The Long and Short of It

Cognitive Constraints on Leaders' Assessments of "Postwar" Iraq

Aaron Rapport

Why did the administration of George W. Bush hold so many mistaken beliefs about the costs of establishing a transformed Iraqi state after the removal of Saddam Hussein? Relatedly, why did the president and senior officials devote so little attention to plans for the postconflict phase of the war, referred to as Phase IV? According to the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), the administration had "no established plans to manage the increasing chaos" in Iraq, adding "when Iraq's withering post-invasion reality superseded [officials'] expectations, there was no well-defined 'Plan B' as a fallback and no existing government structures or resources to support a quick response."[1] Numerous analyses of the administration's assumptions and preparations for the postwar phase of the conflict have argued that leadership in the White House and the Department of Defense grossly underestimated the cost of securing peace in Iraq. President Bush, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and other key administration figures failed to foresee the rise of sectarian violence and ignored officials working on potential postwar problems or left them underresourced, without the necessary time or guidance necessary to plan effectively.[2]

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1. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (hereafter SIGIR), *Hard Lessons: The Iraq Reconstruction Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2009), pp. 323–324.
2. These and other critiques may be found in ibid., pp. 323–326; Nora Bensahel, Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Richard R. Brennan Jr., Heather S. Gregg, Thomas Sullivan, and Andrew Rathmell, *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2008), pp. 234–239; and David A. Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War," *International Security,* Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010/11), pp. 36–37. Detailed narratives include Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), pp. 138–163; George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (New York: Westview, 2005); and Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006). Perhaps the most prominent defense of the Bush

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To explain the Bush administration's lack of planning for postwar Iraq, one must understand the cognitive mechanisms people use to evaluate the latter phases of a sequence of actions. I argue that military operations that policymakers believe will take place at the end of a campaign will be evaluated largely on the desirability of the goals they are meant to achieve, whereas assessments of initial operations will be based more on how feasibly they can be executed. Assessments that privilege desirability over feasibility lead to overconfident estimates of operations' risks and costs. Paradoxically, political actors who attach the most weight to long-term goals are most likely to underestimate the costs of operations occurring in the late stages of an intervention. This argument derives from a prominent field of research in psychology based on construal level theory (CLT), which addresses how people cope with the challenge of forming evaluations of distant actions and events.

Plausible alternative explanations might account for the relative neglect of the final stage of the Iraq intervention. Rationalist theories of war show how imperfect information can hinder assessment. Likewise, opportunity costs might discourage planning for more distant events when those resources could be used to prepare for impending operations. Lastly, the values, biases, and institutionalized knowledge of military organizations can affect the quality of information available to political leaders as well as the preparation and execution of postconflict operations. As I show in this article, the evidence from the Iraq case is inconsistent with the first two explanations. Moreover, a purely organizational account can neither explain the nature of civilian leaders' beliefs about postwar Iraq, nor elucidate why coordination between civilians and officers varied between the preparations for major combat and postconflict operations.

The question of how leaders assess the costs of postconflict stability and reconstruction operations such as those in Iraq is important for several reasons. For better or worse, the United States and other countries will likely continue to engage in military campaigns that include such operations in the years ahead. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the burgeoning academic literature on nation building have illustrated, policymakers and scholars are still striving to understand how postconflict activities should be planned, executed, and evaluated. Second, though accurate assessments cannot guarantee

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administration's postwar planning is Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

the success of a military intervention, they may influence its length and cost. More important, the subjective difficulty of all stages of a military intervention has implications for whether or not the endeavor is initiated in the first place. Just as leaders may reconsider military action after revising estimates of the opposing side's strength, they may reconsider intervention if military victory means having to administer an ungovernable territory.

This article has five sections. It first recounts the calamitous events following the end of the initial major combat operations in Iraq in 2003 and demonstrates that the Bush administration was unprepared to deal with such occurrences. It next describes the construal level theory of assessment and lays out hypotheses on political leaders' assessments of postconflict operations drawn from the theory. The following section examines the validity of the hypotheses as regards leaders' prewar assessments of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The fourth section demonstrates that CLT outperforms or fills in gaps left by other explanations of the case and rebuts other likely criticisms of the argument. The article concludes by addressing additional implications the new theory entails.

Phase IV of the Iraq War

Prior to the Iraq invasion, senior figures in the U.S. Department of Defense estimated that the major offensive would last about one month, and commanding Gen. Tommy Franks of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) predicted a maximum of 1,000 coalition casualties during that time.[3] These estimates proved largely accurate, and President Bush declared the end of major combat less than two months after the invasion had begun. Estimates of Phase IV costs, however, were wildly off the mark. Although prewar predictions of post-Saddam costs ranged from virtually nothing (Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz) to $1.9 trillion, the Bush administration consistently embraced estimates at the lowest end of this spectrum.[4]

Low estimates of costs were not merely attempts to persuade the American public to support the war. They were also consistent with private assumptions that U.S. forces could be extracted quickly once Hussein was deposed. Six

3. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 325, 327; Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* p. 90; and Gregory Fontenot, E.J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), p. 69.
4. Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory," pp. 15–16.

months into war planning, CENTCOM projected that troop levels would decline from 265,000 when major combat operations ended to 50,000 after an eighteen-month drawdown period. Under pressure from Bush and Rumsfeld, CENTCOM changed the estimated pace of withdrawal so that the 140,000 troops actually present by the presumed end of combat operations were projected to decline to 30,000 by September 2003, a drawdown period of only four months. American commanders also had no orders regarding protocol for enforcing order after Hussein's regime fell. Jay Garner, head of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) that was nominally the lead U.S. civilian body in Iraq, reported that the Office of the Secretary of Defense expected that Iraqi ministries would be stood up, an interim government convened, and elections for a new Iraqi government held only five months after the invasion began.[5]

With the government toppled and U.S. personnel unable to fill the power vacuum, weeks of looting and destruction by Iraqi civilians and Baathist elements took hold in Baghdad. Government buildings that coalition forces had planned to use to administer the capital were raided and burned, as were banks, hospitals, universities, and museums. Although the oil ministry was preserved under guard of U.S. Marines, looting was responsible for almost $1 billion in damage to Iraq's oil infrastructure. The chaos greatly added to the costs of reconstruction. Most consequently, thousands of tons of munitions were stolen from weapons dumps around the country, literally providing ammunition for the insurgency that was to come.[6]

Signs of an Iraqi insurgency emerged as early as June 2003. In July Gen. John Abizaid, the new head of CENTCOM, stated that coalition forces were facing "a classical guerrilla-type campaign."[7] The insurgency was likely fueled by the decision of L. Paul Bremer, head of the new Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), to disband the Iraqi army and ban former members of the Baath Party from jobs in the public sector. These decisions were not agreed on by U.S. commanders or anticipated by civilians in Washington, who did not finalize a "de-Baathification" policy before Hussein fell. Bush believed that de-Baathification would be more limited and the army would remain intact. Instead, in the

5. Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*, pp. 132–133; and SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 3.
6. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, pp. 56–60; and Bensahel et al., *After Saddam*, pp. 84–89.
7. Quoted in Donald P. Wright and Timothy R. Reese, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008), p. 32.

words of the president's Iraq coordinator on the National Security Council (NSC), the CPA put "300,000 men with guns in their hands on the street."[8] From the time the president declared the end of major combat operations until July 30, 2008, almost 4,000 U.S. troops were killed in Iraq, compared with fewer than 200 during the drive to take Baghdad.[9] The number of Iraqi civilians killed was greater still.

The primary evidence that the Bush administration had a good grasp of the difficulties it would face in Iraq is Rumsfeld's "Parade of Horribles" memorandum drafted in October 2002. The memo listed many possible dire consequences of an invasion of Iraq, including a U.S. occupation lasting eight to ten years.[10] This document creates more puzzles than it solves, however. If Rumsfeld took seriously his own warnings, it is odd that they did not affect a postwar plan over which his department had substantial influence. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, whose job it was to oversee policy planning for postwar Iraq, gave briefings to the principals on the NSC devoid of such alarming predictions. After reviewing notes taken during Feith's briefing on postwar Iraq on March 4, 2003, Bob Woodward concluded that he had presented a "rosy, pie-in-the-sky" scenario lacking in particulars.[11] As detailed below, top administration officials believed that postwar problems would amount to short-term humanitarian suffering resulting from the destruction wrought during the invasion.[12] The president seemed confident that U.S. efforts to manage the effects of the war would be successful, saying that although there were "a lot of things that could go wrong," it would not be "for want of planning."[13] Yet a lack of planning, along with mistaken prior beliefs by senior policymakers, did leave the administration and U.S. forces in Iraq unprepared to mitigate the gravest consequences of the invasion. Psychological theory can explain why this was the case, and why Bush administra-

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8. Frank Miller, quoted in SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* pp. 74–75. On de-Baathification policy, see Feith, *War and Decision,* pp. 419, 429–430; and James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Benjamin Runkle, and Siddharth Mohandas, *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2009), pp. 113–114.
9. Michael E. O'Hanlon and Jason H. Campbell, "Iraq Index: Tracking Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq" (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, August 28, 2008), pp. 15, 26, http://www.brookings.edu/saban/iraq-index.aspx.
10. Donald Rumsfeld, "Iraq: An Illustrative List of Potential Problems to Be Considered and Addressed," The Rumsfeld Papers, http://www.rumsfeld.com/library/.
11. Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 136.
12. Gordan and Trainor, *Cobra II,* p. 138; and Ricks, *Fiasco,* p. 80.
13. Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* pp. 276–278.

tion assessments of Phase IV differed so greatly from assessments of initial combat operations.

Thinking Ahead: Coping with the Challenge of Assessing the Future

There is plentiful evidence showing that people's assessments of risk vary according to how far removed in time actions and events are perceived to be. For example, researchers have found that when a choice entails immediate consequences, individuals tend to prefer gambles with small payoffs but a high probability of winning to those with poorer odds but higher payoffs. When outcomes are delayed, on the other hand, high-risk, high-reward gambles become more appealing. In short, considerations of desirability get weighted more heavily relative to concerns about feasibility as outcomes are delayed.[14] For instance, one study found that if a lottery outcome was delayed two months, the size of the maximum possible payoff had a 44 percent greater impact on how attractive individuals viewed the lottery than when outcomes occurred in the immediate future. Delaying the lottery also led participants to disregard their likelihood of winning, such that probability considerations had almost 90 percent less impact on evaluations of its attractiveness.[15] Studies have also shown that, unlike their evaluations of the present, people considering actions several months in the future exhibit similar confidence in the likelihood of a positive outcome, regardless of whether the task depends on skill or chance.[16]

Construal level theory sheds light on the correlation between lengthening

14. Nira Liberman and Yaacov Trope, "The Role of Feasibility and Desirability Considerations in Near and Distant Future Decisions: A Test of Temporal Construal Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* Vol. 75, No. 1 (July 1998), pp. 5–18; Marjorie K. Shelley, "Gain/Loss Asymmetry in Risky Intertemporal Choice," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes,* Vol. 59, No. 1 (July 1994), pp. 124–159; Dilip Soman, "The Illusion of Delayed Incentives: Evaluating Future Effort-Monetary Transactions," *Journal of Marketing Research,* Vol. 35, No. 4 (November 1998), pp. 427–437; Scott Highhouse, Susan Mohammed, and Jody R. Hoffman, "Temporal Discounting of Strategic Issues: Bold Forecasts for Opportunities and Threats," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology,* Vol. 24, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 43–56; Michael D. Sagristano, Yaacov Trope, and Nira Liberman, "Time Dependent Gambling: Odds Now, Money Later," *Journal of Experimental Psychology,* Vol. 131, No. 3 (September 2002), pp. 364–376; and Tal Eyal, Nira Liberman, Yaacov Trope, and Eva Walther, "The Pros and Cons of Temporally Near and Distant Action," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* Vol. 86, No. 6 (June 2004), pp. 781–795.

15. Calculated from Sagristano, Trope, and Liberman, "Time Dependent Gambling," p. 369; and cited in Ronald R. Krebs and Aaron Rapport, "International Relations and the Psychology of Time Horizons," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 56, No. 3 (September 2012), p. 541.

16. Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman, "Temporal Construal," *Psychological Review,* Vol. 110, No. 3 (July 2003), p. 411.

time horizons and indifference toward probability considerations.[17] CLT starts from the intuitive premise that it is harder for people to ascertain reliable details about distant events and actions than those that will precede them. To simplify the process of making long-term assessments, people rely on simple mental constructs, or abstractions. Abstract construal focuses on the reasons why an action will be carried out or an event will occur. It is also general in that conclusions are deduced from the use of preexisting beliefs, schemas, and stereotypes. This allows for reasoning that is decontextualized—the conditions under which an action or event will take place do not figure heavily in assessments. Likewise, the desirability of one's goals is less context dependent than the means that should be used to achieve those goals, and thus more salient in abstract assessments. Conversely, when an action or event is on one's immediate agenda, it is easier to gather pertinent contextual information and use inductive reasoning about the case at hand to make judgments. This allows for more concrete construal, which is detail oriented and concerned with how an action or event will transpire.[18] Whereas abstract representations emphasize ends, concrete representations highlight means.

To illustrate, an abstract analysis of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War would focus on the overarching need to contain the expansion of Soviet territorial control and political influence, deducing the value of different policies from a core theory about the threat posed by international communism. As long as the core theory held, the importance of containment could be articulated regardless of shifts in global or local circumstances. In short, abstract construal would encourage a focus on the value of containment largely independent of contextual changes or how feasibly the strategy of containment could be maintained. Alternatively, a concrete assessment of Cold War policy would encourage considerations of how containment was to be achieved given relevant contextual variables, rather than evaluations of the desirability of containment itself. Did the U.S. nuclear arsenal afford the opportunity to

17. Good overviews of CLT are Nira Liberman and Yaacov Trope, "The Psychology of Transcending the Here and Now," *Science,* November 2008, pp. 1201–1205; and Trope and Liberman, "Temporal Construal," pp. 403–421. A broader review of CLT's implications for international politics is Krebs and Rapport, "International Relations and the Psychology of Time Horizons."

18. Liberman and Trope, "The Psychology of Transcending the Here and Now," p. 1201; and Trope and Liberman, "Temporal Construal," p. 416. These different types of assessment are also present in action identification theory, which preceded CLT but lacks a temporal dimension. Robin R. Vallacher and Daniel M. Wegener, *A Theory of Action Identification* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1985).

maintain a small global footprint, or did the United States need flexible military response options and bases on every continent? Could some allies and third world countries be better plied with foreign aid, others with security guarantees, or some combination of the two? Concrete construal of the foreign policy problem would entail considerations of the feasibility of different courses of action given longitudinally shifting variables such as the balance of power, perceptions of the United States' international legitimacy, and the political circumstances in a given state or region.

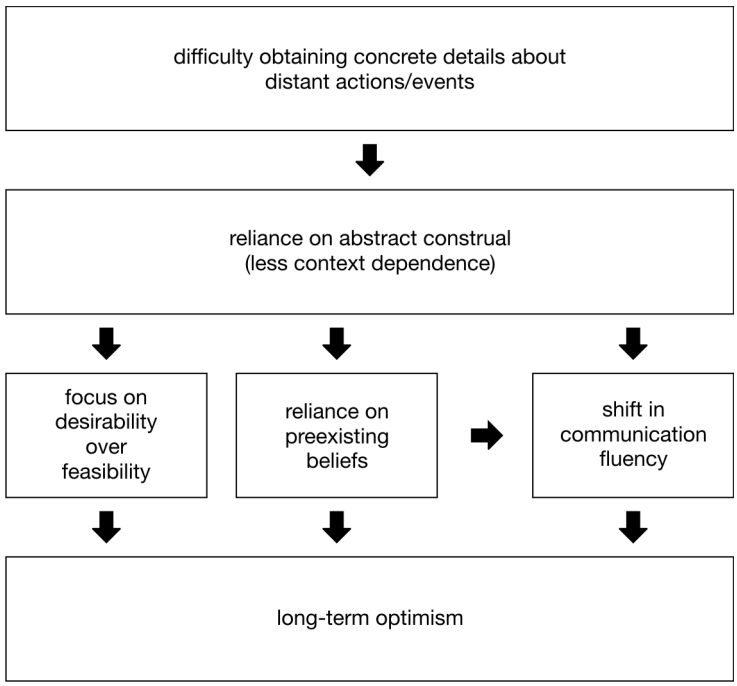
CLT hypotheses on postwar assessments

Reliance on abstract thinking is a heuristic device, or cognitive shortcut, used to simplify decisionmaking. Like many mental shortcuts, abstract thinking may bring about unwanted results for decisionmakers. Crucially, CLT predicts that state leaders considering a military intervention will be relatively more optimistic about the costs of postconflict operations and actions taken to consolidate gains after victory than they will be about near-term operations in a military campaign. Three different mechanisms explain why (see figure 1).

Privileging desirability over feasibility. Because it is difficult to envision the concrete details surrounding distant future actions, decisionmakers rely more on their existing beliefs and focus intently on their goals, which are less context dependent, when making evaluations. Focusing on abstract goals—the "why" of a task—draws attention to the desirability of one's anticipated payoffs.[19] Dominic Johnson makes a similar assertion regarding overconfidence and war, contending that positive illusions are likely to arise when people assess a "very general notion, such as one's intentions or future plans," and thus optimism is more prevalent in "abstract long-term plans" than in "day-to-day plans on the battlefield."[20] This occurs to the detriment of a concern with the feasibility of the means to attain desired goals; because important details necessary for such evaluations are "out of sight," they are also "out of mind." As concrete procedural matters become less salient relative to a goal's desirability, people are less mindful of the costs associated with obtaining their aims, and thus are more prone to optimism biases. Even if actors are pessimistic about future events, CLT predicts they will be optimistic about

19. Liberman and Trope, "The Role of Feasibility and Desirability Considerations in Near and Distant Future Decisions," pp. 6–7.
20. Dominic D.P. Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 41, 237.

Figure 1. Construal Level Theory and Optimism



whether their own actions will effectively deal with these events. Furthermore, people typically feel positively about the goals they set, and these positive feelings become more pronounced as their ultimate objectives become increasingly salient relative to other considerations.[21]

Thus, the first CLT hypothesis is that state leaders considering a military intervention will be able to articulate their postwar goals, as their mind-set encourages a focus on the desirability of their ends. They will have difficulty, however, setting up, managing, and guiding subordinate agents and organizations responsible for postconflict operations meant to achieve those goals, as this entails investment in consideration of means and calculations of feasibility. Leaders will likewise tend to underestimate the costs of postconflict operations. Conversely, the details and feasibility of initial military operations will

21. Eyal et al., "The Pros and Cons of Temporally Near and Distant Action," pp. 781–783.

be salient, and policymakers will be more conscientious about guiding the development of combat plans and estimating their potential costs.

COMMUNICATION FLUENCY. When people engage in abstract construal, they become more receptive to information about the desirability of their goals and less receptive to concrete information about how proposed actions meant to achieve their goals might transpire. This pattern of receptivity is an example of "communication fluency": it is easier for people to comprehend information that is congruent with their mental state—in this case, abstract information about ends. They also mistakenly attribute their (in)comprehension to the quality of the message being sent, rather than its (in)congruence with their mind-set.[22] Accordingly, the second CLT hypothesis is that state leaders will be more open to concrete information challenging their military assessments of initial combat operations than they will be to concrete information challenging their assessments of postconflict operations.

RELIANCE ON SIMPLE BELIEFS. Abstract construal leads people to deduce outcomes from preexisting beliefs about a general class of actions or events rather than concrete, observed information about a specific case. General beliefs about the way the world works are necessarily less complex than the messiness of reality, and the difficulty of assessing distant future events increases such abstractions' utility. Nevertheless, generalized beliefs are less informative when it comes to evaluating a particular case rather than a broad set of phenomena. Reliance on general beliefs obscures how a particular case departs from the simplified models an individual uses to understand the world.[23] This reliance also contributes to shifting communication fluency: as confidence in preexisting theories increases, the subjective value of new information declines. The third hypothesis is that state leaders will be more confident in, and reliant on, preexisting theories when considering postconflict operations compared with their assessments of initial combat operations.

VARIATIONS AMONG INDIVIDUALS. An ironic implication of CLT is that these three mechanisms will be exhibited to a greater extent by officials who have the longest "time horizons": those who most prize the ultimate objectives of a campaign. These individuals will have more trouble anticipating distant

22. Kentaro Fujita, Tal Eyal, Shelly Chaiken, Yaacov Trope, and Nira Liberman, "Influencing Attitudes toward Near and Distant Objects," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (May 2008), pp. 562–572; and Hakkyun Kim, Akshay R. Rao, and Angela Y. Lee, "It's Time to Vote: The Effect of Matching Message Orientation and Temporal Frame on Political Persuasion," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (April 2009), pp. 877–889.
23. Liberman and Trope, "The Psychology of Transcending the Here and Now," p. 1204.

events and long-term costs than present-minded officials who place substantially less weight on end goals relative to the success of initial combat operations. These latter officials are mentally primed to think concretely because their attention is directed primarily toward impending rather than subsequent goals and operations. Furthermore, their considerations of the future are emotionally "neutral" rather than infused with good feelings, because the positive aspects of the goals ultimately meant to be achieved by military action are less salient to them. According to the CLT framework, in short, for individuals' assessments of postconflict operations to be abstract and optimistic, it is necessary they highly value the final ends being sought. Actors with long time horizons will still be disposed to concrete construal when considering plans for initial combat operations, however, because the subjective difficulty of ascertaining context-dependent details will not be as great as when later operations are considered.

Lastly, actors at lower levels of the government hierarchy should think more concretely, as their responsibilities will be narrower than those of their superiors; indeed, their position may formally preclude their consideration of policy ends. Thus, the effects of temporal construal—concrete thinking in the near term, abstract thinking in the long term—should be more apparent among actors with greater authority in the decisionmaking process. Likewise, firmer conclusions can be drawn about the preceding hypotheses if one compares the patterns of assessment exhibited by actors with roughly the same level of authority, rather than comparing actors between levels.

To summarize, temporal distance encourages people to downplay or even ignore the feasibility of their long-term objectives while nevertheless remaining fixated on the desirability of those goals. Abstract thinkers will likewise be overreliant on simple, preexisting theories and be unreceptive to messages containing more concrete information. Assessments and preparations by Franklin Roosevelt's administration for the occupation of Germany after World War II, often held to be a model of how to manage an occupation, can serve as a brief illustration. According to several Roosevelt scholars, the president's tendency to think in abstract, general terms was especially pronounced when his attention turned to postwar objectives.[24] As CLT would predict, his administration struggled to manage and guide postwar policy; Roosevelt and senior officials'

24. Willard Range, *Franklin D. Roosevelt's World Order* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1959), p. 29; and Warren F. Kimball, *Swords or Ploughshares? The Morgenthau Plan for Defeated Nazi Germany, 1943–1946* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1976), p. 78.

preparations for postwar Germany have been criticized as "disconnected, on a small scale, unsustained at the highest level, and never coordinated into a unified policy."[25] This may be contrasted with Roosevelt's dealings with ongoing combat operations, during which the president rigorously tracked details of campaign progress and regularly issued military instructions at key points in the war that were concise and final.[26] Roosevelt and his postwar planners also clearly underestimated the cost of occupying Germany, holding to many unrealistic expectations that remained largely unexamined. Gen. Lucius Clay, the military governor of Germany, wrote in April 1945 that "too much of our planning at home envisaged a Germany in which an existing government has surrendered with a large part of the country intact. In point of fact, it looks as if every foot of ground will have to be occupied. Destruction will be widespread, and government as we know it will be non-existent."[27] One might think he was referring to Iraq in May 2003.

THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF TIME

To gauge the applicability of CLT to matters of politics, one needs to address how individuals' perceptions of temporal distance are shaped outside a controlled setting. All other things being equal, the studies cited here have shown that even a delay of two months can significantly alter the criteria people use when making decisions. In the political realm, unlike a psychology laboratory, all other things are rarely equal, however. Two months may seem like the blink of an eye or a veritable eternity depending on the matter at hand.

The subjective nature of whether an event is "near" or "far" makes an understanding of political norms and beliefs crucial. With regard to military assessments, practitioners and historians have observed that instead of seeing combat and noncombat activities as overlapping tasks, U.S. policymakers have often thought of them as distinct operations that are neatly separated in time.[28]

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25. Gaddis Smith, *American Diplomacy during the Second World War, 1941–1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 57.
26. Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, and Their War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987). A similar evaluation is made by Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 532.
27. Jean Edward Smith, ed., *The Papers of General Lucius D. Clay: Germany, 1945–1949* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 6.
28. Anthony Cordesman refers to this as the "rebuilding-effort-begins-after-the-war-ends syndrome." Cordesman, "Planning for a Self-Inflicted Wound: U.S. Policy to Reshape a Post-Saddam Iraq" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 31, 2002), http://www.comw.org/warreport/fulltext/0212cordesman.pdf. Similar arguments are found in Peter W.

Sequentially dividing operations, even if such a separation is artificial, gives temporal precedence to the activities presumed to occur first. Importantly, studies have shown that merely framing an event as more distant will encourage more abstract construal, even if the amount of concrete information available about the event is held constant.[29] Rather than being overly concerned with precisely how many units of time need to pass before something shifts from near term to long term, then, it is important to note that postconflict operations by definition begin later than combat activities; and even if there is little time between the initiation of combat and postconflict operations, or these two tasks overlap, combat may be viewed as clearly preceding and separate from the postconflict environment. What is more, when an operation is seen as distinct and presumed to come later in a sequence, the task of obtaining concrete, contextual details becomes subjectively harder: details are increasingly seen as dependent on the unpredictable outcomes of preceding operations and events, rather than occurring within the same context. This will further bias decisionmakers toward construing the later operation abstractly. Not only does abstract construal increase as a function of temporal distance, then, but it increases the more policymakers see "combat" and "postconflict" as distinct phases.

A CLT Explanation of Phase IV Preparations for Iraq

A case study of the Bush administration's strategic assessments prior to the invasion of Iraq serves several purposes. First, though the research program that CLT has inspired is sizable, the theory's predictions have not yet been tested against elite political behavior.[30] The Iraq case, which provides ample evidence

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Chiarelli and Patrick R. Michaelis, "Winning the Peace: The Requirement for Full-Spectrum Operations," *Military Review,* Vol. 85, No. 4 (July/August 2005), pp. 4–17; and Isaiah Wilson, *Thinking beyond War: Civil-Military Relations and Why America Fails to Win the Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 16–17.

29. Antonio L. Freitas, Peter Gollwitzer, and Yaacov Trope, "The Influence of Abstract and Concrete Mindsets on Anticipating and Guiding Others' Self-Regulatory Effort," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* Vol. 40, No. 6 (November 2004), pp. 739–752; Jens Förster, Ronald S. Friedman, and Nira Liberman, "Temporal Construal Effects on Abstract and Concrete Thinking: Consequences for Insight and Creative Cognition," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* Vol. 87, No. 2 (August 2004), pp. 177–189; and Cheryl J. Wakslak, Yaacov Trope, Nira Liberman, and Rotem Alony, "Seeing the Forest When Entry Is Unlikely: Probability and the Mental Representation of Events," *Journal of Experimental Psychology,* Vol. 135, No. 4 (November 2006), pp. 641–653.

30. Studies have shown that business executives are insensitive to probability estimates and prone to exhibit optimism biases when making future forecasts. Dan Lovallo and Daniel Kahneman, "Delusions of Success: How Optimism Undermines Executives' Decisions," *Harvard Business Re-*

supporting CLT, serves as a test of its external validity. It is also representative of cases in which the United States has combined its military might with a liberal missionary zeal to fundamentally remake the political character of targeted states.[31] Although such events are rare in international relations, they are likely to be highly consequential. The decision to invade Iraq left thousands of dead Americans and Iraqis and a monetary bill greater than $3 trillion.[32] Lastly, Iraq is a most likely case for CLT: variables take on values that strongly posit specific outcomes. If an explanation fails in a most likely case, then it will likely fail to hold across a wide range of cases from the same general class.[33] What is more, CLT must compete against alternatives advanced elsewhere that assert different causal mechanisms leading to the outcome in Iraq. A study of the Bush administration's preparations for postwar Iraq is thus crucial for assessing the applicability of CLT to foreign policy behavior.

Because there is expected to be variation in construal among levels of government hierarchy that confounds interlevel comparisons, and because they constitute the "ultimate decision unit," the following study focuses on President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld.[34] Bush, as commander in chief, had ultimate authority over the objectives and conduct of the war, whereas Rumsfeld and like-minded figures in the Defense Department had more control over Phase IV policy than any other department.[35]

The study first establishes the presence of two crucial independent variables

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view, Vol. 81, No. 7 (July 2003), pp. 56–63; and James G. March and Zur Shapira, "Managerial Perspectives on Risk and Risk Taking," *Management Science,* Vol. 33, No. 11 (November 1987), pp. 1404–1418.

31. See, among others, Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security,* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 112–156; Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Karin von Hippel, *Democracy by Force: U.S. Military Intervention in the Post–Cold War World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

32. Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

33. Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science,* Vol. 7 (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp. 113–120; and Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 120–121.

34. An ultimate decision unit has the ability to commit or withhold government resources in a matter of foreign affairs, and its decisions cannot be reversed by other government actors without significant costs. Margaret G. Hermann and Charles F. Hermann, "Who Makes Foreign Policy Decisions and How: An Empirical Inquiry," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 33, No. 4 (December 1989), p. 363.

35. Prior to the establishment of a civilian office on postwar policy in the Defense Department in

for CLT: the perception within the Bush administration that the invasion and postwar constituted sequentially distinct phases; and the heavy value Bush and other top officials placed on their long-term goals for the invasion.[36] Establishing that both of these variables were present, the study demonstrates that overconfidence about the costs of war varied depending on which phase was under consideration, rather than being the result of a general tendency toward optimism. The political actors involved, as well as other crucial factors, are "held constant" while only the phase of the war plan under consideration varies, approximating John Stuart Mill's method of difference. Even so, the possibility remains that unobserved third variables and other confounders will lead to faulty causal inferences.[37] Thus, the analysis also uses process tracing to show that the "intermediate" mechanisms of CLT linking the independent variables with overconfidence are present depending on which phase of the war was being assessed, as predicted by the theory. These mechanisms are anemphasis on desirability over feasibility; reliance on simple, preexisting theories; and a lack of receptiveness to messages containing more concrete information—all leading to an overly optimistic assessment of the costs of Phase IV. The analysis of alternative explanations for strategic assessment of Phase IV in the penultimate section further increases confidence in the causal analysis that follows.

WAR CONCEIVED AS DISCRETE PHASES

It has been argued that, in its preparations for the Iraq War, the Bush administration artificially categorized certain issues as "'postwar' problems," and was "reluctant to recognize the establishment of economic and political order as part of war itself, not something which comes after."[38] Feith acknowledges that he and others committed a "major error" in that "across the board, administration officials thought that postwar reconstruction would take place post—that

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December 2002, postwar planning duties had been handled by CENTCOM, as well as by staff from the NSC and USAID. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* pp. 9–10.

36. This first step establishes the presence of "independent variable causal-process observations." James Mahoney, "After KKV: The New Methodology of Qualitative Research," *World Politics,* Vol. 62, No. 1 (January 2010), p. 125.

37. George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences,* pp. 153–160; and Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 37, 47. "Difference" refers to difference in outcomes—in this case, the different nature of strategic assessments made regarding postconflict versus initial combat operations.

38. Nadia Schadlow, "War and the Art of Governance," *Parameters,* Vol. 33, No. 3 (Autumn 2003), p. 85. See also Wright and Reese, *On Point II,* p. 66.

is, after—the war."[39] This was apparent in the sequential manner in which Bush and his advisers deliberated over possible war plans; senior officials spent roughly three months sporadically reviewing preparations for Phase IV, in isolation from the preceding discussions of major combat operations. The first major postconflict briefing at which Bush was present was given in January 2003, only three months prior to the invasion.[40] Bush reportedly reversed Rumsfeld's decision to establish a civilian office in the Defense Department in October 2002 because the development of postwar plans would have signaled to other states that the United States intended to invade, thus damaging the diplomatic track of U.S. efforts against Hussein.[41] If true, this illustrates that Bush saw postwar planning as a significant and distinct step on the path toward war, even though the White House and Defense Department had already devoted significant energy to producing a plan for Iraq's invasion. Isaiah Wilson notes this apparent strategic disconnect in leaders' thinking about postwar Iraq, arguing that if the initial conception of war had integrated the combat phase of battle with tasks to secure the peace, policymakers would have been encouraged to adopt a "radically different" campaign plan.[42]

The mind-set that combat and postconflict operations represented distinct sequential phases was also evident among top military officers. Franks recalls his attitude was that civilian agencies should attend to the "day after" combat ceased, while he would "pay attention to the day of."[43] Accordingly, when the Joint Staff gave CENTCOM the task of postconflict planning in the summer of 2002, the job was assigned to two midlevel officers who worked separately from the other planners in the command. When it appeared to Gen. George Casey, director of the Joint Staff, that CENTCOM needed additional assistance, a new task force was created to focus on postwar planning and take the operational lead after Hussein fell. This envisioned change in command reflected a concept of the war as being divided in distinct combat/noncombat phases. Like CENTCOM's previous postconflict planners, Joint Task Force IV remained separate from the rest of the command and was to prove ineffective as

39. Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 275.
40. Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* p. 276.
41. Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 317; Packer, *The Assassins' Gate,* p. 146; and SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* pp. 12–13.
42. Isaiah Wilson, "America's Anabasis," in Thomas G. Mahnken and Thomas A. Keaney, eds., *War in Iraq: Planning and Execution* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 12.
43. Tommy Franks, with Malcom McConnell, *American Soldier* (New York: Regan Books, 2004), p. 441.

a result.[44] Not surprisingly, officials with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) involved in postconflict planning thought the military had a concept of the war that left Phase IV figuratively sealed off from earlier operations.[45]

LONG TIME HORIZONS

According to CLT, individuals with long time horizons should be primed to think abstractly about actions in the more distant future. For these individuals, as opposed to those who place little weight on long-term goals, the ends they seek should become more salient relative to the feasibility of courses of action that occur later in a perceived sequence. Private memos and internal correspondence within the Bush administration can be used to gauge how much weight the president, Rumsfeld, and other senior leaders placed on long-term goals in Iraq.

Previous accounts of the 2003 Iraq War have held that U.S. time horizons were relatively short because of a heightened sense of threat to the American homeland after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.[46] This is an overly narrow conceptualization of time horizons, which are established not only by perceptions of military threats but also by the type and magnitude of goals that leaders planning interventions adopt. Transformative projects, in which an intervener seeks to install new leadership and domestic institutions in a targeted state, indicate that actors are more focused on long-term gains that will enhance state interests in the future. Leaders adopt as their reference point some future, unrealized state of affairs rather than the maintenance or restoration of the status quo ante.[47]

Democracy promotion was a prevalent part of the Bush administration's strategy to achieve its long-term security objectives in the Middle East, and it was especially embraced by the president when he was considering the benefits of intervention in Iraq.[48] Many in the administration hoped that a demo-

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44. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 38; Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* p. 143; and Ricks, *Fiasco,* p. 80.
45. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 20.
46. Sarah E. Kreps, *Coalitions of Convenience: United States Interventions after the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 114–115, 126–130.
47. Elizabeth N. Saunders recognizes that leaders who seek to transform the internal character of a state likely have long time horizons. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security,* Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 130–131.
48. Alex Roberto Hybel and Justin M. Kaufman, *The Bush Administrations and Saddam Hussein: Deciding on Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 86–87, 127; Robert Jervis, *American*

cratic transformation in Iraq would be a catalyst for similar events elsewhere in the region over time, and the idea of inspiring people to upend their ruling regimes appealed to the president. Bush told Saudi Ambassador Prince Bandar that a democratic Iraq would change the political order of the Middle East, and expressed confidence it could bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Similar talks with Vice President Dick Cheney reportedly convinced the vice president of Bush's sincerity.[49] These accounts are consistent with high-level policy documents drafted under the supervision of Bush's national security adviser at the time, Condoleezza Rice. The "Liberation Strategy" for Iraq, written in the summer of 2002, emphasized how regime change would help Iraqis and the Middle East as a whole. It was envisioned that toppling Hussein would lead to a democratic government in Iraq that could serve as an example to the region. An August meeting of the NSC principals chaired by Rice refined her initial document into a national security presidential directive.[50] The president's views were matched by Feith, overseeing policy for postwar Iraq. Similar to Wolfowitz, Feith had long accepted the argument that democratizing the Middle East would bring about long-term security benefits.[51] Even after an insurgency had clearly emerged in Iraq, Feith reflected on his statement while in office that "a humane representative government" in Iraq would "have beneficial spillover effects on the politics of the whole region," by stating: "I'm damn proud of that sentence. That was right on the nose."[52]

Another key long-term goal of the Bush administration regarding Iraq was to use the invasion to strengthen U.S. deterrence. This was especially apparent in Rumsfeld's thinking as evidenced in his internal government correspon-

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Foreign Policy in a New Era (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 80–83; F. Gregory Gause III, "The Iraq War and American National Security Interests in the Middle East," in John S. Duffield and Peter J. Dombroski, eds., *Balance Sheet: The Iraq War and U.S. National Security* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 69–71; and George W. Bush, "Remarks to the American Enterprise Institute Annual Dinner," February 26, 2003, in John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, eds., The American Presidency Project, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.

49. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), pp. 339–341; and Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* pp. 230, 259, 412, 428.

50. Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 284; SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 21; and Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* pp. 154–155.

51. For a discussion of Wolfowitz and Feith's similar beliefs, see Packer, *The Assassins' Gate,* p. 60; Steven Metz, *Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: Removing Saddam Hussein by Force* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), p. 24; and James Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad: America's War in Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2006), pp. 43, 108–109.

52. Quoted in Jeffrey Goldberg, "A Little Learning: What Douglas Feith Knew, and When He Knew It," *New Yorker,* May 9, 2005.

dence. Even prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks, the secretary had embraced concerns that U.S. operations in Iraq had become a series of "tit-for-tat" actions "without clear objectives or a discernible end state." Accordingly, in May 2001 Rumsfeld composed a list for himself that placed Iraq as his top priority out of twelve areas of concern.[53] This focus overlapped with Rumsfeld's concerns about what he saw as a weakening U.S. deterrent against attacks from regimes such as Hussein's. In "a world where more and more nations and non-state entities are going to have weapons of mass destruction," Rumsfeld wrote, the United States must "resolve to invest what is necessary to assure that we deter and dissuade and, if necessary, defend and prevail." Reviewing U.S. responses to a series of events beginning with the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 up to the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000, Rumsfeld concluded that "for some eight years, the U.S. deterrent was weakened as a result of a series of actions that persuaded the world that the U.S. was 'leaning back,' not 'leaning forward,'" ending his review, in all capital letters, with the declaration "hardly a credible deterrent."[54] Unsurprisingly, when reviewing options for dealing with Iraq in July of 2001, Rumsfeld asserted that "if Saddam's regime were ousted, we would have a much-improved position in the region and elsewhere."[55]

This belief was only reinforced by the attacks of September 11. Rumsfeld told the *New York Times* that the attacks created "the kind of opportunities that World War II offered, to refashion the world."[56] Privately, he had informed U.S. combatant commanders that one of his key objectives in the war on terrorism was to demonstrate to terrorist-harboring states that they would incur great costs if they continued to target the United States. Bold military action, Rumsfeld concluded, could have this long-lasting deterrent effect.[57] He wrote,

If the war [on terror] does not significantly change the world's political map, the U.S. will not achieve its aim. . . . The [U.S. government] should envision a

53. Donald Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Gen. James Jones, September 10, 2001," The Rumsfeld Papers; and Rumsfeld, "Some Big Issues to Focus On, May 22, 2001," ibid.
54. Donald Rumsfeld, "Memorandum, May 31, 2001," ibid.; and Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Paul Wolfowitz, January 4, 2002," ibid.
55. Donald Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Condoleezza Rice, July 27, 2001," ibid.
56. Quoted in Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 156.
57. Feith, *War and Decision*, pp. 55–56; Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 76–78, 85–86; and Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad*, p. 40.

goal along these lines: New regimes in Afghanistan and [other states] that support terrorism (to strengthen political and military efforts to change policies elsewhere); Syria out of Lebanon; dismantlement or destruction of WMD [weapons of mass destruction] in [key states]; end of many other countries support or tolerance of terrorism.[58]

Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz doubted that U.S. operations in Afghanistan could achieve the "impressive results" necessary to have a deterrent effect, but both men thought that an attack on Iraq would produce the desired outcome. Bush agreed with Rumsfeld that a backward-looking "retaliatory" approach should be rejected.[59]

The time horizons of Bush, Rumsfeld, and top civilians in the Defense Department can be contrasted with those of Secretary of State Colin Powell. Powell did not enter the administration with transformative, long-term goals for Iraq. Instead, he advocated incremental changes in policy, such as using "smart" sanctions to contain threats from Hussein's regime.[60] Likewise, after September 11, he was focused narrowly on al-Qaida in Afghanistan rather than the "global" network of terrorist-supporting regimes hypothesized by Rumsfeld and Feith, and he did not seek the same transformation in the Middle East that other Washington officials did.[61] As predicted by CLT, and shown below, this was evident in how much emphasis Powell placed on the feasibility of creating a transformed Iraqi state, rather than the desirability of doing so.

abstract desirability versus concrete feasibility

Bush administration officials' tendency toward abstract thinking varied depending on the phase of the war plan considered. Bush was able to articulate his postwar goals—the desirability of his ends. For example, the Liberation

58. Quoted in Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 82.
59. Ibid., pp. 49, 64–66; Metz, *Removing Saddam Hussein,* p. 20; and Bradley Graham, *By His Own Rules: The Ambitions, Successes, and Ultimate Failures of Donald Rumsfeld* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), pp. 288–289, 292–294. Other reported long-term objectives that Bush, Rumsfeld, and other senior members of the administration sought via the intervention allegedly included the improvement of Israeli and Saudi Arabian security, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Saudi Arabia, and the creation of another dependable source of oil for the U.S. market. Graham, *By His Own Rules,* pp. 67–68, 83–84; Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 265; and Hybel and Kaufman, *The Bush Administrations and Saddam Hussein,* pp. 83–87.
60. Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 315–317; Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* p. 14; and Ricks, *Fiasco,* pp. 27–28.
61. Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 51; and Metz, *Removing Saddam Hussein,* p. 13.

Strategy reflecting the president's policy enumerated thirteen high-level goals and objectives.[62] Bremer reflected that Bush was "quite clear" about his primary objectives, especially the establishment of democratic governance in a reconstructed Iraq.[63] The president, Rumsfeld, and top officials with long time horizons, however, did not seriously attempt to assess the feasibility of post-conflict operations to achieve those objectives. As a result, positive considerations of the war's potential payoffs overwhelmed considerations of potential costs, evidenced by overly optimistic estimates about the costs Phase IV would entail for coalition forces.

Franks and others have characterized participation by Bush and his immediate subordinates as active and engaged during the war planning process.[64] Rumsfeld was especially detail oriented, becoming heavily involved in the process of targeting installations inside Iraq and the scheduled deployment of forces into the Iraqi theater. He was so involved with the military's operational assumptions that CENTCOM characterized his conduct as bordering on harassment.[65] Because Bush, Rumsfeld, and others were attentive to details of how combat operations would be carried out, they were also aware of unwanted events that could happen as a result of the initial hostilities. Bush was particularly worried that Iraqi forces would entrench themselves in urban areas in an attempt to make the fighting as protracted as possible. Franks received a planning order in May 2002 to focus on countering urban warfare strategies that might be employed by the Iraqi military, and civilians returned to the topic of urban warfare repeatedly during briefings.[66] Administration principals were also troubled that Iraqi forces might launch missiles against Israel or other states, and that the initiation of hostilities would disrupt the international oil market.[67] One of the foremost concerns of civilians in the administration was that combat would create a humanitarian crisis in Iraq.[68]

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62. Condoleezza Rice, "Principals' Committee Review of Iraq Policy Paper, October 29, 2002," The Rumsfeld Papers.
63. Dobbins et al., *Occupying Iraq*, p. 40.
64. Franks, with McConnell, *American Soldier,* pp. 391–392. RAND's review accords with these views. See Bensahel et al., *After Saddam*, pp. 236–237.
65. Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* pp. 109, 157–158; Wright and Reese, *On Point II,* p. 72; Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 235; and Franks, with McConnell, *American Soldier,* pp. 361–362.
66. Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* pp. 126, 147, 133, 174, 207–208. For the military's concerns about urban warfare, see Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, pp. 47–50, 56–58.
67. Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, pp. 97, 124, 147, 173, 205, 228, 323.
68. Ricks, *Fiasco,* p. 80; and Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, p. 138.

At the same time, SIGIR noted a "striking asymmetry" in the planning process: "The U.S. government planned for the worst-case humanitarian scenario while it simultaneously planned for the best-case reconstruction one."[69] Likewise, the British secretary of state for international development wrote Prime Minister Tony Blair a month before the invasion that U.S. plans for humanitarian assistance during and immediately after major combat operations were "quite comprehensive, but rely on the naïve assumptions that there will be no major problems and the conflict will be swift."[70] Maj. Gen. Tim Cross, the United Kingdom's military liaison to ORHA, testified in 2009 that Garner was tasked with "immediate humanitarian issues" but that "the longer term view was this will all be okay." Following the views of Defense Department planers, ORHA personnel believed the main problems in Iraq would fall in the first 60 to 180 days of Phase IV, and these would stem from humanitarian issues arising during the invasion rather than issues emerging once major combat had ceased.[71] The asymmetry noted by SIGIR and others is predicted by CLT, which indicates that Bush, Rumsfeld, and others with long time horizons would be attentive to the potential context in which the invasion would be carried out, but not to the possible context of Phase IV. This encouraged these officials to think of a potential humanitarian crisis as a result of the initial invasion, not any long-term difficulties of building a democratic Iraq or reconstructing the country's infrastructure. Ironically, this is best illustrated by a Defense Department memorandum that Feith claims contradicts the assertion that the administration underestimated the potential for long-term suffering and chaos in Iraq. In fact, the memo he cites describes the task of providing humanitarian assistance and maintaining public order as an issue "during Combat Operations," not after.[72]

Because Bush and Rumsfeld were not attentive to the means by which postconflict goals would be achieved, they also failed to clearly delineate the

69. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 31. This asymmetry is also noted in Dobbins et al., *Occupying Iraq,* p. 107; and Johnson, *Overconfidence and War,* pp. 193, 210.
70. Clare Short, "Clare Short to Prime Minister Tony Blair, February 14, 2003," Department for International Development, London, February 14, 2003, declassified document, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/44223/140203short-blair.pdf.
71. Testimony of Maj. Gen. Tim Cross before the Iraq Inquiry Committee (hereafter Cross testimony), December 7, 2009, p. 18, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40477/20091207pmcross-final.pdf.
72. Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 362; and "Maintaining Public Order during Combat Operations in Iraq, Feb. 9, 2003," Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., http://www.waranddecision.com/docLib/20080403_MaintainingPublicOrder.pdf.

organizational relationships necessary for the successful execution of policy. Although sectors of the government such as USAID had been making postwar preparations, the president's order establishing ORHA upended these efforts and showed little appreciation for what groundwork had been laid. This foreshadowed ORHA being quickly and, from Garner's perspective, unexpectedly replaced by Bremer and the CPA.[73] Garner was not approached by Rumsfeld to head the postwar effort until January 2003, and thus could not organize a major interagency meeting on postwar Iraq until a month prior to the invasion. He described his own organization as "glued together over about four or five weeks time. [We] really didn't have enough time to plan."[74]

Although there was a clear chain of command for major combat operations, multiple sources have noted that military personnel were unsure of their relationship with ORHA during Phase IV, and coordination between the two was minimal as a result.[75] Of even greater concern was that Franks and his top commanders had the impression that responsibility for postwar operations lay with other parts of the government, whereas civilians at the Pentagon were sure that CENTCOM knew it was in charge of Phase IV.[76] Powell informed Bush and Rice that the administration did not have unified command in Iraq because both Franks and Garner were placed directly under Rumsfeld, with neither answering to the other. Although incredulous when first told, both the president and the national security adviser were surprised to find that dual chains of command did in fact exist.[77] The absence of coherent command structures was not characteristic of the Bush administration generally or Rumsfeld's department in particular. The administration's transition into the White House in 2001 and its day-to-day operations were marked by discipline, efficiency, and clear lines of authority.[78] Others have observed that the authori-

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73. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* pp. 33–36, 63–64.
74. Phillips, *Losing Iraq,* pp. 131, 138; and Bensahel et al., *After Saddam,* pp. 17, 60–63.
75. Packer, *The Assassins' Gate,* pp. 119–120, 122; Phillips, *Losing Iraq,* p. 138; Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 350; Bensahel et al., *After Saddam,* pp. 237–239; Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* pp. 152–156; and Wright and Reese, *On Point II,* p. 77.
76. Wright and Reese, *On Point II,* p. 76; and Feith, *War and Decision,* pp. 318, 349.
77. Woodward, *State of Denial,* pp. 144–145; and SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 39.
78. John P. Burke, "The Bush Transition," in Gary L. Gregg and Mark J. Rozell, eds., *Considering the Bush Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 21–36; Charles E. Walcott and Karen M. Hult, "The Bush Staff and Cabinet System," in ibid., pp. 52–68; Karen M. Hult, "The Bush White House in Comparative Perspective," in Fred I. Greenstein, ed., *The George W. Bush Presidency: An Early Assessment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 76–77.

zation process at the Pentagon while combat operations were being planned remained robust despite tension between civilians and uniformed officers.[79]

Not only were political leaders disinclined to manage the details of the institutional machinery crucial for Phase IV; their waning attention with regard to feasibility considerations when postconflict operations were assessed did not make such a task seem urgent. Debates between Rumsfeld and Franks about how many troops would be necessary for the invasion excluded Phase IV.[80] Political conditions on the ground in Iraq were projected to help rather than impede U.S. objectives, and it was presumed that U.S. forces could quickly redeploy once major combat operations ended.[81] SIGIR found that the NSC working group on postwar Iraq, following the expectations of Rumsfeld, "assumed that long-term repairs could be undertaken and funded by the Iraqis," who would draw on oil revenues to do so.[82] Rice said the prevailing concept "was that we would defeat the [Iraqi] army, but the institutions would hold, everything from ministries to police forces," while Gen. Carl Strock, a member of ORHA, concluded: "[W]e sort of made the assumption that the country was functioning beforehand."[83] Postwar plans presumed the Iraqi army would be available and willing to help the coalition maintain order, and Rumsfeld was confident that Iraqi exiles could quickly establish authority within the country.[84] He testified in the Senate that "presumably Iraqis from inside the country and from outside the country would have some sort of a mechanism whereby they would decide what kind of a government or template would make sense" in the aftermath of regime change in Iraq; SIGIR noted a general presumption that the United States would magically "pull a [leader like Afghanistan's Hamid] 'Karzai' out of the hat," and then Iraqis would take care of the rest.[85]

Given this optimism, the administration stopped troop deployments and undermined a military command whose postwar structure and responsibilities were already unclear. With major combat operations still ongoing, Bush and

79. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy,* p. 236.
80. Nora Bensahel, "Mission Not Accomplished," in Mahnken and Keaney, *War in Iraq,* pp. 137–138.
81. Bensahel et al., *After Saddam,* pp. 234–236.
82. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* pp. 11–12, 20–21.
83. Quoted in Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* pp. 142, 150. See also Woodward, *State of Denial,* p. 126.
84. Ricks, *Fiasco,* pp. 73–74; and Feith, *War and Decision,* pp. 253–254.
85. Donald Rumsfeld, Senate Armed Services Committee, "U.S. Senator Carl Levin Holds Hearing on U.S. Policy toward Iraq," 107th Cong., 2d sess., September 19, 2002; and SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 12.

Rumsfeld instructed their generals to "be prepared to take as much risk departing as they had in their push to Baghdad."[86] The official U.S. Army history of the Iraq intervention concluded that "it is questionable whether leaders at DOD [Department of Defense], CENTCOM, and [land forces command] conducted a thorough, coordinated, and realistic evaluation of the probable force levels required for Phase IV based on the realities of the new Iraq that were emerging in front of them."[87]

Powell, who did not place the same weight on long-term transformative goals for Iraq and the Middle East as Bush and Rumsfeld, was also not disposed to give disproportionate attention to the "why" of future actions. The secretary privately told Bush that the United States would effectively become the government once the Baathists were deposed, an endeavor fraught with complications.[88] Consistent with CLT, Bush recalled that his reaction to Powell's warning was to focus more on the potential benefits of transforming Iraq than on the chances of success, explaining that his job was to focus on higher level strategy rather than means of implementation.[89] Of course, this was not the president's attitude when considering damages that might occur during initial combat operations. CLT explains this discrepancy and Bush's puzzling admission that he did not categorize Powell's warning as a matter of high-level strategic concern—it was not central to the ends the president sought. In general, the State Department failed to frame its arguments in a way that would resonate with an abstract thinker. According to one senior State official, the department collectively "convinced ourselves that you could make these tactical arguments. . . . But we were guilty of ducking the big issue" of questioning the war's objectives.[90] Bush's admission and that of the State Department official are examples of the second intervening variable between abstraction and optimism regarding postconflict operations, that of communication fluency.

prior belifs and shifting communication fluency

As detailed above, top administration officials were receptive and willing to deliberate over concrete concerns relating to the feasibility of the early stages

86. Wright and Reese, *On Point II,* p. 142.
87. Ibid., pp. 142–143.
88. Woodward, *Bush at War,* p. 332; and Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* pp. 149–150.
89. Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* p. 152; and DeYoung, *Soldier,* p. 402.
90. DeYoung, *Soldier,* p. 430.

of the intervention. Bush and the principals on the NSC were briefed multiple times on the combat phase of the war from December 2001 to March 2003. In contrast to considerations of Phase IV, military historians describe the "numerous discussions" that Bush and members of the NSC had on the developing plan for Iraq as an "open, iterative process."[91] Furthermore, collaboration between Rumsfeld and military officers regarding the invasion plan led to significant changes that departed from the secretary's initial preferences. Rumsfeld came to his position with the goal of transforming the way military forces deployed and fought in a theater of combat, emphasizing more agile forces that could rapidly defeat enemies. In June 2002, he assigned the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and combatant commanders the task of developing strategic concepts for "'swiftly defeat' plans" to use in the administration's war on terror.[92] Deliberations with his commanders, however, led Rumsfeld to abandon his favored "hybrid" invasion plan in December 2002. The final invasion plan in large part resembled Frank's initial scheme, the "generated start," which Rumsfeld had at first rejected because of its large force size and lengthy deployment period prior to invasion.[93]

Rumsfeld and other top civilians were not similarly receptive to concrete criticism regarding Phase IV. Gen. John Jumper, chief of staff for the U.S. Air Force prior to the invasion, recalls that the chiefs were at times asked by top Defense Department officials about whether they were comfortable with the war plan, but never about postwar operations.[94] Garner was able to give one high-level briefing on Phase IV nine days before the start of hostilities. There was a general lack of inquisitiveness at Garner's briefing, at which the president and members of the NSC asked no questions and struck the head of ORHA as uninterested in his mission.[95] Similarly, Iraqi exile Hatem Mukhlis said of his private meeting with Bush before the invasion that the president seemed "unfocused on the key policy questions of the future of the Iraqi army, de-Baathification, and an interim government."[96] This represents a lack of

91. Wright and Reese, *On Point II*, p. 67
92. Donald H. Rumsfeld, "Transforming the Military," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (May/June 2002), pp. 20–32; Rumsfeld, "Memorandum, May 31, 2001," The Rumsfeld Papers; and Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; Commanders, Combatant Commands, June 28, 2002," The Rumsfeld Papers.
93. Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, pp. 93–94; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, pp. 406–407; and Graham, *By His Own Rules*, p. 329.
94. Graham, *By His Own Rules*, p. 384.
95. Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, p. 161; Woodward, *State of Denial*, pp. 131–134; and Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*, pp. 132–133.
96. Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*, p. 96.

communication fluency, the product of key officials thinking abstractly and using relatively simple, preexisting beliefs to reason about Phase IV rather than information from the case at hand.

One of Rumsfeld's important beliefs prior to the Iraq War was the undesirability of "nation building" by U.S. forces.[97] The secretary cited U.S. involvement in the Balkans as a model of how postwar policy could go wrong, specifically by breeding dependency on the United States and creating opportunities for moral hazard.[98] In his internal correspondence with senior officials, Rumsfeld drew on the policy of the United States toward France immediately after World War II to argue that maintaining a U.S. military government in Iraq would have adverse consequences, and thus power should be quickly transferred to the Iraqis.[99] Correspondingly, the secretary discounted information that did not fit with this set of beliefs. Some U.S. Army planners in fact discussed the possibility of an insurgency following regime change, but thought the prevailing mind-set in the Defense Department would prevent their suggestions from affecting the course of action being pursued.[100] Perhaps the clearest signal military planners received from the civilian leadership was the very public rebuke of Gen. Eric Shinseki by Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld after he suggested more soldiers would be necessary for Phase IV than the invasion. This was a forceful indicator that suggestions about postconflict operations that did not accord with administration views were unwelcome. Unlike when

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97. Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad,* p. 74; Dale R. Herspring, *Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), pp. 71, 108; and Packer, *The Assassins' Gate,* pp. 111–112.

98. Donald Rumsfeld, "Beyond Nation Building," remarks delivered at the Eleventh Annual Salute to Freedom, Intrepid Sea-Air-Space Museum, New York City, February 14, 2003, http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=337.

99. Donald Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Richard Cheney et al., July 1 2002," The Rumsfeld Papers. Interestingly, although Rumsfeld borrowed analogies from World War II to justify his position on postwar Iraq, it is unlikely that the intervention in Afghanistan shaped his thinking, as opposed to what some have asserted (e.g., SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 8). Before the Iraq War, Rumsfeld said of operations in Afghanistan, "If you think about that situation, it is kind of distinctive. . . . I don't think we're going to run around with a cookie mold and repeat this." Cited in Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), p. 4. Furthermore, he was unsatisfied with postinvasion progress in Afghanistan, and it seemed that prewar debates about Iraq informed his thinking about U.S. involvement in Afghanistan rather than vice versa. Rumsfeld asked Wolfowitz in September 2002, "[I]f we should have a John McCoy for Iraq [*sic;* reference to commissioner of the U.S. occupation of Germany, John McCloy], why shouldn't we have one for Afghanistan? Someone is going to have to take that over and do it right, and it is not getting done right." Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Paul Wolfowitz, September 14, 2002," The Rumsfeld Papers.

100. Bensahel et al., *After Saddam,* pp. 13–14.

combat operations were considered, private efforts to move Rumsfeld from his initial position gained no traction. Franks's reported warning in February 2002 that a great deal of work was left to be done on Phase IV apparently did not sway the secretary.[101] General Cross testified that, during talks about Phase IV at which Rumsfeld was present, "It was quite clear . . . that he and the system had made up their mind how they were going to fight this campaign, so anybody speaking outside that paradigm was not particularly well received."[102]

Rumsfeld's reliance on preexisting beliefs made him confident in the likelihood of a stable Iraqi state, not uninterested. He recognized that if U.S. troops and the Iraqis who would presumably assist them could not effectively secure the peace following conventional combat operations, the United States could be stuck in Iraq regardless of his wishes, thus undermining his prized policy of military transformation. Speaking in September 2002, Rumsfeld stated that the United States could not afford to be in a position where the failure to prepare for the political and physical reconstruction of Iraq "ties our forces down indefinitely."[103] At the same time, he believed that he and his commanders' efforts had made such a scenario unlikely because, according to Secretary of the Army Thomas White, he thought Phase IV would be "straight forward" and "manageable . . . because this would be a war of liberation and therefore reconstruction would be short lived."[104] If he believed otherwise, it is hard to understand why he secured his department's authority over postwar policy. Rumsfeld did so to ensure that what he believed would be the best approach—a rapid transfer of power to an Iraqi authority and minimal U.S. engagement in Phase IV—would be implemented.[105] Despite his recognition of the importance of postwar success, Rumsfeld made little effort to familiarize himself with the assumptions being made within his own office; in January 2003, he showed no awareness that his concept of Phase IV contradicted that of top Feith aide William Luti.[106]

In sum, Rumsfeld had good reason to care about the success of Phase IV, but

101. Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* p. 102.
102. Cross testimony, p. 40. See also Graham, *By His Own Rules,* pp. 350, 381–382, 404–405.
103. Quoted in Woodward, *State of Denial,* p. 91.
104. Packer, *The Assassins' Gate,* p. 113. Similarly, see Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad,* p. 79; Graham, *By His Own Rules,* pp. 351–352; and Tim Cross, prepared statement for the Iraq Inquiry Committee, London, December 7, 2009, p. 14, http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/39160/timcross-statement.pdf.
105. See SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* pp. 3, 8, 16, 40; Woodward, *State of Denial,* pp. 144–145, 150–151; and Dobbins et al., *Occupying Iraq,* p. 35.
106. Dobbins et al., *Occupying Iraq,* p. 35. The authors state that there was "considerable vacillation and internal division" among top defense officials about postwar Iraq prior to the invasion.

his assumptions of what success would require proved incorrect. He remained wedded to abstract, preexisting beliefs about nation building until March 2003, when preparations for combat were complete and the invasion was initiated. By then, postconflict activities in Iraq were no longer last in a sequence of operations that had to be prepared for: they were the only activities remaining for which preparations were necessary. At that point, Rumsfeld's mind-set regarding postconflict operations appeared to shift to a concrete mode of assessment that resembled how he had dealt with preparations for major combat. In the period from March 17 to April 23, the defense secretary began sending memorandums to Bush, Powell, Wolfowitz, Feith, and others about management of Iraq's currency; the political intricacies of an Iraqi Interim Authority; coordination of humanitarian relief efforts by ORHA and USAID; the possibility of Syria and Iran interfering in Iraqi political affairs; the recruitment of Arabic speakers; and the need for a comptroller to manage U.S. monetary expenditures in postwar Iraq.[107] The detailed content of these memos were not matched by any of Rumsfeld's previous communications regarding Phase IV. He had not received any substantial new information from advisers or events on the ground in Iraq with which to update his prior beliefs. U.S. forces did not begin to report on looting in Baghdad until April 7.[108] This was after the secretary had already begun focusing on postwar challenges, and urban looting was not the subject of any of his correspondence about postconflict tasks during March and April. Rather, concrete assessment of the means by which the peace in Iraq would be secured corresponded with a perceived temporal shift in the proximity of Phase IV.

Alternative Explanations for Phase IV Preparations

The following explanations for U.S. preparations for postwar Iraq have been offered by participants in the planning process or scholars who have analyzed the case. Although these explanations are plausible on their face, closer examination shows that they are either inconsistent with case evidence or that they fail to explain behavior accounted for by CLT.

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107. Donald Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Douglas Feith, March 17 2003," The Rumsfeld Papers; Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to George W. Bush, April 1 2003," ibid.; Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Colin Powell, April 2 2003," ibid.; Rumsfeld,"Donald Rumsfeld to Douglas Feith, April 7 2003," ibid.; Rumsfeld "Donald Rumsfeld to Douglas Feith, April 11 2003," ibid.; and Rumsfeld, "Donald Rumsfeld to Paul Wolfowitz, April 23 2003," ibid.
108. SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 57.

OPPORTUNITY COSTS

Perhaps administration officials did not attend to the structure and relationships among bodies responsible for Phase IV because they did not feel they could afford to, rather than because abstract construal discouraged considerations of the means by which goals would be achieved. Foreign policy scholars have noted that decisionmakers considering military action prioritize short-term challenges relative to longer-term problems such as those involved with postconflict operations.[109] One CENTCOM planner defended preparations for the Iraq War by arguing that "only a fool would propose hurting the war fighting effort to address postwar conditions that might or might not occur."[110] There were high stakes associated with the postwar stage of the Iraq intervention, however, and it seemed clear prior to the invasion that U.S. forces would overpower the Iraqi military.

The possibility of urban warfare in Baghdad weighed on the minds of Bush and his advisers; also, the administration believed that Iraq might use chemical and biological weapons against civilians and coalition forces.[111] Nevertheless, the military imbalance between U.S. and Iraqi forces goes against the argument that opportunity costs explain why Phase IV operations received short shrift. When U.S. forces drove Hussein's troops from Kuwait in 1991, the United States' share of world military power was about eleven times greater than that of Iraq. By 2001, this disparity had doubled.[112] What is more, Iraqi commanders were unable to coordinate or effectively maneuver their units during the Gulf War, and they were unable to prepare proper defensive positions or implement modern combined-arms techniques.[113] Although a WMD attack could be devastating to civilians, concerns in the Defense Department focused less on how WMD would affect the performance of U.S. combatants and more on the proper response for the United States to take if unconventional weapons were used.[114]

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109. Fred Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and Yaacov Y.I. Vertzberger, *Risk Taking and Decisionmaking: Foreign Military Intervention Decisions* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 26.
110. Quoted in Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* p. 146.
111. Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* pp. 126, 147, 174, 207–208.
112. Calculated using the ratio of the United States' and Iraq's military power as measured by the Composite Index of National Capability. J. David Singer, "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816–1985," *International Interactions,* Vol. 14, No. 2 (May 1988), pp. 115–132.
113. Stephen Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us about the Future of Conflict," *International Security,* Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 158–160.
114. Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 290.

Once again, officials believed that the major offensive would conclude quickly and that casualties would be light. Franks said Iraqi troops might "aggregate but probably not fight."[115] Even though such beliefs were prevalent in the administration early in the war planning, top officials continued to devote virtually all available resources to refining the invasion plan. Given the relatively low costs of diverting some planning resources to the postwar environment, it is difficult to explain the gross disparity between the attention given to the different stages of the intervention.

IMPERFECT INFORMATION

Mistaken assumptions can arise because of random events, information asymmetries, and the machinations of intelligent adversaries.[116] As this and other studies have shown, however, little caution was apparent among top officials in the Bush administration when they considered postwar Iraq. Perhaps this was because high-profile Iraqi exiles such as Ahmed Chalabi told Bush and other top officials to expect a warm welcome from the people in Iraq, or, as Feith claims, that no source foresaw the possibility of an insurgency.[117] Even if many of the difficulties in Iraq were foreseen by various people and organizations, high-ranking government officials might have been unaware of such opinions or distrusted them.[118] Instead, it appears officials ignored or rejected the sizable amount of trustworthy information indicating that Phase IV would be as challenging, if not more so, than the initial invasion.

There were numerous warnings from credible organizations that reconstruction and stability operations in Iraq would be difficult and costly. The Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency began producing such assessments in the spring and summer of 2002. The National Defense University, the U.S. Army War College, RAND Corporation, the National Intelligence Council, and the United States Institute of Peace all published reports asserting that the United States would face many challenges in Iraq and would

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115. Quoted in Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* p. 90. See also Fontenot et al., *On Point,* p. 69.
116. James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization,* Vol. 49, No. 3 (June 1995), pp. 379–414. Less formal works that stress the same difficulties include Richard K. Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" *International Security,* Vol. 25, No. 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 5–50; and Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security,* Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 1992/93), pp. 59–90.
117. Feith, *War and Decision,* p. 363. Stephen Walt argues that exiles will typically exaggerate the vulnerability of the regimes they oppose to potential foreign interveners. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 31.
118. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy,* p. 230; and Metz, *Removing Saddam Hussein,* p. 50.

need to maintain a large number of troops there for an extended period of time if it wished to maintain order.[119] Contrary to assertions that an insurgency was unforeseen, an intelligence community assessment issued in January 2003 stated that deposed Baathists "could forge an alliance with existing terrorist organizations or act independently to wage guerilla warfare against [Iraq's] new government or coalition forces."[120] The report, which was disseminated to senior officials in the Bush administration, also predicted that there was a "significant chance" of violent conflict between Iraqi ethnic and sectarian groups, and that Iran and Syria would hamper U.S. efforts to maintain security.[121]

Foreign policy principals may have believed that these sources were opposed to war and thus prone to inflate estimates of intervention costs. Supporters of the invasion, however, also opined that postwar operations could be long and costly. Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, informed Rumsfeld and Cheney that they should expect looting and other civil disturbances in Baghdad once Hussein fell, while Mukhlis told them the city might become another "Mogadishu" if the United States botched Phase IV.[122] Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah wrote to Bush that, although he supported efforts to remove Hussein, a politically destabilized Iraq could harm U.S. and Saudi interests.[123] Nevertheless, postwar security and stabilization continued to receive scant attention within the uppermost levels of the administration.

Organizational explanations

If the doctrine, training, and incentive structure within military organizations lead them to neglect, misunderstand, or denigrate activities typical during postconflict operations, officers will not be able or willing to effectively advise civilian leaders on likely postwar costs, nor will they devote resources to planning for postconflict operations.[124] The claim that the U.S. military resisted fo-

119. A list of U.S. intelligence community assessments of postwar Iraq can be found in U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq, Together with Additional and Minority Views,* 110th Cong., 1st sess., S. Rpt. 110–76, May 2007, pp. 92–106. See also Packer, *The Assassins' Gate,* p. 113; SIGIR, *Hard Lessons,* p. 3; Ricks, *Fiasco,* pp. 72, 107–108; and Johnson, *Overconfidence and War,* pp. 196–197.
120. U.S. Senate, *Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq,* p. 7.
121. Ibid., pp. 8–10, 20, 29. Recipients included Stephen Hadley, Rice's chief assistant; I. Lewis Libby, Cheney's national security adviser; Paul Wolfowitz; and Douglas Feith. The full listing of recipients is on pp. 108–187.
122. Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* p. 157; and Packer, *The Assassins' Gate,* p. 97.
123. Woodward, *Plan of Attack,* pp. 229–230.
124. With regard to Iraq, see Andrew F. Krepinevich, "How to Win in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 84, No. 5 (September/October 2005), pp. 87–104; and Wilson, *Thinking beyond War.*

cusing on postconflict operations because of lack of interest, rather than lack of ability, is consistent with the evidence. It has been shown that military planners who were focused on the postwar environment were separated from the rest of CENTCOM. According to Cross, CENTCOM officers considered themselves "a war fighting team and as far as they were concerned, [Phase IV] was not their major business."[125] An official military historian noted that "nowhere in CENTCOM or [land forces command] had there been a plan for Phase IV that was like the plan for Phase III, let alone all the preparations that accompanied it," while officers reported that their impression was one of "broad acquiescence by high ranking officers" to the lack of postconflict planning.[126]

Organizational preferences might account for poor assessment of postinvasion Iraq in conjunction with other factors. For example, if officials in Washington deferred to the military, officers would have been free to follow their own preferences. This was not the case, however, as civilians were politically dominant and freely interjected their views into military planning.[127] Although the military's inclination was to avoid nation-building duties, it appears that it would have adopted the mission more readily if there had been a clear signal from civilians that Phase IV was a priority and responsibility for planning would fall into soldiers' hands. Planners at CENTCOM disregarded Phase IV preparations only as long as they thought the bulk of the responsibility lay with other agencies in the U.S. government; there was considerable confusion over what agencies would be responsible for postwar Iraq. By late August 2002, however, the Joint Staff had begun urging CENTCOM to focus more on postwar operations. Having already been charged with designing war plans for Afghanistan and Iraq in a very short time frame, it is understandable that strained officers would neglect postwar scenarios as long as it seemed they were also being considered elsewhere. By January 2003, certain elements of the armed forces and U.S. government were cognizant of the challenges Phase IV would pose, but they lacked the time necessary for rigorous planning and interagency collaboration.[128] Shinseki's treatment further re-

125. Cross testimony, p. 8.
126. Ricks, *Fiasco,* p. 110; Bensahel et al., *After Saddam,* pp. xviii–xix; and Wright and Reese, *On Point II,* p. 76.
127. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy,* pp. 233–234.
128. Cross testimony, p. 7; Bensahel et al., *After Saddam,* pp. 15–17, 60–63; Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* pp. 139–140; and Ricks, *Fiasco,* p. 78.

moved officers' incentive to consider postconflict operations until ordered to do so.[129]

Rumsfeld's rebuke of Shinseki is consistent with an argument put forth by Risa Brooks, who holds that poor civil-military relations contributed to inadequate planning for Phase IV operations. Brooks posits that animosities between Rumsfeld and the uniformed military led to meager "strategic coordination," synonymous with the production and evaluation of contingency plans dealing with multiple potential scenarios.[130] There is merit to this argument, as demonstrated by the significant tension between the defense secretary and the JCS over plans to transform the military. Such tension could explain why senior officials ignored criticism of their assumptions. Unlike the civil-military explanation, however, CLT can also account for why there was significant strategic coordination between Rumsfeld and the military regarding the combat phase of the war plan. As Brooks notes, the civilian leadership's lack of engagement with the details of postwar plans when compared to major combat operations gave the military little incentive to prioritize Phase IV.[131] Still, the origins of this indifference are exogenous to Brooks's model. By highlighting tendencies to privilege desirability over feasibility considerations, as well as to discount information inconsistent with prior beliefs, CLT helps to explain the lack of civilian interest she cites.

Further objections and rebuttals

This section addresses three other likely objections that may be directed at the CLT explanation of the Iraq case (see table 1). First, it might be argued that Phase IV was bound to be costly given the ambitious goals of the Bush administration, as well as factors largely outside the administration's control. This article does not contend that factors other than leaders' assessments are irrelevant for understanding postwar costs. Many features that might lead a population to accept an occupying power were absent in Iraq, such as a shared external threat or political cohesion within the occupied country.[132] The primary dependent variable here, however, is leaders' prior assessments of the feasibility and costs of postconflict operations, not their actual costs. Although

129. Metz, *Removing Saddam Hussein,* pp. 17–18; and Graham, *By His Own Rules,* p. 385–386.
130. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy,* pp. 4, 233–243.
131. Ibid., p. 245.
132. David M. Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," *International Security,* Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 82–83.

Table 1. Candidate Explanations for Long-Term Assessment

Candidate Explanation	Antecedent Condition	Predicted Outcome	Actual Outcome	Conclusion
Opportunity costs	U.S. forces grossly outmatch Iraqi military	Planning resources allocated evenly between combat and Phase IV	Planning resources overwhelming allocated to major combat	Prediction not supported
Imperfect information	Government intelligence and outside backers of invasion contend Phase IV will be difficult	Costs of Phase IV estimated to be high	Costs of Phase IV estimated to be low	Prediction not supported
Organization bias and civil-military conflict	Military gives combat operations highest priority; relatively poor civil-military relations	Military planners focus only on Phase IV upon urging by superiors; strategic coordination between military and civilians meager for both combat and Phase IV	Military planners focus only on Phase IV upon urging by superiors; strategic coordination between military and civilians meager only for Phase IV	Prediction partially supported
Construal-level theory	War framed sequentially such that Phase IV comes "last"; key officials highly weight long-term goals	Thinking about late-stage operations characterized by abstract thought, optimism	Thinking about late-stage operations characterized by abstract thought, optimism	Prediction supported

accurate assessments are neither necessary nor sufficient for an intervening state to obtain its objectives, their presence or absence can significantly affect the disposition and preparation of intervening forces, and thus the overall costs of military action. Furthermore, it is the ambitious nature of the Bush administration's goals that makes the substance of top officials' postwar assessments so puzzling; CLT is necessary to resolve that puzzle.

Second, mistaken assumptions and overconfidence prior to violent conflict have often been the subject of students of war. What does CLT add to existing understandings of conflict? Importantly, as David Lake observes in his analy-

sis of the Iraq War, scholars have not effectively integrated leaders' assessments of postwar governance costs into theories of war initiation.[133] CLT adds to the understanding of overconfidence prior to war by explaining how leaders' mind-sets are likely to vary depending on the phase of the conflict under consideration (and whether war is conceived in terms of "phases" at all). By accounting for this variance, CLT subsumes other critiques that assert that excessive confidence on the part of the Bush administration led to the postinvasion outcomes in Iraq.

Third, recent work has proposed what first appears to be the exact opposite dynamic proposed by CLT, namely that present-minded officials who have "crossed the Rubicon" and perceive war to be imminent interpret available information in an exceedingly optimistic fashion.[134] Rather than raising a conundrum, however, these seemingly contradictory theories actually apply to distinct circumstances. The cognitive biases described by the Rubicon theory emerge in response to stress and anxiety, emotions that come about immediately after policymakers decide they must commit to war. CLT, conversely, does not assume that decisionmakers have only just committed to a costly course of action. It is possible that the mechanism described by the Rubicon theory would counter the effects of those posited by CLT, but most leaders—even those considering or engaged in military action—are rarely in close temporal proximity to the momentous decision to commit to war.

Finally, the argument here might be interpreted as an assertion that postconflict planning will always fail. This is not true. The theory predicts that actors will have trouble assessing the feasibility of postconflict operations when they have long time horizons, which will be most common in transformative interventions. Ironically, feasibility considerations will be more salient when actors place less weight on future goals. This will be more characteristic of decisionmakers considering military interventions meant to maintain, rather than significantly alter, the status quo. Attempts to preserve a foreign regime, put a recently deposed regime back in power, safeguard regional balances of power, or restore peace after an outbreak of violence indicate a less distal temporal focus. These objectives encourage more concrete thinking and lessen

133. Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory," p. 40.
134. Dominic D.P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, "The Rubicon Theory of War: How the Path to Conflict Reaches the Point of No Return," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2011), pp. 7–40.

the chance that construal of future actions and events will be infused with positive, optimism-inducing feelings. The result will be more accurate assessments of postconflict costs. Still, it would be incorrect to assert that a cognitive style that is concrete is invariably preferable to those that are abstract. Decisionmakers who rely on highly concrete construal can grasp the potential challenges involved with each discrete step required to carry out a specific task, but they may also endorse courses of action that can be feasibly executed but do not necessarily advance overarching goals. CLT stresses that a balance between abstract and concrete thinking—appropriate consideration of both one's ends and one's means—is necessary for effective strategic assessment. The concluding section addresses possible methods of achieving this balance.

Conclusion

The beliefs and actions of principal foreign policy actors that led to the mismanagement of postwar Iraq can be explained using construal level theory. The theory holds that actors' assessments about the desirability of strategic ends will be highly salient relative to the feasibility of operational means when operations are framed as falling at the end of a sequence of events. This bias will be most pronounced for officials who highly value a campaign's ultimate objectives—those with long time horizons. Officials who believed that the transformation of the Iraqi state would enhance the United States' security in the long term focused on the benefits they believed would accrue when their goals were realized rather than the postinvasion steps necessary to achieve these goals. They relied on preexisting, general beliefs about nation building while resisting relevant information about the case at hand. This pattern of abstract construal had the overall effect of reducing estimates of postwar costs and encouraging optimistic assessments about the political conditions that would exist in Iraq in the late stages of the intervention. Principals did not exhibit similar optimism or inattention and resistance to concrete information during the months of preparation for combat operations or toward the short-term humanitarian crises they believed would arise from the initial invasion.

Plausible alternative explanations for the Iraq case are unsatisfactory or incomplete. An explanation reliant on opportunity costs would not predict that a state would focus on combat operations in which its forces were a priori highly likely to succeed—to the neglect of activities requiring the political transformation of an entire society. This behavior becomes even more puzzling given that

a great deal of information emphasizing the challenges of securing the peace in Iraq was available to key decisionmakers. Although they were perhaps reluctant to take responsibility for postwar Iraq, military planners took the obligation to prepare for Phase IV seriously once it was clear the duty was going to fall to them.

In their 2006 analysis of the Iraq War, Donald Wright and Timothy Reese argue that thinking of the components of military interventions as being sequential in nature leads to the belief that stability and reconstruction activities take less planning than do combat operations.[135] Without an understanding of CLT, it is unclear why this should be the case—even if military planners unrealistically separate combat from postconflict operations, it does not follow that one phase should be considered easier and receive less attention than the other. The reason such a perception does take hold is that a sequential representation of war reinforces the tendency to perceive noncombat lines of operation as more temporally distant than conventional activities by artificially defining them as something that comes last. In transformative interventions, this tendency will reinforce the psychological tendency to construe temporally distant events abstractly and bias actors' assessments toward optimism.

A 2006 joint study of "post-major combat operations" in Iraq argued that military interventions should not be thought of as neatly divided phases, recommending that in the future the U.S. government "conduct combat and stability planning in parallel" to facilitate the execution of postconflict operations.[136] This is a promising start in that it would begin to counteract existing perceptions that stability operations are necessarily more distant than all others. It is unclear, however, whether such steps would alleviate the types of harmful biases that CLT identifies regarding strategic assessment and military interventions. To improve strategic assessment such that policymakers are aware of the potential long-term costs of military interventions, it is necessary that combat and noncombat operations are considered together, not merely parallel to one another. Presenting intervention assessments in which postconflict considerations were incorporated with combat plans would more clearly define the temporal links and trade-offs among different lines of opera-

135. Wright and Reese, *On Point II*, p. 66.
136. Joint Center for Operational Analysis, "Transitions in Iraq: Changing Environment, Changing Organizations, Changing Leadership," July 21, 2006, pp. 12, 182–184, http://www.fas.org/blog/secrecy/2010/03/transition_iraq.html.

tion, as opposed to presenting separate plans at different times and allowing senior officials to try and draw out the links themselves. This would increase key decisionmakers' awareness of how operations in the near and distant future related both to one another and to high-level political goals, as well as expose different contingencies that might emerge from different courses of action. Such awareness is especially important when considering whether or not to initiate an intervention such as the 2003 invasion in Iraq, for these endeavors rarely result in only their intended consequences.