. Neoconservative philosophy has not got a great deal to say about how the transformation of other societies is to take place. Although Neoconservative ideology drove the United States to war, it had very little to contribute once Iraq had been occupied and the business of state and societal reform had to begin. Once the first stage of the war ended, the influence of Liberal ideology became paramount.

Evidence for the extent of Liberalism's influence over Common Sense for key members of the US Administration, especially after 9/11, is not difficult to find. The president placed it at the heart of his foreign policy agenda from at least 2002 onwards. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, published in September 2002, committed the United States to use its 'unparalleled

military strength and great economic and political influence', to favour human liberty, with the end result that all nations and societies would be 'free' to choose 'political and economic liberty' (United States Government, 2002; Rhodes, 2003, p. 144). A close study of Bush's speeches and his interviews indicates an individual relying heavily on his own Common Sense to shape a foreign policy agenda committed to using American military power to deliver liberty through the promotion of 'free market democracy' (Smith, 2007, pp. 14, 21).

It should also come as no great surprise that Liberalism so readily provided the ideational route map for such a muscular and militaristic policy of liberation. The location of Liberalism within the academy may well be within the history of political ideas or as a normative political doctrine for the best ways to realize the good life. However, its history outside the academy highlights its activist intentions. At the heart of the history of Liberalism is what Hindess describes as 'a positive project of government'. This, Williams argues, is the 'the 'kinetic' elements of liberalism; its restless and relentless desire to remake the world in its own image'. It is this he argues 'that ultimately underpins the liberal project' (Hindess, 2002, p. 134; Williams, 2008, p. 12).

The influence of Liberal Philosophy on President Bush, his administration and the application of its policy in Iraq can be divided into three broad categories; how it treats the individual, its understanding of the role and function of the market and finally a tension at its heart about the state. At the core of Liberal Philosophy is the rational individual. The individual and his or her rationality are conceived as a universal and invariant category. The rational individual is not only universal, but also conceived as pre-existing both the state and the society (Williams, 2008, p. 27). It is this Liberal individual that was the focus of George W. Bush's policy, it is his or her liberty that is to be rescued or defended under the Bush doctrine.

However, things become a little more complex when the preferred mechanisms for realizing this freedom of choice are outlined. Firstly, Liberalism makes a clear division between economic and political life. Once both have been separated, the economic is privileged to allow individual rationality to flourish within as free a market as possible (Polanyi, 1957, p. 71; Tooze, 1998, p. 227). But on closer examination, the role of the market is not only to facilitate but also to inculcate. Liberalism conceives of the market as imposing on its participant a series of virtues such as prudence, diligence, punctuality and self-control (Hindess, 2002, p. 135). The tension found in the role that the market is to play is between a naturally occurring phenomenon that allows individuals to realize their rationality and a disciplining mechanism designed to abolish or at least limit non-desirable or non-rational forms of behaviour and organization.

This tension between what is perceived to be universal and naturally occurring and what needs to be done to facilitate or even impose behaviour, reaches its peak with Liberal discussions about the state. On the one hand, Liberal philosophy views the state with profound suspicion. With its organizational and coercive strength the state clearly poses the greatest threat to an individual's ability to exercise their free will. In addition, the state's promotion of nationalism runs the distinct danger of polluting or perverting a specifically individual rationality. Indeed, it is the negative role of despotic states that formed the main target of Bush's National Security Strategy and both Afghanistan and Iraq provided the easily identifiable targets for action after 9/11. For Liberals and for Bush, the state should at best be a facilitator, a guardian of order and a protector of property rights that allows for the individual to interact unhindered with the market. On the other hand, however, although the state in Liberalism should certainly be autonomous from social interests, it has, along with the market, been allotted a much larger role in the realization of Liberal goals (Williams, 2008, p. 14). The state has to guarantee property rights but in certain instances has to directly intervene to create market functions (Polanyi, 1957, pp. 63–65). Under this 'kinetic' Liberalism the state accrues a series of roles designed to teach or indeed force people to be free. This dual role for the state, as the major threat to individual liberty but also as both its guarantor and creator is not only a tension at the heart of Liberalism but also the ideational contradiction that drove the United States to fail in Iraq.

## US Failure in Iraq

### Liberalism, despotism and planning for the invasion

The US government's approach to regime change in Iraq was structured by a series of suppositions whose ideational origins lay within Liberal discourses on state, society and the individual. These shaped official's attitudes to how the military campaign was to be waged, the role and shape of the Iraqi state after the war and how Iraqis themselves would greet their 'liberation'. The whole planning process for the aftermath of the invasion was undermined by the ideologically driven assumptions that underpinned it. The intervention was not perceived by its planners in Washington or sold to the American electorate as an extended exercise in either state building or military occupation. Instead, it was to be a limited exercise in regime change and then state reform. The Neoconservative's proselytizing for regime change saw the whole process through a Liberal paradigm. This was to be a highly limited exercise in state reform. This ideational framework gave birth to two intertwined policy

approaches, one that could be labeled 'despotic decapitation' and the other structural adjustment.

It was early on in both the policy planning process and more public justifications for the war that the 'decapitation thesis' became significant. It was the politically influential exiles of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) that delivered the stage props needed to make this approach appear plausible. Saddam Hussein's regime, the Neoconservatives and their INC allies argued, had certainly built a set of strong institutions. It was these that had kept the Ba'ath Party in power for 35 years. However, the state's relations with and domination of society were solely dependent on the deployment of violence and corruption. The origins of this understanding of state-society relations can be traced back to Montesquieu's notion of 'Oriental Despotism' (Montesquieu, 1989). Its form of government was extreme; the power of the sovereign was arbitrary because no limits were placed upon it. The population under the state was therefore captive, enslaved to a regime based on fear. Added to this were the themes of corruption, neglect and degeneration (Abrahamian, 1974, p. 4).

The policy proscriptions that sprang from such an approach focused on a US military 'decapitation' or an Iraqi coup. From within the despotic approach, Iraq's ruling elite was entirely separated from society. This small governing clique, dependent as they were on violence and corruption to rule, could expect no support from their own population. Instead, they could be 'surgically' removed from the apex of the state, leaving in place the institutions that could be used to rule over a gratefully liberated population. The graphic personification of this discursive vision was the pack of playing cards issued to US soldiers as they invaded Iraq. Here were the commanding heights of the regime pictured as kings, queens and knaves. Pick up the deck and the game was over.

There is strong evidence to suggest that this ideational construct led both the British and American government's to anticipate that at the onset of the air war or in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the regime's power would simply ebb away. Once the government's ability to use violence had gone then an uprising or coup would remove Saddam Hussain, leaving the governing structures in place.[4] The US President, in a speech on the eve of war, promised the Iraqi people that 'the tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near', and then actively encouraged the Iraqi armed forces to move against their leaders (Bush, 2003a).[5] The deployment of the despotic approach saw the Iraqi leadership as fragile and easily removed. Society would certainly welcome its liberation and so the need for large numbers of ground troops or detailed planning was negated. Upon liberation, it was assumed that US troops would find state structures largely in tact, operating coherently with civil servants who would be more than willing to serve their liberators by running government institutions.

The more empirically grounded agenda for state reform shaping post-war plans for Iraq had impeccable Neo-Liberal roots. Its heritage lay in 20 years of Neo-Liberal policy prescriptions for the post-colonial world. This approach was born of the 'Washington consensus' developed in the 1980s. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank set about applying the 'wisdom of market reliance' to developing countries in economic difficulty. Regime change in Baghdad was to be structural adjustment led by the Marine Corps. If there was no coup then the Iraqi state was to be seized by invading US troops who would use the indigenous institutions to rule the country. This would negate the need for a large number of foreign troops, the deployment of large-scale US resources or an extended occupation. It was this vision of post-Saddam Iraq that allowed Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon to budget for such modest post-war expenditure and to claim on the eve of invasion that US troops would only have to be in the country for a short time. It was the power of Iraqi state institutions, forged in the 1970s and 1980s, which the United States assumed they would inherit once they reached Baghdad. Through them, US forces planned to stabilize the country. Once order had been achieved, the occupiers would then move to reform and democratize the state.

Concerted planning for regime change actually began in January 2003, when President Bush signed a National Security Directive centralzing responsibility for Iraq in the Pentagon. From then until May 2003, those who had been campaigning for regime change for many years, personified by Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, were given a free hand to plan for the realization of their dreams. It is during the months before the invasion that the clearest indication of what a Neo-Liberal Iraq was meant to look like can be seen. The main point that emerges is that for those civilians in the Pentagon, Iraq had become a blank screen upon which their own ideological concerns were projected. For Neoconservatives such as Wolfowitz, Iraqi governing structures post-regime change were malleable and could become whatever the US government wanted them to be. This becomes clearest in a meeting Wolfowitz had with the experienced diplomat and ex-Ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine. Bodine was discussing with Wolfowitz the best way to shape a post-war administration. Instead of focusing on practicalities, 'Wolfowitz began musing about redrawing the provincial boundaries altogether. It was as if Iraq were a blank slate, to be remade in the image of its liberators' (Diamond, 2005, p. 31; Packer, 2005, p. 125).

With such an ideologically charged planning process in place, advice was only sought from those who were in agreement with this proselytzing vision. Kanan Makiya, despite leaving Iraq in 1967 to attend college in Boston, became the expert of choice for the White House, National Security Council and Pentagon. This was because Makiya's liberal vision of post-war Iraq, untainted by reality for 36 years, closely matched those he was advising. First

Makiya told Condoleezza Rice that "a new kind of politics is imaginable in Iraq'. Iraq was uniquely suited to become the first liberal Arab country'. He then went on to meet George Bush, telling the president that US actions would 'transform the image of America in the Arab world', that 'people will greet the troops with sweets and flowers'. Perhaps his most startling statement, particularly for anyone with direct experience of pre-war Iraq, was his claim that Iraqis 'were too focused on their own oppression' to hate Israel. Beyond simple mendacity or ignorance, this statement can be explained by the ideological framework Makiya was working through. Iraqis were that universal of categories, rational individuals. Under this rubric, their oppression and poverty shaped their lives. Once this was removed, what the smaller issues were for Makiya, such as Israel, could be explained to them in terms of rational self-interest. Feisal Istrabadi, another Iraqi prominent in Washington, wryly comments: 'I knew nobody who spent four decades in exile who knew what was going on in Iraq. I didn't and Kanan didn't' (Packer, 2005, pp. 81, 96–98).

It was the hapless retired general, Jay Garner, who was first charged with the onerous, if not impossible task of trying to make a reality in Baghdad of the ideological vision developed in the Pentagon. The title of Garner's organization, 'the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance' indicated the role it was meant to play. The United States involvement in Iraq was to be strictly limited in terms of length of stay and capacity. Order and administration would be carried out by the Iraqi state under American supervision (Feldman, 2004, p. 113). The correct role of American advisers was to guide Iraqis towards reform and democracy. With this in mind Garner landed in Baghdad with no professional translators or interpreters on his staff. Instead he travelled with a motley crew of former diplomats, retired military personnel and young Neoconservative firebands (Diamond, 2005, p. 32). Garner repeatedly told reporters that he and his staff would be out of Iraq within 3–4 months. His plan was simple, 'First, his team would go into Baghdad and appoint an Iraqi interim government. Second, it would select an Iraqi constitutional convention, which would write a democratic constitution, which would be ratified. Finally, it would hold elections and hand over power to a sovereign Iraqi government by August [2003]' (Diamond, 2005, p. 33).

The assumptions that Garner carried to Baghdad were those developed in the Department of Defence. In February 2003, Douglas Feith had told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee 'that Iraq's governmental structures would be salvageable. After eliminating Ba'athists implicated in atrocities, the major institutions and ministries would remain in place and continue to perform essential functions just as before' (Phillips, 2005, p. 125). A small US force would race to Baghdad and seize the state. They would then decapitate the higher echelons of the Ba'athist government. Finally they would hand the state and its civil servants over to Ahmed Chalabi's INC, who would run Iraq

as US soldiers withdrew. To quote Rice, 'The concept was that we would defeat the army, but the institutions would hold, everything from ministries to police forces' (Gordon, 2004). This plan quickly disintegrated as it collided with Iraqi realities and Garner was swiftly sacked. He was aptly described by one Defence Department official as 'a fall guy for a bad strategy. He was doing exactly want Rummy wanted him to do. It was the strategy that failed' (Packer, 2005, p. 147). Despotic decapitation and structural adjustment had proved to be a radically inappropriate basis upon which to plan for post-regime change in Iraq.

## Neo-Liberal policy prescriptions: De-Ba'athification and the disbanding of the Iraqi army

In the aftermath of invasion, the state that the United States had hoped to seize and reform was on the verge of collapse. The governing structures, both coercive and administrative, that had kept the Ba'ath Party in power had been placed under immense strain for decades. The US invasion was the third war that the Iraqi governing elite had fought in 20 years. From 1990, Iraq had been placed under 13 years of the harshest international sanctions ever deployed that were specifically designed to bring about a collapse of state capacity. The entrance of US troops into Baghdad triggered 3 weeks of violence and looting. In the immediate aftermath of regime change, civil servants did not return to work, instead opting to protect their families and property as best they could. Their offices across the country but especially in Baghdad were stripped by looters and burnt. Seventeen of Baghdad's 23 central ministry buildings were destroyed in the chaos that followed (Phillips, 2005, p. 135).

So in the aftermath of regime change and the violent looting that followed it, Iraqi state capacity was drastically reduced to a point where for at least the first year of the occupation it failed to exist in any meaningful form. Paul Bremer, the man in charge of running Iraq from 12 May 2003 to 28 April 2004, appeared on the one hand to recognize this, stating that, 'nobody had given me a sense of how utterly *broken* this country was' (Bremer and McConnell, 2006, p. 18). But the conundrum at the heart of the CPAs running of Iraq is that given the collapse of the Iraqi state and the widespread lawlessness that followed regime change, why did they take a series of decisions that directly impeded their own efforts to rebuild the state's administrative capacity and re-impose order on society? The answer to this question lies in the Common Sense Bremer, the White House and the Department of Defence were working within.

Of the numerous controversial decisions Bremer took during his year in Baghdad two, de-Ba'athification and disbanding the Iraqi army, have been the

main target of opprobrium. There is little doubt that both played a major, if not the central role, in igniting the insurgency and driving Iraq into the civil war of 2006–2007 (Dodge, 2007). Nearly all the analytical work on Iraq identifies these two decisions as cataclysmic mistakes. However, what is far less certain is why the decisions were taken? During his first week in Baghdad, Bremer was encountering a country he knew very little or nothing about. Bremer, had been an ambassador in Europe, had worked for Henry Kissinger's consulting firm and was an expert on counter-terrorism, but he had no experience of state-building or working in the Middle East. Upon arrival in Iraq he inherited responsibility for a state with no government, no working civil service and no law and order. Despite his ignorance and the chaos and violence he faced, he took two decisions that directly contributed to government incoherence and an increase in violence. Explanations for these two tumultuous decisions are to be found within the ideology shaping Bremer's agency. It was Bremer's Common Sense that allowed him to act with such speed, certainty and devastating effect.

On 16 May after only 4 days in the country, Bremer issued CPA General Order No. 1: 'The De-Ba'athification of Iraqi Society'. This mandated the sacking of all Ba'ath Party members in government employment who had held the four top-most senior party ranks. The de-Ba'athification order purged government ministries of their top layer of management, making between 20 000 and 120 000 people unemployed.[6] This occurred at a time when restoring government services were the most important way to win over sceptical Iraqi public opinion. The administrational capacity of the state had been destroyed by over a decade of sanctions, three wars in 20 years and 3 weeks of uncontrolled looting. Bremer's decision to pursue de-Ba'athification, in effect, removed what was left of the state: its institutional memory and a large section of its skilled personnel.

Of equal significance was the effect this measure had on the Ba'ath Party itself. Interviews that I carried out with mid-level to senior Ba'athists in Baghdad at the time of Bremer's edict in May 2003, reflected the highly negative effect it had. Before General Order No. 1 the interviews were dominated by a sense of profound defeat. The majority of those questioned were involved in a forensic examination of their own culpability in what had so badly gone wrong from 1968 onwards. This, for all intents and purposes, was the beginning of a moral de-Ba'athification. The swift military defeat and the flight of Saddam Hussein forced high-level Ba'athists to examine their own role in his rule and their culpability in the repression of Iraqi society. However, the sacking of such a large number of civil servants stopped this process in its tracks. The first reactions to it were summed up by a senior Ba'athist I interviewed in the Baghdad suburb of Ghazaliya in May 2003, 'why can't he leave us alone? We are like the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, worn out

and ideologically defeated'. But within days of General Order No. 1 this sense of defeat quickly mutated into defiance and reorganization. In the face of what the remnants of the Ba'ath Party saw as needless persecution, cadres felt they had little choice but to regroup and fight back.

Bremer justified the issuing of General Order No. 1 by claiming its purpose was 'to rid the Iraqi government of the small group of true believers at the top of the party and those who had committed crimes in its name, and to wipe the country clean of the Ba'ath Party ideology' (Bremer and McConnell, 2006, p. 39). However, the numbers and sheer scale involved, undermine this explanation. The order resulted in the sacking of not only senior civil servants in Baghdad but also school teachers across the country. In the early days of the order Bremer himself insisted on signing every individual exception to the edict, thus making sure that very few people would escape its broad remit.

As with other controversial measures, Bremer used his book, *My Year in Iraq,* to carefully explain the decision-making process behind the order. On his last day at the Pentagon before leaving for Baghdad, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld gave Bremer his 'marching orders' in the form of a memo stating 'We will make clear that the Coalition will eliminate the remnants of Saddam's regime'. Under Secretary for Planning, Douglas Feith, followed this up in greater detail with the draft of the 'De-Ba'athification of Iraqi Society'. When Bremer announced the policy to his staff in Baghdad he 'reminded them that the President's guidance is clear: de-Ba'athification will be carried out even at a cost to administrative efficiency' (Bremer and McConnell, 2006, pp. 39–40, 45). Rumsfeld's comments are revealing, such a widespread purge of personnel indicates the size and extent of the regime remnants he was targeting for elimination.

For Rumsfeld, Feith and Bremer the aim of the order was to clear out the old ruling elite from the apparatuses of state power along with the highest echelons of the old technocratic elite. Liberal ideology views the state with extreme suspicion and Bremer was acting in concert with the central tenets of this higher philosophy. Under this rubric, the negative influences of the old Iraqi state had to be purged. De-Ba'athification would do this, reducing the capacity of the state, pushing its institutions out of areas of the economy and society it should never have entered. From within a Liberal discourse this would allow the space for the market to flourish, bringing with it the disciplinary effect of capitalism, forcing Iraqis to be free. However, Bremer's Liberal mistrust of the state was so great that he did not or could not consider the hugely negative consequences his actions would have. Such a brutal attack on an already feeble state far from forcing freedom on Iraqis drove them into open revolt.

If de-Ba'athification shows the destructive influence that Liberal discourse had on Bremer, then the final decision he took during his first fortnight in

Baghdad was equally controversial and even more damaging to the US presence in Iraq: the disbanding of the Iraqi army. It is a measure of the storm that this decision created that both Bremer and his Senior Adviser for Defence and Security Affairs, Walter Slocombe have continually and vociferously defended it (Senor and Slocombe, 2005). This defence revolves around Slocombe's often repeated argument that 'we didn't disband the army. The army disbanded itself … There was no army to disband' (PBS Frontline, 2004). 'To get them back we'd have to go into their homes and drag them out' (Bremer and McConnell, 2006, p. 55). This vociferous defence of such a controversial policy flies directly in the face of evidence that suggests the US military were in negotiations with senior officers in the old Iraqi army at the time of Bremer's order. They were moving forward with plans to contact and then pay as many as 137 000 soldiers, removing the threat they posed to order and bolstering the state's coercive capacity (Woodward, 2006, pp. 188–189). The negotiations surrounding this initiative were made meaningless by Bremer's announcement.

Whatever way it was perceived from the confines of the Republican Palace, the compulsory redundancy of 400 000 trained and armed men following hard on the heels of de-Ba'athification, created a very large pool of resentment across southern and central Iraq. To quote Faisal Istrabadi, 'it was an atrocious decision. I don't understand why you take 400 000 men who were highly armed and trained, and turn them into your enemies. Particularly when these are people who didn't fight' (Phillips, 2005, p. 152).

Like General Order No. 1, the disbanding of the army so quickly by Bremer after his arrival in Baghdad shows the power of the ideational framework he was working within, given his almost complete lack of detailed knowledge about the country he was supposed to be running. Bremer was well aware that the United States occupation faced profound shortages of ground troops (Bremer and McConnell, 2006, p. 10). He witnessed the nature and extent of the disorder Baghdad was facing as he flew over the city when he first arrived. However, even after acknowledging the lack of coercive manpower and the violent disorder the CPA faced, he still pushed on with disbanding the Iraqi armed forces. Beyond sheer bloody minded stupidity, the only plausible explanation is the ideology that guided him. Bremer's distrust of Iraqi state power was such that he brushed aside doubts about the consequences of his actions and pushed on with disbanding the army and initially refused to pay the pensions of retired soldiers. Following the US government's National Security Strategy, Iraqis were now free to choose 'political and economic liberty' and 'free market democracy'. Instead the economic and political space created by Bremer's de-Ba'athification order and the disbanding of the army was predictably filled by a number of hastily organized groups free to deploy violence for their own political ends.

The momentous decisions taken by Bremer in his first 2 weeks as the viceroy of Iraq to disband the Iraqi army and pursue de-Ba'athification, clearly propelled Iraq into insurgency and then civil war. Among a series of decisions that he took during his year in Baghdad, these two bear the most responsibility for US failure in Iraq. They can also be traced directly back to the Liberal ideological framework that Bremer and his bosses within the Defence Department and White House were working on. The 'Kinetic Liberalism' deployed by the Bush Administration in Iraq directly propelled it to failure.

## Conclusions

The self-imposed stakes in Iraq could not have been any higher for George W. Bush who put a successful change of regime in Baghdad on the front line of his global war against terrorism. If this was not an ambitious enough task, he also committed his administration to transforming the way the rest of the state's in the Middle East governed their own societies. The cost of America's failure in Iraq is certainly to be measured in the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have been murdered since 2003. But it has also greatly damaged the United States' prestige across the region and beyond. Domestically, the regimes of the Middle East are as secure today as they were on 9/11. Bush's visionary speeches and calls for the march of liberty to sweep across the Middle East have hurt America's credibility in the region but more damagingly, they have tainted by association those indigenous Arab voices calling for democratization.

Against this background there is a strong analytical temptation to write George W. Bush's administration off as a historical aberration, a post-9/11 diversion in the grand scheme of US foreign policy. However, this would be a mistake. Firstly, two of the most senior office holders in the government, Vice President Richard Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were not gauche Texans nor Neoconservative firebrands. Instead they were long time Belt Way players with decades of experience in US government and foreign policy.

Secondly, US foreign policy towards Iraq after 2003 does not represent an aberration when viewed from the perspective of the rising Liberal trend within international politics since the 1980s. Rather the invasion of Iraq can be seen as a high watermark in post-Cold War Liberal interventionism. What started with the Third World debt crisis and demands by the World Bank for structural adjustment, quickly developed into calls for good governance. This trend then sought to place conditions on the right to sovereign non-intervention. State rights had to be earned, in the Third World at least, by meeting a series of responsibilities in the way a government treated its population (Haass, 2002).

If there was a groundbreaking moment in the onward march of Liberal interventionism it was not the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, which was met with a storm of political criticism. Instead it came much earlier, with the speech given by Tony Blair in Chicago in 1999. This set out his 'Doctrine of the International Community' where the ideational concerns of Liberalism were married with the muscular military self-confidence that was born at the end of the Cold War (Blair, 2004). Blair's speech was not greeted with the opprobrium aimed at George W. Bush. This bold statement of crusading Liberalism appeared, in some quarters to have caught the zeitgeist, giving form and coherence to a number of disparate issues that had become prominent in the period of time between the Berlin Wall falling and the explosion of violence that ripped Yugoslavia apart.

That the invasion of Iraq went so badly wrong may say more about the assumptions underpinning Liberalism than it does about the incompetence of the Bush administration or the extremity of Neoconservative ideology. In Iraq these assumptions were laid bare. Firstly, as Feldman argues, it is 'easier to motivate Americans to support an invasion – however expensive – than it is to convince them to sustain nation building in the aftermath of military action' (Feldman, 2004, p. 28). Secondly, Diamond is right to argue that 'America was simply over matched in a post-war conflict for which it was grossly unprepared' (Diamond, 2005, p. 291). Packer, who was before the invasion of Iraq a chief promoter of Liberal interventionism, captures the main point in his *mea culpa*: 'Because the Iraq War began in ideas, it always suffered from abstraction'. 'Iraq provided a blank screen on which Americans were free to project anything they wanted, and because so few Americans had anything directly at stake there, many of them never saw more than the image of their feelings' (Packer, 2005, pp. 238, 382). With key Liberal interventionists like Samantha Power and Susan E. Rice playing such an influential role in Barack Obama's foreign policy team, they would do well to heed Amitai Etzioni's advice over the first 4 years of the next presidential term: '… advocates of nation-building would greatly benefit from following the Alcoholics Anonymous prayer: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference' (Etzioni, 2004, p. 17).

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## Notes

1 For an indication of what those in the administration might have wanted to do after success see Frum (2003, p. 232).
2 Different individuals operating within ideological systems have varying levels of autonomy to identify and attempt to transform the discourses that shape their perception. However, no individual has complete autonomy to escape the ideational structures within which they work.
3 For a similar conclusion albeit arrived at from a very different perspective see the comments of Stella Rimington, the ex-head of MI5 in Norton-Taylor (2008).
4 Senior Whitehall sources in London were quoted in October 2002 as looking for 'a political outcome' an implosion of Iraqi power from within, as opposed to 'an industrial strength war.' (Norton-Taylor, 2002). 'British government sources admitted yesterday that there had been a 'general expectation' on both sides of the Atlantic that 'the Iraqi people would revolt against Saddam as they had in 1991' or at least that there might be a coup 'with in the higher echelons' of the regime.' (Beeston and Baldwin, 2003). These conclusions were confirmed by a series of interviews I carried out with senior decision makers in Whitehall in November 2002.
5 'It is not too late for the Iraq military to act with honour and protect your country' (Bush, 2003a).
6 Phillips estimates the General Order No. 1 made 120 000 unemployed out of a total party membership of 2 million. Bremer cites intelligence estimates that it effected 1 per cent of the party membership, 20 000 people. Packer estimates 'at least thirty-five thousand'. The large variation in estimates indicated the paucity of reliable intelligence on the ramifications of such an important policy decision. (Packer, 2005, p. 191; Phillips, 2005, pp. 145–146; Bremer and McConnell, 2006, p. 40).

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