

The US Invasion of Iraq: Marxist and Defensive Realist Perspectives

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The United States' Invasion of Iraq through the Theoretical Frameworks of Marxism and Defensive Realism

On March 20, 2003 the United States invaded Iraq and unknowingly began an eight-year occupation of the country, destabilizing the Middle East and costing countless lives and dollars. The reasons for US involvement and events during the invasion are still debated to this day due to their unclear and controversial nature. This research paper explains the US invasion of Iraq through two well-known theories of international relations: Marxism and defensive realism. Specifically, both theories examine the causes of US intervention as well as events during the offensive using their unique theoretical frameworks. After assessment of both theories, the analysis shows that defensive realism is more comprehensive and insightful in terms of accounting for the events preceding and during the invasion.

Theoretical Framework of Marxism

From a Marxist perspective, the US invasion of Iraq was the result of aggressive capitalist expansionism in order to secure threatened oil for future production. The invasion is best explained by the hegemonic control of social norms and constructs, the military-industrial complex of the Bush administration and the overall structure of the international system in 2003. Overall, the Marxist interpretation of the invasion is an interesting perspective with which to examine one of the United States' most defining moments in history.

The control of social constructs of the core collective in 2003 played an integral role in justifying the US invasion of Iraq as well as specific events during the invasion. The mainstream American media was extremely important in raising public support for the invasion, misinterpreting rumors for facts and above all justifying American presence in the Middle East with jingoistic rhetoric. Rene Gabri identifies the defining characteristics of mainstream media today. She argues that in times of national emergency or sensation, media outlets will attempt to mirror the viewer's thoughts and attitudes rather than assure veracity of the news[1]. This dangerous trend was especially impactful during the invasion of Iraq and explains how the United States' control of social norms and constructs played a role in the attack. Gabri highlights significant portions of CNN's coverage during the first two days of the invasion. An important example of the control of norms is the shock and awe campaign. The shock and awe doctrine is a military strategy that employs bursts of overwhelming force to rapidly destroy the enemy's capability and will to fight. However, the shock and awe campaign was multiplied tenfold through the media during the first stages of the invasion of Iraq. CNN, Fox News, and NBC all showed blackout coverage of endless mortars and rockets destroying civilian landmarks in Baghdad. All sources at this time (including the Pentagon) assured viewers that the primary target for these images was the Iraqi people who still resisted "liberation" by the United States. Given the lack of American media availability in Iraq, one must be skeptical of that claim. The shock and awe media campaign was a tool used by the hegemony of the United States to explicitly shape social norms into believing the invasion was not only necessary but essential to national security. On the night of the first air assaults, Anchor Brit Hume of Fox News summarized the sentiment perfectly when he said, "Get ready for some fireworks ladies and gentlemen". Continued coverage of the fiery destruction of Baghdad satisfied the American need for revenge after 9/11 and played into a

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strange kind of national celebration. From a Gramscian perspective, the positive connotations associated with the “fireworks” are an example of the United States’ one version of the invasion: the liberation of Iraq from a ruthless dictator. The media as well as the Bush administration magnified fear of Saddam with intensive claims of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and nuclear program[2]. It is true that Saddam Hussein possessed large quantities of chemical weapons and had used them in the Iran-Iraq War[3]. However, the United Nations repeatedly performed disarmament of these weapons throughout the late 1990’s. Upon growing pressure from the Bush administration, UN head weapons inspector Hans Blix assured the international community that Iraq’s disarmament was proactive but would take a few months². Despite the UN’s disapproval for the invasion of Iraq and general lack of evidence of Saddam Hussein’s nuclear initiative, the US government repeated the urgency of Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction[4]. Moreover, Vice President Cheney and several others in the Department of Defense constantly repeated the falsehood that Saddam Hussein had ties to Al-Qaeda, and would use his weapons of mass destruction on US cities[5]. Despite the shocking lack of evidence in these claims, 79% of Americans said they approved the US invasion of Iraq just two months later⁵. From a Marxist perspective, the United States used its hegemonic control and misconstrued social constructs about Saddam Hussein, weapons of mass destruction and Al-Qaeda to justify the invasion of Iraq.

Additionally, the military-industrial complex of the Bush administration played a significant role in the US invasion of Iraq. Dominated by capitalist elites, the United States government was used to invade Iraq to exploit it for oil and other capitalist interests. Specifically, the oil-related objectives of US military operations before and during the invasion of Iraq seriously contradict the purported mission of liberating the Iraqi people. When the first US marines attacked Baghdad, the only government building that was protected against looting was the Ministry of Oil[6]. Thus, the importance of oil for capitalist elites of the American hegemony was paramount over Iraqi liberation or the search for non-existent weapons of mass destruction. This is significant because it shows how events preceding and during the invasion were directly influenced by lucrative resources, a top priority for the United States hegemony. Moreover, the military-industrial complex of the Bush administration meant capitalist elites had direct power over US military operations and urged for the invasion to happen. In his report *Guns and Butter Once Again*, William Darity raises alarm over the close relationship between the United States’ executive leadership and private business. He argues that between 2003 and 2005, domestic federal spending incurred various restrictions while defense spending increased by seven percent of the national GDP[7]. The main takeaway from *Guns and Butter Once Again* is the argument that government contracts for the invasion of Iraq and the Iraq War were awarded in a no bid, closed selection process. The largest contract winner was Halliburton, the Vice-President’s former company and a firm in which he still held stock options, enjoyed a 230% increase in its stock price three months after the invasion of Iraq⁸. This is important firstly because it underlines the ways in which corporate elites had direct influence on military operations before and during the invasion of Iraq. Secondly, these points also explain the unnecessary overspending and shady military contracts of the invasion. The military-industrial complex of the Bush administration shows that the United States’ invasion of Iraq was due to the control of capitalist elites and their interests in the Middle East. Furthermore, scholars argue that various government entities were excited about the prospect of Iraqi oil, regardless of whether they had any connection to private corporations. As discussed by Professor Michael Klare in *More Blood Less Oil*, the excitement over Iraqi oil was palpable in the months leading up to the invasion[8]. Accordingly, the department of energy’s periodic petroleum reports said that Iraq could double its oil production to 5 million barrels a day. The State Department planned the Future of Iraq Project to help privatize Iraqi oil assets and also establish quick and easy access for American oil companies into Iraq. Exiled Iraqi minister Ahmed Chalabi promised American oil executives unprecedented availability of Iraqi oil as soon as US forces deposed Saddam Hussein. From a Marxist lens, Klare’s findings are important as they show that the United States was concerned first and foremost with the control of resources for future production, whether or not the decision to invade Iraq was controlled by private corporations. As these findings show, every department of the US government thirsted for the flow of Iraqi oil to serve capitalist elites in the United States. Overall, the United States’ expansionist nature gave it the inherent need to control Middle Eastern oil and this need was a primary reason for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The American desire for Iraqi oil was also due to the structure of the international system at that time. In the early 2000’s the United States had reached its apogee as the global hegemony and the top of the hierarchal international arena. Even before the invasion, the United States’ military budget was over seven hundred billion dollars, greater than the budgets of China, Russia, the United Kingdom and France combined[9]. Its armed forces boasted one and a

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half million well-trained men and women and its military presence was felt in every corner of the world. In the October 2003 editorial *Hegemony or Empire*, Niall Ferguson compares the US dominance in foreign affairs to that of the British Empire in the early twentieth century. Ferguson argues that the United States current hegemony holds much greater power than the British Empire ever did. This hegemony began when the United States decided to assume the responsibility of creating external conditions for peace and prosperity, primarily for its own capitalists, but by extension for the rest of the world itself[10]. This is meaningful as it establishes the overbearing stature of the United States' hegemony in world affairs at the time of the invasion. Furthermore, after the UN voted to disallow the US invasion of Iraq in February 2003, the Bush administration ignored international protocol and initiated the attack. The United Nations and other world powers would have severely condemned and possibly even sanctioned the country responsible for the invasion had it not been the United States. The absence of any serious consequences for the United States shows its overwhelming power as the global hegemony in world affairs. Expanding upon the international dimensions of Marxism, Immanuel Wallerstein introduced the dependency theory, stating that the world is divided into two kinds of states. Advanced states like the United States belong to the core, a small group of wealthy countries that exploit less developed states that belong to the periphery[11]. As a core imperialist state, the United States felt no qualms about pursuing the natural resource of Iraq. This is because Iraq belonged to the vast majority of states that are in the periphery, in other words Iraq's main purpose in the eyes of the US was to be a funnel for natural resources. In return, exploited nations like Iraq are dependent upon the United States as their only source of national income. This exploitation was extremely common in 2003 and happened in countless nations across the world. Indonesia, Bangladesh and India were heavily used for the American clothing industry due to the lack of workers' rights and cheap labor costs. Thus, Saddam Hussein's resistance to American hegemony threatened US policymakers and private business interests alike. This is important because it shows that the US invasion of Iraq was the result of the US hegemony retaliating against an exploited nation's defiance of the natural hierarchy of the global arena. Even more importantly, it shows the United States' role as the global hegemony and its purely capitalist interests. In conclusion, the hegemonic control of social norms, desire for lucrative resources and the state of international affairs in 2003 all contribute to the Marxist explanation of the US invasion of Iraq.

Theoretical Framework of Defensive Realism

Differently from Marxism, the US invasion of Iraq can also be explained by defensive realism. Realism on the whole argues that the structure of the international system is anarchic, meaning that there is no overarching hegemony or supranational government to keep order. This means that a state's primary concern is to ensure survival by attaining security. Defensive realism, first introduced by Kenneth Waltz, stems from the neorealist school of thought and argues that states will attain security by maintaining their position in the international system and achieving an appropriate degree of power in relation to other states. The defensive realist approach to the US invasion of Iraq draws heavily upon the notion of preemptive strike, a central theme in the Bush administration's justification for the invasion. Thus, the notion of preemptive strike, the structure of the international system and the unfamiliar nature of modern warfare all give a comprehensive explanation for the US invasion of Iraq through the lens of defensive realism.

Preemptive strike is one of the foundations for the ideology that justified the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is also essential in understanding the defensive realist interpretation of the US invasion of Iraq. This is the notion that because enemies of the United States are radicalized terrorist groups that contain means of mass destruction (most specifically referring to 9/11), the United States had to practice anticipatory self-defense[12]. Bush summarized what was later known as the Bush Doctrine in several speeches preceding the Iraq War including one to West Point in mid 2002, citing the greatest danger to freedom as the meeting of radicalization and technology¹⁴. The Bush Doctrine examines three main forces in its assessment of threat preceding the Iraq War. Radicalized terrorist groups with no regard for international law or human life, weapons of mass destruction like chemical or nuclear agents and politically corrupted, economically weak states that harbor and even aid these radicalized groups. The immense threat that these three forces represented equaled an unavoidable threat for the United States. After the threat had taken physical form in the attacks of 9/11, US invasion of Iraq was inevitable. From a defensive realist lens, the United States attempted to achieve safety by equalizing the threat of attack with its invasion of Iraq. An important theory that represents the thinking behind the anticipatory self-defense of the Bush doctrine is the balance of threat theory. Stephen Walt argues that states will generally balance by allying against a perceived threat,

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conversely weak states are more likely to join with the rising threat to protect their own security¹³. In the case of the US invasion of Iraq, the United States attempted to ally itself against the United Nations and other superpowers against the rising threat of terrorism in the Middle East. From the perspective of the Bush administration as well as defensive realists, Iraq and other Middle Eastern nations aligned itself with radical terrorist groups to protect their own security against domestic attacks. Whether the Saddam Hussein regime actually aligned with Al-Qaeda or not is irrelevant as the perceived threat was real enough and caused the United States to invade Iraq. This is relevant as it explains the invasion through a defensive realist lens. However, a main critique of the Bush doctrine is the United States' reserved right to determine what constitutes a legitimate threat to national security. In Professor Douglas Kellner's analysis of the Bush doctrine, he points out that this major shift away from conflict deterrence in US foreign policy was evoked primarily by war hawks in Bush's cabinet[13]. Many of these hawks, most notably Dick Cheney, had never been to war. In various attempts to elevate the urgency of Saddam Hussein's threat to the United States and its allies, the Bush administration produced unclear and even false evidence to the international community¹⁵. At the same time, hysteria in the United States over weapons of mass destruction mixed with growing Islamophobia and resentment over 9/11. This is important because it highlights how important the perceived threat was before the invasion of Iraq. It also shows how unimportant the real legitimacy of the threat was compared to the United States' perception of the threat. Ultimately, the notion of preemptive strike and the Bush doctrine played a significant role in the US invasion of Iraq when examined through a defensive realist lens.

The Bush doctrine represented a certain audacity in its foreign policy in that it gave the United States the right to independently judge what counted as a threat to national security and to act upon that threat without approval. This audacity came from the structure of the international system and the United States' role as an increasingly unilateral force in international politics. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 the international system became unipolar, leaving the United States as the sole hegemony. American economic and political spheres of influence extended over more parts of the world throughout the 1990's, giving the United States unprecedented levels of power in the early 2000's. Yet even before the United States enjoyed this sole position as the global superpower it had a long history of engaging in preemptive strikes. According to the UN charter, states are permitted to use force to defend against imminent threat. The interpretation of what constitutes as an imminent threat usually means defending against a known aggressor as it prepares for attack, like the Israeli attack of Egypt in 1967. Robert Delahunty discusses the United States' history of preemptive strikes when assessing the legality of the Bush doctrine and anticipatory defense. His findings show that the vast majority of US armed conflict over the past century has been preemptive in nature[14]. Intervention in Latin America in the early 1900's, the Korean War as well as the Vietnam War can be considered preemptive in this loose sense. So it is clear that the Bush doctrine was not revolutionary in its approach to foreign policy in this respect. The defining elements in the Bush doctrine and the invasion of Iraq were the lack of evidence for real threat, the audacity of the United States when ignoring international law and the perception of threat versus the reality of it. The United States' level of power in the early 2000's was at an all-time high, and any opposing force would have been a serious threat to national security. Thus, the role of the United States in the international system magnified the threat of Iraq so that perception did not match reality. This is significant because it discusses the ways in which the international system played a part in the invasion of Iraq and explains the actions of the United States through defensive realism. Furthermore, cabinet members of the Bush administration were also heavily entrenched in the economic interests of the United States. In other words, the United States' hegemony had become so powerful in 2003 that any violent restriction to American economic or political interests would seem like a threat to national security. Perceptions, possible intentions and potential future events spawned the United States' invasion of Iraq rather than any real imminent danger to national security. From the lens of a defensive realist, the United States was only trying to maintain the same level of power that it had acquired over the last decade when it invaded Iraq. Due to the ease in which it had become accustomed to controlling world affairs and dominating lucrative markets, it had little choice but to put troops on the ground in order to achieve security. Given these points, the importance of the international system is clear when explaining the US invasion of Iraq with defensive realism.

In addition to the international system and the Bush doctrine, the role of the Iraqi regime also contributed to the US invasion of Iraq. According to defensive realism, states are the most important actors in the international system. This gives a clearer picture as to why the United States invaded Iraq when many questioned whether the Iraqi government represented the true enemies and imminent threats to the United States. From a defensive realist perspective, Iraq in fact was the proper entity and only real choice to combat when the United States perceived such threat. As President

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Bush said when laying the foundation for the Bush doctrine: one of the greatest threats is the presence of politically corrupt, economically fragile states that allow terrorist groups to freely operate inside their borders. Moreover, in a 2005 report by the Council of Foreign Relations, numerous pieces of evidence emerged proving that Saddam Hussein had provided headquarters, funding and even training camps for terrorist organizations in the early 1990's[15]. Saddam Hussein had also attempted to annex Kuwait in 1990, resulting in the First Gulf War. These points are relevant as they explain the United States' decision to invade Iraq rather than pursue other avenues to subdue the perceived threat of weapons of mass destruction. In hindsight, the decision to invade Iraq is heavily criticized now but in the months preceding the invasion Iraq's threat to the United States seemed extremely real. The potential consequences of an aggressive Iraqi regime's possession of weapons of mass destruction as well as the possibility of Saddam Hussein's support of terrorist groups made the state of Iraq the primary enemy of the United States. In essence, the role of the Iraqi regime and unfamiliar nature of modern warfare is essential in understanding the United States' invasion of Iraq from the perspective of defensive realism.

Empirical Analysis

Both the Marxist and defensive realist interpretations provide sound explanations for the US invasion of Iraq. However, both also possess significant weaknesses in their arguments caused by problems in general theoretical structure as well their applicability to this historical case. Nevertheless, Marxism and defensive realism are so comprehensive but unique in their worldviews that they complete each other's weaknesses. With that being said, defensive realism gives a more accurate explanation of the US invasion of Iraq due to its understanding of Bush doctrine and the international system. Additionally, while the Marxist explanation represents elements of the invasion that are often overlooked like the control of collective thought, it fails to explain the role of the perceived threat of terrorism and loss of security the US faced. Ultimately, both theories explore noteworthy regions of thought that are important to indulge in when studying the US invasion of Iraq.

It is immediately clear that there are serious flaws in the Marxist interpretation. First and foremost, it fails to acknowledge the threat of terrorism to United States' security as well as the possibility of the United States attempting to achieve security through the invasion. Moreover, the gravity of 9/11 cannot be ignored as a seminal event that changed foreign relations and foreign policy of the United States. Secondly, Marxism's inherent issues with capitalism, especially elite capitalist nations like the United States, force its explanation of the invasion to be overwhelmingly critical of the United States. Its cynical assumptions about the United States present an innate bias that judges any action on the part of the United States as aggressive and money-driven. This therefore reduces the strength of the Marxist argument by failing to evaluate a holistic picture of the invasion and incorporate other explanations. Moreover, the one-sidedness of the Marxist argument accusing the United States of imperialism and hegemony also ignores the role played by Saddam Hussein as well as the situation in Iraq. The prospect of Saddam Hussein's association with terrorist groups coupled with the possibility of his possession of weapons of mass destruction was a serious and legitimate concern. While it is true that the United States invaded without any substantial evidence that these weapons existed, their threat must be recognized as a significant explanation for the invasion. This lack of consideration in the Marxist argument summarizes an overall inadequacy in its explanation for the US invasion of Iraq.

On the other hand, the Marxist interpretation is strong because it reveals key ways mainstream society, politics and the United States' place in the world shaped the US invasion of Iraq. Initially, its critique of mainstream media as well as the examination of the media's control of collective thought provide a fascinating look into why the invasion was popular among average citizens and even top cabinet members. In the article previously mentioned, Rene Gabri writes that the media is a reflection of one's own thought processes. Slowly, it replaces people's own thinking and becomes a construct that does a person's thinking for them¹. This idea is especially important to remember when noting that viewership increased by 33%¹ during the invasion. The Marxist perspective is also important because it identifies the clear biases in the media that heavily influenced public support for the invasion. A University of Maryland study showed that 69% of viewers believed that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks, and 51% believed Iraq had seriously supported Al-Qaeda[16]. While both of these statements are false, they show that the biases and perspectives of the news directly shaped American thought. This is important because it highlights a strength of the Marxist interpretation of the invasion. Furthermore, the Marxist explanation of the military-industrial

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complex raises necessary questions about the conflicts of interest in the White House and urgency with which the Bush administration pushed the invasion. The lack of accountability concerning government contracts as well as the focus on Iraqi oil helps explain specific events during the invasion. Lastly, this interpretation draws on significant points about the role of the United States in the international system. The section discussing the hierarchical nature of the global arena and US hegemony forces the reader to question the lack of consequences from the international community after the invasion as well as the reasons for the prioritization of oil landmarks during the invasion. On the whole, the Marxist explanation raises key questions and strong arguments to consider when examining the invasion of Iraq.

While defensive realism still works better than Marxism, it still possesses notable weaknesses in its argument. Most notably, it ignores the huge influence of private interests on the invasion, like the questionable conflicts of interest that Dick Cheney and others possessed. It also does not shed light on the United States' history of militarism in the Middle East or the dependence on Middle Eastern oil in the early 2000's. Both of these are very important factors to consider when explaining the invasion of Iraq. Thus, defensive realism also has flaws in its explanation of US action towards Iraq in 2003.

Interestingly, defensive realism perfectly completes the gaps in the Marxist explanation by focusing on the threats the US perceived leading up to the invasion. This examination from the defensive realist lens gives a better perspective from the United States' point of view; an extremely important frame of reference when trying to understand why the US invaded Iraq. The analysis of Bush doctrine in particular makes the defensive realist explanation much more plausible because it was in fact the executive branch that spearheaded the invasion. Furthermore, analysis of the Bush doctrine makes it much easier to understand why the invasion felt almost inevitable and why the executive branch felt forced to invade Iraq to maintain security in a defensive sense. Unlike the Marxist interpretation, defensive realism appropriately captures the importance of weapons of mass destruction in the United States' decision to go to war. Moreover, the inclusion of balance of threat theory in the argument helps the reader understand the importance of perceived threat at the time of the invasion as well as why potential scenarios and possible outcomes had such grave importance to the United States. Lastly, defensive realism also does a better job explaining the role of US interest in Iraqi oil in the invasion. Unlike Marxism, this interpretation shows that there were serious conflicts of interest concerning oil, but the invasion was not launched because of oil. Another way that defensive realism fixes the flaws of the Marxist explanation is its portrayal of the international system as a factor in the invasion. While Marxism attacks the United States for supposedly greedy intentions, defensive realism explains that why the United States invaded due to its role as the global superpower. In summary, defensive realism is much more comprehensive in its outlook and explains multiple perspectives of the invasion; both key weaknesses in the Marxist interpretation. Regardless of the theoretical lens, the US invasion of Iraq was one of the most influential events in recent history and has since played a defining role in the international system.

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