

# The Bush Administration's Invasion of Iraq: A Case of Ontological Insecurity?

Written by Ayman Triki

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AYMAN TRIKI, SEP 7 2021

This paper argues that ontological insecurity (OIS) was a key element in the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. By conveying how both the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks induced OIS, it can be demonstrated that the Bush administration was influenced to intervene in Iraq by the need to maintain a stable and coherent sense of the USA's Self and state identity. To substantiate my argument, I will conduct a discourse analysis of political speeches produced by the Bush administration between the 9/11 attacks and the invasion. I will, in similar fashion to Ayse Zarakol, take a middle-line approach with my level of analysis, applying both Mitzen's exogenous approach to OS, and Steele's endogenous approach, presenting how both the breakdown of external routinised relations and incongruence with the USA's internal biographical narratives, were present in the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq (Bolton, 2021: 131; Zarakol, 2010; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2007). Initially, I will explore the decision to invade Iraq through the exogenous lens which will attempt to convey how since the end of the Cold War and after the 9/11 attacks, the USA experienced a breakdown in the Self-Other and state-state routinised relations that sustained its identity, and its need to re-establish these routines and achieve OS influenced its decision to invade Iraq. After exploring some criticisms of Mitzen's exogenous approach and how this may question the extent to which OIS influenced the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, I will then cool these tensions by applying Steele's endogenous approach to analyse the speeches. This will eventually present how maintaining consistency with and finding friendship for an overlap with its internal biographical narratives, played a prominent role in the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, reinforcing how they acted in an OS-security seeking manner.

### Exogenous roots of American ontological insecurity

#### *Searching for a purpose: Iraq as the enemy-Other*

A discourse analysis of Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address, widely regarded as setting in motion the decision to invade Iraq, can present the importance of OIS in explaining the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. This is because Bush's labelling of Iraq as comprising an "axis of evil" (Bush, 2002) can be regarded as elucidating how the invasion of Iraq was constitutive of an anxiety-management mechanism, where the Bush administration sought to return to its Cold War routines and re-establish its purpose of Self by identifying an enemy-Other in the post-Cold War era. Neorealists have argued that the end of the Cold War marked a period of uncertainty as bipolarity had proven to be the most stable in regard to balance of power and physical security. However, Dumbrell conveys how in fact, this uncertainty within the USA stemmed from discussions and concerns of a search for a statement of purpose, which anchors itself much more to the issue of identity (Dumbrell, 2018:101). Mitzen's exogenous vision of OS can account for this, as the uncertainty and loss of purpose that the USA experienced after the end of the Cold War stemmed from OIS, as they entered a state of fundamental anxiety known as peacetime anxieties (Berenskoetter and Nayalm, 2020:15). Since state identity is formed via international interaction, states can become attached to relationships, even conflictual ones, which sustain these identities as they begin to satisfy states' routines. This allows them to form a basic trust system, and have agency by gaining a sense of predictability which orders the international arena (Mitzen, 2006:346). For the USA, it had become so attached to its routines during the Cold War, that the dissolution of the enemy-Other (the USSR) meant that the loss of this relationship created OIS, as it was a relationship which defined and provided stability for the USA's identity and purpose for the best part of 40 years

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(Berenskoetter and Nyalm, 2020:15). Given that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which the USA became involved in by liberating Kuwait, coincided with the end of the Cold War, one can infer that the USA set about constructing a new enemy-Other in Iraq, achieving OS, as O'Reilly argues of how the USA immediately began framing rogue states as the new threat (O'Reilly, 2007:296). This influenced the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003, as this slowly began allowing the USA to return to its Cold War routines, in which it had a dichotomised view of good vs evil. This meant that when 9/11 happened, the Bush administration had no qualms in framing Iraq as evil and using it as leverage to invade Iraq, as it satisfied OS routines (Ruby 2004:32). Correspondingly, we can see the significant role that OIS has in explaining the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. Since the end of the Cold War, the USA pursued rogue states, principally Iraq as the new enemy-Other, which allowed it to retain a stable identity and rediscover the routines which provided it with a sense of purpose.

## *Iraq as the 'visible' enemy-Other post-9/11*

Having made mention of the 9/11 attacks, the decision to frame Iraq as evil and a 'sponsor of terror' (Bush, 2002) within the State of Union Address, very much accelerated the invasion. When inspected much more closely, 9/11 can be demonstrated as a source of OIS, explaining the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq as an anxiety-reducing procedure in response to 9/11. The 9/11 attacks were a shock to the international system, as for a non-state actor as Al Qaeda to inflict the level of damage it did, this represented a novel and unprecedented security challenge (Fukuyama, 2006:67). This became a source for OIS, with the concepts of how states and people understood the international system being fundamentally shaken, as this was not a conventional inter-state conflict, but rather an attack from a group who, as Mitzen and Schweller note, seemed to pose an existential threat to the entire state-system by rejecting it altogether (Mitzen and Schweller, 2011:32). For the USA, this created anxiety and a disconnect with the perception of its own state-qua-state identity, in which it assumed itself the role of protecting the states system (Epstein, 2007:15). The routines it had established, especially since the Cold War, were not programmed to deal with a threat against an enemy in Al Qaeda who functions behind the scenes as a network spanning over many territories (Epstein, 2007:19). Therefore, as Ruby demonstrates, the Bush administration returned to its Cold War routines to establish OS and identify a visible enemy. By placing states within the War on Terror (WoT) discourse and invading Iraq, the Bush administration re-established the stability and concepts of the international system, consolidating its view of states as the primary actors, who can be held accountable for disorder in the international system (Ruby, 2004:32). Hence, OIS holds important explanatory power in the Bush administration's decision to create an Al Qaeda-Iraq nexus and invade Iraq. By identifying a state (Iraq) as the evil enemy and having a share of responsibility in the 9/11 attacks, a visible enemy was able to be produced, allowing the USA to restore a perception of authority and order in the international system, sustaining the routines of its state-qua-state identity.

## *Weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)*

When analysing Secretary of Defence Dominic Rumsfeld's usage of the terminology 'unknown unknowns' (Rumsfeld, 2002) within his Press Conference in NATO in 2002, we also see how this breakdown of the external, international routinised relations after 9/11 affected the decision-making of the Bush administration, making them prone to accepting a lack of evidence to justify invasion of Iraq, one such being WMDs. This is because the need for the Bush administration to create a "WMD-terrorist nexus" (Gause, 2009) to invade Iraq, stemmed from the need to regain confidence and certainty in their OS routines, establishing a sense of agency to allow them to know how exactly to respond to the new threat of 9/11. The decision to invade Iraq under the pretext of WMDs, despite there being a lack of evidence and eventually no WMDs found, has been problematic for analysts attempting to gauge the Bush administration's motives for invading Iraq (Hinnebusch, 2007:209). Mitzen and Schweller assert that what analysts overlook is that those within the Bush administration were acting in an OS-seeking manner, as they convey how Vice-President Dick Cheney's decision to endorse the WMDs as justification to invade Iraq, was the effect of misplaced certainty, a symptomatic tendency of being in times of OIS (Mitzen and Schweller, 2011:32). As already mentioned, the scale of damage that Al Qaeda was able to inflict during 9/11, despite being a non-state actor, disrupted the concepts and established routines of the international system. What this meant is that the USA also experienced a sense of paralysis in its established routines, and hence OIS, as it did not know exactly how to respond to this new threat. By creating a nexus between terrorism and rogue states with potential WMDs such as Iraq, this allowed the Bush administration to invade Iraq and regain a sense of confidence in its routines, as it gave it a clear cognitive

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vision of how to address the issue of terrorism (Mitzen and Scheweller, 2011:32). Kinnvall has noted how emotions such as confidence and self-esteem act as processes of OS during times of OIS, as it provides comfort and acts as an anxiety-reduction mechanism, and this was the case for the Bush administration (Kinnvall, 2004:755). Hence, OIS provides a substantial explanation and rationale behind the Bush administration's decision to, despite a lack of evidence, create and pursue the 'unknown unknown' of the WMD-terrorist nexus, and hence invade Iraq. This is because this was symptomatic of a need to secure OS, where the Bush administration needed to reassure itself of how to tackle this new threat and restore a sense of agency with its routines in the face of terrorism.

## *Potential limitations*

However, one could question the extent to which OIS explains the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, by arguing that physical security was much more important in the decision to invade on account of potential WMDs. As Jervis argues, the decision to invade Iraq after 9/11 and root out potential WMDs was driven by a realist, realist deterrence approach to avoid future attacks on American soil. (Jervis, 2003:327). This is certainly plausible, as after the 9/11 attacks, fears became that since a weak non-state actor could inflict such damage, defiance of the USA would be emboldened, and the chances of another attack may be increased, especially from potential WMD rogue states (Hinnebusch, 2007:220). Since there had been a four-year long absence of UN inspections on WMDs in Iraq by 9/11, and Saddam Hussein had a history of willingness to use biological and chemical weapons, this meant that, as Butt contends, invasion of Iraq became a suitable candidate for its demonstrative and performative effect as a retaliation to 9/11 (Butt, 2019:270/Hinnebusch, 2007:220/van Tergouw, 2018:11). This more realist and realist approach can question OIS as a measure of state behaviour. Scholars such as Lebow have taken issue with OS literature's application of emotions, such as confidence and self-esteem, to states such as the USA, which have multiple and conflicting identifications (Lerner, 2020:21). This can feed into, as Epstein argues, a fallacy of composition in which issues of individual-level anxiety are being uncritically scaled up to a state (Epstein, 2011:327). In this case, it can cast doubt on the extent to which OIS explains the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, as it may have just been a realist deterrence act against any future attacks.

## **Endogenous roots of American ontological insecurity**

### *Biographical narrative of US exceptionalism*

Nonetheless, Steele's endogenous vision of OS can challenge Jervis' portrayal of the Iraq invasion as solely being an example of realist deterrence and physical security needs. Rather, an analysis of Bush's 'Speech on Iraq' in 2003 (Bush, 2003), which declared the decision to invade Iraq, suggests that alongside physical security needs, the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq was also driven by the OS desire to reassure the self-needs of its internal biographical narrative of 'exceptionalism' after 9/11. Steele's endogenous vision of OS stipulates a more domestic vision, where rather than constantly becoming attached to routinised relations with the Other to sustain its identity, a state also aims to achieve OS by having consistency with the biographical narratives it has of itself (Steele, 2007). The USA has an endogenous biographical narrative of itself as an exceptional and unique nation, and one way in which it has expressed this has been the way it has attempted to act as a benevolent hegemon and fashion the world in accordance with its liberal vision of peace and freedom (Deudney and Meiser, 2018:35). However, 9/11 challenged this notion of exceptionalism, causing OIS as despite the USA's self-professed benevolence and desire to impart peace and freedom to the world, the terrorist attacks represented a source of hatred towards the USA, creating an incongruence with its biographical narrative. To reassure its self-needs of maintaining consistency with the biographical narrative of its exceptionalism and benevolent role, Steele demonstrates how the Bush administration's post-9/11 foreign policy became encompassed by a pursuit of OS through three forms of social action: morality, humanitarianism, and social honour (Steele, 2007). These forms of social action inspired the decision to invade Iraq, as theories began to emerge from within the Bush administration, that the 9/11 attacks were symptomatic of the high degree of authoritarianism and repression in the Middle East, and the region needed to be liberated (Cook, 2012). By removing a prominent and virulent dictator in Saddam Hussein, a possible domino effect would have been established in which the democratisation of the region would become consistent with the USA's notion of exceptionalism and benevolence (Cook, 2012). This is substantiated within Bush's 'Address to the Nation on Iraq' speech, as the use of language such as how the USA would rise to its "duty", and "advance liberty and

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peace" to the Iraqi people "deserving and capable of human liberty" (Bush, 2003/Dearborn, 2013:52). This suggests that the OIS very much explains the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, as Bush's discourse of liberation presents the need to reassure itself of its supposed benevolent qualities and maintain consistency with its biographical narrative of US exceptionalism, which was shaken after 9/11.

## Friendship

This focus on biographical narratives, within the perspective of a middle-line approach between an exogenous and endogenous vision of OS, also brings us to how friendship with the Other acts as a process for OS, and how this was an important factor in explaining the Bush administration's decision to disregard the opposition of its democratic allies and invade Iraq. Horness notes how the American decision to invade Iraq has been problematic for the theory of liberalism, which finds it difficult to explain why the USA was willing to pursue regime change in Iraq through undemocratic means, especially in the face of opposition by its democratic allies (Horness, 2003:25). However, this can be accounted for when establishing friendship as an analytical concept within OS, as Berenskoetter argues that friendship provides OS in times of OIS, as not only is it an anxiety controlling mechanism, but it also provides the Self with power and stabilises the sense of Self by immersing biographical narratives in a shared project of world building (Berenskoetter, 2014:10,19). Considering this, one could argue that since 9/11 caused a period of OIS, it was the mutual empowerment gained by the encouragement of Britain, which played a decisive factor in the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. This is because Britain's overlapping with the USA's biographical narrative in seeing itself as a benevolent hegemon and leader of the Western world against the 'evil' Saddam Hussein, meant that the USA was willing to invade Iraq despite opposition from its democratic allies (Berenskoetter, 2014:15). Kissinger substantiates this, arguing that what came to distinguish the USA and Britain from its European counterparts after 9/11 and in its decision to invade Iraq, was a sense of solving and overcoming challenges, which resonates more with US exceptionalism, whereas European identity tends to seek the management of issues (Kissinger, 2001:295). Therefore, one could argue that without 9/11 inducing OIS and the mutual empowerment of friendship through OS, it would have been more difficult for the Bush administration to invade Iraq.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that OIS has an integral role in explaining the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. When applying Mitzen's exogenous approach to OS to Bush and Rumsfeld's political speeches, we see how the characterisation of Iraq as comprising an 'axis of evil', being a 'sponsor of terror' and retaining the 'unknown unknown' of WMDs, setting in motion the decision to invade Iraq, stemmed from a source of OIS. By portraying Iraq in such a way, we see how the USA sought to create an enemy-Other after the Cold War to regain a sense of purpose in its routines and identity. 9/11 as an OIS-inducing moment spelled a breakdown in the external routinised relations for being an unprecedented security challenge in the international system. This notion provides a rationale behind the pursuit of an Al Qaeda-Iraq, WMD-terrorist nexus, despite a lack of evidence, to invade Iraq, as this reduced anxiety and allowed the Bush administration to identify a visible enemy in the WoT. Despite tensions that the decision to invade Iraq may just have been a realist deterrence act for physical security reasons, Steele's endogenous approach to OS shows that the discourse of liberation within Bush's 'Address to the Nation on Iraq' speech, is consistent with acting in an OS-security seeking manner. We see how the Bush administration's willingness to ignore the opposition of its democratic allies and invade Iraq stemmed from maintaining consistency with the USA's biographical narrative of exceptionalism, enhanced by the mutual empowerment from and overlap by the Britain.

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