The Other Intelligence Failure: The Tabula Rasa Fallacy and How the US Misjudged Postwar Iraq

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Abstract:

It is widely believed that opponents of the Iraq War within the US government were generally vindicated in their postwar predictions. This article challenges this view, arguing that the inability to understand which actors the American overthrow of Saddam Hussein would empower was an intelligence failure at practically all levels of government. This mistake was theoretical in nature, as both prominent supporters and opponents of the Iraq War alike fell victim to the tabula rasa fallacy, believing either that the Iraqi people would welcome the Americans as liberators or that how the majority Shia reacted to the invasion was to be determined by US actions. This article contributes to the fields of intelligence studies and the literature on the Iraq War by connecting them to some of the most fundamental contributions of political psychology and authoritarian politics. Saddam Hussein faced internal threats to his regime, and knowledge regarding the nature of these threats would have been the best way to predict which actors would come to power after his overthrow. While even prominent war opponents believed that the Shia could be won over to American views, political psychology regarding ingroup-outgroup relations and the study of authoritarian politics, which would have suggested studying the ideologies of organizations on the ground, imply otherwise. The findings presented have deep implications for American policy with regards to regime change, suggesting that the lack of success in the aftermath of such policies is deeply rooted in false theoretical assumptions about the nature of politics.

"Well, I don't think it's likely to unfold that way, Tim, because I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators. I've talked with a lot of Iraqis in the last several months myself, had them to the White House…The read we get on the people of Iraq is there is no question, but what they want [is to] get rid of Saddam Hussein and they will welcome as liberators the United States when we come to do that."

–Dick Cheney, March 6, 2003

"[T]he predictive nature of the assessments about postwar Iraq meant that analysts had little intelligence collection upon which to base their judgments. Current and former intelligence officials told the Committee that intelligence reporting did not play a significant role in developing assessments about postwar Iraq because it was not an issue that was well-suited to intelligence collection. Accordingly, most prewar assessments cite relatively few intelligence sources. Analysts based their judgments primarily on regional and country expertise, historical evidence and analytic tradecraft."

–Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on Prewar Assessments of Postwar Iraq, 2007, p .2

Over the last several years, few subjects in the field of intelligence studies have drawn as much attention from policy makers and researchers as the failure to find weapons of mass destruction after the US-led invasion of Iraq.[1] Scholars have pointed out, however, that this mistake was understandable, as Saddam Hussein was able to fool most intelligence agencies investigating the issue, and, up to a few months before the invasion, had even misled high-ranking officials in his own government.[2] In all but the most rudimentary sense, however, less attention has been paid to an intelligence failure that was more inexcusable and no less consequential: the failure to reasonably predict the political future of a post-Saddam Iraq, based on information available at the time. Outside of the Kurdish north, from at least the 1970s to the time of the 2003 American invasion, Iraq was a land where the main popular opposition to the state was Shia Islamists that were often tied to Iran, sometimes carrying out assassination attempts against regime figures and fighting repeated insurrections against the government in which hundreds or thousands were killed.[3]

In the days and weeks after the fall of Saddam, these forces would come to power. While the U.S. would struggle to create the conditions for elections over the course of its occupation of Iraq, even when successful they would bring to power pro-Iranian religious

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[1] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD*, by Charles A. Dueller (Washington D.C., September 2004), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001156395.pdf; and Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*: *Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 156-196.

[2] Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 135-140; and Kevin M. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam's Senior Leadership* (Norfolk, V.A.: United States Join Forces Command, 2006), pp. 91-92.

[3] Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 60.

parties; figures favored by the American government in the pre-war period could only gain high office through alliances that relied on the mass support of these organizations.[4] Could this have been predicted before the war? To frame the question differently, might political science be able to shed light on the reasons behind such an intelligence failure, while also providing insights into other past and future policies of regime change?

This article addresses these questions, bringing together the fields of intelligence studies and authoritarian politics. Top American officials disagreed on many things in the run-up to the Iraq War, but they all for the most part neglected to consider that the Iraqi regime had internal enemies that it needed to suppress or placate, and these organizations would be best positioned to take power after regime change. Without an understanding of Iraqi politics, or more precisely, without considering that *there was such a thing as Iraqi politics* under Saddam, even opponents of the war within the American government could do little more than guess at what would happen after the invasion, and instead of country specific knowledge, views were shaped by preconceived biases and sophisticated media and public relations campaigns that gave optimistic assessments of a post-Baathist Iraq. While opponents of the Iraq War within the C.I.A. and State Department are often credited for their foresight, they thought little more about the politics of Iraq than the war proponents, as can be seen in their push to empower local leaders an extended period of time without a clear understanding of the consequences of such a policy.[5]

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[4] Richard Bonin, *Arrows of the Night: Ahmad Chalabi and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Random House, 2012), pp. 248-252.
[5] See Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 72-73; and James Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad: America's War in Iraq* (Toronto: Random House, 2006), pp. 47-48.

In addressing the ways in which social science can inform the politics of regime change, this article does not only make use of information that was available in 2003. Some of the findings introduced from authoritarian politics and political psychology were well known at the time of the Iraq invasion, while others were not. Rather, the goal is to better understand the failure that was the postwar aftermath in Iraq and to provide a framework that can be of use when policy makers consider regime change in the future. The question of whether to overthrow Bashar al-Assad in Syria seems to be largely settled, while the question of how much to push regime change in Iran remains an open one. Given the frequency with which the United States has sought to replace foreign governments in the nearly two decades since the attacks of September 11, the social sciences should do more to provide a framework through which leaders in the coming years can make better policy choices with regards to regime change, both in terms of whether to engage in the practice and how to deal with the post-war aftermath.

Part I discusses two types of intelligence failures. The first one involves making a factual error, while the second is failing to ask the right questions. Misjudging the kinds of weapons Iraq had was the first kind of intelligence failure, not seriously considering which actors would be empowered in a post-Saddam Iraq was the second. In Part II, I discuss how supporters and opponents of the war within the American government conceptualized postwar Iraq. War supporters focused on the Iraqi people, while opponents thought in terms of competing ethno-religious groups. The unit of observation determined what questions were asked and, in part, the answers received. War supporters such as the President and top Pentagon officials asked what Iraqis wanted, while opponents wondered how Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds would get along. Neither view,

however, appreciated the degree to which there were forces within the Shia community that were ready and able to take power once Saddam was removed.

Part III argues that what both views have in common is that they ignore the fact that there was actual internal non-Kurdish opposition to the Iraqi government before 2003, subscribing to what I call the *tabula rasa fallacy*. Political scientists studying authoritarian regimes have shown that even tyrants must work to stay in power, sometimes being forced to make concessions to forces beyond their control.[6] In the case of Iraq in particular, after the war with Kuwait the government was obsessed with the Shia problem and was constantly worried about revolt.[7] This article argues that the best way to predict which actors will be most powerful after the removal of a regime is to find out which are the most powerful existing opposition forces are before the overthrow of that government. Indeed, after the US overthrew Saddam, those who came to power were the same individuals and group that had been able to mount the most effective opposition to his rule before the invasion. I compare the *authoritarian politics* view of postwar Iraq to what I call the *individualist* view of war supporters and the *factions* view of the opponents, arguing that the first is a superior lens through which to judge the likely consequences of regime change. I show that while opponents of the war were correct to be more pessimistic about post-Saddam Iraq, compared to war supporters, they lacked a

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[6] See Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor, Mich..: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 27-88; and Linda Blaydes, *State of Repression: Iraq Under Saddam Hussein* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 8-9.
[7] Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003: Ba'thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 232-292.

framework that could produce forecasts with any reasonable degree of certainty, as shown by the 2007 Senate Intelligence Committee report, among other documents.

Having established the method that should have been used to predict what would happen after Saddam's fall, Part IV discusses the historical opposition to the Baathist regime, relying on primary materials from the Saddam government and publications by the Shia opposition itself along with the secondary literature on the topic that has emerged in recent years. The section draws a direct line between groups that had a presence under the tyrant and those that would succeed under the conditions of democracy and civil war. Finally, Part V answers the question of whether the intelligence community and American officials might have been able to judge the prewar—and, as a result, I argue, the postwar—politics of Iraq from what was known at the time, given the theoretical lens argued for in this article. Of course, there were some people in the U.S. government who knew something about the internal politics of Iraq, but that information was not given the attention it deserved or seen as necessary to understand in order to predict the consequences of American actions by top policy makers.

Finally, I close by making suggestions regarding how to ensure that this kind of intelligence failure does not happen again, while discussing the relevance of these findings for understanding American foreign policy more generally. The overall view is pessimistic, as American policymakers in the years before the invasion had more incentive to understand Iraq than any other country; the fact that they did not may not bode well for future decision-making. Yet, while leaders cannot be expected to devote unlimited time and resources to understanding a foreign country, political scientists can

aid the decision-making process by spelling out what questions should be asked when making certain kinds of decisions.

I. Types of Intelligence Failures

Broadly speaking, scholars have noted two kinds of intelligence failures.[8] The first we may call errors of fact, and happens when policymakers are interested in a question that is relevant to policy and receive an answer that is misleading, incomplete, or simply factually incorrect. The second type of failure involves not asking the right questions. In order to achieve its goals, a state needs to know something, but fails to even consider the factors most relevant for making a decision, which is the first step towards having a clear and useful understanding of the issues involved.

There have been several famous errors of fact in American history. In the postwar era, among the most famous of these kinds of intelligence failures were the beliefs that the Shah would use the level force necessary to stay in power prior to the 1979 Revolution and not foreseeing the collapse of the Soviet Union.[9] The existence of an

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[8] See Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, pp. 180-182; Richard K. Betts, "Two Faces of Intelligence Failure: September 11 and Iraq's Missing WMD," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 122, No. 4 (Winter 2007/08), pp. 93-96, doi:10.1002/j.1538-165X.2007.tb00610.x; and Paul R. Pillar, "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (March/April 2006), pp. 22-23, doi:10.2307/20031908.

[9] The existence of this latter "failure" is disputed, as some have argued that the American government did actually understand what was happening near the end of the Cold War and over the 1970s and 80s understood the nature of the problems Soviet leaders were facing. See Bruce D. Berkowitz, "U.S. Intelligence Estimates of the Soviet Collapse: Reality and Perception," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 237-250. Nonetheless, no one of consequence in the US government actually believed that the Soviet state would break up into independent entities See Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2017), pp. 261-262. For the 1979 Iranian Revolution, see Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, pp. 70-71. For the collapse of the Soviet Union, see Melvin A. Goodman, *Failure*

intelligence failure does not mean that every single person in the government was wrong about an issue. Indeed, given the size of the American state, we can always expect some faction or prominent individuals to be correct on any given issue if only by chance. Thus, when discussing intelligence failures, it is always important to understand at what levels they occur. The failure to predict the attacks of September 11 is often cited as an important failure, because the possibility was overlooked by top policy makers, even if some members of the American government did foresee the potential for a catastrophic strike by Al-Qaida prior to the events of that day.[10] In other words, the literature usually focuses its attention on top officials and what they know about a given topic; information produced by the government at lower levels has less inherent value if it does not influence policy.

Sometimes, errors of fact can be excused on the grounds that the event in question was by its nature unforeseeable. For example, there are few, if any, precedents of an empire dissolving itself virtually overnight in the absence of a major war, and any American administration that discounted such a possibility throughout the 1980s was likely rational in doing so.[11] Similarly, intelligence failures may result from inherent limitations in collection techniques, such as when a closed regime is difficult to infiltrate or technology does not allow an accurate estimate of the military strength of an adversary.

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of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), pp. 160-171.

[10] See James J. Wirtz, *Understanding Intelligence Failure: Warning, Response, and Deterrence* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 51; and Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), pp. 227-238.

[11] See Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, pp. 261-262.

The more interesting cases are the ones in which leaders make misjudgments that we have good reason to believe that they should have avoided. Many, if not most, of the worst of these cases result from motivated reasoning, which involves a biased reading of evidence in order to arrive at conclusions that accord with ideological commitments or fulfill psychological needs, through a process that wishes away uncomfortable trade-offs and makes the decision in favor of a certain policy easier.[12] Top American officials, including the President, seem to have genuinely believed that US soldiers would be welcomed as liberators in Iraq, based on the inherent cruelty of the Baathist regime and their personal conversations with exiles.[13] While there was no scientific study of public opinion in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the history of anti-Americanism and resentment towards occupation in the Middle East should probably have led to the opposite conclusion.

The second type of intelligence failure involves not asking the right questions. Former C.I.A. official Paul Pillar hinted at this idea, when he reflected on the lead up to the Iraq War, writing that "[o]n any given a subject, the intelligence community faces what is in effect a field of rocks, and it lacks the resources to turn over every one to see what threats to national security may lurk underneath."[14] In other words, intelligence officials, like governments in general, must naturally be selective in what kinds of questions to ask, as it is not feasible to investigate every possible issue that could potentially matter. George Kennan blamed the deterioration of relations between the United States and Japan in the first half of the twentieth century in part to American

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[12] See Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, pp. 181-182.
[13] Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, pp. 228-232.
[14] Pillar, "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq," p. 23.

leaders not considering Japanese sensitivities with regards to its regional interests.[15] It

was not that Americans misunderstood the Japanese psychological response to support

for their Chinese adversaries and not allowing Japan to benefit from its military victories;

rather, the issue was not given serious consideration.

Given the limited attention that policymakers can apply to any given issue, it is

likely that this second kind of intelligence failure is the most common. Its effects can also

be among the most consequential, as the assumptions underlying what is relevant are less

likely to be questioned than issues that are thought of in terms of yes-or-no propositions.

Jervis notes that in analyzing the opposition to the Shah prior to the 1979 revolution,

Western analysts gave little to no consideration to the role of religion, likely due to an

assumption that secular ideologies and economic interests were more important drivers of

mass movements in the modern world.[16] Analysts will always bring to their work the

perspective of a certain culture and unquestioned beliefs about the nature of politics, and

occasionally make inaccurate predictions as a result.

These two categories of intelligence failure have a tendency to blend together. In

the amount of attention it has received, 9/11 is the only intelligence failure since the end

of Cold War that can rival getting WMDs wrong.[17] From one perspective, American

leaders considered threats to the nation and did not foresee the specific possibility of

Muslim extremists hijacking an airplane and using it as a weapon. Thus, they got the

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[15] George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy: Sixtieth-Anniversary Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 50-54.
[16] Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails,* pp. 85-87.
[17] See Amy B. Zegart, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Random House, 2006); and Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*: *The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

question, "What are the main threats that the nation faces?" at least partly wrong. From a different perspective, however, they approached the issue of protecting national security in an incomplete way, because they were stuck in a paradigm that saw threats emanating from other states as practically the only ones worthy of high level attention.[18] But while not every intelligence failure can easily be placed into one of the two categories presented here, the distinction between getting certain questions wrong and not asking the right questions is a useful one for the purposes of analysis, as it implies a different kind of remedy for each category.

Correcting for the first of these is relatively simple, conceptually if not practically, and depends on gathering more reliable sources of evidence and efforts towards intelligent, unbiased analysis. The second requires individuals and policymakers to rethink important assumptions about the way the world works, which can be extremely difficult to do if their false beliefs have deep roots in culture or ideology. Here, political science can make its greatest contribution, by providing guidance regarding where to direct one's attention to in a world in which policymakers suffer from bounded rationality and limited resources.[19] Philosophers of decision theory argue that a frame without rigorous theoretical grounding can be rationally chosen in the sense that it produces desirable results.[20] For the purposes put forth here, whether one classifies an intelligence failure as falling into the first or second category should depend on the nature of the solution proposed, rather than any *a priori* rule that is independent of the consequences of

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[18] Clarke, *Against All Enemies,* pp. 74-77.
[19] W. Brian Arthur, "Inductive Reasoning and Bounded Rationality," *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (1994), pp. 406-411.
[20] James M. Joyce, *The Foundations of Causal Decision Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 74-77.

the frame chosen. Government officials, for their part, tend to find qualitative analysis

more useful than complex theoretical modeling for the purposes of making policy, and

the classification of intelligence failures described here is put forth in that spirit.[21]

In the run-up to the Iraq War, the question of whether Saddam Hussein had

WMDs was widely debated. Most observers agree that WMDs were not the actual

motivation for going to war; rather, there were other ideological reasons for the

American-led attack, and Saddam's potential use of such weapons against American

interests was settled on as a public justification.[22] Nonetheless, because the question of

the capabilities of the Iraqi regime was used to sell the war, it has been important to

understand why American leaders got this issue wrong.[23] Scholars have noted that the

American intelligence agencies were not the only ones to make a mistake regarding

WMDs. Saddam believed that such weapons were necessary to deter Iran, and his

behavior was such that even some of his generals thought that they might be able to make

use of chemical or biological weapons when the time for war came, despite his previous

assertions to the contrary.[24] From this perspective, whatever the merits of actually going

to war in order to disarm Saddam, the intelligence failure regarding the existence of

WMDs appears understandable.

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[21] Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch, "What Do Policymakers Want from Us? Results of a Survey of Current and Former Senior National Security Decision Makers," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 58, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 227-246, doi:10.1111/isqu.12111.

[22] Peter W. Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War without End* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2006), pp. 78-79.

[23] Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, pp. 124-127.

[24] Kevin M. Woods et al., eds., *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime, 1978-2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 42-44, 292-294; and Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, pp. 135-140.

At the same time, American leaders fundamentally misjudged what the postwar aftermath of invasion would look like. While one may suspect that comments about Americans being greeted as liberators were only for public consumption, actual plans were made on that basis.[25] Popular accounts seeking to understand why focus on themes such as the ideological underpinnings of neo-conservatism, President Bush's view of human nature rooted in his Christian faith, and public relations campaigns launched by Iraqi exiles, while scholarly works make use of concepts from cognitive psychology such as motivated reasoning and limited time horizons.[26] In this view, the intelligence failure is simply a matter of the Americans who happened to be in power after the September 11 attacks having certain ideological commitments, which interacted with aspects of human psychology in ways that led to false conclusions.

Yet the totality of the intelligence failure across the American government suggests that this can only be part of the story. Ricks shows that "[b]ecause the Pentagon assumed that U.S. troops would be greeted as liberators and that an Iraqi government would be stood up quickly, it didn't plan seriously for less rosy scenarios."[27] Similarly, Gordon and Trainor write that "[t]he CIA was so sure that American soldiers would be greeted warmly when they pushed into southern Iraq that a CIA operative suggested

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[25] Ricks, *Fiasco*, pp. 110-116.

[26] See Jacob Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of Neocons* (New York: Anchor, 2009), pp. 262-268; George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), p. 177-179; and Galbraith, *The End of Iraq*, pp. 84-88. See also Aaron Rapport, "The Long and Short of It: Cognitive Constraints on Leaders' Assessments of 'Postwar Iraq,'" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 133-171, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00110; and Ronald R. Krebs and Aaron Rapport, "International Relations and the Psychology of Time Horizons," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (September 2012), pp. 530-543, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2012.00726.x.

[27] Ricks, *Fiasco,* p. 111.

sneaking hundreds of small American flags into the country for grateful Iraqis to wave at their liberators."[28] In other words, even parts of the American government not pushing for war or staffed with neo-conservative ideologues, and with the greatest incentive to understand postwar Iraq, made the same mistakes as top officials. To understand why the United States believed that it was entering friendly territory, one needs a more general explanation.

II. Conceptualizing Postwar Iraq

Accounts of the run-up to the Iraq War agree that there were two broad camps in Washington prior to the invasion. The pro-war faction was centered at the White House and among top officials at the Pentagon, while the CIA and State Department, along with some among the uniformed military, were more skeptical about the war. On practically every relevant question in the period before the war—the likelihood of the existence of WMDs, whether there were meaningful connections between the Iraqi government and al-Qaida, what the costs of war would eventually be to the US taxpayer—hawks and doves took opposite positions, which could be predicted by how they felt about the war.[29] Certainly motivated reasoning must have played a role, as there is no other obvious reason why knowing an individual's view about one of these questions should be able to predict how they feel about another.

The same is true with regards to how each faction imagined the postwar aftermath. The President, and to a lesser extent other war hawks, saw the Iraqi people as in effect a unified entity that with American help would collectively make decisions about the future of its country through the aggregation of the preferences of individuals.

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[28] Quoted in Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, pp. 228-232.
[29] Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*, pp. 8-38; and Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, pp. 135-157.

Opponents showed some basic understanding of the history of Iraq and warned about the possibility of tensions between the three main ethno-religious communities. Yet, as will be shown, previous analysts have overestimated the insights of the doves, as they failed to go beyond the most superficial understanding of what could be expected after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Both groups neglected the internal politics of Iraq, which would turn out to be the best predictor of the postwar aftermath.

A. *"The Iraqi People"*

For obvious reasons, as the Bush administration sold the Iraq War, it mentioned practically nothing about sectarian and ethnic divisions within that country. Any such talk would have been at best a distraction from discussions about WMDs, and at worst would have provided an argument against the war. Public discussion therefore presented a simplified view of Iraq in which practically the only two actors in that country were an evil dictator and the people he was oppressing, who saw that they were oppressed and would be grateful for American help in overthrowing their government. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz told Congress that "[t]hese are Arabs, 23 million of the most educated people in the Arab world, who are going to welcome us as liberators."[30] Why being Arab or educated would predict support for American occupation was never explained.

Of course, the ultimate decision-maker was President Bush, and he was the most prominent example of this tendency to view the Iraqi people as natural allies in the quest to build democracy in their country. Indeed, a credible anecdote in the run-up to the war can serve to illustrate how little the President knew about the internal dynamics of Iraq,

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[30] Quoted in Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2018), p. 80.

and is therefore worth considering at length. On January 10, 2003, two months before the war, Bush and other top officials met with a group of Iraqi exiles. According to Packer, the guests "spent a good portion of the time explaining to Bush that there were two kinds of Arabs in Iraq, Sunnis and Shia."[31] Former American ambassador Peter Galbraith repeats the same story and says that this was when Bush first learned about the sectarian division within Islam, citing two sources who were in the meeting.[32]

There is no immediate reason to doubt this story, as none of the known participants in the meeting had an obvious incentive to put forth such a misrepresentation. Nonetheless, there are a few indications that the President had reason to know about sectarian differences before the infamous meeting two months before the invasion of Iraq. A former C.I.A. official reports that although he had been previously unaware of the Sunni-Shia split, Bush was briefed on the topic by a senior analyst from the agency soon after he became President.[33] And, in an October 2002 speech, President Bush mentioned that when Saddam was gone "[t]he oppression of Kurds, Assyrians, Turkomans, Shi'a, Sunnis and others will be lifted."[34] Yet, as anyone who has taught students at any level can attest, presenting an individual with a piece of information once or twice is no guarantee that it will be recalled when needed months or years later.

Zalmay Khalilzad, for his part, attended the meeting and says that the President did indeed know about the religious differences in question but was simply asking about

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[31] Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*, p. 96.
[32] Galbraith, *The End of Iraq*, pp. 83-84.
[33] John Nixon, *Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein* (New York: Random House, 2017), p. 196.
[34] George W. Bush, "President Bush Outlines Iraq Threat: Remarks by the President on Iraq," October 7, 2002, in The White House: President George W. Bush, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021007-8.html.

the nature and depth of the sectarian split within Iraq.[35] Yet, even Khalilzad's account

shows Bush giving the matter little serious consideration. When an exiled Sunni

physician said that Sunnis and Shia would work together after Saddam was gone, the

President was satisfied. Whether he knew about the Sunni-Shia split or not, then, the

President's knowledge about the religious divide was at most an afterthought that could

be cast aside based on some vague reassurances coming from a stranger.

In the case of Bush, then, private beliefs appear to have matched public rhetoric.

Similarly, on March 16, perhaps only two months after Bush learned about sectarian

divisions within Iraq, surely referring in part to that meeting, Vice President Cheney said

that he "talked with a lot of Iraqis in the last several months myself, had them to the

White House," which had given him a "read … on the people of Iraq," telling him that

"they will welcome as liberators the United States when we come" to overthrow Saddam

Hussein. Questions of sample size, much less selection effects—the fact that the

administration was talking only to those Iraqis who favored intervention—do not appear

to have been considered.

A few hawks expressed naïve optimism in their most public statements, but put

forth more nuanced views in interviews and books in which they gave more detailed

accounts of what they believed. Wolfowitz went out of his way to ensure Congress that

the postwar occupation would not require many troops and publicly admonished

members of the administration who argued otherwise.[36] Yet about six weeks after

Baghdad fell, when pressed on whether the new Iraq would be pro-Western and

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[35] Zalmay Khalizad, *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House: My Journey Through a Turbulent World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), chap. 14.
[36] Ricks, *Fiasco*, pp. 96-100.

democratic, he conceded that "[t]here's going to be a huge struggle for the soul of Iraqi Shiism, there's no question about it."[37] In September 2003, Pentagon official Richard Perle said that "a year from now, I'll be very surprised if there is not some grand square in Baghdad that is named after President Bush," and "[t]here is no doubt that, with the exception of a very small number of people close to a vicious regime, the people of Iraq have been liberated and they understand that they've been liberated."[38] Yet, he also complained in a 2004 book that "after thirty-five years of Baathist repression, nobody except Baathist thugs, Shiite imams, and Sunni tribal sheikhs had a political base in non-Kurdish areas of Iraq."[39] In other words, he was aware of the societal divisions, but did not see them as enough of an obstacle to make him question the war effort. Knowing who had a political base within Iraq as of March 2003 was not considered much help in predicting who would come to power months and years later.

Often, the views of war supporters were colored by cultural assumptions that were not checked empirically. When Wolfowitz was asked about the possibility that Iraqis would chose to live under a theocracy, he responded:

> Look, fifty percent of the Arab world are women. Most of those women do not want to live in a theocratic state. The other fifty percent are men. I know a lot of them. I don't think they want to live in a theocratic state.[40]

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[37] Paul Wolfowitz, interview by Sam Tannenhaus, *Vanity Fair*, May 9, 2003, http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2594.
[38] Quoted in Alan Weisman, *Prince of Darkness, Richard Perle: The Kingdom, the Power, and the End of Empire in America* (New York: Union Square, 2007), on p. 205.
[39] David Frum and Richard N. Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), p. 141.
[40] Quoted in Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*, p. 115.

A few months after the invasion, Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith likewise assured Congress that support for clerical rule among the Iraqi Shia was low. When asked for empirical data supporting this view, however, he was unable to provide any.[41] In fact, for decades there has been overwhelming support for sharia law as the basis of government in several Arab countries surveyed, including 91 percent of Iraqis asked in 2017, a number that mathematically must have included a large majority of women.[42]

Reports credibly indicate that President Bush had decided on war with Iraq by July 2002 at the latest.[43] After that point, documents presented to the National Security Council show that those around the President made few attempts to bring to his attention any unpleasant facts that could complicate the path to war. This included not mentioning the possibility of sectarian tensions, even to dismiss them as unimportant.[44] While other hawks occasionally expressed views that were more informed or nuanced, they presented to the public and potential critics a view of the Iraqi people that was unified and would be grateful for American help. The nature of postwar planning, particularly the low number of troops that would be sent to Iraq, suggests that they were not misleading the public when they put forth their most optimistic estimates. Regardless of the degree to which hawks knew or thought about sectarian divisions within Iraq, they all believed that these

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[41] Galbraith, *The End of Iraq*, pp. 88-89.
[42] See Michael Lipka, "Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and Around the World," FactTank: News in the Numbers, *Pew Research*, August 9, 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/.
[43] Nicholas Lemann, "How It Came to War," *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2003, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/31/how-it-came-to-war.
[44] White House, *Principals' Committee Review of Iraq Policy Paper* (Washington D.C.: White House, 2002).

divisions were relatively unimportant and that it was not worth investigating the actual state of public opinion or the internal political dynamics of that country.

B. *"Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds"*

If portraying the Iraqi people as a united nation simplified the case for war, an awareness of sectarian differences tended to complicate it. War skeptics at the C.I.A., the State Department, and the military pointed out that there had been a history of tensions between the communities of Iraq and that the United States would be stuck with these problems in case of war. At the same time, the doves shared many of the same fundamental assumptions as the hawks. They did not give sectarian differences the attention they deserved, or, when they did, officials ignored the internal politics within the Shia community in particular and instead made guesses about what the consequences of intervention and democratization would be.

Among those who argue that the United States inadequately planned for postwar conditions—and few argue otherwise—there is the belief that war opponents had a much clearer understanding of the problems a liberated Iraq would face. Pointing to the work of the State Department's Future of Iraq (FOI) project, Fallows writes that "[t]he administration will be admired in retrospect for how much knowledge it created about the challenge it was taking on."[45] Indeed, the 1,200 page report is impressive by the measure of sheer volume.[46] Sections were produced on topics such as education, oil and energy, and a free media. Yet there is very little discussion of sectarian differences, even in sections where one would think such a discussion would be necessary. For example, the

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[45] Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad,* pp. 47-48.
[46] Democratic Principles Workshop, *Final Report on The Transition to Democracy in Iraq* (November 2002), http://www.wadinet.de/news/dokus/transition_to_democracy.pdf.

project recommends de-Baathification, while discussing potentially negative consequences if those who lose their jobs form into a destabilizing influence.[47] There is no consideration of the possibility that the process could inflame sectarian tensions.

This oversight can be explained in part by the fact that the F.O.I. reports were put together by teams of Iraqi exiles that hoped to have a future role in the new government.[48] Yet the State Department recruited these exiles and connected them to American advisors, and did not exercise power in the belief that sectarian differences within Iraq would be important enough to receive sustained attention from those that they organized. Whatever insights the F.O.I. project may have produced with regards to electricity production or civil service reform, such knowledge was of considerably less use in what would be a country without a stable government able to keep peace, a precondition to implementing most of the ideas recommended.

Similarly, a few months before the invasion, the Army staff at the Pentagon produced a report that Ricks argues was "stunning in its prescience."[49] This document did indeed foresee many of the difficulties of post-war Iraq, noting, for example, that there could be conflict along ethno-sectarian lines.[50] However, in some ways its attempts at deeper analysis of the politics of the Shia community could not have been more wrong.

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[47] Democratic Principles' Workshop, "4.3: De-Ba'thification," *Final Report on The Transition to Democracy in Iraq* (November 2002), pp. 60-63, http://www.wadinet.de/news/dokus/transition_to_democracy.pdf.
[48] Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad,* pp. 43-106.
[49] Ricks, *Fiasco,* pp. 72-73.
[50] Conrad C. Crane and W. Andrew Terrill, *Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario* (Carlisle, Penn.: U.S. Army War College, 2003), https://archive.org/stream/DTIC_ADA412663/DTIC_ADA412663_djvu.txt.

Most Iraqi Shi'ites have proven themselves to be unwilling to cooperate with Tehran against their own country. They correspondingly resent [Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or S.C.I.R.I.] people attempting to play a prominent role in government. The public would probably favor cooperation with the Iranians only in cases of extreme need or clear political disenfranchisement by an emerging post-Saddam government in Baghdad.

Left unexplained is on what basis the analysts knew that "most" Shia had the opportunity to cooperate with Iran or rejected that country playing a role in the future of Iraq. After 1991, Saddam Hussein himself believed that Iran and its theocratic ideology was always a threat to influence the Iraqi Shia masses.[51] In fact, S.C.I.R.I. would become the most dominant party in post-war Iraq for years to come. The US did not have to worry about the Shia supporting S.C.I.R.I. because of estrangement from Baghdad because democratic elections had in effect *made S.C.I.R.I. the government in Baghdad.* This idea that the Iraqi Shia were hostile to Iran was often stated but there is little indication of what that assessment was based on.

In 2007, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence [hereinafter S.S.C.I] released a report titled "Prewar Assessments of Postwar Iraq," that reviewed assessments produced between the month after the passage of the 1998 Iraqi Liberation Act and the 2003 invasion.[52] This report put together some of the most important widely distributed

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[51] Woods et al. eds., *The Saddam Tapes*, pp. 25-26.
[52] U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments About Postwar Iraq*, 110th Congress, 1st sess., 2007, S. Rep 110-76, p. 1, https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/110th-congress/senate-report/76/1.

documents produced by American intelligence agencies on postwar Iraq, along with summaries representing majority and minority views of the committee.

The prewar reports included do occasionally acknowledge that the possibility of sectarian violence, yet they make inconsistent predictions about the Shia community and do not ground their views in the internal politics of Iraq beyond basic demographic facts. In January 2003, the CIA correctly noted the split between Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds.[53] Under the heading "Sunni-Shia Strife," the report noted that the Sunnis had been in power and would possibly resent their loss of status. For their part, the Shia might engage in reprisals against their former rulers. In a March 2003 report, the Defense Intelligence Agency similarly noted that the Shia might try "to redress the imbalance of political power in their favor."[54] That same month, US Central Command optimistically states that reports of the potential for Iran to have control over southern Iraq were "probably overstated," since the Shia were "strongly nationalistic."[55] Overall, however, there was no consensus on how the Shia would respond to an American invasion, and policymakers therefore had little guidance from war skeptics in the intelligence community beyond an idea that they should be less optimistic than the main supporters of the war. As noted by a minority report of the S.S.C.I. signed by three Republican senators, "the Intelligence Community's assessments ranged from judgments stating that segments of Iraqi society (particularly the Shia) would welcome the intervention, to ambivalence, to non-violent opposition, to some level of violent opposition."[56]

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[53] Ibid., pp. 70-71.
[54] Ibid., p. 94
[55] Ibid., p. 96.
[56] Ibid., p. 199.

Thus, the American intelligence community knew that there were different communities in Iraq, and there could be tensions between them once the dictator was removed. Yet the analysis is striking for the absence of any kind of deeper insight into the Shia community. What kinds of leaders had they followed in the past, and what were their ideas? Did they advocate Western-style democracy or theocracy, and were they pro- or anti-American? In the eyes of intelligence analysts, the attitudes of different ethno-linguistic communities were determined mostly by power relations with other communities and what they stood to gain or lose from American intervention.

Despite the S.S.I.C. Report, some of the prewar analysis remains classified, and even those documents that have been released often contain redactions. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether key decision-makers knew more about the internal dynamics of pre-invasion Iraq than the available literature suggests. That appears doubtful, however, for two reasons. First, as the Democrats controlled the Senate in 2007, they composed a majority of the Intelligence Committee, and were sympathetic towards critics of the war within the American government. Thus, we have no reason to believe that the S.S.C.I report would have underestimated the foresight of the intelligence community, either due to conscious manipulation or a selective reading of the documents.

Second, many top officials who were more skeptical or hostile towards the war have written their own accounts of the decision-making process and would seem to have an incentive to emphasize any information that they and their agencies knew that would vindicate them. Yet we do not find much evidence that they asked serious questions about the nature of the Shia opposition to Saddam Hussein. For example, George Tenet's CIA pushed back on claims of a link between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaida, and the

more extreme claims about WMDs.[57] But he freely admits that the US did not foresee civil war and anarchy within Iraq except as a worst-case scenario, and does not mention the nature of the Shia opposition to Saddam as one of the arguments he presented.

Paul Pillar was the National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East between 2000 and 2005, which meant that some of the reports about postwar Iraq delivered to top officials discussed above were distributed under his name. He has been a fierce critic of every aspect of the war, yet his writings in the years after the invasion sound the same notes as the documents produced immediately before, indicating that top C.I.A. officials did not have insights into Iraqi politics that they have kept from public view.[58] Other accounts back up the view that inter-Shia dynamics were practically unknown to the American government. In 1999, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, the father of Muqtada, was killed. His death was blamed on the Saddam regime and clashes occurred between the followers of Sadr and the government. According to John Nixon, a C.I.A. expert on Iraq who was the first American official to interrogate Saddam Hussein, when Sadr was killed "we didn't know anything about the Sadrists and had almost no idea who Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was."[59]

III. Authoritarian Politics and Regime Change

Iraq under Saddam Hussein was a closed society, and there were obvious inherent difficulties in receiving on-the-ground intelligence. Thus, it may be reasonable to write off the inability to understand the Iraqi Shia as inevitable even with the best intelligence methods and analysis. This appears to have been the conclusion of many individuals in

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[57] George Tenet and Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 301-320.
[58] Pillar, "Intelligence, Policy, and the War on Iraq," p. 18.
[59] Nixon, *Debriefing the President*, pp. 37-39.

the intelligence community itself, as reflected in the passage from the 2007 S.S.C.I report quoted in the introduction to this paper. One of the minority perspectives amended to the main report argued that the assessments of the intelligence community with regards to postwar Iraq were, in the end, "no more authoritative than the many other educated opinions that were available in the same time frame."[60]

However, while this may have been true given the perspectives used to make predictions by the American government, that does not mean that a different approach to the issue could not have led to more accurate estimates. As will be shown below, the actors that came to power in the Shia community after the war, and thus would control the country, were the exact same individuals and groups that had most threatened the Saddam regime. Had American leaders considered the internal dynamics of Iraq more fully, even using open source materials alone, they could have made reasonable predictions regarding these matters.

This section has three parts. First, I review some of the main lessons from the study of authoritarian regimes. I go on to then explain how importing this knowledge into the decision-making process can give American policymakers, and potentially others in a similar situation, a more accurate picture of what to expect in the aftermath of a conflict in which an existing government is removed. Understanding the main threats to a regime before this takes place is important because it tells observers something about who the organized forces in a society are, and also gives insights into the culture and state of public opinion. Finally, I contrast what the literature on authoritarian politics can tell us

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[60] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, *Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments About Postwar Iraq*, p. 196.

about predictions of postwar environments with the perspectives of those in the Bush administration.

A. *Lessons of the Study of Authoritarian Politics*

In the popular imagination, a vicious dictator rules over a subservient population through the use of sheer force and terror. The public must do what the tyrant wants or risk imprisonment, torture, and death. Those who study authoritarian regimes, however, recognize this as a crude caricature that obscures more than it reveals about these states. Perhaps no less than leaders in a democracy, dictators must be politicians, which means countering potential opposition and accommodating different power centers within society or the regime itself. In the words of Richard Overy, referring to Hitler and Stalin, "the paradigm of completely unrestricted power, exercised in a coherent, centralized polity by men of exceptional ruthlessness who brooked no limitations or dissent was, and remains, a political-science fantasy."[61]

Probably the greatest demonstration of the limitations of the power of dictators is how often they are overthrown. By one count, between 1946 and 2008 authoritarian leaders lost power through non-constitutional means no less than 303 times.[62] For these leaders, the stakes could not be higher. Escribà-Folchs finds that in the postwar era up to 2004, 47% of dictators lost power ended up dead, in jail, or in exile.[63] The fear of loss of power helps to explain many of the most unsavory aspects of the behavior of non-

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[61] Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 73.

[62] See Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 4-5.

[63] Abel Escribà-Folch, "Accountable for What? Regime Types, Performance, and the Fate of Outgoing Dictators, 1946-2004," *Democratization*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2013) pp. 160-185, doi:10.1080/13510347.2013.738866.

democratic leaders, such as mass killing, which is often undertaken with strategic goals in mind.[64]

Exactly what groups or institutions threaten a political leader and what methods the opposition uses may be different across states, but the threat of losing power is almost always there. Dictators not only face threats, but they cannot rule without some level of public backing, and must please their supporters just as they need to counter enemies.[65] Before the Iraq War, this point was fundamentally misunderstood by some top American officials, who were unable to recognize that leaders who commit atrocities can nonetheless command support from large segments of the population. In a private 2008 meeting, for example, Bush expressed disbelief regarding the view that there had ever been Iraqis who respected and admired Saddam Hussein, a failure of imagination that is shockingly out of step with political psychology and findings from the study of authoritarian regimes.[66]

That being said, given limited temporal and cognitive resources, does it make sense for leaders in a country like the United States, who are considering enacting some sort of regime change, to bother familiarizing themselves with the internal politics of the target state? One could argue that policymakers would be better served by putting their time towards learning and applying more general economic or political theories, an argument that is analogous to international relations theories that favor structural

[64] Gary Uzonyi and Richard Hanania, "Government-Sponsored Mass Killing and Civil War Reoccurance," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (September 2017), pp. 677-689, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2018.1469587.
[65] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 15-16.
[66] Nixon, *Debriefing the President*, pp. 173-185.

explanations for state behavior.[67] Yet there are two reasons to believe that, if one is

considering regime change, knowing who the main threats to the dictator in power are is

likely the single best predictor of who will rise in his aftermath.

First of all, those who are organized and somewhat effective opponents of an

authoritarian regime are most likely to bring their institutional and organizational capital

with them into the new order. Within any state, just because a certain worldview or

policy position is popular at the mass level does not mean that it will be enacted by a

government or well represented among political elites, even in an advanced democracy.

For example, after the Second World War, public opinion with regards to foreign policy

preferences was similar in countries such as the US, Japan, and Germany, yet these states

pursued very different policies due in part to variance in policy networks and coalitions

formed at the elite level.[68] Well-organized groups and elites can disproportionately shape

public policy by engaging in agenda setting and deciding the "bundle" of choices that the

public faces.[69] Established institutions can also take various forms of action to undercut

upstart rivals, which even happens in advanced democracies such as the United States,

where the Republicans and Democrats make it difficult for third parties to achieve ballot

access.[70] This is likely part of the reason why within any country there is a great deal of

[67] See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

[68] Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (July 1991), pp. 479-512, doi:10.2307/2010534.

[69] Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. (Maiden, Mass., Polity, 2014); and Paul Burstein, "The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (March 2003), pp. 29-40, doi: 10.1177/106591290305600103.

[70] Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Pervill Squire, "The Politics of Institutional Choice: Presidential Ballot Access for Third Parties in the United States," *British Journal of*

continuity with regards to which parties are competing to govern over time, as in the

U.S., which has been ruled by either a Republican or Democrat since the administration

of Franklin Pierce. Thus, those who are already organized into political parties should be

in the best position to affect their preferences and shape the future after an existing

government is removed. Furthermore, such parties should have access to media arms and

prominence as some of the most important members of the community, meaning that

their worldviews should color the lenses through which every action that an occupier

takes will be seen.

That being said, even assuming that public opinion is important and

independently generated, how do leaders of one country estimate the state of public

opinion in another? Dictatorial regimes in particular rarely allow scientific polls of mass

preferences on sensitive political issues. That leads to the second reason states should

take an interest in the internal politics of any regime that they are considering

overthrowing, which is that the nature of threats to a regime can be taken as an indirect

proxy for public opinion. If an organization, party, or institution has enough influence to

pose some threat to a dictator, it must be able to inspire supporters to take a certain

degree of risk. By knowing the nature of the opposition, one gains a better understanding

of the positions and causes that are likely to motivate political activity within a given

society. This would be true even if one did have access to scientific public polling, which

can provide an aggregated picture of what the masses think—given a certain framing of

an issue, at least—but not necessarily predict which groups of citizens will feel strongly

enough about a cause to overcome the collective action problem inherent to political action.

Both of the main factions in the US government largely assumed that Iraqi views would be shaped mostly by individual or group economic and security interests. In political science, however, the model of public opinion formation that this view was implicitly based on has largely been discredited. Those studying American politics have generally found that individual-level prejudices and moral values are superior to objectively defined interest in determining public opinion, whether in regards to domestic or foreign policy.[71] A recent experiment from Pashtun provinces of Afghanistan poses a direct challenge to conventional counterinsurgency doctrine by finding that respondents treated occupiers and insurgents asymmetrically: the I.S.A.F. killing civilians increased support for the Taliban, but the Taliban killing civilians did not increase support for the I.S.A.F.[72] Experimental results match what we can see from a casual observation of international politics. Defenders of Israel, for example, note that it is condemned harshly by Muslims across the world who are not nearly as outraged when repression on a comparable or greater scale is carried out by their co-religionists.

American leaders shared the assumption that the ultimate determinants of Shia attitudes towards the United States would be determined by American behavior. To supporters, the fact that the U.S. overthrew Saddam would create a justified amount of good will. Opponents often left more space for U.S. actions the day after the fall of the

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[71] Richard Hanania and Robert Trager, "Virtue in Our Own Eyes: How Moral Identity Defines the Politics of Force (unpublished manuscript, 2018).
[72] Jason Lyall, Graeme Blair, and Kosuke Imai, "Explaining Support for Combatants during Wartime: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 4 (November 2013), pp. 679-705, doi:10.1017/S0003055413000403.

regime to have an influence, including whether occupying forces could provide security and good governance. Yet one cannot simply draw a straight line between these kinds of "objective" economic and political realities and popular attitudes. Often, emotional reactions to situations depend more on the cultural attitudes that observers carry with them and the identities of relevant parties. The authoritarian politics perspective gives these prejudices their due weight.

The nature of the internal opposition to an authoritarian regime may matter less in situations in which the invading army is willing and able to dominate the conquered population by force or allow proxies to do the same. When the Red Army displaced the Wehrmacht in Eastern Europe over the course of the last year of the Second World War, Stalin probably did not need to know much about internal politics or public opinion in Romania or Bulgaria; the Soviets, along with their communist allies, were willing and able to use whatever means necessary to install their preferred system of government.[73] The United States, however, decided months before the invasion that it would insist on building a democracy in Iraq, as it was simultaneously trying to do in Afghanistan.[74] Having precluded empowering a government that could rule through terror and without popular consent, the U.S. government had every reason to learn about the internal politics of Iraq. Even had the occupation succeeded in creating a stable democracy within a reasonable period of time, it was likely that those who posed the greatest challenge to

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[73] Like Iraq under Saddam, however, gaining and remaining staying in power proved easier than winning widespread public support, as was demonstrated by the popular uprisings that ended the Cold War. See Krystyna Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland, 1943-1948* (Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1991).
[74] Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), chap. 14.

Saddam Hussein would have the institutional capital, motivation, and public support to gain power.

In the famous formulation of Svolik, in the broadest terms dictators face two main issues: the problem of power sharing and the problem of control.[75] As will be seen below, the Baathist government confronted both issues. Nonetheless, the old Iraqi Army was dissolved in the initial months after the invasion, precluding it from being a major player in post-Saddam Iraq.[76] Thus, this article focuses on the problem of control and the popular uprising that Saddam feared but never came. A prewar study of this threat in particular would have been the best guide to what the U.S. could expect from the majority population of Iraq.

<div align="center">B. Different Perspectives on Postwar Iraq</div>

Table 1 below shows three perspectives through which an analyst could have tried to predict post-Saddam Iraq. As can be seen, each perspective comes with its own assumptions. To some war supporters, Iraqis were a unified bloc, and their hopes and wishes would determine the future of the country. Although one could assume a unified population and nonetheless use empirical methods such as public opinion polls to come to inform one's views, there is no evidence that the war hawks sought answers of this kind before the war. For that reason, we can call their method of analysis, particularly that of the President, "axiomatic," in that it made assumptions about human nature that were not subject to challenge.

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[75] See Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

[76] L. Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), pp. 56-58.

Perspective	Masses	Factions	Authoritarian Politics
Faction in US Government	War supporters	War skeptics/opponents	None
Individuals associated with each	President, top defense officials, officials making public statements	CIA, State Department, some parts of the uniformed military	N/A
Worldview	Individualist	Sectarian	Political
Unit of Analysis	Individuals ("Iraqis")	Ethno-religious groups ("Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds")	Existing political actors (S.C.I.R.I., Sadrists, Kurdish Democratic Party, etc.)
Relevant Question	What do the Iraqi people want?	How will different groups get along?	What actors are likely to come to power, and how will they interact with one another?
Predictions for Postwar Outcome	Optimistic	Depends mainly on US policy, method of managing interactions between communities	Depends on pre-war political conditions (public opinion and already existing institutions)
Method of analysis	Axiomatic	Theoretical	Empirical
Post-War Plan	Hand over to exiles (Pentagon); Democratic elections (White House)	Hand over to internal forces	N/A
Major Determinants of Public Opinion	US actions in Iraq (mostly gratitude for removing Saddam)	Power relations of various groups, plus US actions	Pre-existing cultural attitudes and institutions, reflected in most powerful parties

Table 1. Three Methods for Predicting the Effects of Regime Change

The second group, composed of war opponents, was largely theoretical in its

approach. The factions perspective acknowledges major ethno-religious groups in Iraq,

but pays little attention to their actual views. Their beliefs, actions, and desires would be

shaped by American action and power relations, similar to realist theories of international

relations in which states are like "billiard balls," and one gains more insight by examining structural conditions than investigating the internal politics of any particular government.[77] From those who took the factions perspective, one might predict, for example, that the Shia would be more likely to accept a democratic system because they would understand that it would put them in power, and the Sunnis might oppose the new order for similar reasons.[78] This perspective had some truth to it, as Shia political parties were able to maintain a unified bloc in the immediate years after Saddam's overthrow for precisely this reason.[79]

Despite differences regarding empirical assumptions and theoretical methods, the first two perspectives can be contrasted with the third in the sense that only the latter would have suggested taking an interest in the specific beliefs of those who threatened the regime. In other words, the American government, war supporters and skeptics alike, subscribed to the *tabula rasa* fallacy: the future of Iraqi politics would be determined by how Americans interacted with the people living in that country. In contrast, the authoritarian politics perspective is empirical in its approach, in the sense that it holds that specific country-level knowledge is the best guide to predicting the future.

The debate about who the US should empower after Saddam's overthrow can be analyzed with these distinctions in mind. Some war supporters simply wanted to install

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[77] For examples, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; and Benjamin O. Fordham and Victor Asai, "Billiard Balls or Snowflakes? Major Power Prestige and the International Diffusion of Instiutionts and Practices," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (March 2007), pp. 31-52, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2007.00438.x.

[78] See U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee, *Report on Prewar Intelligence Assessments About Postwar Iraq*.

[79] Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 343-344.

Ahmad Chalabi as the leader of Iraq.[80] When told that an American-backed exile would

not have legitimacy within that country, Vice President Cheney is reported to have

retorted that the only legitimacy needed would come on the back of an Abrams tank. The

Iraqi people would presumably be so happy to be rid of Saddam and so grateful to the

United States that they would accept nearly anything. The view of opponents, in contrast,

was that "this was not a situation in which the United States would be able to midwife a

new Iraq by picking this or that leader or party."[81] Once resigned to war, however, the

State Department called for the selection of internal forces that could form a democratic

leadership of Iraq. Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, as head of the Coalition Provisional

Authority (C.P.A.), ultimately sided with the war skeptics, beginning with the installation

of an exile-dominated Governing Council that would be expanded to include internal

actors and be replaced by a democratically elected government within a year.[82]

  The State Department and other skeptics ended up being mistaken in its belief that

new leaders would emerge to rule Iraq. In the January 2005 elections, 90 percent of the

vote would go to Iraqi parties that had already been on the Governing Council, indicating

that the C.P.A. lost more than a year-and-a-half during which the Americans became an

occupying force in a quest for legitimacy and representation that could have been had by

simply allowing the Governing Council to rule the country from the beginning.[83] The

belief that new leaders would rise up was mistaken, because, as will be shown below,

many of the main members of the Governing Council were the head of political parties

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[80] See Bonin, *Arrows of the Night*, pp. 210-213.
[81] Paul Pillar, telephone interview by author, August 10, 2018.
[82] Bremer, *My Year in Iraq*, pp. 78-103.
[83] Galbraith, *The End of Iraq*, pp. 122-124; and Stephen Benedict Dyson, "What Really Happened in Planning for Postwar Iraq?" *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 128, No. 3 (Fall 2013), pp. 455-488, doi:10.1002/polq.12073.

that had widespread support within the country before the overthrow of Saddam. There was no reason not to believe that they would not be those with the greatest chance to succeed after the restraints of dictatorship were removed.[84]

IV. Iraq, Before and After the Invasion

The nature of the fall of the Baathist government in Iraq produced documents available to historians that together give us among the most detailed insights that we have into the operations of a totalitarian regime. Several works have been written that rely on original documents and recordings produced by the top levels of the government.[85] These accounts paint a picture of a regime that was constantly worried about its survival and had specific enemies who had enough influence within Iraq to potentially threaten the government. These individuals or groups had to be either bought off, co-opted, marginalized, or—usually as a last resort—imprisoned or killed.

Some scholars have found it useful to distinguish between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, with Lintz characterizing the latter as a rule by an individual or small group that acts in service of an ideology without being accountable towards any larger

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[84] Among the war skeptics, there were those in the CIA who would have supported the installation of a Sunni strongman after Saddam was gone. See Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), pp. 200–01. This view, however, does not appear to have been taken seriously by top administration officials, and the debate ended up being largely about the degree to which exiles or those chosen internally would dominate the new Iraq.
[85] For examples, see Blaydes, *State of Repression*; Samuel Helfont, *Compulsion in Religion: Saddam Hussein, Islam, and the Roots of Insurgencies in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Aaron M. Faust, *The Ba'thification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Totalitarianism* (Austin, Tex., University of Texas Press, 2015); Dina Rizk Khory, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003*; and Woods et al. eds., *The Saddam Tapes*.

constituency.[86] Others have put forth other definitions, placing non-democratic regimes

into a number of categories or measuring them along various dimensions.[87] Scholars

disagree on whether the Ba'athist government under Saddam was "totalitarian" or merely

"authoritarian," yet this has more to do with different definitions used than any

differences about the true nature of the regime. For example, Sassoon argues that pre-

2003 Iraq was not a totalitarian regime because it had no centrally planned economy,

while Faust does apply the term because Saddam's government showed an "aspiration to

apply an exclusivist, utopian, populist ideology."[88] Regardless of what definition we use,

and whatever the ultimate goals of the party, scholars are in agreement that even with

regards to the Arab population Saddam never achieved a level of societal control

comparable to that of Stalin, Mao, or Hitler, due to internal divisions within Iraq, and

especially in later years, reduced state capacity.[89]

With regards to power sharing, Saddam worried about threats from within the

government, particularly the military and therefore looked to make sure that the regime

was "coup proof."[90] Furthermore, after the Gulf War, the international community

established a no-fly zone over the Kurdish north, and the Iraqi government lost control

over much of the area.[91] Although fighting continued between the regime and the Kurds

until the 2003 invasion, the main threat to the survival of the state did not come from the

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[86] Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2000), pp. 66-68.

[87] For examples, see Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles*, pp. 50-53; and Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, pp. 1-18.

[88] See Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 5; and Faust, *The Ba'thification of Iraq*, pp. 6-8.

[89] See Khory, *Iraq in Wartime*, pp. 152-158.

[90] See Blaydes, *State of Repression*, pp. 266-304.

[91] Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 49-50.

North.[92] Also, given that the Kurds made up no more than 20 percent of the population and were concentrated far from the capital, they were not going to be the ones to take over the government, nor be among the main participants in any civil war over control of the state in its entirety.

The group that the American government most needed to understand in order to plan the postwar aftermath was the Shia, who made up 50-60 percent of the total Iraqi population, and about three-quarters of the Arabs living in that country. They threatened the B'athists on account of their numbers and estrangement from the regime, and in the long run, Shia politics and how this community reacted to America occupation would be the most important determinant of the success or failure of the Iraq War. Furthermore, if Iraq did become a democracy, as the Bush Administration hoped, it would be they who would control the state.

It is an oversimplification and too certain to say that "the Shia" opposed the Saddam government. There was no public polling or free elections in Iraq under Saddam, which seem to be among the only bases on which one can make a scientific judgment about the feelings of a community. Nonetheless, there was a kind of Shia politics within Iraq prior to the 2003 American invasion, and by studying the most prominent groups one could have made predictions about the nature of post-Saddam Iraq that would have been more informed than speculation. The two main groups were the Sadrists and the Iranian-backed Shia Islamists. They two groups were occasionally united, but at times also

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[92] It must be noted that there were plans made for a coup in the mid-1990s that would have included Kurdish forces joining up with a group of exiles and marching on Baghdad. Top American officials either never supported the coup or pulled their support late, and it possibly failed for that reason. See Robert Baer, *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Three Rivers, 2002), pp. 177-213.

hostile to one another. This part begins by explaining the threats to the Saddam government before the 2003 invasion and goes on to trace a direct line between the main challenges to the regime and what emerged after the 2003 American-led invasion.

A. *Internal Threats to the Iraqi Government*

The main problem of control faced by the Saddam government was that it was a regime that was *de facto* dominated by Sunnis with a relatively secular ideology, yet ruled over a population that was majority Shia and religious.[93] Complicating the problem further was the fact that its neighbor to the east was, and still is, the largest majority-Shia country in the world, which has been ruled by a theocratic government since 1979 and has historical, ethnic, and cultural ties to the Iraqi Shia. We can group the anti-Saddam Shia opposition within Iraq in the decades before the 2003 invasion into two categories. First, there were Islamist parties with significant support from abroad, with the two most important of these being Dawa and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (S.C.I.R.I.). The second group was the Sadrists, a more nationalistic, but no less Islamist, force that had few contacts with the outside world.

The Islamic Dawa Party was established by religious scholars in the holy city of Karbala in 1958, and its founding marks the beginning of modern Shia religious activism in Iraq.[94] Upon the Baathist regime coming to power in a 1968 coup, it identified Islamists of all stripes as the enemy. In 1982, S.C.I.R.I. was founded in Iran during the Iraq-Iran War, as an alliance between the Shia movements of Dawa, the Islamic Action

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[93] See Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003.*
[94] Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 27-31.

Organization, and the Iraqi Mujahideen.[95] Dawa would split from S.C.I.R.I. in 1984, but both organizations shared similar goals and would together run under the banner of the Shia coalition called the United Iraqi Alliance in the first elections after the 2003 invasion. Dawa was still the party most feared by Saddam's regime in the last decade of its rule, as can be seen in a 1999 form that perspective Baathists had to sign pledging they were not part of that party; no other organization received similar treatment.[96]

Dawa was founded by Iraqi cleric Muhamad Baqir al-Sadr, conventionally referred to as Sadr I, who called for a state based on Islamic law.[97] Fearing an Islamist revolution like that which recently had taken place in Iran, the regime's Revolutionary Command Council made membership in Dawa punishable by death in March 1980.[98] Although its methods were brutal, the regime had strong grounds on which to fear Shia militancy. Throughout the war with Iran (1980-1988), Islamists made several attempts on the lives of senior Iraqi officials, some of which were successful. In 1980, Dawa militants tried to kill Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, and a week later Sadr I was executed.[99] The regime also arrested thousands of suspected Islamists, and tens of thousands of Iraqi Shia were deported on the grounds that they had Iranian nationality.[100] In 1982, Dawa

[95] Rashid Al-Khayyun, *Am min al-Islam al-Siyyasi bi-l-'Iraq–1: al-Shi'a.* (100 Years of Political Islam in Iraq–1: The Shia) (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center, 2011), pp. 297-298.

[96] See Fuast, *The Ba'thification of Iraq*, pp. 159-160.

[97] Roger Shanahan, "Shi'a Political Development in Iraq: The Case of the Islamic Da'wa Party," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2004), doi: 10.1080/0143659042000232045.

[98] Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2008), p. 41.

[99] Cockburn, *Muqtada*, p. 41.

[100] See Blaydes, *State of Repression*, pp. 237-265; Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 30-32; Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Idnetity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 190-191.

militants would try to assassinate the President himself in the town of Dujayl, which led to the regime killing 140 men and boys, a war crime for which Saddam himself would be executed in 2006.[101] For its part, during the war, S.C.I.R.I. organized Iraqi POWs into a military unit called the Badr Corps that fought against Saddam under Iranian supervision.[102]

Over the course of their rule, the most dangerous moment for the Baathists up until the 2003 overthrow was the 1991 Shia uprising in the aftermath of the Gulf War. At the beginning of March of that year, mobs and armed Islamists surrounded and began to seize government buildings, with the state losing control of every major city in the South. In Najaf alone, close to 500 members of the security forces were killed.[103] The response from the government was swift and brutal, with a mass killing campaign that ended the Shia rebellion only about a month after it began.

The second group of Shia Islamists that was able to notably challenge the regime was the Sadrists. Unlike S.C.I.R.I. and Dawa, they were an almost exclusively internal movement without significant support from abroad. It was founded by Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (Sadr II), a cousin of Sadr I, who throughout the 1990s was so conciliatory towards the regime that some think that he was a state agent, although no direct evidence substantiating this argument has been found.[104] Eventually, however, he had a falling out with the state, as Sadr II refused to sufficiently support the government and continued with Friday prayers, despite being warned by regime officials to stop. The cleric and two

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[101] See Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 242-243.
[102] Ibid., p. 44.
[103] Ibid., pp. 46-52.
[104] See Abbas Kadhim, "The Hawza Under Siege: A Study in the Ba'th Party Archive," *IISBU Occasional Paper*, No. 1 (June 2013).

of his sons were assassinated in February 1999.[105] The Iraqi government was blamed,

though again, no proof of this has emerged and the regime pointed the finger at the

Iranians.[106] By the next month, there were attacks on police stations and the houses of

party members in Baghdad (Baath Regional Command Center [hereinafter BRCC] 3757-

0002:0217, 0230).[107] Clashes erupted between Sadrists and the regime, in which

hundreds were killed, and 120 of Sadr II's deputies were arrested, along with 4,000 of his

supporters.[108] One four-day operation alone in late July involved the detention of 2,659

men across the southern provinces.[109] The regime actually lost control over the city of

Nasiriya before retaking it, but had crushed the uprising by the summer of that year.

Although S.C.I.R.I. had its difference with Sadr II before he was killed, they reportedly

participated in the rebellion that followed his death.

While the Sadrist uprising failed, the movement's leader had established himself

as a power center in Iraq before he was killed. Sadr II was able to mobilize a great

number of Shia to take to the streets at a great risk to themselves. His power was such

that he established informal Shari courts in Saddam City, renamed Sadr City after the

invasion, an area that is often referred to as a "suburb" of Baghdad but was actually the

home to over two million people at the time of the 2003 invasion. Sadr II also set up a

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[105] Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 59-61.

[106] At least one scholar regards the idea that the Iranians and S.C.I.R.I. carried out the murders as plausible, since Tehran and its proxies had poor relations with the Sadrists and saw their leader as a rival in the struggle over the leadership of the Iraq Shia. See Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, pp. 272-276.

[107] Ba'ath Regional Command Center [hereinafter BRCC] #3757-0002:0217, 0230, trans. by author, Hoover Institution (Stanford, Calif.).

[108] Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, p. 279; and Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 59-61.

[109] BRCC #3521-002:0346–47,trans. by author, Hoover Institution (Stanford, Calif.).

network of preachers throughout the South during the last years of his life, with some believing that he was laying the ground for a direct confrontation with the regime.[110]

The ever-present threat of a Shia popular uprising was such that Saddam's Iraq could be described as a society that was in a constant state of war up until the 2003 invasion.[111] The regime in later years had imperfect control of the south, with internal government and party documents indicating widespread sabotage and the inability of the state to control it borders or suppress religious contraband. While 1999 saw the last indication of widespread clashes between the regime and Shia Islamist opponents, low-level violence persisted, including coordinated suicide attacks in August 2000 on two party headquarters that were blamed on Iran.[112] As the date of the American invasion approached, the regime even circulated reports warning about the Badr Corps staging an all-out assault on Baghdad.[113]

The picture that emerges, then, is a regime that knew it had lost legitimacy in the south, where the population was hostile and subject to influence by the Iranian state and Shia clerics. The regime was so afraid of being overthrown from within that it was willing to sacrifice its ability to ward off external enemies in order to prevent a popular revolt. According to Woods and his colleagues, "[t]he post-Desert Storm 1991 uprisings as the seminal events in Saddam's rule cannot be overstated."[114] To ensure that no Shia rebellion could succeed, the security services were organized in ways that hurt military effectiveness but made a successful popular overthrow unlikely. Even after the 2003 war

[110] See Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, p. 57-59; and Cockburn, *Muqtada*, pp. 90-93.
[111] Khory, *Iraq in Wartime*, pp. 142-148.
[112] BRCC #028-1-7:0592–93, trans. by author, Hoover Institution (Stanford, Calif.).
[113] BRCC #3175-0000:0546–47, 2850-0002:0664–65, trans. by author, Hoover Institution (Stanford, Calif.).
[114] Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, p. 52.

to overthrow his regime had begun, Saddam refused to destroy bridges in the south of the country, a move that could have slowed down the American advance, on the grounds that doing so would make it difficult for the regime to take back control of the Shia areas of Iraq after the US went home.[115] As Baram points out, even a slight delay in the American advance could have given Saddam and his family more time to plan a better escape; in the end, it may be that "[h]is paranoia cost him his life."[116]

B. *Iraq after Regime Change*

The American led-coalition invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, and was able to overthrow the Baghdad government within three weeks. While the American government squabbled over who the new Iraqi leadership would be or the process through which it would be chosen, actors with roots in the country took action and left the United States with a series of *faits accomplis* across the Shia regions of the country. S.C.I.R.I. sought control in Kut and tribes associated with Dawa would take Nasiriyah.[117] The Sadrists, led by Muqtada al-Sadr (Sadr III), established themselves in Saddam City and renamed it after the founder of their movement within days.[118] In Basra, the second largest city in Iraq, factions associated with the Sadrists or S.C.I.R.I. exercised authority, and the two groups served on rival councils and clashed with one another in the Maysan Province.[119]

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[115] Ibid., pp. 31-32.
[116] Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, p. 218.
[117] See Blaydes, *State of Repression*, pp. 319-320.
[118] "al-Iraq taht al-Ihtilal 'umila al-Deen al-Shi'ah Yamliun al-Faragh al-Siyaasee fee al-Iraq" (Iraq under Occupation, Shiite Clerics Fill the Political Vacuum), *Al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut), April 18, 2003, https://almustaqbal.com/article/6026/; and Juan Cole, "The United States and Shi'ite Religious Factions in Post-Ba'thist Iraq," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Autumn 2003), pp. 543-566.
[119] See Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 91-94; and Rory Stewart, *The Prince of the Marshes: And Other Occupational Hazards of a Year in Iraq* (Orlando, Fla.: Hartcourt, 2006), pp. 119-144.

Islamist organizations were easily able to outmaneuver and pickoff rivals aligned with coalition forces in some areas, while in others they simply filled a vacuum that had been created by the fall of Baghdad.

Scholars debate the ultimate origins of anti-Americanism and theocratic views among the Iraqi Shia. Blaydes argues that it was rooted in Ba'athist repression, as actors gained credibility by taking more extreme positions in the face of persecution by the state.[120] Interestingly, Helfont makes almost the opposite argument, by showing how deeply the Ba'athist regime kept control over religious discourse in Iraq.[121] When Saddam was overthrown, the Shia, like the Sunnis, were prone to expect their leaders to put forth views that were anti-American and Islamist. While these perspectives are not mutually incompatible as both attribute Shia Islamism to Baathist repression, according to Blaydes the Shia were standing up to Saddam through Islam, while Helfont argues that they were taking after him. Both of these views may attribute too much to the last decades before Saddam's removal, as Dawa was already gaining adherents in the 1950s, and Islamism was on the rise throughout the Muslim world from the middle of the second half of the twentieth century onward. Regardless of the perspective that one takes, it is clear that as of 2003 the Shia had political institutions with broad popular support that would be in the best position to take power in the event of a power vacuum or even a transition to democracy.

The case of Ahmad Chalabi demonstrates the discrepancy between American expectations and the reality on the ground. Since the first Gulf War, Chalabi had been the most tireless advocate for overthrowing Saddam Hussein within the United States, and

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[120] See Blaydes, *State of Repression*, pp. 318-324.
[121] See Helfont, *Compulsion in Religion*, pp. 220-225.

perhaps no non-American had done as much as he did to bring the superpower back into Iraq.[122] Some among the neo-conservative faction wanted him to be installed as the interim leader of Iraq, although they often deny it now.[123] Yet, attempts made to train an army to bring with Chalabi into Iraq were failures; when he arrived in his country of birth, the militia protecting him was composed of members of the Badr Corps, the militia loyal to S.C.I.R.I., some members of which only spoke Farsi.[124] The only mass Shia movement that was able to form any kind of resistance to S.C.I.R.I. and its allies, such as Dawa, was the Sadrists. Unfortunately for the occupation, what distinguished the Sadrists most from their more mainstream rivals was their more virulent and uncompromising anti-Americanism. Sadr III's Mahdi Army would clash with coalition forces until he disbanded the militia in 2008.[125]

Islamists were not only vindicated on the ground, but importantly, at the ballot box. In the years to come, the same groups that had been the most effective opposition to Saddam were able to dominate free elections. In 2005, under American supervision Iraq had two national elections to select leaders. The United Iraqi Alliance, which included S.C.I.R.I. and Dawa as its most prominent members and had the tacit support of the Shia religious establishment, won a plurality of the vote both times—48 percent in January and 41 percent in December after the Sadrists had joined their list, or 65 percent and 53

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[122] See Bonin, *Arrows of the Night*; and Aram Roston, *The Man Who Pushed America to War: The Extraordinary Life, Adventures and Obsessions of Ahmad Chalabi* (New York: Nation Books, 2008).
[123] See Bonin, *Arrows of the Night*, pp. 210-212.
[124] Tenet and Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm*, pp. 398-399.
[125] Amatzia Baram, "Religious Extremism and Ecumenical Tendencies in Modern Iraqi Shi'ism," in *The Sunna and Shia in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Modern Middle East*, eds. Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak (New York: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 105-124.

percent of the non-Kurdish vote. Exiles favored by the US-coalition could only advance by relying on the mass followings and the mobilized forces of the Islamist parties. Thus, in the January 2005 elections, Chalabi aligned himself with the United Iraqi Alliance and was therefore in the running for Prime Minister; he had a falling out with his former allies, however, and when he set out on his own in December of that year his party received around one quarter of one percent of the total vote. Ayad Allawi, the second most prominent Iraqi exile in the West in the years before Saddam's overthrow, maintained more contacts within the old regime and did much better, with his Iraq National List winning a plurality of 24.7 percent in the parliamentary elections of 2010. Although this was his strongest showing to date, even here the total for his party was significantly dwarfed by the combined support for Dawa and S.C.I.R.I.

Those two parties would run against one another after 2005 but continue to be the most important forces in Iraqi politics over the next decade, with every elected prime minister belonging to Dawa from the time of the first elections in 2005 to 2018. S.C.I.R.I. and Dawa were finally displaced as the strongest Shia parties in 2018, in which Sadr III has emerged as a kingmaker after the list he supported emerged as the largest faction in that election.[126] In second place was the party of Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization with close ties to Iran. Iraq, of course, still faces threats from Sunni militants; yet, even if the country holds together, it looks like the future will be determined by some sort of compromise between various forms of Shia Islamists.

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[126] Tamer el-Ghobashy and Mustafa Salim, "Protesters May Decide Abadi's Fate," *Washington Post*, August 8, 2018, p. A1.

IV. Knowable at the Time?

Much of what we now know about Saddam's regime comes from documents seized in the aftermath of the U.S. intervention in that country. Thus, American leaders could not have known with certainty the extent to which his government feared a popular Shia rebellion. This is important, as the factions perspective might have made sense in a world in which the U.S. government had no access to information that could tell it anything useful about what the major threats to the Baathist regime were, and had to nonetheless make predictions about the future. Might it therefore be unreasonable to expect that American decision makers could have known what the opposition to Saddam Hussein looked like within Iraq?

In fact, the ideologies of S.C.I.R.I. and Dawa were known in the West years before the invasion, as was the fact that S.C.I.R.I. had an armed presence in Iran. The nature of the Shia opposition to the government could have been learned from open source materials in English and Arabic. The 1999 killing of Sadr II and the turmoil it caused was reported on in the American press. The *Washington Post*, for example, noted riots in Najaf and Baghdad and found that it was "not hard to come by tapes of Sadr's sermons" criticizing the government despite official prohibitions.[127] Furthermore, checkpoints were ubiquitous in Southern Iraq and government officials were afraid to travel in some cities after dark. When Uday Hussein was injured in a 1996 assassination attempt, Dawa claimed responsibility and Iraq even called on the UN to pressure Iran to

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[127] Daniel Williams, "Cleric's Killing Arouses Shittes Iraqi Officials Nervous about Turmoil in the South," *Washington Post*, March 16, 1999, p. A13.

hand over those involved.[128] Human rights organizations and the UN reported on the

regime's regular killing of Shia clerics throughout the 1990s, and even widespread

military operations against tribal and Islamist forces in the south.[129]

Chalabi had actually brought S.C.I.R.I. into the Iraqi National Congress (I.N.C.),

the coalition of parties opposing Saddam that were supported by the United States in the

years after the first Gulf War. In January 2003, however, Zalmay Khalilzad was the US

envoy to the opposition, and perhaps realizing that S.C.I.R.I. would be the strongest force

on the ground, he sought to dilute its influence in the council that was expected to

become the provisional government of Iraq.[130] The American government also apparently

relied on S.C.I.R.I. for its most useful intelligence on the regime in the year immediately

preceding the war.[131] By that point, however, it was too late to significantly change war

plans based on the nature of the opposition to Saddam, and close contacts with Iraqi

Islamists did not make their way up the chain of command to significantly influence

beliefs about the aftermath of the invasion. S.C.I.R.I. did not hide its affinity to the

Iranian regime, with its leaders appearing in public events with representatives of

Ayatollah Khameini and other leading government figures.[132]

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[128] "Iraqis Call for United Nations Help in Attach on Saddam's Son," *Associated Press*, January 7, 1997.
[129] "Iraq Report: February 26, 1999," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (February 26, 1999), https://www.rferl.org/a/1343287.html; and UN Economic and Social Council, Decision 229, Situation of Human Rights in Iraq, E/DEC/229 (July 27, 1999), p. 161, http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/docs/1999/e1999-inf2-add2.pdf,
[130] See Khalizad, *The Envoy*, chap. 6.
[131] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, ch. 19. Woodward does not mention S.C.I.R.I by name, but his description of the group that was of most use to the intelligence community makes clear that the American government was dealing with the al-Hakim family.
[132] See John Lee Anderson, "Dreaming of Baghdad," *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2018, pp. 58-69; and "Ihtifal Taabini fee Thikra Shuhidah al-Hakim." (A

For its part, Dawa in the years before the war tried to maintain some independence from Iran, which led to some members of the American government to believe it could be a constructive partner for the United States in postwar Iraq.[133] Yet it still called for an Islamist state, albeit one infused with technocratic expertise.[134] Right up to the years preceding the Iraq War, its newspaper vehemently denounced Israel and praised the Islamic Revolution in Iran.[135] After he was killed, it would commemorate the memory of Sadr II, the Shia leader who hated the US and Israel and who had frictions with Saddam's regime over the belief that it was not religious enough.[136] Unlike S.C.I.R.I., which was willing to work with the Americans in order to gain power, and perhaps having a harder time making amends given its terrorist attacks on American interests in the 1980s, Dawa pulled out of the I.N.C. in 1995 and remained hostile to American intervention despite what it stood to gain as a result.[137]

Commemorative Celebration in Memory of the Martyrs of the al-Hakim Family), *Liwa al-Sadr,* October 31, 2001.

[133] See Feith, *War and Decision*, p. 201.

[134] Salah Al-Kharsan, *Hizb al-Da'awa al-Islamiyya: Haqaiq wa Wathaiq* (The Dawa Party: Facts and Documents) (Damascus: Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa l-Buhuth al-Istratijiyya [The Arab Institute for Strategic Studies and Research], 1999), pp. 407-424; and Shanahan, "Shi'a Political Development in Iraq."

[135] "Al-Thawrah al-Islamiyah fii Iran…Tajaddad Daim" (The Islamic Revolution in Iran…Perpetually Renewing Itself), *Sawt al-Iraq*, February 20, 2001, p. 3; and "Al-Istratijiyah al-Amrikiyah al-Jadiidah bi-Shan al-Iraq Tatadaa'eh" (The New American Strategy with Regards to Iraq is Faltering), *Sawt al-Iraq*, July 9, 2001, p. 4.

[136] "Ightiaal Sha'b…Disrasah fee Jarimat Ightiaal al-Majra' al-Sadr." (The Assassination of the People…A Study in the Crime of Assassination of the Marja' al-Sadr), *Sawt al-Iraq*, February 20, 2001, p. 6.

[137] Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, pp. 53, 69, 100-101; and Christopher Dickey, "Friends or Foes," *Newsweek,* December 22, 2002, https://www.newsweek.com/friends-or-foes-141171.

Few outside observers knew much about the Sadrists, and there was likely no way to know that Sadr II's son would emerge as a political force in his own right.[138] Yet the history of the Sadrists in the country could have given the United States an idea about the nature of public opinion in Iraq: if there was going to be a less pro-Iranian rival to S.C.I.R.I. and Dawa within the Shia community, it was likely to be someone no less anti-American or Islamist. Like his father before him, after his emergence as a leader Sadr III would denounce the "doomed trinity" of the U.S., Great Britain, and Israel.[139] The indigenous Iraqi opponent of the American intervention might not have been named Sadr, but the emergence of such a figure was likely given the recent history of Iraq.

Such is the picture of Iraq that was available from open source material. This view was reinforced by Gulf Arab states, who repeatedly warned American leaders that a democratic Iraq would empower Shia extremists and serve the interests of Iran.[140] If intelligence resources had been devoted to finding out more about the Shia opposition to Saddam within Iraq, the U.S. could certainly have known more, about not only Dawa and S.C.I.R.I., but also anyone else who might have had a following in that country. Nixon, the CIA analyst, reports that his superiors provided no encouragement when he suggested looking into the Sadrists in 1999, as "[o]ur collection of information was so focused on Saddam and his inner circle that any mention of topics that touched only tangentially on the regime were deemed a poor use of resources."[141]

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[138] Al-Khayyun, *Am min al-Islam al-Siyyasi bi-l-'Iraq–1: al-Shi'a*. (100 Years of Political Islam in Iraq–1: The Shia), p. 353.
[139] Baram, "Religious Extremism and Ecumenical Tendencies," p. 117.
[140] Feith, *War and Decision*, p. 201.
[141] Nixon, *Debriefing the President*, pp. 38-40

Thus, elements of the American government certainly knew of SC.I.R.I. and Dawa and their ideologies, although few considered the Sadrists a compelling force. War supporters, however, did not expect these Islamists to be any more likely to be able to take and maintain power than Ahmad Chalabi and other secular exiles, especially if the latter had American help. Opponents, while they were pessimistic about what the postwar would be like, left open the possibility that the Shia as a community could be won over depending on American policy, expecting new leaders to spontaneously emerge from within the country. In fact, what the U.S. desired for Iraq was largely irreconcilable with what the Islamists wanted, and there was always little chance that S.C.I.R.I., Dawa, and others like them would not be the main forces shaping the future of Iraq. It was important to not only understand the nature of the main opposition to Saddam's regime, but also to give that information the priority it deserved as the best predictor of who would come to power after his overthrow.

Conclusion

The United States choosing to overthrow Saddam Hussein is seen as a monumental decision that altered the course of the history of the Middle East. It indeed was, costing the country over four thousand lives and financial costs that by some accounts run into the trillions.[142] It also led to the deaths of an untold number of Iraqis, and the target of the invasion has been engaged in what can be described as one long civil war since Saddam was removed from power. For good or for ill, the war in Iraq served as a catalyst for the Arab Spring that would emerge less than a decade after the invasion.

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[142] Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Blimes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

Yet, despite the chaos that has engulfed the country, less noticed has been the continuity. An observer of Iraqi politics in the 1970s and '80s who was transported to a time after 2003 would recognize the same parties and surnames that had been the alternatives to Saddam in an earlier era: S.C.I.R.I., Dawa, al-Sadr, and al-Hakim. If not told that there had been an American invasion and occupation, this observer may well conclude that, as Saddam has always feared, the Baathist regime was deposed by a popular Shia uprising. From this perspective, what was a historic American decision that caused a radical break from the past can also be described as another chapter in an inter-Iraqi dispute that had been going on since the middle of the twentieth century.

While much research has gone into how the United States got the question of WMDs wrong, scholars should spend more time investigating the kinds of intelligence failures that are less obvious but no less important. In broad terms, the way to get better answers to questions one has already asked are relatively obvious, and depends mainly on improving sources and methods of analysis, including steps taken to mitigate cognitive biases. Political scientists have more to contribute, however, to solving the kind of intelligence failure that results when one frames a question in a less than useful way.

American leaders failed to predict the nature of postwar Iraq because they asked the question of what the Iraqi people wanted or focused on ethno-religious sects in a largely apolitical manner. Because the nature of the Iraqi opposition to Saddam was rarely investigated, war supporters found it easy to make optimistic assumptions. War opponents seem to have made better predictions, as, "it was pretty much a consensus within the intelligence community that the exiles–and Chalabi and his group in particular–did not have sufficient support to be the basis for some post-Saddam

regime."[143] Yet, while the critics were correct about the difficulties involved in occupying postwar Iraq, they neglected what may have been their best argument: the groups that an invasion was likely to empower were antagonistic to American interests.

More research is needed to address the degree to which the failures in Iraq are generalizable across other American interventions. In the post-9/11 era, the United States has overthrown the governments of two other Muslim states—Libya and Afghanistan—in hopes of midwifing new democracies. Instead, we have seen civil wars with no end in sight. The war in Afghanistan is now the longest engagement in U.S. history, and according to U.S. military estimates, as of early 2018, the central government in Kabul only had full control of 14 percent of districts, a substantial drop from only a few years earlier.[144]

Failures this consistent, over the span of what have now been three administrations and close to two decades, call for deep theoretical explanations. American administrations have ignored the extent to which dictators no less than democrats must deal with internal politics. Knowing about threats to a regime can form the basis of predictions about the postwar aftermath after regime change, particularly if the U.S. insists on a democracy and is only willing to use force to make sure that the right process is followed, but not to determine who will actually gain power. Understanding the challenges that a dictators faces can help make predictions about who future leaders will be, and while such a methodology would not produce absolutely certain predictions,

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[143] Pillar, interview.

[144] Nick Paton Walsh, "Taliban Control of Afghanistan on the Rise, US Data Reveals," *CNN*, January 30, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/30/asia/afghanistan-taliban-us-control-intl/index.html.

it is superior to wishful thinking, simply guessing based on general principles of group relations, or relying on the promises of self-interested exiles.

As the United States continues to intervene in Middle Eastern conflicts, it is essential that we fully comprehend the mistakes of the recent past. Practically, the lessons of Iraq call for more reliance on area expertise, less reliance on those who have a vested interest in intervention, and greater engagement with groups and institutions that may not share American values. If a better understanding of the political and social realities of foreign societies does not always counsel against intervention, it can at the very least contribute to the creation of pragmatic and achievable goals in terms of postwar planning.