

The Role of Intelligence in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq

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The invasion of Iraq in March 2003 by a U.S.-led coalition has left a lasting impression on contemporary international relations. The legacy of military action in Iraq has been profound; when the UK ceased combat operations in 2009 the number of British casualties stood at 179 (BBC News, 2010; Ministry of Defence, 2010), while the number of American military casualties at the cessation of US combat actions stood at 4,408 with nearly 32,000 wounded in action (U.S. Dept. of Defense, 2011). Alongside the individual tragedies which have occurred as a result of the invasion of Iraq, military intervention has also resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi President since 1979. Domestically, this threw Iraq into a period of transition, instability and insecurity (Gwertzman, 2006; Panch et al, 2004). While, in a wider regional security context, the change in regime impacted geopolitics in the Middle East as well as fueling anti-American sentiment among Arab nations (Gwertzman, 2006). The reasons for going to war and the evidence upon which many justifications for the 2003 invasion were based came from the intelligence community in the United States, the United Kingdom and other countries. Intelligence plays a vital role in any military operation; “*Manui dat cognitio vires*”, to quote the UK Intelligence Corps motto – “Knowledge gives strength to the arm”.

Understandably, the capacity to predict the intentions and capabilities of other states is vital to national security, thus accurate intelligence can be invaluable. However inaccurate intelligence, a lack of cooperation between intelligence agencies or the politicization of intelligence are all factors which can lead to a situation where the reliance on intelligence as an asset has undesirable results. This essay will examine the events leading up to the Iraq War in 2003, including the evidence from the intelligence community which was presented to the international community as justification to begin military action in Iraq, as well as numerous documents and publications during the Iraq War which highlight the importance of intelligence, particularly in shaping the decision to go to war. Additionally, the author will offer a broadly neoclassical realist approach to analysing the importance of intelligence in the Iraq War; a neoclassical realist framework will allow the author to examine individual, state and systemic levels of analysis, as well as the importance of elites and domestic political culture in determining a state's behaviour in the international system. Furthermore, this essay will examine important conceptual elements such as the intelligence cycle and the relationship between the intelligence community and the policy process.

Neoclassical realism is a development of Kenneth Waltz's theory of structural realism which identifies the anarchical international system as the primary cause of conflict (Waltz, 1959). However, neoclassical realist scholars also highlight the importance of unit-level variables, primarily domestic political factors, as important in shaping the power-seeking behaviour of a state in the international arena. Additionally, neoclassical realists would suggest that individuals also have a role to play, particularly the political elites of a state where the preferences and perceptions of the ruling elite can also influence the actions of a state (Rose, 1998; Schmidt, 2005; Taliaferro, 2006; Waever, 2009). Further neoclassical realist theory will be applied throughout the following essay in relation to the use of intelligence in the Iraq War, however it is the multiple levels of analysis; individual, state and system, which are of importance in the opening section of this study as they shape the foundation and structure of the remainder of this study.

Individuals are crucial in the intelligence process, most importantly in the gathering of raw intelligence. This can be through the use of spies, diplomatic staff, informants or military personnel. The following section will focus on the role of an individual informant, infamously named Curveball, in the collection of prewar intelligence during the years prior to the invasion of Iraq. Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, Curveball's real name (Pidd, 2011), was an Iraqi male who handed himself in to German authorities in 1999, claiming to be a chemical engineer who had knowledge of a

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chemical and biological weapons program being developed under Saddam Hussein's regime (Drogin, 2008). The intelligence that Curveball passed on to German officials, which they in turn passed to the American intelligence community, turned out to be a fabrication but was also the foundation upon which justifications were built for military intervention in Iraq (CBS, 2007; Pidd, 2011). Curveball's reports to his BND^[1] interrogators were crucial in the decision to go to war, as his descriptions of the transportation of biological materials illustrates. Bob Drogin describes the informant's account of Saddam Hussein's use of trucks as part of his biological weapons program in his book, *Curveball* (2008), "According to Curveball, Saddam secretly put his entire biowarfare program on the road to evade discovery. He shifted apocalyptic germ weapons and sinister production up and around Iraq... The menacing fleet of monster rigs would blend in with countless other eighteen-wheelers" (p. 64). This report of trucks being used as mobile production factories would be echoed in the 2002 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE); a comprehensive intelligence report produced by the National Intelligence Council (National Intelligence Estimate, 2002; Bobbitt, 2009). The 2002 NIE states that "Baghdad has mobile facilities for producing bacterial and toxin BW [biological weapon] agents" (National Intelligence Estimate, 2002, p. 2). This intelligence came directly from Curveball's interviews with BND agents and would ultimately be one of the most influential arguments in adopting a military strategy in Iraq. Phillip Bobbitt highlights the importance of the Curveball source in the 2002 NIE, where the information being published about Iraq's biological weapons capability came almost exclusively from Curveball, despite the assertion that there were multiple sources (Bobbitt, 2009, p. 332; Presidential Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction^[2], 2005, p. 84).

However, of the other three sources which were attributed as having contributed intelligence about Saddam's weapons program; two of the sources only gave one report each, compared to approximately a hundred reports from Curveball, and the fourth source, associated with the Iraqi National Congress, was deemed to be a fabricator in 2002 by Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA) Defense Human Intelligence (HUMINT) Service^[3], however a failure to recall intelligence gathered from the source led to the information being used in published intelligence reports, such as the 2002 NIE (Bobbitt, 2009, p. 332; Robb-Silberman Commission, 2005, p. 85). It is clear to see the chain of events which were set in motion by the intelligence collected from Curveball. The information being gathered from this individual had been used extensively in the evidence being presented to policymakers in the United States, a nation who's political elites, after the shocking events of the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, were already concerned about the possibility of weapons of mass destruction being obtained by terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda. Thus the political culture around the Bush administration meant that any information of weapons of mass destruction being developed by a rogue nation would be cause for a shift towards a more aggressive foreign policy on Iraq. The neoclassical realist, unit-level analysis of the domestic political culture of the United States in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq is crucial in showing why Curveball's intelligence was not only deemed to be extremely important, but was received so favourably by policymakers in Washington.

Another important conceptual aspect of the handling of the intelligence coming from Curveball is the use of the intelligence cycle^[4] to illustrate some of the breakdowns in communication which led essentially misinformation to be used as a basis to approve military intervention. The intelligence cycle can be broken down in to five broad areas of action; planning and direction, collection, processing, analysis and dissemination. If one compares the intelligence cycle with the case of Curveball it is plain to see the intelligence breakdowns which led to his intelligence being used to shape American foreign policy in 2003. The collection phase of the cycle was handled primarily by the BND, however the DIA Defense HUMINT Service also held a responsibility to assess the validity of the information which they were receiving (Robb-Silberman Commission, 2005, p. 88). The first failure in the intelligence cycle which allowed Curveball to feed misinformation to the authorities was the failure of the Defense HUMINT service "even to attempt to validate Curveball's reporting", which the service later claimed was the responsibility of the analysts to whom intelligence was being passed (Robb-Silberman Commission, 2005, p. 88). A lack of asset validation, as it is referred to within the intelligence community, allowed analysts who were processing the intelligence reports being passed to them to treat this information as being reliable. As a result, the potentially inaccurate intelligence was passed to analysts to be processed and scrutinized, however at this stage of the intelligence cycle there were also errors in judgement.

During the processing and analysis phases of the intelligence cycle, an over-reliance on Curveball's information emerged. This phase of the intelligence cycle encompasses the processes of piecing bits of information gathered

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during the collection phase into a broader intelligence report, processing, which can then be interpreted by intelligence analysts. As stated earlier, Curveball was providing virtually the entire content of the intelligence which was being passed to intelligence analysts and which would then be packaged into the 2002 NIE. The refusal of intelligence analysts to acknowledge possible concerns about the reliability demonstrated a possible case of analysts looking to sieve the evidence for information which supported their preconceptions about Iraq weapons of mass destruction program (Bobbitt, 2009, p. 335; Robb-Silberman Commission, 2005, p. 90; Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2004, p. 162). An anonymous analyst involved in the production of the NIE, quoted in Drogin (2008), confirms the prejudice which existed among intelligence analysts, "The going-in assumption was that we were going to war so this NIE was to be written with that in mind" (p. 159). The preconceived assumptions which analysts were making about the Iraqi weapons program, combined with their over-reliance on a single source, resulted in an overstated report on Iraq mobile biological weapons capability (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2004, p. 188). The analysis of the intelligence cycle in relation to the Curveball source has thus far demonstrated the reasons why information from the source gained momentum within the United States intelligence community and how it began to shape the evidence, and subsequent policy, in the months before the invasion of Iraq. However, to understand fully the effects of relying so heavily on a single, unverified source, one must examine the final phase of the intelligence cycle; the dissemination of intelligence to policymakers and into the public domain.

The dissemination of Curveball intelligence to policymakers and the wider international community was vital in supporting the case for military action against Saddam Hussein. However, a failure to make policymakers aware of the circumstances surrounding Curveball, such as the fact that American interrogators were not able to gain access to the source before the 2002 NIE, restricted policymakers from being able to properly assess the information that was being presented to them (Robb-Silberman Commission, 2005, p. 94). This lack of communication between analysts and policymakers reflects the lack of communication which was present throughout the intelligence cycle in the Curveball case. After observing a presentation to the United Nations by U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, German intelligence officials were "incredulous" because the BND believed that Curveball was only a single source of intelligence and could not be verified (Drogin, 2008, p. 203). To the contrary, during his presentation to the United Nations in February of 2003, Colin Powell used phrases such as "the thick intelligence file we have", "firsthand descriptions" and "eyewitness account", however, Curveball had admitted to the Germans that some of the information he was giving them had been second- or third-hand accounts (Drogin, 2008, p. 202; CNN, 2003). The presentation proved to be crucial and "galvanized American opinion in favor of war... [O]pinion polls showed an immediate jump in support for Bush's threat to use force" (Drogin, 2008, p. 202). One can see how the lack of communication that riddled the intelligence cycle, particularly between analysts and policymakers, led to a gross overstating of the Iraqi biological weapon capability, as well as the veracity of the intelligence which was providing the evidence for these claims. Simultaneously, it is clear to see the process by which Curveball's intelligence was passed through the intelligence cycle, gained momentum and ultimately played a crucial role in the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003.

The following section of the essay will expand upon the neoclassical realist analysis of the role of intelligence in the Iraq War, as well as addressing some of the systemic features of the international system in 2003 which allowed America, along with other countries, to initiate military action against Saddam Hussein. Having introduced the importance of policymakers in the previous section examining the intelligence cycle, attention will now turn towards the importance of the political elites and domestic political culture in neoclassical realism and the role which these factors played in the use of intelligence regarding the Iraq War.

Neoclassical realists assert that the personalities and perceptions of statesman play an important role in shaping the foreign policy, and therefore behaviour, of states (Schmidt, 2005, p. 543; Schweller, 2004, p. 170; Zakaria, 1998, p. 42). As has been previously examined, the intelligence community passes the information which it has gathered and analysed to policymakers and statesmen in order for a decision to be made on how the intelligence relates to policy. In the case of the Bush administration in the United States and the Blair government in the United Kingdom, one must examine the context in which this information was being interpreted and the perceptions and preferences of the political elite, who would subsequently make policy decision based on the intelligence they had.

The attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 were a crucial turning point in the perception of American leadership

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and paved the way for the development of the Bush Doctrine. George W. Bush, quoted in Jervis (2003), explained in a 2003 speech that “my vision shifted dramatically after September 11, because I now realize the stakes, I realize the world has changed” (Jervis, 2003, p. 372). This demonstrates the then-President’s shift in opinion towards a policy of unilateralism, preventative war, American hegemony and the spread of democracy (Jervis, 2003). Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, would later assert that war in Iraq was initiated because “we saw the existing evidence in a new light, through the prism of our experience on September 11” (Risen, Sanger & Shanker, 2003). These examples clearly show that the terrorist attacks of September 11th had a profound effect on the Bush administration, pushing the President and his advisors towards a military course in order to combat terrorism and rogue states. The Bush Doctrine is an important factor when analysing the role that intelligence played in the Iraq War. In line with neoclassical realist theory, the perceptions of the political elite are crucial in a state’s foreign policy decisions and this was very much the case in post-September 11th America. The intelligence reports that were being passed to policymakers were being viewed from a standpoint which already embraced preventative war as a justifiable means of securing oneself against Saddam Hussein’s development of a biological weapons program. Therefore any intelligence which suggested that Iraq could possess weapons of mass destruction would provide a basis for taking military action against the regime in Iraq. Coupled with the Bush Doctrine’s desire to “bring free markets and free elections to countries without them” (Jervis, 2003, p. 366) and it becomes clear that the context within which intelligence was being interpreted by policymakers was one where there was a strong willingness to utilise the military, not only as part of Bush’s preventative war policy, but also in an attempt to spread Western values of democracy and liberalism across the globe. Thus, while the intelligence that was being passed to policymakers, particularly that of Curveball, was an extremely influential factor in the decision to invade Iraq, an equally important factor that must be considered is the preexisting prejudices towards the Iraqi weapons program which were present in the American political elite at the time.

Similarly, the political elite in the United Kingdom were moving towards the decision that action which went beyond the previous sanctions against Iraq was needed. The decision to go to war in Iraq was a much different process from that of the events which took place in the United States. As Christoph Bluth (2004) highlights, one of the key issues in the British decision-making process was whether to support the United States and form a coalition. The initiative for military action was coming from the Bush administration (Bluth, 2004, p. 874) and ultimately Britain would choose to support this initiative. Echoing Secretary Rumsfeld and President Bush’s sentiments regarding the effect of the September 11th attacks, Tony Blair made it clear that these events were also a pivotal moment for the UK administration, “what changed for me with September 11th was that I thought then you have to change your mindset... you have to go out and get after the different aspects of this threat... you have to deal with this because otherwise the threat will grow... you have to take a stand” (Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors, 2004, p. 54^[5]). This excerpt illustrates that a shift in attitude towards so-called rogue states occurred after September 11th, not only in Washington but in London as well. Thus, it is clear that there was a consensus among the political elite of the two countries, particularly in their preconceptions towards the use of military action in Iraq. Again, the importance of the existing mindset of policymakers towards a particular issue cannot be overstated. It is crucial in understanding the emphasis which may be placed on certain information, such as the development of biological weapons program by Iraq, and the action they are prepared to take in response to this intelligence.

Similar to the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate which was published in the United States, the UK government published a dossier entitled “Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction” in 2002, based on intelligence which came through the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC)^[6]. The dossier outlined the JIC’s assessment of the threat that Iraq’s suspected weapons program constituted, including the now infamous assertion that Saddam’s “military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them”, the development of mobile biological laboratories for military use and the development of weapons which would be able to strike UK armed force bases on the island of Cyprus (UK Government, 2002). The use of human intelligence in compiling the assessments of Iraq’s weapons capability was again based on sources which had not been carefully verified by the UK intelligence (Butler Report, 2004, p. 89). Additionally, the claim that Iraq could have biological and chemical weapons ready to fire in 45 minutes garnered much attention in the media, however the ambiguous^[7] nature of the assessment led the Butler Report to conclude that “the JIC should not have included the ‘45 minute’ report in its assessment and in the Government’s dossier without stating what it was believed to refer to” (2004, p. 127). Despite this assessment of the 45-minute claim over the deployment of weapons, the September 2002 Dossier placed a significant emphasis on the

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timeframe within which Saddam Hussein could use biological weapons, highlighting the possibility of using weapons within 45 minutes no fewer than four times, including in the foreword, which was written by Prime Minister Blair, and executive summary sections of the Dossier (UK Government, 2002; House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2002, p. 26). The prominence which was given to this claim was later criticised by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee's review on the decision to go to war in Iraq (2002, p. 27). However, when presented to the House of Commons, and the public, this claim proved to be extremely influential in the decision to go to war. Much like Secretary of State Powell's presentation to the United Nations Security Council which would take place in 2003, the Dossier's publication helped to build public support for military intervention in Iraq. As with any state's behaviour, public support for a foreign policy shift is crucial, especially when examining such a change in foreign policy from a neoclassical realist perspective. Fareed Zakaria's analysis of the United States' rise in power after the U.S. Civil War juxtaposed against its relative lack of expansion overseas demonstrates why unit-level variables, in this case the ability of government to gain public support for a foreign policy, are so important. Zakaria notes that the rise in material wealth of the post-Civil War America did not result in an expansion of U.S. influence abroad but that "national power lay dormant beneath a weak state, one that was decentralized, diffuse and divided" (Zakaria, 1998, pp. 10-11)^[8]. His analysis shows that influence or power can not be effectively projected abroad without the government being able to access the resources and support of the nation. However, in the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003, the intelligence community provided the evidence about weapons of mass destruction, the potential speed with which these weapons could be launched and the danger they posed to national interests which gave policymakers the ability to win over public support and legislative approval, both by the U.S. Congress and the U.K. House of Commons, to use military force. Therefore, the intelligence which was used as evidence of a rising threat from the Hussein regime played a crucial role in ensuring that both state and society were willing to pursue the policy of intervention in Iraq.

While neoclassical realist theory is a departure from the structural realism promoted by Kenneth Waltz, the international system still plays an important role in determining the foreign policy behaviour of a state. Gideon Rose asserts that while systemic factors may not be strong enough to force a state into choosing a particular course of action, they "may shape the broad contours and general direction of foreign policy" (1998, p. 147). As the final section of this analysis will highlight, the context of the international system allowed the United States to pursue a policy of military intervention without a significant check on American influence. Combined with the unilateral nature of the Bush Doctrine, it will become clear that the intelligence being passed through the U.S. intelligence community and policymakers would direct foreign policy in a system which would have little restriction on the influence of such a powerful state.

Since the end of the Cold War, the international system has become a unipolar model, with the United States of America as the sole superpower in the international community. Recently, the rise of China and other economically powerful states such as India and Brazil has called into question America's economic hegemony over the international system, but culturally, militarily and, for the time-being, economically, the United States remains as the undisputed hegemonic power in international relations (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 7). Thus, as has been previously discussed, the intelligence which indicated that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction directed U.S. foreign policy towards military intervention. This became a plausible course of action for America due, in part to the unilateral nature of the Bush Doctrine, but also to the lack of constraints on the projection of military power by the United States in Iraq. Here, one can observe the role of systemic factors in controlling the broad aspects of foreign policy, as detailed by Rose, working together with the unit-level analysis and individual factors, arguably more important in neoclassical realism (Schmidt, 2005, p. 544), which directed policymakers towards a particular course of action. Rose states that "in the neoclassical realist world leaders can be constrained by both international and domestic politics" (1998, p. 152), however in the decision to go to war in Iraq the international system and domestic politics combined to promote, rather than constrain, an expansion of American influence and power. Therefore, the conclusion that can be reached regarding the role of the international system in decision to intervene in Iraq is that the unipolar nature of the international arena in 2003 allowed the United States a virtually blank canvas for its decision on how to respond to the intelligence that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction. Had another superpower existed then power may have been balanced against another state and the foreign policy options available to America may have been limited, but with the United States securely in place as the global, hegemonic power there was no constraints on the options open to policymakers.

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In conclusion, this essay has highlighted empirical and theoretical evidence to support the view that while the decision to go to war in Iraq was perhaps not intelligence-*led*, it was most certainly intelligence-*driven*. That is to say that there were many factors which combined in a perfect political storm, resulting in military intervention in Iraq, but that the foundation upon which the argument for going to war was built was the intelligence pointing towards Saddam Hussein's development of weapons of mass destruction, particularly biological weapons. As this essay has shown, a significant amount of importance is placed on intelligence, particularly when that information indicates a potential threat. The information being passed to the intelligence community by the Curveball source highlighted precisely such a concern, and thus gained momentum among U.S. intelligence analysts, policymakers and public opinion. This was the empirical evidence which justified military intervention to halt the development of incredibly lethal weapons in a state which was perceived as being suspicious at best. The persuasive evidence presented both in America and the United Kingdom would convince both legislatures to approve the decision to use military force in Iraq. An examination of the intelligence cycle and the manner in which Curveball's intelligence was passed through this cycle, although highlighting a breakdown in communication, also illustrates that documents such as the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate or 2002 Dossier published by the UK government, would be crucial in supporting the decision to go to war in Iraq. The intelligence being passed to policymakers acted as a catalyst towards military intervention and became the foundation that could always be referred to in order to justify taking action against Saddam Hussein.

However, there were also a number of external factors which played an important role in the decision to go to war and on the manner in which the intelligence being obtained was interpreted. The existing prejudices of political elites in the United States and the United Kingdom towards an Iraqi weapons program coloured their view on an appropriate response to information that Iraq had been developing biological weapons. This was particularly important within the Bush administration and the policies of unilateralism and preemptive action that were already being advocated within the upper echelons of government. There was significant shift in the attitudes of leaders after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11th, 2001. Subsequent to these attacks, both Tony Blair and George W. Bush felt a pressing need to take action against states which posed a threat to national security. Finally, the lack of a competing superpower in the international system and the scope of U.S. hegemonic power resulted in a lack of constraints on the menu of foreign policy choices which the United States could choose from. A combination of these factors; the level of threat perceived by the political elite, public and political support for military intervention and favourable conditions in the international system were the deciding factors in going to war in Iraq. However, the development which set the entire process in motion was the emergence of intelligence about a developing weapons program in Iraq. Thus, intelligence provided the issue which had to be dealt with but there were many other factors which shaped the response of the United States and coalition forces. The multiplicity of factors which are involved in making a foreign policy decision have been highlighted by the use of a neoclassical realist approach in examining the view that the Iraq War was intelligence-led and as has been demonstrated, the decision to use military force came down to a combination of factors, driven by the discovery of intelligence pertaining to Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction.

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[1] BND stands for Bundesnachrichtendienst, the German Federal Intelligence Agency.

[2] This report will hereafter be referred to as the Robb-Silberman Commission.

[3] This is the human intelligence collection service of the Department of Defense

[4] For a full illustration of the intelligence cycle, see Diagram 1, page 16.

[5] This report will hereafter be referred to as it's more commonly-known name, the Butler Report

[6] The Joint Intelligence Committee is "chaired by the Cabinet Office and made up of the heads of the UK's three Intelligence and Security Agencies, the Chief of Defence Intelligence, and senior officials from key government departments" (UK Government, 2002, p. 3)

[7] It was not made clear in the 2002 Dossier whether the claim was relating to weapons which could reach UK Sovereign bases, such as Cyprus, and if the 45-minute timeframe described the maximum time from the order being given and the weapon being fired, or the weapon being moved into a position on a battlefield where it could be ready to fire.

[8] Zakaria draws a distinction between national power and state power, which he describes as the "proportion of national power the government can extract for its purposes and reflects the ease with which central decisionmakers can achieve their ends" (1998, p. 9).

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Written by: Daniel Sutherland Written at: University of Aberdeen Written for: Dr. Archie W. Simpson Date written: April 2011