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Zimmerman

Anatomy of Self Deception:

Judgment, Belief and the US Decision to Invade Iraq

“We know ... (that Saddam) is currently doing things... namely developing WMD... Within a few years the US will undoubtedly have to confront a Saddam armed with nuclear weapons.”

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

July 27, 2001¹

“I believe the assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt that Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons, that he continues his efforts to develop nuclear weapons, and that he has been able to extend the range of his ballistic missile programme. I also believe that Saddam will now do his utmost to try to conceal his weapons from UN inspectors.”

Prime Minister Tony Blair

September 2002²

“Most brazenly of all, the Iraqi declaration denies the existence of any prohibited weapons programs at all.... We are disappointed but not deceived.”

Secretary of State Colin Powell

December 19, 2002

“First of all, I expected to find weapons...”

President George W Bush

February 4, 2004

On March 19, 2003, the US and its allies invaded Iraq.

There launched one of the longest and costliest wars in American history.

¹ Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld Top Secret memo to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Vice President Richard Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell, July 27,2001. Reproduced in Douglas Feith, War and Decision , Harper, New York , 2008, pp 535-538

² The Prime Minister, The Right Honourable Tony Blair MP, Foreward , Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction :The Assessment of the British Government, UK Joint Intelligence Committee, September 2002

Two days earlier, President George W Bush, addressed the nation and the world, explaining why the invasion was necessary:

” Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised. ...The danger is clear: using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons, obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country, or any other.”³

The President was crystal clear about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi regime. Iraq possessed stocks of chemical and biological weapons (BW). Iraq had used chemical weapons (CW) in the past, retained hundreds of tons of such weapons and had restarted its chemical weapons production programs. Iraq had an active biological weapons program, which now included hard-to-detect mobile weapons laboratories. And, perhaps most threatening of all, Iraq had reconstituted its nuclear program, and was developing the capacity to enrich uranium and soon thereafter to build nuclear bombs.

President Bush and other top US officials had repeated this assessment frequently in the months leading up to war. Perhaps the most persuasive presentation was given by Secretary of State Colin Powell at the United Nations on February 5, 2003. Powell provided extensive detail to support his case, including photographs of suspect facilities and incriminating transcripts of intercepted Iraqi communications. Many found Powell persuasive.⁴ What’s more, Powell was believed to hold reservations about going to war in Iraq⁵, which only enhanced the credibility of his presentation. If Secretary Powell believed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD), then it must be true.

Belief in Iraq’s WMD capability coupled with presumed links to terrorist groups made the war necessary. Action was imperative. The looming threat to the US, her interests and the region could not be denied.

President Bush believed these assessments, as did the Vice President, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and many top members of his administration⁶. So too did British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other allies. Even chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix, who hoped that progress in renewed inspections would forestall war, has written that,

³ President George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, *President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq Within 48 Hours*, March, 17, 2003, Office of the White House Press Secretary, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030317-7.html>

⁴ See for example, Colbert King, *Powell’s Mastery*, Washington Post, February 8, 2003, Jennifer Barrett, *Powell Made His Case*, Newsweek, February 8, 2003, (editorial) *Colin Powell’s Course*, Boston Globe, February 6, 2003, for a foreign reaction, calling Powell’s presentation “convincing”, see (editorial) *Powell’s UN Address*, Jakarta Post, February 7, 2003. Polls showed a perceptible upward bump in support for action against Iraq in the days after Powell’s speech.

⁵ Some called for Powell to resign to express his opposition, see for example, Richard S Dunham, *Why Colin Powell Should Bow Out*, Business Week (on line), September 9, 2002. Two senior State Department Foreign Service officers resigned in protest in advance of the war and others called on Powell to step down.

⁶ Feith, op cit., Feith who served Bush as Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, writes that no one in the top ranks of the administration questioned the belief that Iraq had WMD, p. 15.

privately, he believed that Iraq must have had some prohibited weapons.⁷ As a long time colleague observed: “everybody believed that Saddam had WMD”⁸

But, “these assessments were all wrong”⁹

After extensive search of sites, buildings, hundreds of thousands of pages of written records, and interrogation of thousands of Iraqis, the US reluctantly concluded that Saddam Hussein had not reconstituted his nuclear program, and, further that there was:

“no evidence of BW agent stockpiles or mobile biological weapon production facilities; and no substantial chemical warfare stockpiles or credible indications that Baghdad has resumed production of CW after 1991.”¹⁰

As implausible as it would have seemed to many in 2003, Iraq had not retained its weapons from the past nor undertaken initiatives to develop WMD after 1991.

Whatever the aspirations and intentions in the dark mind of Saddam Hussein, the hard fact was that, in the dozen years after the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq had grudgingly (at times clandestinely) destroyed its weapons stocks from the past, terminated programs, dismantled facilities, destroyed equipment and had done nothing to develop new weapons of mass destruction.

Neither the US nor its allies had evidence of Iraqi WMD- there was none to be had.

Iraq’s economy was prostrate and her military depleted.

Iraq was not a threat in 2003.

We were indeed deceived.

We largely deceived ourselves.

This paper addresses the question of why and how the US made the decision to invade Iraq. I offer a plausible explanation of how the President and other leaders of the American government came to decide that the US had to take action to prevent¹¹ Iraq, with its WMD programs and terrorist links, from becoming an active threat to peace and security in the region and the world.

⁷ Hans Blix Disarming Iraq, Pantheon, New York, 2004, p 194 Blix held ample doubts about the claims of US and allied intelligence; almost none of their leads had proven out; still, he could not explain instances of Iraq’s evasive behavior as motivated by any reason other than the desire to conceal prohibited items.

⁸ All of the top US officials expressed surprise that Iraq did not have stocks or active programs to produce WMD. Some, such as Rumsfeld, were initially skeptical of the conclusion- perhaps Saddam’s troops had buried weapons in the desert or smuggled them out of the country. Others, such as Powell expressed remorse and anger; as he believed that he had been misled by top intelligence officials.

⁹ Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction: Report to the President of the United States, March 31, 2005, Superintendent of Documents, US GPO, Washington, DC, p. 45

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Frequently confused with the concept of preemptive war by writers, commentators and some public officials in this period. In limited circumstances, international law recognizes the right of states who deem themselves under *imminent* threat of attack, to strike preemptively at an adversary. US action was not preemptive, but was aimed at preventing Iraq becoming a threat to security. Abraham D. Sofaer. *On the Necessity of Pre-emption*. European Journal of International Law, Vol. 14 No. 2, 2003

It is a *plausible* explanation. One cannot explain historical events with the confidence and certainty of the scientific laboratory. We can't specify the variables and conditions, repeat the experiment multiple times and generate statistical evidence that supports the proposed conclusion. In this instance, we are not even able to specify the time and conditions under which the decision was made. We cannot know with certainty whose judgment was affected in which ways by which factors in which time period. Even first hand- but retrospective- accounts from key participants (some we have, others are emerging) are subject to predictable sources of error that limit their probative weight¹². Graham Allison's masterful study of the Cuban Missile Crisis draws its title (*Essence of Decision*) from John F Kennedy's observation, "The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer-often indeed to the decider..." Uncertainty abounds in interpreting qualitative data gathered by diverse contributors at one or more remove from key actors and events, in specifying contributing factors, their magnitude and direction of effect, in attempts to disentangle multiple factors, each fallible and incomplete, and in estimating their interaction and extent of causality¹³.

The best one can do is compare one's hypothesized explanation against the data (such as it is), check for consistency, introduce theories and research that can help explain key judgments and decisions, consider competing explanations and engage in thought experiments, "what if...?" to test plausibility, all of which follows, along with a more detailed explanation of the decision to go to war that attempts to tie together the research and theories with the chronicle of key judgments and events, concluding with some tentative implications for decision- makers.

¹² Schacter and Scarry, eds., *Memory, Brain and Belief*, Harvard, Cambridge, 2000, see esp. Ross and Wilson, *Constructing and Appraising Past Selves*, Eakin, *Autobiography and the Fictions of Memory*, and Bok, *Autobiography as Moral Battleground*. Also Kenneth Hammond, *Beyond Rationality: The Search for Wisdom in a Troubled Time*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007 pp 3-54 At this writing George W Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld have promised books in 2010 or 2011

¹³ Hammond, *ibid*