

Deconstructing the Causes of the Iraq War

Written by Lucas Van Milders

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LUCAS VAN MILDERS, APR 14 2012

By the end of this year the last U.S. troops will, as President Barack Obama promised, leave Iraq, a country they invaded nearly a decade ago.[1] Although this marks the ending of one of the first wars of the 21st century, to date its origins have been and continue to be widely debated and contested. Rather than discourage any effort to address the issue of the causes of war, this may stress the importance of such an effort even more. In the past, attempts to broach the causes of war have rarely led to clear-cut answers. Even so, they mostly brought us to a better understanding.

Why did the United States decide to go to war in Iraq on March 20th, 2003? In this essay I will above all treat the question itself. Following Hidemi Suganami, looking at this question from a philosophical perspective will allow us to address the issue more thoroughly. He rightfully proposes a narrative lection of causation: if we want to know what caused a war, we have to construct a narrative that explained what happened and so properly establish a connection between cause and effect.

In looking at the war advocating argument, we are confronted with a narrative that sees democracy as an ideal system that inherently justifies its spread. When scrutinising this reasoning, explained by political theorists and actors such as Paul Wolfowitz and Francis Fukuyama, we see how this *End of History* argument directly traces us back to typical modern philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Does this imply that the War in Iraq therefore is related to Western modernity?

Viewing this question from a Derridaean angle, we are presented with a different perspective that stresses the fundamental ambiguity of notions such as modernity, Western and democracy. In looking at the attacks of September 11th 2001 and their perception as a causal condition for the Iraq War, this essay will argue that we are confronted with a challenge of our linear conception of time that displaces the relationship between cause and effect and therefore unavoidably affects any attempt of examining the causes of war.

1. The Causes of War

Answering the question on the causes of war is not an easy matter. In his elaborate analysis of this question, Hidemi Suganami[2] states that, as philosophers, we have to look at the nature of questioning itself. This claim is highly unusual and uncommon in International Relations research on the basis of being out of touch with reality and not being down to earth; something that is highly essential according to these “non-philosophers.”[3] But in falsely labelling a philosophical approach as being irreconcilable with empirical research, they seem to be missing the point. For, as Suganami states, “what point is there in being ‘down to earth’ if the ‘grounding’ is not secure?”[4]

The issue here is not neglecting facts for the sake of abstract and pointless philosophical reasoning. It rather concerns the idea that even if we concentrate on real world issues and wipe the conceptual problems from the blackboard, as Suganami states, the latter won’t disappear. It’s not a matter of or/or but of first looking at the nature of the question. Both an empirical and a philosophical approach are equally important. “‘Philosophers and ‘non-philosophers’ have their respective contributions to make in rendering the world a more intelligible place to live in. It stands to reason, therefore, that they must not only divide the intellectual labour, but cooperate.”[5] Giving priority to

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a philosophical and conceptual analysis without excluding a supplementary empirical part is of great importance. This might cast a new and perhaps brighter light on the issues at hand.

So if we want to look at the nature of the question at hand (i.e. what caused the War in Iraq), we ought to start with an inquiry of causation itself. In our general understanding of this concept, we are inclined to see causation as the constitutive relationship between a cause and an effect. Seen this way, reality is the infinite sequence or chain of causes and effects, which, in most cases, are not clearly defined. Certain effects may have multiple causes and vice versa or other events may occur between a cause and its effect without affecting it.

According to Suganami, if we want to explain why a war happened, i.e. what caused the war, we have to tell the story.[6] This narrative account goes beyond merely presenting the events as symbols (a, b, c, d...) that led to a particular effect (z). "To answer the question 'what caused this war?' either requires or is equivalent to answering the question 'how did this war come about.' In answering this, an intelligibly structured, or argued, narrative must be presented." [7] In this way, the story *constitutes* the cause.

Furthermore, Suganami is not looking for a *general* explanation of wars. Rather, the question is how *particular* wars can be made intelligible. The result is not an explanation that can be broadly applied to any case of warfare because it "does *not* involve [a] statement of law(s) covering it." It is not about the statistical regularity but about the ability to follow a path that constructs a narrative. The aim here will thus be to try to understand the narrative behind the Iraq War in particular.

2. The Road to Iraq

Events do not occur in a vacuum and the war in Iraq was no different. According to Thomas E. Ricks, this is precisely the reason why we have to start our inquiry at an earlier point.[8] "The 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq can't be viewed in isolation. The chain of events began more than a decade earlier with the botched close of the 1991 Gulf War and then it continued in the U.S. effort to contain Saddam Hussein in the years that followed." [9] Discussing the Gulf War is not the subject of this essay so I won't address this issue here and I will, like Ricks, mainly focus on the aftermath of that war.

To get to the point, Ricks argues that the U.S. government made three mistakes at the end of the Gulf War in 1991. Firstly, they encouraged Shiite and Kurdish rebels to revolt against Saddam's regime but didn't give them the proper support. This double signal gave Saddam the opportunity to crush these uprisings brutally while U.S. troops stood by and watched. The second mistake was that they falsely believed that Saddam's regime was so damaged that it would only be a matter of time before it would fall. Unfortunately, this was wishful thinking and Saddam would remain in power. Lastly, and partially connected to the second mistake, the U.S. military did not undercut the basis of Saddam Hussein's power. Crucial divisions of the Iraqi military such as the elite Republican guard were not dismantled.

Paul Wolfowitz, then Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, highlighted this problem and urged for immediate action, particularly by supporting the rebels. His call for support fell on deaf ears, nothing was done and Wolfowitz was left standing alone. Dick Cheney, then Secretary of Defence, agreed that the U.S. were confronting a dictator, but also just one more they had to learn to live with. "Saddam is just one more irritant, but there's a long list of irritants in that part of the world." [10] Also, the Republicans spent the nineties in opposition so there was pretty much nothing they could do about the situation in Iraq.

President Bill Clinton would promote a policy of *containment* in dealing with Saddam Hussein. This would prove to be an effective response that was unfortunately implemented too late. "[A] series of more limited steps were taken, like slowly heating a warm bath, and Saddam Hussein's regime found ways to live with them." [11]

Wolfowitz would use the analogy with the failure of appeasement arguing that one of the lessons "he took from the Holocaust is that the American people need to be pushed to do the right thing, because by the time the United States

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entered World War II it had been too late for millions of Jews and other victims of the Nazis.”[12] This whole conviction was based on the belief that “every country was capable of becoming democratic – and that their becoming so aids the American cause.”[13]

In January 1998, this idea was crystallised in a letter to President Clinton issued by the *Project for the New American Century*, a group of Republican interventionists who urged the President to amend his failing policy from *containment* to *regime change*. “We urge you to articulate this aim, and to turn your administration’s attention to implementing a strategy for removing Saddam’s regime from power.”[14] Several notable neoconservative republicans, including Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Armitage and Francis Fukuyama, signed the letter.

Admittedly, there was an element of truth in their analysis but that did not necessarily had to imply regime change. More so, Anthony Zinni, at that time a Marine Brigadier General who was Chief of Staff of *Provide Comfort*, proposed to finetune the existing policy rather than topple Saddam. This finetuning came to be known as operation *Desert Fox*. “Launched in reaction to a standoff with Saddam Hussein over weapons inspections, the attacks began on December 16, 1998. “[15] These attacks turned out to be very effective. According to Kenneth Pollack, as quoted by Ricks, “Saddam panicked during the strikes. Fearing that his control was threatened, he ordered large scale arrests and executions, which backfired and destabilised his regime for months afterward.”[16]

Events, however, can have multiple effects. One of the unintended side-effects of these raids was Saddam tightening his internal controls and preventing Iraqis from having contact with U.S.intelligence. “After the raids the U.S. intelligence community did not have a single HUMINT (human intelligence) source collecting against Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programs.”[17] This in turn would have its effects when “all sorts of wild claims could be made about Saddam’s armaments programs in 2002 that later would be proven wrong but at the time couldn’t be refuted.”[18]

Nonetheless, the attacks were having an undeniable effect in eliminating the nuclear threats. According to Army Col. Alan King, then Chief Civil Affairs Officer attached to the invading 3rd Infantry Division, “our reason for invading pretty much went away in 1998.”[19] Saddam had abandoned his nuclear facilities two years earlier and *Desert Fox* destroyed the remaining manufacturing capability.

It seems this operation had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, by crushing the remains of Saddam’s nuclear capability, it eliminated the reason for invasion in 2003 as given by the Bush administration. On the other hand, the psychological effect and the disappearance of intelligence sources made this justification possible for lack of evidence to the contrary.

Three years later, the attacks on September 11th 2001 provided the political opening Paul Wolfowitz, then Deputy Secretary of Defence, and other regime change proponents needed to shuttle their plans for Iraq into policy. What they argued was that 9/11 had caught the intelligence community asleep, so how could the latter be trusted concerning future threats? Moreover, the effects of *Desert Fox* had caused a major decrease in human intelligence sources in Iraq, obscuring any knowledge of Saddam’s nuclear capabilities. Supported by Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, then Secretary of Defence, would take advantage of this intelligence gap and “take steps to substantially increase the role his office played in gathering and analyzing intelligence.”[20]

Before examining this turning point in the run up to the Iraq War in closer detail, I will first take a look at the theoretical foundation of this quest for war. Ricks tends to place Paul Wolfowitz as the major war advocate without shedding light on the latter’s reasoning. He thereby risks merely portraying Wolfowitz as a sinister man on a quest for war as an end in itself. As said before, reality is more complex than we like it to be.

3. The End of History

In understanding any set of events like these and the reasoning of the main proponents behind them, it is useful to examine their justification. The idea of spreading democracy is a conviction Wolfowitz shares with another signatory

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of the *Letter to President Clinton*. Apart from being a political theorist, philosopher, and author of the book *The End of History and the Last Man*,^[21] Francis Fukuyama also was a political actor as a member of the Policy Planning Staff of the Department of State in 1981-82 and again in 1989. He also signed the *Letter to President Bush on the War on Terrorism*. Written by the *Project for the New American Century* on 20 September 2001, it urged the administration to “include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq”^[22] in their foreign policy planning.

Giving a brief but thorough presentation of the *End of History* thesis is not without risk. Failed efforts to do this have become the exact reason why Fukuyama’s 1992 book has, according to Matthews, Sullivan and Williams, frequently been misunderstood.^[23] His role in the Reagan administration as a political actor and his close ties with the neoconservative movement have cleared the way for labelling the book as a justification for the spread of democracy and the resulting wars to that end. Although this is partly true, this conclusion is oversimplified and largely underestimates Fukuyama’s value as a political philosopher.

To start with, *The End of History* is about the philosophy of history rather than the spread of democracy, the latter being an implication of Fukuyama’s interpretation of the former. His notion of history can be embedded in a typical modern and Western philosophy of history, going back to German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Fukuyama was clearly influenced by both: his notion of the end of history is quite Hegelian,^[24] whereas his conviction of democracy as a superior idea was largely influenced by Kant. I will address the issues in that order since the war in Iraq as a way of spreading democracy, like Wolfowitz argued, is inherently related to a typical Western notion of history in terms of progress.

Hegel sees history as the “outward manifestation of a deeper metaphysical process, which he refers to as the development of *Geist* or Spirit.”^[25] Regarded this way, history is the product and the account of a *Spirit* or reason that gradually becomes self-conscious. Every step of human history and philosophy can therefore be seen as part of a larger story of cumulative history. According to Hegel, this progressive and teleological account of human history considers freedom as its main goal, which will be reached at the *End of History*. History starts as a potentiality and unfolds itself step-by-step into actuality.

Fukuyama would share this linear view on history in terms of progress. He saw the idea of liberal democracy as the end of history since, after the fall of feudalism, fascism and communism, liberal democracy had prevailed and proven to be a superior ideology. The main reason for misunderstanding Fukuyama is the confusion between the superiority of liberal democracy as an *idea* and the types of liberal democracy there are in the *real world*. It is his belief in this pre-eminence that lead him to support the spread of liberal democracy as an *idea* or, in terms of the *End of History*, to help other countries abandon history. Claiming to be Kantian, Fukuyama and other supporters of the spread of democracy are convinced that this would be beneficial to every party involved in the process. Advocating that the spread of democracy is equal to spreading peace since it is empirically proven that democracies do not wage war with one another, these Democratic Peace theorists believe that this will eventually lead to a Kantian perpetual peace.^[26]

Although this argument shows remarkable differences with Kant,^[27] it can, like Fukuyama’s notion of the *End of History*, nonetheless be related to a typical modern way of thinking. “This included a belief in power of reason to solve problems, the importance of empirical methods, the secularization of knowledge and society, and a faith in progress. (...) Fukuyama shares all of these ideals.”^[28] By proclaiming that history has reached its end in the idea of liberal democracy, Fukuyama applies a typically modern way of thinking to reach a typically modern conclusion. Not only does he argue that history is to be measured in terms of progress, he also holds his interpretation to be the only correct one.

Applying this to the war in Iraq, we can refute the idea that people like Paul Wolfowitz and Francis Fukuyama were merely sinister men on a quest for war. They can be seen as proponents of a specific notion of modernity. They see history as the unravelling of a story and claim to know the direction it is going. Fukuyama saw the United States as the perfect actor to lead by example in helping other countries leave history, as Wolfowitz believed that people needed to be pushed in the right direction. Thus, if you know where history is going, it is very tempting to give it a little push.^[29]

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It seems that the War in Iraq and, underneath it, the reasoning of its main proponents, exposes a darker side of modernity and the ambiguity it contains. To unravel this ambiguity we need to take a closer look at 9/11 and examine not only its relation to the War in Iraq, but more broadly its relation to Western modernity as a whole.

4. Deconstructing 9/11

As mentioned before, the attacks on September 11th 2001 provided Wolfowitz with the political opening he needed. "Four days after the attacks, the president and his national security team met at Camp David to discuss the response to 9/11. The briefing materials that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz brought offered three targets in the war on terrorism: al Qaeda, Afghanistan's Taliban and Iraq." [30] These attacks urged for an immediate and prompt response, they argued. Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz cleverly used the intelligence gap 9/11 and *Desert Fox* had caused to push their war agenda through.

According to Maja Zehfuss in *Forget September 11*, these attacks were used by the administration, and to a lesser extent other governments, to justify their response. [31] They would be used as a framing device to install some controversial anti-terrorism legislation such as the *Patriot Act* and also to legitimise the War in Afghanistan and two years later the War in Iraq. Defined this way, 9/11 was the cause that would justify almost any form of response.

Not only did this involve the construction of 9/11 as an exceptional event; it also allowed the U.S. to divide the world: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" [32], Bush proclaimed. In doing so, he constructed a Western identity and excluded the terrorists from belonging to it. This is quite problematic, not only when realising that the hijackers were trained in the West, but, more importantly, because it is unclear who this 'we' actually is. Is there such thing as one 'we' or one 'West'? Are we all to support (this justification of) the War in Iraq?

Again, we are confronted with the inescapable ambiguity of the idea of Western modernity. According to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, this ambiguity is actually an essential part of this idea and its identity. In his critique of Western metaphysics, Derrida rejects the binary opposition that not only perceives everything in opposing terms (black/white, inside/outside, us/them...), but also implements a hierarchy in these juxtapositions; one is always better than the other. Derrida therefore proposes to perceive the world in terms of *différance* [33] as opposed to a metaphysics of presence. [34] Since opposites have all the qualities of each other, it is impossible to exclude any one in a hierarchical order. No *presence* without *absence*, no *us* without *them*, no *effect* without *cause*. Derrida defines these as *undecidables*. [35] They are the embodiment of ambiguity. They are not this, nor that, and both simultaneously.

Western culture is fundamentally and inherently ambiguous. "There is no culture or cultural identity without this difference *with itself*." [36] This explains for instance the paradox of proclaiming the idea of freedom abroad (*Operation Iraqi Freedom*) while at the same time undermining it at home (*Patriot Act*.) Not only is the relationship between us as Western and them as Non-Western ambiguous; that ambiguity is a fundamental aspect of the Western idea as a whole.

Returning to the War in Iraq and its cause, 9/11, Zehfuss argues:

"Cause-effect thinking is fundamentally unhelpful as it suggests not only the separability of events, but also the ability to define actors as clearly delimited entities. (...) [T]he events of September 11 have in some way set the response, but at the same time the response has dictated what these events were. (...) [They] can function as a cause for the U.S. war effort only thanks to this interpretation, which is an integral part of the war effort itself." [37]

More and more, the relationship between cause and effect becomes blurred. 9/11 was reshaped as a cause to justify the War on Terrorism. Portraying 9/11 as an uncaused cause is just another example of defining politics in terms of cause and effect; actions and responses. Unfortunately, this "leaves out a crucial step, namely that of the interpretation (...) of what has happened." [38] If we want to know what caused the war, we have to give an account of narration and explanation, as Suganami rightly claims. He argues that "there are no such things as 'origins of war',

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existing independently of the stories we tell about them, waiting only to be discovered by historians attempting to reconstruct the past as *it actually was*; that war origins are necessarily narratives and as narratives they are artefacts constructed retrospectively.”[39]

Only in hindsight can we know what the causes of war truly were. This affects, however, the typical modern, linear notion of time presupposed by the *End of History* theorists. In discussing the revolutionary founding of a state, Jenny Edkins challenges this notion. “If the revolutionaries fail, they will be arrested and charged by the state as criminals or terrorists. If, however, they succeed and a new state is instituted, it will appear retroactively as if their actions had been totally justified.”[40]

If we tell the story of how something came to happen, like a war, we retroactively constitute that event. The causes of the War in Iraq do not exist independently but are constructed through our narrative explanation. Time is not a linear chain of events, linking causes and effects in a logical order. It is in hindsight that we can define exactly what caused certain events. But by doing so we, like Derrida’s notion of *différance*, reverse the relation between cause and effect, making the cause the effect.

Conclusion

Starting with a narrative examination of the causes of the War in Iraq, this essay has deconstructed the notion of causation in war explanation. Causes are no objective entities but are attributed to certain events in hindsight. Looking at the justification for this war given by Paul Wolfowitz and Francis Fukuyama, we see how their typical modern notion of spreading democracy because of its inherent superiority exposes the ambiguity of modernity itself.

It was Jacques Derrida who called our attention to the modern metaphysics of presence; defining everything in a hierarchical opposition. In deconstructing this opposition, this metaphysics in *différance* is displaced.

But even ambiguity is ambiguous. The *End of History* argument may explain the ambiguity of modernity, but at the same time, when examining how the war proponents constructed 9/11 as a cause for war, we see how they already displaced the relation between cause and its effect.

When asking what has caused a particular war, we are in a way constructing these causes. With the benefit of hindsight, we can determine which conditions were vital although this may not have been the case at the time. Defined this way, there are no such things as objective causes but only those that we construct in hindsight; in the future. Time is not a linear notion but strangely is always constructed in the future. The causes of what we do today are somewhere in the future.

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[2] Suganami, Hidemi *On the Causes of War* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996)

[3] Suganami, *On the Causes of War*, p. 1

[4] Suganami, *On the Causes of War*, p. 2

[5] Suganami, *On the Causes of War*, p. 1

[6] Suganami differentiates between three theories on causation (causation as related to general laws, causation as a necessary condition and causation as explanation) and states that the third is the most plausible.

[7] Suganami, *On the Causes of War*, p. 150

[8] Ricks, Thomas E. *Fiasco. The Military Adventure In Iraq* (London: Penguin Books, 2006)

[9] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 4

[10] Ricks, *Fiasco*, pp. 6-7

[11] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 13

[12] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 16

[13] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 17

[14] Project for the New American Century, *Letter to President Clinton on Iraq*. Available from: <http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm> [Accessed 2 December 2011].

[15] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 19

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[16] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 19

[17] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 20

[18] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 22

[19] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 21

[20] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 32

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[25] Matthews et al. *Fukuyama*, p. 25

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[28] Matthews et al. *Fukuyama*, p. 163

[29] This thought resembles in many ways the philosophy of another follower of Hegel; Karl Marx.

[30] Ricks, *Fiasco*, p. 30

[31] Zehfuss, Maja 'Forget September 11', *Third World Quarterly*, 24 (2003) pp. 513-528

[32] George W. Bush as quoted by Zehfuss, *Forget September 11*, p. 518

[33] The French word for difference is *différence* but in speech, there is no audible difference between *différence* and *différance*. This inverts the relation between the spoken word, which is superior in Western metaphysics, and the written word.

[34] Edkins, Jenny *Poststructuralism & International Relations. Bringing the Political Back In* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999) p. 68

[35] Edkins, *Poststructuralism*, p. 70

[36] Derrida as quoted by Zehfuss, *Forget September 11*, p. 521

[37] Zehfuss, *Forget September 11*, p. 521

[38] Zehfuss, *Forget September 11*, p. 522

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[39] Suganami, Hidemi 'Stories of War Origins: A Narrativist Theory of the Causes of War', *Review of International Studies*, 23 (1997) p. 402

[40] Edkins, *Poststructuralism*, p. 83

Written by: Lucas Van Milders
Written at: Aberystwyth University
Written for: Campbell Craig
Date Written: December 2011

About the author:

Lucas is a Commissioning Editor at e-IR. He holds a MA in both Philosophy and International Relations from the University of Antwerp and is completing his MScEcon in Security Studies at Aberystwyth University. His main focus lies on International Relations Theory and Philosophy applied to Liberal Foreign Policy and Humanitarian Intervention. Additionally, he intends to apply for a PhD in International Relations