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The invasion of Iraq

On 19 March 2003, U.S. military forces, supported by forces from Britain and a few other countries, invaded Iraq and soon overwhelmed Iraqi military resistance. The U.S. government had spent months pushing its case for the operation, arguing that the Iraqi regime had, or was trying to obtain, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), especially nuclear weapons, and implying it had links with the terrorist group al Qaeda. There had been popular opposition to the invasion in numerous countries, including in the United States itself.

In the months following 19 March, the occupying forces were met by a guerrilla resistance. As U.S. soldiers died, George W. Bush's promise of a glorious transition to democracy faded. Meanwhile, the search for Iraqi WMD came up with a blank, undercutting the primary justification for the attack. These were signs the Iraq operation might be going wrong for the U.S. administration. But signs of backfire had been apparent for a long time.

Prior to the invasion, protest rallies attracted huge numbers of people, with the largest single-day numbers in history — some ten million people across the world — on 15 February, 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 United States 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-World War II era — the U.N. and the North Atlantic alliance.[1]

A note on terminology: because the initial military conflict was so one-sided, I seldom refer to the invasion of Iraq as a "war." In western media reports, the attackers were conventionally called "the coalition." Here I usually refer to the "U.S. government" because it was the prime mover, with the British government playing second fiddle; other military contingents, such as from Australia and Poland, were token and mostly unremarked. I avoid referring to "the United States" as an actor — as in "the United States said" or "the United States attacked" — because it doesn't distinguish between the government and the people. But even to refer to the U.S. government as the attacker is misleading, because a small group within the government made the key decisions.

In examining the Iraq case, I look at the five principal ways the attackers tried to inhibit outrage and how opponents attempted to express it. There is such a wealth of material on the events that only a few of many possible examples can be presented here. I concentrate on the events leading up to the invasion. I

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1. Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Views of a Changing World* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, June 2003), 1. Similar findings were reported the following year: Pew Global Attitudes Project, *A Year after Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 16 March 2004).

examine only backfire dynamics associated with the attack on Iraq; terrorist acts by the Iraqi resistance, such as beheadings, can also be analyzed in backfire terms. Wars are filled with so many atrocities that they are a rich source of material on backfire.

In the cases described in previous chapters, the targets of attack — peaceful protesters, citizens being arrested, whistleblowing employees — were relatively harmless, at least to wider society. The Iraq attack brings in a new dimension: the target, namely Saddam Hussein and his regime, was itself a menace. The Iraqi regime was built on ruthless violence against internal opponents. It had launched two major wars, against Iran in the 1980s and Kuwait in 1990. Yet despite its terrible record of aggression and human rights violations, many people opposed the U.S.-government-led attack on Iraq, because it represented an injustice of its own, whether seen as a violation of international law, as an assault by an overwhelmingly powerful military on a weak one, or as a self-interested attack on an opponent that posed no threat. For an attack on a reviled opponent to backfire, the violation of norms must be correspondingly greater. When protesters are resolutely nonviolent, as in Dharasana, a brutal beating can echo around the world. When the target is a ruthless regime, attackers can get away with much more — but there are limits. The invasion of Iraq illustrates these limits starkly.

Cover-up

Some wars are carried out in secrecy or by use of proxy armies, limiting the prospect for revulsion. For example, the U.S. 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 U.S. troops. The low profile of this involvement is one key reason why, from the late 1940s until the mid 1960s, opposition to U.S.-government-

supported military operations in Vietnam was limited.[2]

However, there was no prospect of covering up the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Throughout 2002, long in advance of the actual assault, the U.S. government increasingly signaled its intention to invade 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 frequent bombings of Iraq that seldom attracted news coverage or protest. After the first Gulf war, the U.S. 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.[3]

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 caused concern. The very normality and banality of the attacks served as a sort of de facto cover-up.

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2. Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002).

3. Anthony Arnove, ed., *Iraq under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000); Jeremy Scahill, "No-fly Zones: Washington's Undeclared War on 'Saddam's Victims'," *IraqJournal.org,* 2 December 2002. http://www.iraqjournal.org/journals/021202.html (accessed 29 June 2006).

Such de facto cover-ups applied to many other matters involving Iraq. The U.S. government's support for Saddam Hussein's regime throughout the 1980s was, following the Iraqi military invasion of Kuwait in 1990, seldom mentioned by U.S. government officials, especially in the 2002-2003 lead-up to attack. Nor did officials mention the U.S. government's unwillingness to topple Saddam Hussein in 1991 when, just after the first Gulf War, it had the opportunity, and indeed had promised to support anti-Saddam uprisings but then allowed them to be brutally crushed by the regime.

This silence about earlier complicity with Saddam became more salient as U.S. 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 U.S. and British governments and companies in supplying materials for Iraqi weapons programs. For example, in President Bush's address to the nation of 17 March 2003, on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, he stated, "This regime has already used weapons of mass destruction against Iraq's neighbors and against Iraq's people."[4] However, he did not mention this occurred in the 1980s when the U.S. government supported the Iraqi regime, nor did he mention that the U.S. government covered up the chemical weapons attack.[5] Similarly, the British government covered up its role in building the chemical plant in Iraq used for production of chemical weapons.[6] In his address, Bush did not mention that his administration had undermined international efforts to develop a stronger biological weapons convention, nor that the United States has the world's largest biological weapons program.

The UN sanctions imposed on Iraq beginning in 1990 resulted in enormous levels of suffering and death, with figures commonly quoted of around a million extra deaths over a decade, but with no apparent impact on the rule of Saddam Hussein. Such a death toll might have been treated, in other circumstances, as an 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."[7]

The investigation of Iraqi WMD was subject to more conventional cover-ups and disinformation, at least by some accounts.[8] 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. U.S. spying under the cover of the UN weapons inspectors was also covered up. In March 2003, diplomats from half a dozen countries met in secret in an attempt to find a compromise that could prevent the invasion of Iraq, but a British-U.S. spying operation disrupted the initiative. This too was covered up.[9]

Cover-up is greatly aided when mass media report U.S. government pronouncements with

4. George W. Bush, "President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq within 48 Hours: Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation," 17 March 2003. http://www.white house.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030317-7. html (accessed 29 June 2006).

5. Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982–1990* (New York: Norton, 1994).

6. David Leigh and John Hooper, "Britain's Dirty Secret," *Guardian,* 6 March 2003.

7. Arnove, *Iraq under Siege*; Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999); Geoff Simons, *The Scourging of Iraq: Sanctions, Law and Natural Justice,* 2d ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

8. William Rivers Pitt with Scott Ritter, *War on Iraq: What Team Bush Doesn't Want You to Know* (New York: Context Books, 2002).

9. Martin Bright, Peter Beaumont, and Jo Tuckman, "British Spy Op Wrecked Peace Move," *Observer,* 15 February 2004.

no critical analysis or historical background, and do not run stories presenting other perspectives. This is characteristic of much western reporting, especially in the United States.[10]

The counter to these forms of cover-up is straightforward in principle: exposure of information, for example of U.S. 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 signaled well in advance. In these circumstances, cover-up did not work very well to inhibit public fury over the attack.

Devaluing the Target

In January 2002, President Bush, in his State of the Union address, labeled Iraq, along with Iran and North Korea, the "axis of evil." An even more potent form of devaluation was to demonize Saddam Hussein and to treat him as the personification of Iraq. There is no doubt Saddam was a brutal and dangerous dictator, guilty of gross human rights violations and launching wars against Iran and Kuwait. Even so, U.S. government officials painted Saddam as an even greater monster, for example by comparisons with Hitler. Bush in a talk in Prague on 20 November 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 terrorize nations which love freedom."[11] This was an implicit comparison between Hitler and Saddam Hussein, at least as interpreted by reporters.[12] Similarly, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in an interview with *The Guardian,* drew parallels between confronting fascism in the 1930s and confronting Iraq.[13]

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 program of conquest; Saddam, though probably more

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10. Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003); Paul Rutherford, *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Marketing the War Against Iraq* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Danny Schechter, *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception: How the Media Failed to Cover the War on Iraq* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003); Norman Solomon and Reese Erlich, *Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You* (New York: Context Books, 2003). For critical assessments of the mass media more generally, see for example Cees J. Hamelink, *Trends in World Communication: On Disempowerment and Self-Empowerment* (Penang: Southbound and Third World Network, 1994); Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Gerald Sussman, *Communication, Technology, and Politics in the Information Age* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

11. George W. Bush, "President Bush Previews Historic NATO Summit in Prague Speech: Remarks by the President to Prague Atlantic Student Summit," 20 November 2002. http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/11/20021120-4.html (accessed 29 June 2006).

12. Anne E. Kornblut and Charles M. Sennott, "Bush Seeks NATO Solidarity," *Boston Globe,* 21 November 2002.

13. Jackie Ashley and Ewen MacAskill, "History Will Be My Judge," *Guardian,* 1 March 2003; "Blair Likens Saddam to Hitler," *CNN.com,* 1 March 2003.

brutal personally, commanded only the medio-
cre Iraqi military, with limited capacity for
external aggression after 1991. To compare
Saddam with Hitler, as dangers to the world,
was to confuse personal evil with state capaci-
ties. 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 invasion did not try to
argue Saddam was virtuous. Instead, their
response can be summarized by the questions
"Why Iraq?" and "Why (attack) now?" They
pointed to double standards: there were plenty
of brutal dictators in the world, including some
who ruled countries allied in the "war on
terror," such as China, Pakistan, and Uzbeki-
stan. Critics questioned why Iraq was singled
out, among all the world's repressive regimes,
for attack. Double standards were also in-
volved in demonizing Saddam, given that in
the 1980s, when he had been just as ruthless
and was more powerful militarily, he had been
an ally.

The demonization of Saddam no doubt
helped convince some people to support the
invasion. 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 invasion 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 interpreta-
tions are considered to be honest views or as
calculated public relations,[14] they operated to
reduce opposition.

For a long time, the main theme was that
Iraqi militarism was a threat to the world,
including to the United States, especially via
WMD. This cleverly reinterpreted the attack-
ers as the targets, and the target, Iraq, as the
attacker. The attack on Iraq then could be
interpreted as a form of defense, an interpreta-
tion that was formalized as the doctrine of pre-
emption.[15] Military aggressors have long
painted their targets as threats.

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 programs existed,
and claims that the UN weapons inspection
process was not working. Underlying the
ongoing claims by U.S. and other officials was
the assumption that the primary danger was
from Iraq, indeed such an overwhelming and
immediate danger that military action 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, traveled
further than the 150-kilometer limit placed on
them after the first Gulf war: to be specific,
they could travel up to 183 kilometers. Iraqi
officials claimed that this was because the
missiles had no payload. However, U.S. and
British officials made great play over this

On war and the media more generally, see
Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War:
Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth
Century* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000);
Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The
War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker
from the Crimea to Kosovo* (London: Prion,
2000); Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The
Media and the Military: From the Crimea to
Desert Strike* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan,
1997).

15. *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,* 20 September
2002.

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14. Rampton and Stauber, *Weapons of Mass
Deception;* Rutherford, *Weapons of Mass
Persuasion.*

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-kilometer range was far short of what could reach Israel, much less the United States. The key point here is that the focus was entirely on the Iraqi military threat.

The obsessive focus on the danger of the Iraqi regime can be seen as a facet of "American exceptionalism," a pervasive double standard in which, for example, the U.S. government demands that others adhere to human rights principles but does not expect these principles to be applied to its own behavior.[16]

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 invasion of Iraq, U.S. 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.[17] Other U.S.-government favored expressions included "regime change" (rather than "government overthrow"), "death squads" (instead of "fedayeen"), "thugs" (instead of "troops"), and "liberation" (instead of "conquest" or "occupation").[18]

The second main argument used by the U.S. government was that the Iraqi government was supplying WMD 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 harbored terrorists, including operatives of al Qaeda."[19] Carefully crafted statements gave the impression that Saddam Hussein was implicated in the September 11 attacks — polls showed that many U.S. citizens believed this was the case[20] — though no substantive evidence was ever presented to show any link between al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime.[21]

A third argument was that Iraq must be attacked to liberate Iraqis from Saddam Hussein. This received relatively little play before the invasion, but as the occupation continued and no evidence of WMD or Iraqi links to al Qaeda could be found, Bush and his supporters put greater emphasis on liberation as a justification and downplayed their earlier reliance on fears of imminent danger from WMD and al Qaeda links.

Although many people were persuaded by one or more of these interpretations, 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.[22]

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16. Julie A. Mertus, *Bait and Switch: Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

17. Vic Carroll, "Some Words Can Make a War Cry Foul," *Sydney Morning Herald,* 28 May 2003, p. 13.

18. Elisabeth Bumiller, "Even Critics of War Say the White House Spun It with Skill," *New York Times,* 20 April 2003, p. B14; Rampton and Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception,* 113–30.

19. Bush, "President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq within 48 Hours."

20. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Americans Thinking about Iraq, but Focused on the Economy: Midterm Election Preview," Washington, DC, 10 October 2002. http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=162 (accessed 29 June 2006).

21. Gethin Chamberlain, "Experts Scorn Saddam Link to al-Qaeda," *The Scotsman,* 6 February 2003; Pitt, *War on Iraq.*

22. Milan Rai, *War Plan Iraq: Ten Reasons against War on Iraq* (London: Verso, 2002). For critiques of Bush speeches, see Solomon and Erlich, *Target Iraq,* 125–54.

Critics also pointed to double standards. Iraq's nuclear weapons program was nonexistent 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 United States itself, were not subject to the same strictures?[23] Why was Iraq's meager 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 Iraqis, why not also undertake wars to liberate Pakistanis or Uzbekis, among others?

Of the huge outpouring of words leading up to the invasion, 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 conquering Iraq was about U.S. access to Iraqi oil, about U.S. power in the Middle East, about revenge, about U.S. world hegemony, or about diverting U.S. public attention away from domestic scandals and economic problems.

The way people responded to all this information and opinion varied individual to individual, with systematic differences across cultures. One fascinating study found differences between countries in the way people remembered misinformation, namely false statements made in the media that were later retracted. The respondents were surveyed in the weeks immediately after the invasion of Iraq. When the media published misinformation that was later corrected, respondents in Germany and Australia tended to discount it, whereas respondents in the United States continued to believe the misinformation even though they knew it had been retracted. For

example, many U.S. respondents had a false memory that WMD had been discovered in Iraq. The researchers concluded that their results "are consistent with previous findings in that the differences between samples reflect greater suspicion about the motives underlying the war among people in Australia and Germany than among people in the United States."[24]

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 humor, such as in the British Channel 4 television comedy "Between Iraq and a Hard Place" of January 2003. 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 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

Because it seems unfair when a powerful country invades a weaker one without good justification, it is common for attackers to seek authoritative endorsement for their actions. In the international scene, one of the best endorsements is from international bodies, especially the United Nations. After the Iraqi army invaded and occupied Kuwait in 1990, the UN Security Council endorsed the use of force against the invaders. This gave credibility to the U.S.-led assault in 1991. Although many people favored other measures against Iraq, notably sanctions, the existence of a UN

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23. Ian Williams, "Double Standards, UN Style," *Globalvision News Network,* 3 February 2003.

24. Stephan Lewandowsky, Werner G. K. Stritzke, Klaus Oberauer, and Michael Morales, "Memory for Fact, Fiction, and Misinformation: The Iraq War 2003," *Psychological Science* 16 (2005): 190–95.

endorsement made a big difference in justifying the first Gulf war.

In 2002-2003, though, there was no immediate pretext for attacking Iraq: no hard evidence of Iraqi WMD, no immediate risk of an Iraqi military attack on the United States, no illegal Iraqi invasion or occupation of neighboring countries. An attack in these circumstances could backfire. Obtaining UN approval for an attack would greatly reduce popular opposition.

The U.S. government decided in 2002 to seek a UN resolution permitting an invasion. 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,[25] and the UN Security Council is even less neutral and independent. The U.S. government applied its formidable persuasive powers — primarily threats and bribes, along with tendentious evidence — in an attempt to obtain a resolution authorizing attack, and British prime minister Tony Blair added his eloquence.[26] Though there was some reporting of the heavy-handed tactics used by U.S. officials to obtain a favorable UN resolution,[27] 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 few member governments acquiesced. The existence of massive popular opposition to war played a significant role in stiffening the resolve of government leaders.

The delicacy of the "politics of endorsement" is suggested by the U.S. government's hot-and-cold approach to seeking a vote at the Security Council. Not long before the invasion, U.S. officials said they would bring a resolution before the Council. But then, as it appeared that the vote would go against them, the resolution was not put forward.

> This was a tacit admission that it could not have passed. If the resolution had been submitted to a vote and rejected, the negative vote would have further undermined the doubtful claim by the sponsors that earlier resolutions by the Council authorized them to use armed force if and when they deemed that Iraq was in non-fulfillment.[28]

In other words, for minimizing public backlash, it was 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 even more powerful than if no resolution had been sought.

U.S. leaders displayed an ambivalent attitude towards the UN. On the one hand, they

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25. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *Unvanquished: A U.S.–U.N. Saga* (New York: Random House, 1999); Shirley Hazzard, *Countenance of Truth: The United Nations and the Waldheim Case* (New York: Viking, 1990); Abraham Yeselson and Anthony Gaglione, *A Dangerous Place: The United Nations as a Weapon in World Politics* (New York: Grossman, 1974).

26. Sarah Anderson, Phyllis Bennis, and John Cavanagh, *Coalition of the Willing or Coalition of the Coerced?* (Washington, DC: Institute for Policy Studies, 2003).

27. Ed Vulliamy, Peter Beaumont, Nick Paton Walsh, and Paul Webster, "America the Armtwister," *Observer,* 2 March 2003; Martin Bright, Ed Vulliamy, and Peter Beaumont, "US Dirty Tricks to Win Vote on Iraq War," *Observer,* 2 March 2003.

28. Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq: The Search for Weapons of Mass Destruction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 7–8.

sought UN endorsement for their preferred options, but when this gambit failed, they attacked the UN as irrelevant. As soon as the UN became an obstacle, it was subject to familiar sorts of denigration, reinterpretation, and intimidation.

Another example of the role of official channels is the UN team, headed by Hans Blix, sent to Iraq in 2002 to look for WMD. 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 U.S. government plans. Blix himself later claimed that some U.S. officials had tried to discredit the UN team — and him personally — implicitly recognizing that his team's work was valued by the U.S. government only for its potential role in legitimating an attack.[29]

Intimidation and Bribery

When a powerful government threatens a weaker one, that itself constitutes intimidation. In addition, many forms of intimidation can be used before, during, and after an attack. As described earlier, Iraq came under repeated military assault over the years 1991-2003. In the invasion in March 2003, the initial "shock and awe" bombardment served to intimidate both Iraqi resisters and any other government that might consider defying U.S. government demands.

Another target is commentators, who may be threatened or wooed. It is well known that journalists who write uncritically about U.S. government policy can be rewarded with greater access to officials, whereas those who are too critical may be penalized by denial of access. Journalists who venture into sensitive areas may suffer censorship and dismissal.[30] NBC dismissed veteran journalist Peter Arnett for making a few comments during the conquest that, though innocuous enough in the eyes of many, were labeled as treacherous by high officials. His treatment was an object lesson for anyone who might stray from the mainstream.

Tami Silicio, a worker in Kuwait, took a photo of coffins of U.S. soldiers. After it was published in the *Seattle Times,* she was fired from her job. U.S. military forces in Iraq have attacked, arrested, beaten, bombed, and killed independent journalists.[31] For example, on 8 April 2003, a U.S. missile hit the Baghdad bureau of the satellite broadcaster Al-Jazeera, killing Tareq Ayyoub. U.S. officials claimed that their forces were responding to enemy fire, but Al-Jazeera said no fire was coming from their building.[32]

Experts who do not toe the line can come under attack. U.S. government officials exposed the cover of covert CIA operative Valerie Plame as a reprisal against her husband Joseph Wilson, who publicly challenged official claims that Niger supplied uranium to Iraq.[33] U.S. troops in Iraq have been threatened with reprisals should they be openly critical of U.S. government policy.[34]

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29. Ibid., 215–28; Helena Smith, "Hans Blix Interview: One Last Warning from the Man Who Made an Enemy of Bush: UN Weapons Inspector Says Iraqi Guilt Is Still Not Proven," *Guardian,* 11 June 2003, p. 4.

30. Kristina Borjesson, ed., *Into the Buzzsaw: Leading Journalists Expose the Myth of a Free Press* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002).

31. Christian Parenti, "Al Jazeera Goes to Jail," *The Nation* 278 (29 March 2004): 20–23; Jeremy Scahill, "Shooting the Messenger," *The Nation* 280 (7 March 2005): 4–6.

32. For details about this and many other cases, see Committee to Protect Journalists, http://www.cpj.org/ (accessed 29 June 2006).

33. Joseph Wilson, *The Politics of Truth: Inside the Lies that Put the White House on Trial and Betrayed My Wife's CIA Identity* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005).

34. Steve Liewer, "Servicemembers Speaking Out: A Look at the Policies, Consequences," *Stars and Stripes,* 22 August 2003.

The pettiness of reprisals is shown by the attack on Mick Keelty, the Australian Federal Police Commissioner, Australia's highest ranking police official, who was interviewed about terrorism on Australian television in March 2004. He made a passing and oblique reference to the possibility that a country having troops in Iraq was more likely to come under terrorist attack: "The reality is, if this turns out to be Islamic extremists responsible for this bombing in Spain, it's more likely to be linked to the position that Spain and other allies took on issues such as Iraq." This was contrary to the Australian government's position. The Prime Minister's office immediately put pressure on Keelty to retract, and government officials apparently even wrote the "clarifying statement" that he had to make. Keelty's original comment would probably have passed unnoticed; forcing him to make a humiliating retraction drew more attention to it, as well as adverse comment on the government's intolerance.[35]

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. The connections between reinterpretation, official channels, and intimidation are captured in this comment:

> The glaring contradiction in the UK-U.S. posture toward the UN seems to be lost on Downing Street and the White House. On the one hand, Bush administration and Whitehall officials declare that war was necessary to uphold the authority of the UN Security Council against alleged Iraqi denial and deception. President Bush even cited the electronic bugging of UN weapon inspectors by Iraqi officials in his eve of war address to the nation. On the other hand, the U.S. and British governments

target the Security Council for espionage and outright subversion.[36]

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 indignation is to expose the use of these unsavory means.

Conclusion

The 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq generated enormous hostility around the world, a popular and political reaction that can be interpreted as an example of how state-sanctioned 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. Each of the five usual methods for inhibiting outrage 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 demonization of Saddam Hussein was perhaps the most effective tool in inhibiting outrage, convincing many people the invasion 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 invading Iraq: to prevent Iraqi aggressive use of WMD, 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 counter-arguments. 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,

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35. Alan Ramsey, "Bad Call of a Keystone Cop Routine," *Sydney Morning Herald,* 20–21 March 2004, p. 39.

36. Andreas Persbo and Ian Davis, "Electronic Surveillance of Foreign Diplomatic Missions: A Question of Law and Morality" (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy in Focus, 2 March 2004).

but this did not appear to significantly reduce the overall volume of criticism.

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, WMD, disagreements between governments, and so forth. The concept of backfire brings some order to this complex picture by focusing attention on the struggle over perceptions, specifically the perception of an attack as unjust or disproportionate.

The Iraq case suggests many ways to increase outrage, and roles for doing so. For exposing cover-ups, vital roles are played by investigative journalists, whistleblowers, outspoken advocates, researchers, independent commentators, and courageous publishers. 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, eloquence, and access to communication channels. Commentary about an impending invasion, or one that has already occurred, is far from irrelevant; instead, it is crucial in shaping attitudes that influence whether an invasion proceeds or, if it does, how and whether future attacks occur.

The role of official channels for legitimating attacks is a challenging obstacle for opponents. There are two basic approaches to ensuring appropriate concern: 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 sometimes realized. These techniques are widely used in ostensibly open societies and, even more extensively, by repressive regimes. These regimes do not rely solely on force. Examples include secrecy and state propaganda in the Soviet Union and the secrecy with which the Nazis carried out their exterminations. Official channels are also important for dictatorial regimes, such as when they hold elections that are transparently fraudulent, but nevertheless give a facade of legitimacy.

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, e-mails, and everyday conversations. This struggle will continue long after the invasion of Iraq, for example in the ongoing debate over what U.S. officials actually knew in advance about the presence or absence of WMD.

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

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