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Title: Review of Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2023)

Keywords: George W. Bush; Iraq War; Melvyn Leffler

Abstract: This review engages with Melvyn Leffler's new book on the origins of the (second) Iraq war. It focusses particularly upon his argument that the Bush administration, and especially the president himself, genuinely regarded Iraq as a serious threat and initiated the war in 2003 for understandable reasons of national security. The review acknowledges that Leffler makes a strong case that Bush himself was motivated by such concerns, but goes on to argue that Leffler underplays the role of White House officials and beltway journalists and lobbyists who seemed clearly to have other motivations.

By Campbell Craig, Cardiff University craigc2@cardiff.ac.uk

Melvyn Leffler states that his objective in *Confronting Saddam Hussein* is to 'correct some widely held misperceptions' about the reasons why the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Oddly, he does not specifically identify what these misperceptions are, but it is fairly clear that what he means is that the common view that the war occurred because 'an inattentive chief executive' was 'easily manipulated by neoconservative advisers' is incorrect; instead, the United States decided to wage its disastrous war against Iraq because president George W. Bush concluded in 2002 and 2003 that Iraq, led by its brutal dictator Saddam Hussein, possibly possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and could conceivably use them against regional foes or, more ominous, transfer them to terrorist groups who could use them on US targets. In the aftermath of 11 September, the risk of an Iraqi-sponsored attack was too grave to ignore. Added to this was Bush's own antipathy towards Hussein himself and his tyrannical regime, a view shared by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Bush, in tandem with Blair, used the threat of war in late 2002 and early 2003 to compel Iraq to get rid of any WMD it might possess and to open its borders up to UN inspectors to verify this disarmament. Hussein agreed to this demand, but his belligerent rhetoric and uncertainty over whether the inspectors had indeed spotted everything led the US and the UK to decide for war in March 2003, despite opposition from major allies and other important powers, as well as significant dissent from some top government officials in both countries. As we all know, the invading forces found no WMD, and the toppling of Hussein's government unleashed chaos throughout Iraq and the region, a problem that continues to this day. Thousands of US and UK soldiers were killed or grievously wounded, as were hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. The war has cost the United States hundreds of billions of dollars and counting. It is today almost universally regarded as a total disaster, perhaps the biggest blunder in the history of American foreign policy.

Why do so many people continue to have misperceptions about the causes of this decision? Again, Leffler does not address this question directly, but the answer is obvious. We now know that senior White House officials exaggerated or fabricated evidence about Iraq's possession of WMD, as well as its supposed ties to al-Qaeda. We also know that think tanks, lobby groups, and media organisations hyped the case for war in 2002 and early 2003. When powerful people try hard to sell a war, and their arguments are shown to be false, and the war goes disastrously, it is natural to become cynical about their motivations. Leffler does not deny that all of this happened. What he does is to develop a strong and in places convincing case that such cynicism, however tempting, is in this case misplaced. The Bush administration, and in particular Bush himself, genuinely worried about the

threat of Iraq and was not bent upon war. He was well-intentioned, motivated fundamentally by security concerns, and faced understandable dilemmas that would have led any American regime to ponder and perhaps commit to war. Anyone, in his shoes, might have made the same decision.

The book is based on careful primary research and extensive interviews – though, as Leffler openly acknowledges, an historical account that relies on early and incomplete documentation and interviews with policy-makers who will have reason to exonerate themselves must be regarded as provisional.¹ The writing is clear and the argumentation is coherent throughout, as one would expect from anything Leffler writes. He stresses, reasonably, that in attributing blame for the fiasco we must focus on those in the White House who actually made the decisions, rather than on shady war-mongers operating from the outside.

In the rest of this review, I will push back against Leffler's claim that suspicions about the causes of the war are misperceptions. This review is solely concerned with the decision to attack, and so does not engage with the biographical chapters on Bush and Hussein at the beginning of the book and a later chapter on the progress of the war after that decision.

We now know, as Leffler acknowledges, that key actors within the administration repeatedly and deliberately issued misleading and/or unsubstantiated claims about Iraq in the run-up to the 2003 invasion.² Several administration officials insinuated that the Hussein regime had ties to the 9/11 terrorists, or even might have been involved in the attack, even though they had received intelligence reports stating unambiguously that Iraq had no connection to the attack at all, and was unlikely to have any ties with a fundamentalist Islamic organisation whose goal was to eliminate secular governments in the Arab world like Hussein's.

Moreover, leading figures in the White House publicly claimed, over and over, that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction when – again – intelligence reports denied that this was likely, and when no clear evidence of such weaponry existed. They amplified debatable or clearly bogus information indicating that Iraq might have WMD, such as its acquisition of aluminium tubes, which, intelligence reports insisted, could not be used for WMD, or its supposed purchase of 'yellowcake' uranium from Niger, which, it later emerged, did not happen at all. Equally, administration officials suppressed reports casting doubt about Iraqi WMD, 'stovepiping' the intelligence process so that only evidence that supported the case for war reached the top.³ When UN inspectors returned to Iraq in 2003, advocates for war in the White House belittled their findings that Iraq had stopped all WMD production. Richard Perle, chairman of the Pentagon's Defence Policy Board, compared UN inspectors to the Red Cross ignoring atrocities in Nazi Germany, which of course made the argument for war unfalsifiable: either the inspectors found weapons, or they were covering them up like the Red Cross. You cannot lose.

The US government's duplicity about Iraq's connection to al-Qaeda and its WMD programme obviously raises doubt about whether we can characterise it as having nothing but good intentions about the case for war. Leffler contends with this suspicion by zeroing in on Bush, who was after all the person who made the ultimate decision for war. Officials might well have exaggerated or fabricated evidence about the Hussein regime, but the president could not rule out the possibility

¹ Leffler, p. xiv.

² Ibid., p. 183.

³ On this see Chaim Kaufmann, 'Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,' *International Security* 29 (Summer, 2004).

that Iraq had WMD, could use it against regional adversaries or deliver it to terrorists, and therefore decided that the risks of war was worth it. As long as that remained a possibility, and no one could argue in 2003 that it was impossible, Bush had to make the tough decision.

I think that this conclusion diminishes the importance of the exaggerations and lies issued by senior people in the American government in 2002 and 2003. Yes, Bush made the final call, but he was operating in a political environment in which experienced and respected officials all around him were implying, or outright insisting, that Saddam Hussein posed a clear and present danger to the United States, and doing so soon after the 9/11 attacks. Added to this was a constant flow of visits to the White House by hawkish intellectuals, like Victor Hanson and Eliot Cohen, who stressed the importance of conveying a muscular, even brutal image to the rest of the world.⁴ That put a lot of pressure on the new President, who had no previous experience in foreign policy and could surely recognise that a decision to forego war would meet with a wave of accusations of weakness and naivete. Were another act of terrorism to occur, whether perpetrated by Iraq or not, Bush would have faced a political firestorm. It beggars belief to imagine that some of the officials hyping the case for war were not aware of this fact.

Leffler, in this book and also in his numerous works on US foreign policy during the Cold War, does not acknowledge the importance of this kind of political pressure in beltway Washington. He adopts a kind of depoliticised, 'rational-choice' position that leaders, or at least American leaders, act strategically and pursue policies of national security as best as they can. Indeed, in the final paragraph of the book Leffler argues

Tragedy occurs not because leaders are ill-intentioned, stupid, and corrupt; tragedy occurs when earnest people and responsible officials seek to do the right thing, and end up making things much worse (p. 252).

This passage is written as a general claim. It comes at the very end of a book where those of us who have written them tend to make our most important closing arguments. If I read it correctly, Leffler appears to be ruling out the possibility that policies that end up making things much worse, or at least American policies that do so, might have been the result of something inherently dysfunctional or malign in the decision-making process; they had, by definition, to have resulted from imprudent but understandable mistakes made by people who were seeking to do the right thing. It rules out, in other words, the possibility that at least some people responsible for a tragedy might have had bad intentions. By developing a persuasive case that the Iraq war was a tragedy because Bush himself meant well, Leffler may be absolving others who did not.

A second overarching argument in the book is that the incessant drumbeat for war taking place outside of the White House, coming from think tanks, lobby groups, newspapers, and magazines, was not decisive in pushing the US into Iraq. That there was a wave of war-mongering in 2002 and 2003 is not a debatable point. The Project for a New American Century (PNAC) had been calling for war with Iraq since the late 1990s; many of its board members served in the Bush administration, including vice-president Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, and the influential Deputy Defence secretary Paul Wolfowitz. Soon after the 11 September attacks the organisation declared that a failure to go after Iraq would 'constitute an early and perhaps decisive surrender in

⁴ I am grateful to Patrick Porter for pointing this out.

the war on international terrorism.⁵ Right-wing pro-Israel groups like the Foundation for the Defence of Democracy (FDD) and the America-Israel Public Action Committee (AIPAC) called for action repeatedly in the months leading to the war; indeed, in a statement he'd probably like to have back, AIPAC's president Howard Kohr told the *New York Sun* in early 2003 that lobbying for war was one of his group's main achievements in 2002.⁶ Prominent beltway intellectuals wrote books calling for war; atop the long list of these was Kenneth Pollack's *The Threatening Storm*. Liberal newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* featured reporting on their front pages throughout 2002 and 2003 that repeated the dubious WMD claims coming from the White House, while downplaying or ignoring contrary evidence; one journalist, the *Times*' Judith Miller, was later found by the newspaper to have so uncritically reported such claims that she lost her job. Neoconservative journals like the *Weekly Standard* and *The New Republic* demanded action on a weekly basis. One could go on.

Nothing like this happened in the short period of time before the US invaded Afghanistan in order to go after al-Qaeda. Perhaps more to the point, nothing like this happened in the months before the US decided to commit ground forces to Vietnam in 1965. The wave of pro-war advocacy that took place in the year or so before the invasion was really something to behold.

Leffler does not discuss this at any length in his book. PNAC does not appear in the index; nor does Judith Miller, nor the *Weekly Standard*. This is presumably because, as already mentioned, he sticks by his argument that, whatever newspapers and lobby groups were doing, the White House, and in particular Bush himself, had come to the conclusion that going to war was in US security interests. This conclusion, as we have seen, may have resulted from the fact that many government officials inflated the case for war and suppressed arguments that weighed against it. But that does not mean that Leffler is wrong.

I would suggest, in fact, that on this specific point Leffler is probably right. The drumbeat coming from outside the White House probably was not decisive in explaining why the president chose war. However, that does not mean it was unimportant.

It is crucial to remember that in 2002 and early 2003 protestors marched against the prospective war in the US and around the world (I was one of them). With the lone exception of Tony Blair's Britain, major allies in Europe and Asia openly opposed the US, and would end up refusing to support the American request for UN approval of its impending decision.⁷ Senators such as the late Paul Wellstone (a former professor of mine) and the junior Senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, vocally opposed the war; Obama denounced 'weekend warriors' trying to 'shove their ideological agendas down our throats.'⁸ Scholars and satirists alike predicted that the war would end badly.⁹

⁵ Though PNAC dissolved long ago, this letter remains on the archive.org website. See [Letter to President Bush on the War on Terrorism \(archive.org\)](https://www.archive.org/details/letter-to-president-bush-on-the-war-on-terrorism/letter-to-president-bush-on-the-war-on-terrorism.pdf)

⁶ See Matthew Yglesias, 'AIPAC and Iraq,' *The Atlantic*, 3 October 2007, and Tony Judt, 'Bush's Useful Idiots,' *London Review of Books*, 21 September 2006. As Eli Clifton has discovered, using the archive.org website, both the FDD and AIPAC have erased evidence of their war cheerleading from their websites. See [AIPAC, FDD websites erase all evidence of their Iraq War cheerleading - Responsible Statecraft](https://www.archive.org/details/aipac-fdd-websites-erase-all-evidence-of-their-iraq-war-cheerleading-responsible-statecraft/aipac-fdd-websites-erase-all-evidence-of-their-iraq-war-cheerleading-responsible-statecraft.pdf).

⁷ On Blair's fateful decision to side with the US, see Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2018). This book, widely seen as the definitive study of the British role, is not cited by Leffler.

⁸ See the NPR's transcript of Obama's 2 October 2002 speech at [Transcript: Obama's Speech Against The Iraq War : NPR](https://www.npr.org/2002/10/02/111111111)

⁹ See the famous *New York Times* advertisement, signed (and paid for) by leading American IR scholars: 'War in Iraq is Not in America's National Interest,' 26 September 2002; and also the debate in *The Onion*: 'This War

There was a possibility, in other words, that the Democratic party, perhaps in tandem with a few anti-war Republicans, might have prevented Bush from getting congressional approval for the war – or at the least, made the vote close. A serious fight on Capitol Hill would have undermined administration claims that the war was broadly supported by the American public, and it could have encouraged foreign allies to redouble their efforts to stop the Americans from driving off the cliff.

Why didn't that happen? Leffler notes that 28 Democratic senators and 81 congresspeople ended up joining Republicans to authorise the invasion, and that in March 2003 a majority of Americans believed that the war would stabilise the Middle East and improve the lives of Iraqis, but this only begs the question. Why did Democratic lawmakers support a Republican war, and the American people buy its justifications, when, in the rest of the world, hardly anyone did so?¹⁰ Could it have been because, unlike in other countries, the American people and their elected officials were being fed a constant barrage of pro-war misinformation?

Twenty years later, and we are now into the third decade of America's 'forever wars.' The annual military budget now approaches \$1 trillion, a development opposed by very few people in congress from either party. American forces are fighting in several nations, none of which pose any imminent threat to the United States. Republicans are, as I write, clamouring for a war on Mexico. This is a phenomenon that, like the origins of the Iraq War, demands explanation.

I would argue that the decision to invade in 2003, and the incessant growth of American militarisation since then, has the same cause. High military spending and alarmism about dangers overseas serves the interests of powerful political and economic actors in the United States, whilst there are few political or economic incentives to call for lower spending or question threat inflation. This process, as Fredrik Logevall and I have argued, began during the Cold War, but it was at times constrained by the actual security interest of contending with the Soviet Union.¹¹ After the Cold War, the scope for politicising US foreign affairs became almost infinite, and these actors gravitated toward policies that maximised military spending and global expansion, a process that was gradual in the 1990s but exploded after 11 September.¹² In other words, there is a political establishment in Washington – call it Eisenhower's 'military-industrial complex,' or Ben Rhodes's 'blob' – that both perpetuates an activist and expensive foreign policy and benefits from it.

Obviously, it is difficult to prove this with the sort of conventional historical methods Leffler uses. It is unlikely (though not out of the question) that we will find much archival evidence of administration officials or newspaper editors acknowledging that they were pushing for war for their own purposes; even less likely is the possibility of them saying so in an interview.

I am aware that once one goes down this path, of downplaying official documentation in favour of inference and circumstantial evidence, almost any historical interpretation goes. Leffler has rightly and repeatedly insisted upon sticking to the record in his long career as one of America's best

Will Destabilize the Entire Mideast Region and Trigger a Shockwave of Anti-Americanism' vs 'No it Won't,' 26 March 2003.

¹⁰ See Steven Kull, Clay Ramsey, and Evan Lewis, 'Misperceptions, Media, and the Iraq War,' *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (Winter 2003/04).

¹¹ Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* 2nd ed. (Harvard University Press, 2020).

¹² On this point see Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

historians, and has effectively attacked schools of Cold War history for relying more upon ideological prisms than old-fashioned archival research.¹³ I respect and understand this position.

Yet on the case of Iraq, something has happened over the past twenty years that surely lends credence to a more sceptical view of the origins of the Iraq War. This is the fact that no one – no one – has faced any professional consequences for their initiation of, or propagandising for, such a disastrous war.¹⁴ We know that White House officials made dishonest claims and suppressed information showing that there was little evidence that Iraq had WMD: who among them has paid any price for this? We know that lobbyists, journalists, scholars, and defence intellectuals exaggerated the threat from Iraq: they remain employed, often in top positions, by their newspapers, universities, and think tanks, and continue to appear as experts on talk shows and at foreign policy summits. Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, two of the most influential Democratic supporters of the war, were their party's nominees for president in 2016 and 2020. Yes, Judith Miller was sacked from *The New York Times* for her dishonest journalism. Today, she is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Someone transported through time from the launch of the war to today and observing the careers of its major architects and cheerleaders would think that the war had gone swimmingly.

I find this complete lack of accountability for a disastrous war incompatible with the well-meaning policy-making environment in Washington that Leffler depicts, in his historical account of Bush's decision. It is perfectly compatible with a more cynical view of the causes of Bush's decision to confront Saddam Hussein, and all of the wars fought and trillions of dollars spent since.

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¹³ See in particular his trenchant essay, 'New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Configurations,' in Michael Hogan, ed., *America in the World: the Historiography of US Foreign Relations since 1941* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ For a full discussion, see Walt, chapter five.

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