

Correspondence

Michael K. McKoy

David A. Lake

Bargaining Theory and Rationalist Explanations for the Iraq War

To the Editors (Michael K. McKoy writes):

In "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations for the Iraq War," David Lake makes several important contributions to international relations scholarship.¹ He provides greater empirical testing of the hypotheses generated by bargaining theory, a need that many theorists have long recognized.² He likewise provides greater "analytical eclecticism" to international relations scholarship by seeking to integrate rationalist and behavioral explanations for war.³ He also draws needed attention to the issue of postwar governance costs in strategic bargaining and decisionmaking. Finally, he provides a theoretical framework for the 2003 war in Iraq, arguably the most important U.S. conflict since the Vietnam War.

Nevertheless, in evaluating rationalist explanations for the Iraq War, Lake does not fully take into account the strategic environment faced by Saddam Hussein or the George W. Bush administration. Instead, he concludes that both sides suffered from "self-delusions, biased decisionmaking, and failures to update prior beliefs," which illustrated "deviations from rationality" and "cognitive limitations" (pp. 9–10). Although both sides are likely guilty in this respect, Lake overlooks or downplays the incentives to misrepresent and commitment problems faced by both sides, and thereby overstates the limits of rationalist propositions to explain the Iraq War.⁴ Further consideration of their respective strategic environments demonstrates that bargaining theory provides greater insights into the Iraq War than Lake claims.

SADDAM HUSSEIN: REASSURANCE OR DETERRENCE?

Saddam Hussein faced a dilemma between reassuring the United States that Iraq had dismantled its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program and deterring domestic and regional threats with the false claim that this program was still ongoing. Lake lays out Saddam's strategic dilemma (pp. 29–31), but he concludes that "recognizing the near certainty of defeat if war actually occurred, Saddam should have backed down

Michael K. McKoy is a Ph.D. candidate in the Politics Department at Princeton University. He thanks John Ikenberry, Alexander Lanoszka, and Praise Oh for their comments.

David A. Lake is Jerri-Ann and Gary E. Jacobs Professor of Social Sciences and Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego.

1. David A. Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations for the Iraq War," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010/11), pp. 7–52. Additional references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Robert Powell, "Bargaining Theory and International Conflict," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 5 (June 2002), pp. 1–30; and Dan Reiter, "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 2003), pp. 27–43.

3. Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms: Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

4. James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414.

International Security, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12), pp. 172–178

© 2011 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

and capitulated to U.S. demands" (p. 32). Consistent U.S. behavior, however, strongly indicated that reassurance was unnecessary. Beginning with the 1991 Persian Gulf War, U.S. action against Iraq was impeded by international consent and domestic casualty aversion. In 1991 the United States made Security Council approval a clear criterion for action, and U.S.-led forces bowed to coalition pressure not to continue onto Baghdad once Iraqi forces were expelled from Kuwait. Saddam was surprised by this decision, and while it did foster a deluded view of Iraqi military superiority, it also fostered a belief in U.S. timidity.⁵ U.S. policy throughout the 1990s consistently validated this belief. Despite UN sanctions against Iraq and demands for transparent WMD disarmament, Saddam continually violated UN regulations and restricted inspector access to designated sites. The United States occasionally launched missile attacks against Iraq in response, but the refusal to use ground troops made international threats to Saddam's regime appear noncredible.⁶ U.S. military actions in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia likewise convinced Saddam that the United States was fickle and casualty averse.⁷ If this was a "misperception," it was a commonly held one, including within the United States.⁸

Even Operation Desert Fox, the most decisive U.S. military action against Iraq since the Persian Gulf War, confirmed this image of weak American resolve. In December 1998, the United States and the United Kingdom flew more than 300 sorties and launched more than 400 cruise missile attacks against Iraq. These strikes, however, only reinforced the belief that U.S. efforts would remain strictly aerial and long-distance. Saddam's response was to forbid further inspections, for which he received no external punishment. Instead, China, France, Russia, and neighboring Arab states increased the pressure within the UN to lift the sanctions for humanitarian reasons.⁹ While the incoming administration of George W. Bush demonstrated greater hostility toward Saddam, it initially signaled no particular military designs against his regime. Even when Bush began targeting Iraq more explicitly following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he still initially made UN approval a priority. Given past events, Saddam held the reasonable belief that a French or Russian veto would prevent a U.S. attack.¹⁰ Once it became apparent, however, that the United States would attack even without UN approval, Saddam agreed to let weapons inspectors return, while still try-

5. Kevin M. Woods, with Michael R. Pease, Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam's Senior Leadership* (Norfolk, Va.: Joint Center for Operational Analysis, U.S. Joint Forces Command, 2006), pp. 15–16. On Saddam's delusions of Iraqi grandeur following the Persian Gulf War, see Kevin M. Woods and Mark E. Stout, "Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions: The Case of 'Desert Storm,'" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (February 2010), pp. 5–41.

6. Robert S. Litwak, *Regime Change: U.S. Strategy through the Prism of 9/11* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2007), pp. 129–136. On the ineffectiveness of aerial coercion alone, see Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

7. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, pp. 15–16.

8. Bruce Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 49–73; and Edward N. Luttwak, "A Post-Heroic Military Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (July/August 1996), pp. 33–44.

9. Litwak, *Regime Change*, p. 136.

10. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, pp. 28–29.

ing to maintain some veneer that he had a hidden cache, so as to maintain his dual game.¹¹

Experience instead demonstrated that the greatest threats to Saddam's regime were from domestic and regional adversaries. During his time in power, the two greatest challenges to Saddam's rule came from Iran during its war with Iraq in the 1980s and the internal rebellions following the Persian Gulf War. Iran and Iraq fought in the longest war of the twentieth century and the bloodiest in the Middle East. Unlike the United States, Iran actually tried to depose Saddam through a direct military assault.¹² Iran and Iraq also hosted and funded insurgents targeting the other's regime, and Iran bombed insurgent camps inside Iraq in 1992.¹³ Internal adversaries also posed a more pressing threat to Saddam's regime. When uprisings erupted throughout Iraq following its 1991 defeat in the Gulf War, Saddam's remaining forces suppressed them with much greater ferocity than used against UN coalition forces. U.S. passage of the Iraqi Liberation Act in 1998 made it official U.S. policy to remove Saddam through the training and supplying of internal Iraqi forces. Saddam therefore responded by targeting domestic forces, given that U.S. strategy was dependent on them. He responded similarly following Desert Fox.¹⁴ Even after the September 11 attacks, U.S. reliance on the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan further convinced Saddam that the United States was unwilling to commit large ground forces under any circumstances.¹⁵ Lake even acknowledges that "[a]s late as February 2003, the Bush administration was still expecting regime change through the actions of agents inside Iraq" (p. 22). Saddam's actions were therefore reasonable given the constraints of his strategic environment and the record of past U.S. behavior. The Iraqi Perspectives Project (IPP) report states it best: "While in Western eyes the choices Iraq made may appear dysfunctional and even absurd, the regime's responses to the threat and then the invasion were logical within the Iraqi political framework, even if later proven counterproductive."¹⁶

BUSH ADMINISTRATION: COMMITMENT PROBLEMS AND INCENTIVES TO MISREPRESENT

Recognizing Saddam's dual dilemma clarifies the overriding Iraqi commitment problem. If Saddam needed WMD to maintain power, then he could not credibly commit not to develop them. Lake suggests that Bush officials should have recognized Saddam's dilemma, with the implicit argument that recognition of this dilemma should have changed their threat perception (p. 30). Yet recognition would only further validate the existent commitment problem. Regardless, Lake questions the commitment

11. Michael R. Gordon and Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), pp. 135–137.

12. Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1988).

13. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 268.

14. Litwak, *Regime Change*, p. 136; and Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 19–20.

15. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, p. 16. For conflicting U.S. views on Afghan strategy, see Michael E. O'Hanlon, "A Flawed Masterpiece," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (May/June 2002), pp. 47–63; and Richard B. Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas E. Griffith Jr., "Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter 2005/06), pp. 124–160.

16. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, p. vii.

problem as an overall explanation for war, because it was not similarly felt by Bill Clinton's administration (pp. 25, 27). This, however, overlooks two important points.

First, evidence of the commitment problem itself became apparent through the failure of Clinton's "containment plus" policy. Saddam refused to comply with the UN-mandated inspections, and the sanctions regime was losing global support as the Iraqi humanitarian crisis worsened.¹⁷ The IPP report states, "Given the international situation, the growing concern over the humanitarian effects of sanctions, and the world's thirst for oil, it probably would have been difficult to impose new sanctions even if Saddam subsequently resurrected Iraq's WMD program."¹⁸ Another strategy for confronting Saddam became increasingly necessary. Nor were Clinton officials sanguine about the Iraqi threat. Defense Secretary William Cohen displayed a bag of sugar in a televised interview to visually represent the threat Iraqi-produced anthrax posed to U.S. cities.¹⁹ Madeleine Albright states that by the end of the Clinton administration, "President Clinton recognized, as did I, the mixture of sanctions, containment, Iraqi defiance, and our own uncertainty about Saddam's weapons couldn't go on forever. . . . As President Clinton said in 1998, . . . 'the best way to end the threat once and for all is with a new Iraq government.'"²⁰

Second, Lake largely disregards the impact of September 11. Although Lake initially states that the "terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, were a decisive pivot for the Bush administration," he nonetheless downplays the full extent of Bush administration updating (p. 26). Prior to the attacks, Bush policy deviated little from Clinton's, despite any greater animosity toward Saddam's regime or the new administration's "anything-but-Clinton" rhetoric.²¹ The September 11 attacks, however, had a profound effect on many within the Bush administration. Bush's radical change from opposing nation-building to advocating the total transformation of the Middle East has been oft-noted.²² Condoleezza Rice also acknowledged that the attacks drastically altered her view of the global threat environment.²³ Dick Cheney, when secretary of defense during the Persian Gulf War, defended the decision not to unseat Saddam, declaring, "I do not think the United States wants to have U.S. military forces accept casualties and accept the responsibility of trying to govern Iraq. I think it makes no sense at all."²⁴ When *Meet the Press* moderator Tim Russert confronted Cheney with his previous stance, however, the

17. Ramsey Clark, *The Children Are Dying: The Impact of Sanctions on Iraq* (New York: International Action Center, 1998); and F. Gregory Gause III, "Getting It Backward on Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (May/June 1999), pp. 54–65.

18. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, p. 91.

19. Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), pp. 351–352.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

21. Litwak, *Regime Change*, p. 137.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–26; Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 118, No. 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 365–388; Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); and Stanley A. Renshon, *In His Father's Shadow: The Transformations of George W. Bush* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

23. Condoleezza Rice, "Rethinking the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (July/August 2008), pp. 2–26.

24. Quoted in Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America between the Wars, from 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the State of the War on Terror* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), p. 15.

vice president responded, “[I]t was based on the proposition that Saddam Hussein probably wouldn’t survive. . . . We’re now faced with a situation, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, where . . . we have to be prepared, I think, to take the action that is being contemplated.”²⁵ This change was not restricted to those within the Bush administration. Kenneth Pollack, a Clinton administration official for Middle Eastern affairs, originally advocated support for rebels in Iraq.²⁶ The severity of the September 11 attacks and Saddam’s consistent ability to suppress internal opponents, however, convinced Pollack that only direct U.S. military action could topple his regime.²⁷

The decision to go to war then created an incentive to misrepresent strategy. Lake states, “[I]nformational asymmetry . . . was not a product of any incentive by the United States to misrepresent its strategy. Indeed, the United States signaled its plans clearly” (p. 32). On the contrary, military planners consciously developed the “shock-and-awe” strategy of simultaneous ground and aerial assault with minimal troop levels, so that the Iraqi military would neither be tipped off to U.S. plans nor be able to adequately recover.²⁸ Even Iraqi generals who believed that the United States would launch a ground assault thought it would be preceded by a massive aerial campaign, as happened in 1991.²⁹ These minimal troop levels, however, affected governing capability following the war. Although Lake argues that the overoptimism concerning governance costs suggests irrationality, there was also a strategic component. Minimal troop numbers allowed for quicker mobilization and victory. It also dampened domestic opposition. The U.S. public shared Bush’s earlier aversion to nation-building, which made a minimal U.S. postwar commitment crucial to gaining public support. Moreover, some advocates for war recognized the postwar governance costs, but believed that the risk of Saddam Hussein developing or using WMD was even more costly. Cheney’s statement following the Persian Gulf War suggests that he was aware of the difficulties of governing Iraq, but that September 11 required the United States to take on such costs. Even while advocating for war, Pollack acknowledged that governing Iraq would require 250,000–300,000 troops, with a decade-long occupation costing \$5–\$15 billion per year.³⁰ Overall, though, it is clear that too many within the Bush administration, including Cheney, engaged in wishful thinking and did not fully consider these costs. In this regard, Lake’s critique concerning governance costs is well founded. Nonetheless, Lake greatly understates the rational incentives the Bush administration had for going to war.

CONCLUSION

David Lake draws needed attention to the strategic dynamics surrounding the Iraq War and their application to existing international relations theory. He also makes an impor-

25. Tim Russert, “Interview with Vice President Dick Cheney,” *Meet the Press*, March 16, 2003, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/cheneymeetthepress.htm>.

26. Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Matthew Waxman, “Coercing Saddam Hussein: Lessons from the Past,” *Survival*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Autumn 1998), pp. 127–151.

27. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002). Pollack was nevertheless mindful not to attribute blame for the September 11 attacks to Saddam, but rather to note that they demonstrated the complacency of U.S. policy in a threatening world (pp. xxi–xxiii).

28. Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, pp. 39–42, 50–58.

29. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, p. viii–ix.

30. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm*, pp. 398–399.

tant call for an integrated theory using both rationalist and behavioral explanations and including postwar governance costs in war calculations. He falls into the familiar trap, however, of equating error with irrationality. Saddam Hussein faced a dual dilemma of needing to reassure the United States and deter domestic and regional threats. Experience strongly suggested that those threats were more pressing, which created an incentive to misrepresent his capabilities. This decision hastened the onset of war, which is consistent with bargaining theory. Saddam's dilemma only reaffirmed the overriding commitment problem, which makes the Bush administration's choice for war also consistent with bargaining theory. The Clinton years confirmed the existence of the commitment problem, and September 11 illustrated the high costs of ignoring it. Following the civilian leadership's decision for war, U.S. military planners consciously crafted a strategy that would surprise and overwhelm Iraqi forces. This unfortunately came at the cost of thoughtful postwar planning, which ultimately fell victim to wishful thinking. Lake is certainly right that behavioral explanations have much to offer, but bargaining theory still captures much of the dynamics regarding the 2003 war between Iraq and the United States.

—Michael K. McKoy
Princeton, New Jersey

To the Editors (David A. Lake replies):

Bargaining theory gets many things right about the Iraq War of 2003. It also gets some things wrong, and on closer inspection, some of what it gets right is for the wrong reasons. Drawing on the Iraq War, I conclude that bargaining theory needs revision and, specifically, that it might gain from incorporating insights from psychology and behavioral economics on human decisionmaking.¹ Michael McKoy raises some very good points and wants to give bargaining theory an extra half-huzzah. Whether the theory deserves two or two-and-a-half cheers remains open. The real question is whether the Iraq War suggests progressive ways in which the theory can be revised to explain the anomalies posed by the 2003 war and potentially other conflicts.

McKoy makes two important arguments. First, he argues that the threat to Saddam Hussein from domestic opponents and Iran was larger than that posed by the United States, and that it was rational, in turn, for the Iraqi dictator to continue to obfuscate about his dismantled weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. McKoy and I agree that Saddam faced two sets of challengers. Threats are a combination of the capabilities of the actors if they actually fight and the probability of attack. Saddam's domestic opponents and Iran possessed smaller capabilities, compared with those of the United States, but likely a higher probability of trying to remove him from power. The United States enjoyed far superior capabilities, McKoy argues, but based on past behavior, Washington was less likely to attack—or at least this was a reasonable supposition in Baghdad. The issue between us is the balance between these threats. McKoy points to substantial evidence from the 1990s and even after 2001 that suggests the

1. David A. Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations for the Iraq War," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010/11), pp. 7–52. Additional references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

United States was irresolute, and thus that it was not implausible that Saddam might doubt the George W. Bush administration's willingness to fight a major preventive war. This is important evidence, much of which I had to gloss over in what was already a very long article. My point, however, is that regardless of the balance between these two threats in, say, 2000 or even late 2001, over the fall of 2002 and in early 2003 the Bush administration made abundantly clear that it was willing to risk war to remove Saddam from power, and that Saddam should have revised his beliefs about the president's resolve accordingly. That the U.S. battle plan was not revealed so as to maximize the impact of "shock and awe" does not diminish the clear fact that the Bush administration was committed to regime change. As the clock ticked closer to midnight and Saddam's inevitable defeat, the probability of the Iraqi ruler being removed by the United States became very close to one. On the eve of the war, it seems highly unlikely that the threat from domestic opponents and Iran was larger than the threat from the United States. That Saddam did not then capitulate to the inevitable and appears not to have updated his beliefs about the United States remains a puzzle for me and, more important, for bargaining theory.

Second, McKoy argues that I understate the commitment problem and, especially, the difference between the Clinton and Bush administrations given the intervening event of September 11. That Iraq could not commit not to develop WMD at some future date was, as I tried to explain, the key cause of the Iraq War (p. 25). I also stress the effects of the terrorist attacks on the United States, but caution that the Bush administration likely overreacted in transforming a probability into a certainty in the "one percent" doctrine espoused by Vice President Dick Cheney (pp. 26–28). This overreaction, such as it was, was conditioned by the prior beliefs of key members of the Bush team who were already far more skeptical of Saddam's intentions than were Bill Clinton and his advisers. Yet, these prior beliefs are not explicable simply in terms of subsequent events but were premised on different worldviews held by the participants. The September 11 attacks would have led any president to be more concerned about Iraq, but that it occurred on Bush's watch interacted with preexisting dispositions toward Saddam in ways that magnified the commitment problem. More important, though, was Saddam's failure to send a costly signal of his abandonment of his WMD programs. Saddam's failure to reveal that he had actually dismantled his WMD programs and had, in fact, complied with the United Nations resolutions reinforced the initial skepticism of Bush administration officials, convincing them that he "had to go." This brings us back to the prior point. Facing almost certain removal from power, why did Saddam not capitulate?

The failure of bargaining between the United States and Iraq in 2003 remains less than fully explained by bargaining theory. Both the United States and Iraq deviated from the expectations of this approach and especially its strictures on rationality. As I argue, self-delusions were a greater cause of the war than private information, even with incentives to misrepresent. McKoy and I agree on much, but there are still puzzles about the Iraq War that challenge bargaining theory. Human folly is all too evident in this case. A deeper investigation into systematic biases in human decisionmaking may shed additional light on this and other wars.

—David A. Lake
San Diego, California