Iraq Attack Backfire

Attacks of all sorts can backfire, especially when they are perceived as unjust. But as well as being a potential outcome of an attack, backfire can be studied as a process. Attackers often seek to prevent backfire, whereas opponents of the attack seek to magnify it. Backfire is an ongoing struggle, a sort of game. The key is to understand the rules of the game. Using historical examples to outline the basic process of backfire, this essay examines the Iraq case and the five principal ways in which the attackers tried to inhibit backfire.

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With each death of a US soldier in Iraq and each report about the absence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, it becomes more obvious that the attack of Iraq has backfired on the US administration. But the signs of backfire have been apparent for a long time.

Before the invasion there were massive protest rallies, with the largest single-day numbers in history on February 15, 2003 including large numbers of people who had never joined a rally before. Public opinion in most countries was strongly against the attack. Many governments opposed it, most prominently several key members of the UN Security Council. Interviews in 20 countries in May 2003 revealed that "in most countries, opinions of the US are markedly lower than they were a year ago. The war has widened the rift between Americans and western Europeans, further inflamed the Muslim world, softened support for the war on terrorism, and significantly weakened global public support for the pillars of the post-second world war era – the UN and the North Atlantic alliance" [PGAP 2003].

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A note on terminology: I avoid calling the attack on Iraq a 'war' because the conflict was so one-sided. In western media reports, the attackers were conventionally called 'the coalition'. Here I usually refer to the 'US government' because it was the prime mover, with the British government playing second fiddle; the Australian and Polish military contingents were token and mostly unremarked. I avoid referring to 'the US' as an actor – as in 'the US said' or 'the US attacked' – because it doesn't distinguish between the government and the people. But even to refer to the US government as the attacker is misleading, because it was a relatively small group within the government that made the key decisions.

I begin by outlining the basic process of backfire using historical examples. Then I examine the Iraq case, looking at five principal ways in which the attackers tried to inhibit backfire.

Backfire: The Process

On March 21, 1960, white South African police in the township of Sharpeville opened fire on a large crowd of black Africans protesting against pass laws, killing perhaps a hundred and wounding many more. This massacre reverberated around the world, triggering an enormous upsurge in global anti-apartheid action [Frankel 2001]. The massacre can be said to have backfired in that it discredited apartheid and led to an expansion of opposition.

Two factors are central to this backfire effect. The first is that the attack is seen to be unjust or, more generally, a violation of a widely held norm. In Sharpeville just prior to the massacre, there were clashes between police and black activists, including one in which several activists were killed. There were deep-seated misperceptions. Organisers of the rally did not plan an attack on the police, but many police believed they were under serious threat. Leadership on both sides was weak. Some protesters threw stones. Despite the lack of non-violent discipline, though, nothing that the protesters did warranted sustained shooting without warning, with many crowd members shot in the back. The shooting was grossly disproportionate to anything done by the protesters and this was seen as unjust.

Across many cultures and historical periods, there appears to be a common sense of injustice [Moore 1978]. The widespread reaction to the Sharpeville massacre is readily explained as due to a perception of injustice. However, not everyone perceives things the same way, no matter how blatant the situation may appear to some. Within white South Africa, where blacks were seen as inferior, and especially within the police, blame for the killings was attributed to 'agitators' who had egged on the crowd and created a serious threat to the police.

The second factor central to the backfire effect is availability of information to relevant audiences. News of the Sharpeville massacre was immediately available: many people had witnessed the events or had heard about them via reports by police and journalists, even though the police did make an effort to block information flow. The Sharpeville massacre is just one of many examples in which attacks on largely nonviolent protesters backfire.

– The 1905 massacre of protesters in St Petersburg, Russia, triggered a massive increase in opposition to the Csar's regime, including revolutionary action, first in the cities and eventually in the countryside [Harcave 1964];

– The beating of satyagrahis participating in the 1930 salt march in India, led by Gandhi, weakened British popular support for colonial rule [Dalton 1993];

– The 1998 police shooting of protesting students at Trisaki University, Indonesia triggered a massive expansion in the opposition to president Suharto, who stepped down not long after [Aspinall et al 1999; Forrester and May 1998].

Non-violence scholar Gene Sharp called this process 'political jiu-jitsu', in analogy with the sport of jiu-jitsu in which the opponent's strength and force are used against them. Examining hundreds of historical examples, Sharp found that political jiu-jitsu was such a predictable consequence of attack on non-violent activists that he included it as a key stage in

what he called "the dynamics of nonviolent action" [Sharp 1973, Sharp built his concept of political jiu-jitsu on the earlier concept of moral jiu-jitsu formulated by Richard B Gregg (1966)].

This same sort of process also occurs in cases that do not fit the category of non-violent action. In 1991, several Los Angeles police beat a fleeing black motorist named Rodney King, causing him serious injuries. This was not exceptional in itself; in preceding years, millions of dollars had been paid, as a result of judgments, jury verdicts or settlements, to claimants alleging police brutality by members of the Los Angeles police department. However, the beating of Rodney King was captured on video by George Holliday, one of many witnesses, and broadcast on television shortly after, causing outrage among many viewers [Lawrence 2000].

Rodney King was not a non-violent activist, so, strictly speaking, Sharp's framework of political jiu-jitsu does not apply to the reaction to his beating. Clearly, though, the same sorts of dynamics are involved: outrage when evidence of what appears to be a gross injustice is available to concerned people. I use the term 'back-fire' here to include all such cases in which people react against what they perceive as an unjust attack. It can occur in a wide variety of contexts, for example, in response to censorship [Jansen and Martin 2003] and torture [Martin and Wright 2003].

A related concept is 'blowback', a term used to describe unforeseen adverse consequences of government policies, especially covert operations [Johnson 2000; Simpson 1988]. More generally, policies can be assessed as counterproductive, according to some criteria [Kwitny 1986]. These concepts diverge from 'backfire', as used here, in that the centrepiece of the backfire process is an attack that can be perceived to be unjust.

Many attackers realise, consciously or intuitively, that their attacks can backfire, and take measures to mitigate this effect. However, it is not necessary to know the motivations of attackers in order to analyse backfire dynamics; all that is required is observation of actions that do indeed have the potential to inhibit backfire. There are five principal ways to inhibit backfire.

(1) The attack is hidden, for example by secrecy, censorship and false reports, to minimise awareness of its existence or significance.

Immediately after the Sharpeville massacre, police cordoned off the township and prevented entry of journalists. They also covered up the use of 'dum-dum' bullets that expand on impact, causing extensive injuries. The uproar over the Rodney King beating was an anomaly because it was videotaped; police are less likely to engage in brutal beatings when independent witnesses are obviously present.

(2) The target is devalued, for example by destroying its reputation or even de-humanising it, to create the impression that the target deserves being attacked or that it doesn't really matter.

Under apartheid in South Africa, many whites did not consider blacks to have the same human rights as themselves. Rodney King was denigrated as a petty criminal and, in the months following his beating, was arrested several times in ways that harmed his reputation [Owens and Browning 1994].

(3) Events are reinterpreted, with the alternative interpretation being that an attack didn't occur or no injustice was involved, for example, that the victim was actually the aggressor. The South African police blamed the Sharpeville massacre on black 'agitators'. Critics of Rodney King said that he was a 'felony evader' and a 'monster' who was an immediate threat to the police who beat him.

(4) Official bodies undertake investigations or make pronouncements that legitimate the attack.

After the Sharpeville massacre, a commission of inquiry was held and, through its assumptions and superficial investigation, minimised the implications of the events. Four police officers twice faced criminal charges in court over the Rodney King beating, a focus on individuals that diverted attention from wider problems with Los Angeles police department use-of-force policies and practices.

(5) The target, witnesses and supporters are intimidated so that concern about the attacks is less easily voiced.

Following the Sharpeville massacre, South African police went through the township arresting and beating up activists and others. Also, they forcibly removed injured protesters from hospitals. Following the Rodney King beating, in the course of the trials of Los Angeles police, many potential witnesses refused to testify due to fear of reprisals.

Having listed methods of inhibiting back-fire, the next stage is to examine 'counter-inhibitors', namely, ways of promoting backfire. That is normally the aim of those who are opposed to the attacks. Counter-inhibitors include exposing the attack, validating the victims, exposing double standards, avoiding reliance on official inquiries, and resisting and exposing intimidation.

With this framework, it is possible to systematically analyse the attack on Iraq, noting how the attackers attempted to inhibit backfire and how opponents attempted to maximise it. There is such a wealth of material on the events that only a few of many possible examples can be presented here.

Cover Up

Some wars are carried out in secrecy or by use of proxy armies, limiting the prospect for backfire. For example, the US government financially supported the French military in Vietnam for years until its defeat in 1954, and subsequently supported the South Vietnamese government and military before, during and after direct participation by US troops. The low profile of this involvement is one key reason why, from the late 1940s until the mid-1960s, opposition to US-government-supported attacks in Vietnam was limited [Ellsberg 2002].

However, there was no prospect of covering up the 2003 attack on Iraq. Throughout 2002, long in advance of the actual assault, the US government increasingly signalled its intention to conquer Iraq. This made the likelihood of backfire much greater, at least if people perceived the attack as unjust.

Nevertheless, cover-ups played a significant role. It is often perceived that the attack on Iraq only began in March 2003, but actually attacks occurred throughout the period after the first Gulf war, in 1991, until 2003. This included bombings of Iraq that seldom attracted news coverage or protest. After the first Gulf war, the US and British governments unilaterally set up 'no-fly' zones – no flying for Iraqi aircraft – over parts of Iraq, though these had no legal status, and made thousands of overflights between 1991 and 2003, including regular bombings leading to many civilian casualties [Arnove 2000; Scahill 2002].

Some attacks on Iraq in the period 1991-2003 were undertaken covertly, but others were made openly, sometimes with fanfare such as the bombings beginning in December 1998. For these latter attacks, the description 'cover-up' is not quite appropriate, but still captures some of the dynamics. By being a matter of routine and usually operating below the threshold of interest for news media and peace groups, the attacks largely escaped scrutiny and seldom triggered outrage. The very normality and banality of the attacks served as a sort of de facto cover-up.

Such de facto cover-ups applied to many other matters involving Iraq. The US government's support for Saddam Hussein's regime throughout the 1980s was, following the Iraqi military invasion of Kuwait in 1990, seldom mentioned by

US government officials, especially in the 2002-03 lead-up to attack. Nor did officials mention the US government's unwillingness to topple Saddam Hussein in 1991 when, just after the first Gulf war, it had the opportunity. This silence about earlier complicity with the regime became more salient as US officials castigated the Iraqi regime for having biological and chemical weapons and for using chemical weapons against Iranian troops and Kurdish civilians in the 1980s. Little was said by official sources about the role of US and British governments and companies in supplying materials for the Iraqi weapons programmes. For example, in president George W Bush's address to the nation of March 17, 2003, on the eve of the attack on Iraq, he stated "This regime has already used weapons of mass destruction against Iraq's neighbours and against Iraq's people" [Bush 2003]. However, he did not mention that this occurred in the 1980s when the US government supported the Iraqi regime, nor that the US government covered up the chemical weapons attack [Jentleson 1994]. (Similarly, the British government covered up its role in building the chemical plant in Iraq used for production of chemical weapons [Leigh and Hooper 2003].) In his address, Bush did not mention that the US government in 2001 undermined international efforts to develop a biological weapons convention, nor that the US has the world's largest biological weapons programme.

The UN sanctions imposed on Iraq beginning in 1990 resulted in enormous levels of suffering and death, with figures around a million extra deaths over a decade commonly being quoted, but with no apparent impact on the rule of Saddam Hussein. Such a death toll might have been treated, in other circumstances, as a emergency warranting humanitarian intervention; the process of de facto cover-up – namely, lack of attention or concern by government officials – turned this into an unremarkable occurrence or a "price that had to be paid"[Arnove 1979; Simons 1998].

The investigation of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was subject to more conventional cover-ups and disinformation, at least by some accounts [Pitt and Ritter 2002]. The lack of evidence of effective, deliverable biological, chemical or nuclear weapons in Iraq was covered up by false and misleading claims, for example of Iraqi importation of uranium from Niger. US spying under the cover of the UN weapons inspectors was also covered up.

Cover-up is greatly aided when mass media report US government pronouncements with no critical analysis or historical background, and do not run stories presenting other perspectives. This is typical of much western reporting, especially in the US [Rampton and Stauber 2003; Solomon and Erlich 2003, For critical assessments of the mass media more generally, see for example Hamelink 1994; Herman and Chomsky 1988, McChesney 1999; Sussman 1997].

The counter to these forms of cover-up is straightforward: exposure of information, for example of US government support for Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. Some writers and activists made great efforts to expose the horrific consequences of the sanctions. Finally, as mentioned, the conquest of Iraq was undertaken openly and signalled well in advance. In these circumstances, cover-up did not work very well to inhibit backfire from the attack.

Devaluing the Target

The most obvious method of devaluing Iraq as a target was by demonising Saddam Hussein. There is no doubt that Saddam was a brutal and dangerous dictator, guilty of gross human rights violations and launching wars against Iran and Kuwait. Even so, US government officials painted Saddam as an even greater monster, for example, by comparisons with Hitler. Bush in a talk in Prague on November 20, 2002 said, "Czechs and Slovaks learned through the harsh experience of 1938, … that aggression left unchecked by the great democracies can rob millions of their liberty and their lives". He went on to say, "A dictator who has used weapons of mass destruction on his own people must not be allowed to produce or possess those weapons. We will not permit Saddam Hussein to blackmail and/or terrorise nations which love freedom" [Bush 2002]. This was an implicit comparison between Hitler and Saddam Hussein, at least as interpreted by reporters [Kornblut and Sennot 2002]. Similarly, British prime minister Tony Blair, in an interview with *The Guardian,* drew parallels between confronting fascism in the 1930s and confronting Iraq [Ashley and MacAskill 2003a, 2003b].

The comparison with Hitler was misleading in more than one respect. Hitler was a far greater danger to the world because he commanded the extremely powerful German military machine and embarked on a programme of conquest; Saddam, though probably more brutal personally, commanded only the mediocre Iraqi military, with limited capacity for aggression after 1991. To compare Saddam with Hitler, as dangers to the world, was to confuse personal evil with state capacities. Many torturers and serial killers are just as evil personally as Saddam or Hitler, but they do not pose more than a local danger to the world.

Opponents of the attack on Iraq did not try to argue that Saddam was virtuous. Instead, their response can be summarised by the questions 'Why Iraq?' and 'Why (attack) now?' They pointed to double standards: there are plenty of brutal dictators in the world, including some who rule countries allied in the 'war on terrorism', such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Critics questioned why Iraq was singled out, among all the world's repressive regimes, for attack. Double standards were also involved in demonising Saddam, given that in the 1980s, when he had been just as ruthless, he had been an ally. The demonisation of Saddam no doubt helped convince some people to support the attack on Iraq. Others, though, used the double standard test to draw an opposite conclusion.

Interpreting the Attack

The attack on Iraq was perceived by many as a case of the world's sole superpower and possessor of overwhelming military force conquering a relatively weak country that posed no immediate threat. The attack was seen as unjust because it was illegal and because it was disproportionate to any threat posed by Iraq. To counter this perception, supporters of the attack offered a series of interpretations of what was going on. Whether these interpretations are considered to be honest views or as calculated public relations [Rampton and Stauber 2000; on war generally Carruthers 2000; Knightley 2000; Young and Jesser 1997], they operated to reduce backfire.

For a long time, the main theme was that Iraqi militarism was a threat to the world, including to the US, especially via weapons of mass destruction. This cleverly reinterpreted the attackers as the targets, and the target, Iraq, as the attacker. The attack on Iraq then could be interpreted as a form of defence, an interpretation that was formalised as the doctrine of pre-emption.[1]

The interpretation that the Iraqi regime was the (potential) attacker was pursued in various ways, including reference to Iraqi military use of chemical weapons in the 1980s, claims that evidence for Iraqi weapons programmes existed and claims that the UN weapons inspection process was not working. Underlying the ongoing claims by US and other officials was the assumption that the primary danger was from Iraq, indeed such an overwhelming and immediate danger that war was

required and that any other course of action constituted appeasement.

At one point, inspectors found that some Iraqi al-Samoud II missiles, in testing, travelled further than the 150-km limit placed on them after the first Gulf war: in particular, that they could travel up to 183 kms. Iraqi officials claimed that this was because the missiles had no payload. However, US and British officials made great play over this evidence of a threat – the missiles might be able to deliver biological or chemical weapons – and over Saddam's alleged unwillingness to disarm, even though a 183 km range was far short of what could reach Israel, much less the US. The key point here is that the focus was entirely on the Iraqi military threat.

In the psychological process of projection, a person denies a certain undesirable part of their personality and instead attributes it to others, and then attacks them [Lichtenberg 1994]. It could be said that US government officials, in planning an attack on Iraq, denied their own aggression and instead attributed it to the Iraqi regime, which was seen as so dangerous that it had to be attacked, and encouraged others to use the same process of projection.

Language played a big role in attempts to justify the attack. During the cold war, the expression 'weapons of mass destruction' referred exclusively to nuclear weapons. In the lead up to the attack on Iraq, US government officials expanded the meaning to include biological and chemical weapons, even though there were no examples where biological or chemical weapons had ever caused or were likely to cause 'mass destruction' approaching the scale routinely achieved using conventional weapons [Carroll 2003]. Other US-government favoured expressions included 'regime change' (rather than 'government overthrow'), 'death squads' (instead of 'fedayeen'), 'thugs' (instead of 'troops') and 'liberation' (instead of 'conquest' or 'occupation') [Bumiller 2003; Rampton and Stauber 2003; 113-130, Grammer as well as words can shape perception Cerulo 1998; Lukin 2003].

The second main argument used by the US government to justify the attack was that the Iraqi government was supplying weapons of mass destruction to terrorists, or was capable of doing so. Bush in his address to the nation just before the attack stated, "The regime … has aided, trained, and harboured terrorists, including operatives of Al Qaida" [Bush 2003]. Carefully crafted statements gave the impression that Saddam Hussein was implicated in the September 11 attacks – polls showed that many US citizens believed this was the case [PRCPP 2002]. – though no substantive evidence was ever presented to show any link between Al Qaida and the Iraqi regime [Chamberlain 2003; Pitt]. A third argument was that Iraq must be attacked to liberate Iraqis from Saddam Hussein.

Although many people were persuaded by one or more of these interpretations of the attack, many others found them wanting. Critics presented evidence of the absence of any serious threat from Iraq, of the effectiveness of the UN weapons inspection process, of Osama bin Laden's hostility to the secular Iraqi regime, and of fraudulent documents used to make the case against Saddam Hussein [Rai 2002; for examples of critiques of Bush speeches, Solomon and Erlich 125-154; Zunes (undated)].

Critics also pointed to double standards. Iraq's nuclear weapons programme was non-existent or at least far from making a bomb; why was it seen as such an urgent threat when known weapons states, including Pakistan, Israel, China and indeed the US itself, were not subject to the same strictures? [Williams 2003]. Why was Iraq's meagre potential to make deliverable chemical and biological weapons seen as such a threat when dozens of other countries had a greater capacity? As for the alleged need to liberate Iraqi, why not also undertake wars to liberate Pakistanis or Uzbekis, among others?

Of the huge outpouring of words leading up to the attack on Iraq, a large proportion were about interpretation of what was going on. Those who supported an attack presented evidence and, just as importantly, made assumptions that framed attack as necessary, just, even emancipatory. Opponents of the attack countered these interpretations using evidence and exposure of double standards. They also presented alternative interpretations, including that the attack was about US access to Iraqi oil, about US power in the west Asia, about revenge, about US world hegemony or about diverting US public attention away from domestic economic problems and scandals.

For many commentators, the case for the invasion involved so many transparent lies and contradictions that they found it hard to take seriously and so responded with humour, such as in the British Channel 4 television comedy 'Between Iraq and a Hard Place' of January 2003 (http://www.channel4.com/news/2003/special_reports/iraq_hard_place.html). In a Doonesbury strip, an instructor of CIA trainees says, "We're here to serve the president. When he asks us to jump, what does the C I A reply?" Dismissing the answer "How high?" the instructor says "No. That's Congress. We say, 'Into which country?'" In July 2003, inserting "weapons of mass destruction" into the google.com search engine led to a fake error message saying, "These weapons of mass destruction cannot be displayed," with a series of mordant options for fixing the problem.

Official Channels

When a court makes a ruling, many people presume that justice is being done. The same applies when some other official body, such as an auditor, an ombudsman or a commission of inquiry, makes a ruling. Official channels give a stamp of approval for decisions. In quite a few cases, though, official channels are actually quite biased. For example, wealthy individuals and corporations can hire expensive legal counsel and obtain better results in court than others. Yet despite known biases, many official channels give the appearance of dispensing justice.

For these reasons, official channels can be remarkably effective tools for inhibiting backfires. In the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, the government moved immediately to set up an official inquiry, in part "to head off any sympathy demonstrations and protests that could reasonably be expected in the wake of public reaction" [Frankel:187]. Formal inquiries, once established, take time, so that passions, kindled after an outrageous event, cool.

Setting up an inquiry carries risks. "While any commission of inquiry carried the risk of wholesale condemnation of the government and the whole apartheid system, such an exercise could also be turned to advantage by mobilising support for the ruling party" [Frankel:188]. The commission into the Sharpeville massacre needed to be compliant, from the government's point of view, but not so compliant that it discredited itself in the eyes of observers. A total whitewash of the police could be just as damaging to the government as a stinging attack.

The Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, set up after the Rodney King beating, was quite critical of the department [Christopher et al 1991]. On the other hand, the initial court acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King led to tragedy: the decision lacked credibility among black community members who had seen the video of the beating, and a major riot ensued. President George Bush Sr immediately announced his support for a second criminal prosecution of the same officers, a stance that seemed a response to the backlash from the first trial's verdict.

After the Iraqi army invaded and occupied Kuwait in 1990, the United Nations Security Council endorsed the use of force against the invaders. This gave credibility

to the US-led assault in 1991. Although many people favoured other measures against Iraq, notably sanctions, the existence of a UN endorsement made a big difference in justifying the war.

In 2002-2003, though, there was no immediate pretext for attacking Iraq: no hard evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, no immediate risk of an Iraqi military attack on the US, no illegal Iraqi invasion or occupation of neighbouring countries. An attack in these circumstances could backfire. Obtaining UN approval for an attack would greatly reduce this backfire.

The US government decided in 2002 to seek a UN resolution permitting an attack. This can be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the backlash from unilaterally launching an illegal, unjust assault. If UN approval had been obtained, it would have made a big difference in many people's minds. To be sure, some people supported military action even without UN approval and others opposed it under any circumstances, but opinion polls showed a substantial middle ground of people who supported an invasion with UN endorsement but opposed it otherwise.

As noted, official channels may give only the appearance of fairness. The UN is very far from being a neutral, independent body, as many analyses reveal [Boutros-Ghali 1999;Hazzard 1990; Yeselson and Gaglione 1974], and the UN Security Council is even less neutral and independent. The US government applied its formidable persuasive powers – primarily threats and bribes, along with tendentious evidence – in an attempt to obtain a resolution authorising attack, and British prime minister Tony Blair added his eloquence [Anderson, Bennis and Cavanagh 2003]. Though there was some reporting of the arm-twisting tactics used by US officials to obtain a favourable UN resolution [Vulliamy et al 2003; Bright, Vulliamy and Beaumont 2003], many people would have been unaware of these behind-the-scenes machinations. UN endorsement remained a potent tool for legitimating an invasion.

However, unlike previous occasions in which the Security Council was more susceptible to pressure, this time most of the member governments did not acquiesce; the existence of massive popular opposition to war played a significant role in stiffening the resolve of government leaders. Thus, when the US-government-led 'coalition' launched its attack on Iraq without UN endorsement, it had even less legitimacy than if no approach to the UN had been made at all.

The delicacy of the 'politics of endorsement' is suggested by the US government's hot-and-cold approach to seeking a vote at the Security Council. Not long before the attack was initiated, US officials said they would bring a resolution before the Council. But then, as it appeared that the vote would go against an attack, the resolution was not put forward [Associated Press 2003]. For minimising public backlash, it is better to have no vote at all than a hostile vote. Even so, having sought UN endorsement for months, the failure to obtain it made the backfire effect even more powerful.

Another example of the role of official channels is the UN team, headed by Hans Blix, sent to Iraq in 2002 to look for weapons of mass destruction. If the team had found damning evidence, it would have provided convenient legitimation for an attack. However, by failing to report substantial Iraqi violations of UN-imposed conditions, Blix became an obstacle to US government plans. Blix himself later claimed that some US officials had tried to discredit the UN team – and him personally – implicitly recognising that his team's work was valued by the US government only for its potential role in legitimating an attack [Smith 2003].

Intimidation and Bribery

If an attack can backfire when it is perceived by significant audiences to be unjust, then the addition of intimidation and bribery to the mix is unlikely to make the attack seem more just, given that these means are widely seen as illegitimate. Nevertheless, intimidation and bribery can be effective if carried out behind the scenes. Given that the cover-up is a key means of inhibiting backfire, covering up intimidation and bribery is a natural accompaniment.

One possible target is the opponent. Many attacks are both preceded and followed by threats and sometimes by bribes for the target to keep quiet. As described earlier, Iraq came under repeated military attack over the years 1991-2003.

Another target is commentators, who may be threatened or wooed. It is well known that journalists who write uncritically about US government policy can be rewarded with greater access to officials, whereas those who are too critical may be penalised by denial of access. Those journalists who venture into certain sensitive areas may suffer censorship and dismissal [Borjesson 2002]. NBC dismissed veteran journalist Peter Arnett for making a few comments during the conquest that, though innocuous enough in the eyes of many, were labelled as treacherous by high officials. His treatment was an object lesson for anyone who might stray from the mainstream. US military forces in Iraq appeared to attack a number of independent journalists, killing several [Naureckas 2000].

Experts who do not toe the line can come under attack. US government officials exposed the cover of covert CIA operative Valerie Plame apparently as a reprisal against her husband Joe Wilson, who publicly challenged official claims that Niger supplied uranium to Iraq [Marshall 2003]. US troops in Iraq have been threatened with reprisals should they be openly critical of US government policy [Liewer 2003]. Yet another target is members of official bodies. The bribes and threats used to pressure members of the UN Security Council have already been mentioned.

Intimidation and bribery are risky strategies: if revealed, they can discredit those who use them. Therefore, a central task for those who want to magnify the backfire effect is to expose the use of these unsavoury means.

Conclusion

The 2003 conquest of Iraq generated enormous hostility around the world, a popular and political reaction that can be interpreted as an example of how attacks can backfire. Much of this hostility can be attributed to the attack being perceived as unjust and disproportionate to anything the Iraqi regime had done, or threatened to do, to the attackers.

Various measures taken by attackers can inhibit this sort of backfire effect. Five key methods are covering up the attack, devaluing the target, reinterpreting events, using official channels and intimidating critics. In the case of the attack on Iraq, each of these methods was used, but without great success. The impending invasion was announced to the world, so cover-up played a limited role, though it was important in limiting awareness of the ongoing attacks from 1991. The demonisation of Saddam Hussein was perhaps the most effective tool in inhibiting backfire, convincing many people that attack was justified, but was powerfully countered by exposure of double standards such as via the queries 'Why Iraq?' and 'Why now?' Various arguments were advanced for attacking Iraq: to prevent Iraqi aggressive use of weapons of mass destruction, to prevent Iraqi government support for terrorists and to liberate the Iraqi people. However, these arguments were not very effective, partly because of transparent inconsistencies and partly because of powerful counterarguments. An attempt was made to legitimate the invasion by obtaining UN endorsement, but this failed, causing further

delegitimation. Finally, there was some intimidation of critics of the attack, but this did not appear to significantly reduce the overall volume of criticism.

The backfire framework helps to unify understanding of the ways that attacks are supported and opposed. To a casual consumer of the media, the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq could well have appeared bewildering, with multitudinous claims and counter-claims involving Saddam Hussein, weapons of mass destruction, disagreement between governments and so forth. The concept of backfire brings some order to this messy picture by focusing attention on the struggle over perceptions, specifically the perception of an attack as unjust or disproportionate. Attackers use various means that prevent or undermine such a perception, or in other words that inhibit backfire: control of information (cover-up); rhetoric (devaluation of the target; reinterpretations); official channels; and exercise of economic and political power (intimidation).

An analysis in terms of backfire sheds light on how to go about opposing unjust attacks. Basically, each of the methods used to inhibit backfire can be countered. Exposing cover-ups is crucially important and points to the vital role played by investigative journalists, whistleblowers, outspoken advocates, researchers and independent commentators. To expose cover-ups can be very difficult: persistence in both gathering and distributing information in a credible fashion is vital. Countering rhetorical means of justifying attack – devaluing the target and reinterpreting events – requires knowledge, commitment and eloquence. Commentary about an impending attack, or one that has already occurred, is far from irrelevant; instead, it is crucial in shaping attitudes that influence whether an attack proceeds or, if it does, how and whether future attacks occur.

The role of official channels for legitimating attacks is the most challenging for opponents. There are two basic approaches to maximise backfire: to influence the official body to refuse to endorse the attack, or to undermine the credibility of the official body or its deliberations. The first approach is often more effective in the short term but, for official bodies whose appearance of fairness and neutrality is a facade, the second approach may be better. Finally, a good way to oppose intimidation is to expose it, thereby making it backfire.

This analysis of backfire dynamics points to the crucial role of information and communication. Attacks backfire because of perceptions of injustice and disproportionality. Therefore, secrecy, disinformation, spin-doctoring and public relations may be of much greater importance for attackers than normally realised. This may apply in repressive regimes as well as in more open societies, as suggested by the role of secrecy and state propaganda in the Soviet Union and the secrecy in which the Nazis carried out their exterminations. The importance of official channels, even the most transparently fraudulent ones, for justifying injustice is suggested by Stalin's show trials and the facade of elections in dictatorial regimes.

Backfire analysis can give a new appreciation of the diverse means of opposing attacks. Opposition to the attack on Iraq was most obvious in massive rallies throughout the world and in resistance by many governments to joining or endorsing an invasion. These forms of resistance cannot easily be separated from an ongoing struggle over information and meaning, involving news reports, articles, letters, leaflets, emails and everyday conversations. This struggle will continue long after the conquest of Iraq, for example in the ongoing debate over the presence or absence of weapons of mass destruction.

In many cases, such as the Sharpeville massacre and the beating of Rodney King, backfire occurs after the attack. In the case of Iraq, in contrast, much of the backfire occurred before the attack. This suggests that an early warning system, raising concern about potential attacks, can be a potent way of resisting injustice. ▣

Note

1 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, September 2002); 'Bush outlines strategy of pre-emptive strikes, cooperation', *USA Today,* September 20, 2002.

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