WHY DID BUSH BYPASS THE UN IN 2003?
UNILATERALISM, MULTILATERALISM
AND PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP[*]

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ABSTRACT

Why did President George W. Bush bypass the UN and adopt a largely unilateral approach when he invaded Iraq in 2003? Given the political and material benefits of multilateralism, this is a puzzling case on both theoretical and cost-benefit grounds, especially because Iraq did not pose an urgent national security threat to the United States. Three overlapping factors help to explain this outcome: the influence of the September 11, 2001, attacks; the predispositions of Bush's key advisers; and the dysfunctional decision-making process prior to the war, which served to enhance the perceived costs of multilateralism and the perceived benefits of unilateral action. With the lessons of Iraq in mind, U.S. presidents should use constructive leadership at the UN to capture the long-term benefits of working through multilateral institutions.

INTRODUCTION

In security affairs, as in other realms of foreign policy, states sometimes choose to operate multilaterally and other times work alone. The choice between unilateralism and multilateralism has always occupied foreign policy leaders but has become especially salient since the Second World War, with the rise of international security organizations and the growth of international law governing the use of force. There are simply more options in the modern era for pursuing policies more or less multilaterally, and multilateralism has indeed taken hold as never before. There are notable exceptions to this trend, of course, as today's leaders sometimes choose to proceed on a unilateral basis. The variation that results presents an interesting puzzle for scholars of international relations and foreign policy.

The United States embodies this ambivalence, often working through international organizations (IOs) or with broad coalitions and other times choosing to go-it-alone.[1] The 2003 invasion of Iraq is a recent and dramatic case of the latter. President George W. Bush conducted the intervention without the legal and political cover of a United Nations (UN) Security Council authorization and with only a modest coalition. Needless to say, the decision was controversial and its consequences are still being felt today.

This paper presents some general propositions for thinking about the unilateralism-multilateralism choice and applies these to shed light on the Iraq 2003 case. The next section develops the concept of multilateralism as including three components: a large number of states cooperating, consistency with international law, and approval by an international organization. I then discuss a leader's incentives when it comes to the choice between unilateralism and multilateralism. I argue that they generally prefer multilateralism and identify a relatively narrow set of conditions under which we should expect them to operate unilaterally. I then turn to the decision by Bush to bypass the UN in 2003, which I view as a puzzling case of unilateralism given conventional theoretical expectations and the costs and benefits of the policy, and outline a number of factors that caused Bush and his foreign policy team to be unusually sensitive to the constraints of working through an IO and with a multilateral coalition. These include the effects of the September 11, 2001, attacks; the ideological and policy predispositions of key advisors; and a decisionmaking process that was not conducive to systematic weighing of costs and benefits. The impact of these overlapping factors was heightened by Bush's inexperience with foreign policy, his heavy reliance on advisers, and his tendency to make decisions based on instinct and with relatively little information.

The concluding section turns to the theme of U.S. leadership at the UN and draws lessons from the Iraq experience. Constructive leadership at the UN requires compromise and engagement, in the spirit of multilateralism, by U.S. presidents. Other countries are not likely to support U.S. actions if the policy is set in Washington and they are subsequently asked to join or be left behind. Given that today's challenges are increasingly transnational and global, exercising constructive leadership at the UN and other multilateral organizations will be a critical component of an effective foreign policy strategy for the United States.

MULTILATERALISM AND THE PUZZLING CASE OF IRAQ

Too many foreign policy commentators refer to multilateralism and unilateralism without offering a clear definition. The prevailing attitude is that we know it when we see it. The problem with such an approach is that there is no universal agreement on what constitutes a "multilateral" approach, and thus the same policy can be viewed differently by different observers. Also, we tend to conflate the phenomenon with its consequences; we define a policy as unilateral when there is a negative reaction to it, for example, or multilateral when there is widespread support. These are reactions to a policy and should be treated as analytically distinct from the characteristics of the policy itself.

I treat multilateralism as containing three components. First, a multilateral policy entails cooperation by many states. Of course, any action conducted by three or more states is multilateral in the narrowest sense. But such a policy becomes more multilateral as more states become involved and if these states are truly cooperating – that is, if they consult and

mutually adjust their policy expectations.[2] Second, a multilateral policy is one that is consistent with international law. In this case, the action reflects principles established by the international community and is more likely to promote collective rather than parochial interests. Finally, multilateralism can be established through approval by an international organization. In contrast to ad hoc coalitions, IOs have a standing membership with more or less diverse interests, thus their imprimatur offers an independent assessment that the policy is justified and that broad interests are at stake.[3] It should be noted that the UN Security Council plays a uniquely pivotal role when it comes to the use of force. Because its authorizations (under Chapter VII of the UN Charter) render an action legal, they simultaneously satisfy two of the components outlined above.

We can think of policies as falling on a continuum from those that contain none of the three elements (the most unilateral policies) to those that conform to all three (the most multilateral policy), with various combinations in between. In terms of recent cases of U.S. military intervention, the 1989 invasion of Panama lacked all three ingredients and was thus a very unilateral action. The 1999 intervention over Kosovo was conducted with a meaningful coalition and with the approval of NATO but, as an interference in the domestic affairs of another country (the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), it violated a core principle of international law. The 1991 Operation Desert Storm in Iraq was a paragon of multilateralism: it was conducted with a broad coalition and was legal as both an act of self-defense (at the invitation of the exiled Kuwaiti government) and as an enforcement action authorized by Security Council Resolution 678. These examples show that multilateralism is a matter of degree, and in practice most cases fall between the two ideal types.

The 2003 Iraq War is not a case of pure unilateralism – but it comes close. The invasion did not have the benefit of a Security Council authorization and most international lawyers agree that it was illegal, as it was not a response to an actual or imminent attack. Thus the policy fails to satisfy the second and third elements of multilateralism outlined above.[4] The first criterion, cooperation by many states, is more plausible in this case, although the much touted "coalition of the willing" should not be overestimated. While many governments expressed support of the war, only the U.K., Australia and Poland actually participated in combat operations, and no other government had any appreciable influence over the shape of Washington's policy.[5] Indeed, those that participated indirectly by offering support were hardly partners – many were bribed or coerced into doing so.[6] It is therefore safe to say that the 2003 invasion was a relatively unilateral policy, even if it contained elements of multilateralism.

The choice to proceed unilaterally in Iraq was both dramatic and genuinely puzzling. According to conventional Realist theories of international relations, the United States should be concerned mostly with the behavior of other great powers and with activities that have a potential effect on its relative power position or vital security interests. Smaller states are a minor concern and can, in any case, be deterred and contained, as two prominent Realists argued specifically with respect to Saddam Hussein's Iraq.[7] Indeed, prior to her service as Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice made precisely the same argument. She downplayed the risk posed by Iraq and other rogue states: "These regimes are living on borrowed time, so there need be no sense of panic about them. Rather, the first line of defense should be a clear and classical statement of deterrence – if they do acquire WMD [weapons of mass destruction], their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration."[8] Theories from the social constructivist tradition also have trouble

accommodating the Iraq 2003 outcome, as they generally predict multilateral behavior and a desire to seek IO approval as more consistent with contemporary norms.[9] Indeed, since the end of the Cold War most military interventions by great powers have been conducted either with IO approval or with a substantial coalition. The 2003 invasion of Iraq defies this trend and stands out as unusually unilateral.

Beyond these broad theoretical perspectives, a more precise explanation of the unilateralism-multilateralism choice would focus on the range of costs and benefits involved and how the relevant tradeoffs are rationally navigated by leaders. From this cost-benefit perspective, I would argue that the president's incentives are to seek multilateral approaches in most cases; the benefits are great and the potential downside is usually small. One interesting feature of the executive is that he is, to a unique extent, both an international-level and a domestic-level actor and must make decisions at the interface of these two domains. Viewing the president from this perspective helps us clarify the respective costs and benefits of multilateralism and unilateralism.

The advantages of multilateralism are both political and material. First, there are direct benefits in terms of carrying out the policy in question. Multilateralism tends to increase international support for policies, both because such an approach is viewed as more legitimate and because policies constrained by a multilateral process are viewed as more reasonable and less threatening to the international community.[10] This support, in turn, increases the prospects for burden sharing and decreases the chances that other states will directly challenge the policy or undermine its goals. Direct benefits may also accrue at the domestic level. IO approval and a demonstration that other states are involved tend to increase support in Congress [11] and in terms of public opinion.[12] These benefits can increase the effectiveness and success of a policy to the extent that a president requires ongoing budgetary resources or needs domestic support to maintain diplomatic leverage.

There are also indirect benefits that a president derives from multilateralism. Following the logic of reciprocity and reputation, acting cooperatively and in compliance with international law can help a state find partners more easily in the future and in other issue areas.[13] Such reputations can inhere in a state but may also attach to an individual, giving leaders a distinct incentive to build reputational capital. Over the longer-term, acting multilaterally can help a leader build moral authority and soft power, assets that help with achieving a variety of goals.[14] Presidents tend to be more concerned with these broad, long-term political considerations in comparison to other political actors and interest groups at the domestic level, who are driven by more parochial and immediate interests.

There is a potential downside to multilateralism, of course. Acting unilaterally can allow a state to act more swiftly and with more secrecy, since extensive diplomacy and appeals to IOs are not required. In more general terms, the main advantage of unilateralism is that it offers a leader maximum freedom of action in designing and conducting a policy, which can reflect the self-defined interests of the state without interference from others. Even powerful states expect to compromise when seeking help from other states and typically must accept some modification to a policy when seeking approval from an IO.[15] Unilateralism makes such compromise unnecessary. This helps explain why the United States chose to work alone during the 2001 Afghanistan invasion and made a deliberate decision not to channel the policy through the Security Council. In the end, policy success is the most important factor shaping public opinion over security policies.[16] If a leader feels that a multilateral approach

would undermine her ability to implement a policy effectively by imposing excessive constraints, unilateralism becomes more appealing.

Thinking through these costs and benefits helps us specify the conditions under which we should expect an executive to prefer unilateralism, or at least to find multilateralism less appealing. First, we are more likely to see unilateralism when there is an operational need for speed or surprise. Second, unilateralism is more likely when there is little need for burden sharing in order for a policy to be successfully implemented. Third, unilateralism is more likely when anticipated political opposition to a policy is low or inconsequential (for example, if the goals of the policy are popular or uncontroversial to begin with). Fourth, unilateralism is more likely when core national security interests are at stake but there is little hope of generating a broad coalition or of securing IO approval.

An interesting feature of the Iraq 2003 case is that these conditions were not met. The march toward war was already playing out on a very public international stage, so there was no prospect of surprise or secrecy. Burden sharing was vital, both for the war plan itself (namely, the military planners' desire to launch a second ground offensive from Turkish soil to the north) and for postwar security and reconstruction, which in the event was plagued by a lack of adequate personnel and resources.[17] The international political backlash that resulted from the invasion was substantial and largely a product of the United States' unilateral approach.[18] Based on the first three criteria, therefore, the costs of acting alone were considerable and without clear offsetting benefits.

The final condition is the most debatable, as observers disagree over the extent of the security threat posed by Iraq to the United States. Most analysts agree that Iraq did not represent a substantial threat – certainly not one that affected core national interests. Even if Saddam had possessed dangerous unconventional weapons, he had shown no willingness to use them against the United States in the past despite opportunities to do so (during the Gulf War and against U.S. troops stationed in the region, for example). Notwithstanding talk of "mushroom clouds" by members of Bush's foreign policy team, nobody in the intelligence community thought that Iraq possessed a nuclear capability or would any time soon. UN weapons inspectors had declared Iraq nuclear-free in the 1990s and even the U.S. government's 2002 National Intelligence Estimate, which contained what turned out to be exaggerated claims regarding Iraq's WMD, noted that Iraq did not have nuclear weapons or even the material to make them. In any case, the CIA's assessment in October 2002 was that Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction would pose a threat to U.S. national security *only if the United States chose to go to war*.[19] Even General Hugh Shelton, Bush's first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, concluded that pre-war Iraq "had a greatly diminished capacity and was in a complete state of containment."[20] Even from the perspective of some insiders, this was a war of choice not of necessity. [21]

Others argued that war with Iraq would undermine the United States' most important security challenge at the time: terrorism. In the short term, shifting intelligence and military resources to Iraq served to undermine the ongoing war in Afghanistan. More broadly, CIA director George Tenet worried that a war with Iraq would aggravate anti-American terrorism and generally undermine U.S. security interests in the Middle East.[22] Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor to George H.W. Bush, warned in the *Wall Street Journal* on August 15, 2002, that, "Our pre-eminent security priority – underscored repeatedly by the president – is the war on terrorism. An attack on Iraq at this time would seriously jeopardize, if not destroy, the global counterterrorist campaign we have undertaken." These moderates argued

that aggressive policy choices toward Iraq would promote terrorist recruitment and inhibit cooperation from other governments in this global struggle. Indeed, according to a survey published a year after the invasion, the war served to galvanize al Qaeda's will and swell its ranks. [23]

In short, whatever potential threat Iraq might have posed, the situation was not urgent and the security risks of an invasion, especially a unilateral one, outweighed the benefits by most measures. Given that almost all of the United States' key allies, including France, Germany, Turkey and Canada, were calling for more time to conduct diplomacy and UN-led inspections, as were permanent Security Council members Russia and China, the Bush administration's desire to move so quickly to war under these circumstances is especially surprising.

The rest of this article offers a suggestive and partial answer to the question of why the Bush administration chose to act unilaterally despite the various benefits of multilateralism and despite the absence of the conditions that would normally make unilateralism appealing.

IRAQ 2003: WHY UNILATERALISM?

By his own admission, George W. Bush had little experience with foreign policy issues. While contemplating a run for the presidency, he confided in an acquaintance, "I don't have the foggiest idea about what I think about international, foreign policy."[24] One important result is that he came to rely extensively on his advisers for information and opinions – and the most influential advisers were those most hawkish on Iraq and most wary of multilateral constraints. This was especially important in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which colored the thinking of Bush's entire team and made them highly sensitive to security threats and wary of diplomatic entanglements. The confluence of these factors helps explain why the 2003 Iraq War was conducted unilaterally despite theoretical expectations and the costs and benefits entailed.

The Post-9/11 Mindset

The end of the Cold War had brought about what James Baker describes as "a general reduction of the strategic stakes for the great powers,"[25] who no longer viewed every threat and local conflict through the lens of a global power struggle. The 2001 attacks brought an abrupt end to this mindset and profoundly altered thinking inside the Beltway. September 11 appears to have had an important impact on Bush himself, who prior to his presidency had advocated fewer military commitments abroad and a "humble" approach to wielding U.S. power.[26] "September the 11th obviously changed my thinking a lot about my responsibility as president," Bush told journalist Bob Woodward.[27]

The most important source of change was a new sense of vulnerability: suddenly it was demonstrably possible for a foreign adversary to inflict massive civilian casualties on U.S. soil. Despite its immense power, one historian notes, the United States now felt itself "to be uniquely vulnerable."[28] Fueling this sense of vulnerability was the fact that adversaries did not require great strength to cause harm. As the Bush administration's 2002 National Security

Strategy warns, "even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations."[29]

According to the calculus of many in the Bush administration, this vulnerability to almost invisible and suicidal enemies rendered irrelevant much of the strategic culture and lessons of the Cold War. Overwhelming power was no longer a guarantee of safety and traditional deterrence would be largely unworkable. The lessons of 9/11 (combined with the ideological predispositions of some key advisers, discussed below) led to two powerful new sets of ideas in the Bush administration: the "nexus argument" and the preemption doctrine. The first held that the primary threat to U.S. national security was the potential for terrorists to acquire WMD, and for outlaw regimes to facilitate this acquisition. Bush's invocation of an "axis of evil" – comprising North Korea, Iran and Iraq – during his 2002 State of the Union address was based on this logic. He proclaimed that, "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger." While the objective threat posed by Iraq had not changed, it was now seen in a different light. As Bush explains, "Before 9/11, Saddam was a problem America might have been able to manage. Through the lens of the post-9/11 world, my view changed."[30] This prompted a new calculus when it came to Saddam: "all his terrible features became much more threatening."[31]

This nexus argument was coupled with an emerging doctrine of preemption, the most important element of what came to be known as the Bush Doctrine. In June of 2002, Bush used a commencement address at the West Point military academy to outline his post-9/11 strategic vision. He declared that new threats require new thinking, and continued: "If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long….We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act."[32] As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recalls in his memoir, after 9/11 he determined that threats had to be taken on before they materialized – they had to be aggressively preempted.[33] National Security Adviser Rice expressed a similar sentiment in 2002, arguing that "post-9/11, you have to look at the number of threats that are not deterrable. We had no warning on September 11. When you're dealing with hostile states that are aggressive, that have highly asymmetric capabilities to your own, you may have no warning."[34] Thus the Cold War mainstays of deterrence and containment, long-term policy approaches designed to avoid conflict, were declared obsolete.

This new mindset had clear implications for the strategic value of multilateralism and international institutions. Rumsfeld captured the administration's thinking in a *New York Times* editorial entitled "A New Kind of War," published on September 27, 2001. In his words, "This war [on terrorism] will not be waged by a grand alliance united for the single purpose of defeating an axis of hostile powers. Instead, it will involve floating coalitions of countries, which may change and evolve….In this war, the mission will define the coalition – not the other way around." In other words, solutions to serious security threats would not be held hostage to diplomatic niceties and institutional entanglements. The 2002 National Security Strategy lays out this more unilateralist approach in even starker terms. "While the United States will strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country."[35]

This new approach was first manifested in the invasion of Afghanistan, which was entirely legal (as an act of self-defense in response to an attack) but consciously conducted without a coalition and without working through an IO.[36] From the Bush administration's perspective, the initial success of Operation Enduring Freedom illustrated the utility of relying almost exclusively on U.S. planning and operations. It also confirmed many of the perceived lessons of multilateral interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s, which showed that working with a coalition and through an IO (in those cases, NATO) imposed significant constraints on policy-making and complicated war planning and execution.[37] Multilateralism was also less attractive for fighting the war on terrorism because the potential partners did not necessarily agree on the nature and magnitude of the threat. The strategic assessments and perceived vulnerability of the United States after 9/11 were simply not shared by the Europeans and most other allies.[38] This divide served to increase the costs of working multilaterally and especially through IOs, where the interests of other states are integrated into the policy process. Bush and his team had a low tolerance for such constraints.

The development of policy towards Iraq followed a more general pattern evident in post-9/11 security policy: it often was not based on cost-benefit analysis but rather on worst-case scenarios or ideological motivations.[39] As Bush explained in a 2004 interview with NBC, "Every potential harm to America had to be judged in this context of this war on terror."[40] This attitude tended to favor action even in the face of high costs. Moreover, the specter of terrorism was routinely mobilized to justify costly policies with little benefit in terms of national security. In this context of heightened fear, unilateralism as an approach to foreign threats had substantial political appeal. Its proponents started with the advantage of sounding tough and could characterize advocates of multilateralism as naïve or inappropriately cautious.

Advisors and Ideology

The response of Bush administration officials to 9/11 was also a function of existing biases and predisposition – and a sense that the terrorist attacks would bolster executive power and allow various foreign policy goals to be pursued. In other words, 9/11 not only changed the mindset of Bush administration officials, it provided a strategic opportunity. Rice made precisely this point when, reflecting on the post-9/11 atmosphere for an interview with *The New Yorker* magazine, she stated that it was "important to try to seize on that and position American interests and institutions and all of that before they harden again."[41]

The foreign policy team assembled by Bush combined a set of idealistic goals with an appreciation for *realpolitik* methods based on the exercise and threat of military power.[42] Much has been made of the influence of neoconservatives in the Bush administration, who had been advocating for regime change in Iraq and had an important influence on policy-making and intelligence gathering in the lead-up to war.[43] The "neocons" believed that American values – especially freedom and democracy – should be spread actively around the world. Added to this Wilsonian idealism [44] was the notion that the United States' unparalleled military power was a legitimate tool for achieving this goal and for confronting regimes that challenged U.S. values and interests. The neocon philosophy combined a strong belief in American exceptionalism with a willingness to challenge others, if necessary through the application of military force. This confidence was matched by "a skepticism

about the ability of international law and institutions to solve serious security problems."[45] The UN was subject to the most pointed derision.

The neocon critique of President Clinton had always been one of wasted opportunities: he was unwilling to use American power on behalf of a coherent, principled project.[46] The events of September 11, 2001, allowed this group to activate American muscle and set their idealism in motion. As Elizabeth Pond describes it, "The neoconservative policy shift after 9/11 transformed the United States from being the guarantor of the status quo, its traditional role, into a revolutionary power and supplanted the USA's collaborative Cold War leadership with a more muscular, unilateral, and crusading exercise of hegemony."[47] Beyond Afghanistan, Iraq was fingered as the best candidate for the spread of American values in the Middle East. For Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, arguably the leader of the neocon contingent in the administration, Iraq was an obsession. [48]

For his part, Bush found the idealism of the neocons appealing and shared their vision of a democratic Middle East. In particular, Bush embraced the neocon argument that democracy in Iraq would serve as an example to other countries. While his advisers had various reasons for focusing on Iraq – including access to oil, humanitarian concerns, Israel's interests, democracy promotion, and genuine security concerns related to WMD [49] – Bush seems to have been motivated primarily by this vision of spreading freedom, [50] which he repeatedly described as "God's gift to humanity."

Vice President Dick Cheney, arguably the pivotal foreign policy player of Bush's first term, was not a neoconservative per se; he was in Daalder and Lindsay's (2003, 15) terms an "assertive nationalist" in the mold of more traditional, hard-line conservatives.[51] What he and the neocons had in common after 9/11 was a willingness to use military power to defeat even indirect threats to U.S. security. He therefore did not stand in the way of – and indeed encouraged – the focus on Iraq. Cheney shared with the neocons a strong skepticism of multilateral institutions, which they believed stood in the way of U.S. interests more often than they promoted them. Determined to exercise and expand American power without restraint, according to one historian, he "had little use for the United Nations or any other multilateral organizations that might restrict America's freedom to act as it chose to anywhere in the globe."[52] He was also skeptical of the value of international law and was the primary advocate for sidestepping the Geneva Conventions in conducting the War on Terrorism.[53]

In debates over Iraq, Cheney thus emerged as the leading advocate for unilateralism and repeatedly stressed the constraints – including reduced freedom of action and delay – that would result from working through the UN and with a meaningful coalition. In an August 2002 speech, Cheney argued against the diplomatic, multilateral track for Iraq, cautioning that "time is not on our side" and that "the risks of inaction are far greater than the risks of action." Referring to Saddam's Iraq as a "mortal threat" and asserting that "there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction," he declared that the administration would "consider all possible options to deal with the threat that an Iraq ruled by Saddam Hussein represents."[54] While the passage of Resolution 1441 in November (which revived UN inspections and warned Saddam of "serious consequences" if he failed to cooperate) was hailed as a diplomatic victory in much of the world, Cheney repeatedly advised Bush that inspections and UN-based diplomacy would impede U.S. policy. He warned that, "Going to the UN would invite a never-ending process of debate, compromise and delay. Words not action."[55] During this period, so pronounced was his hawkishness that former colleague Brent Scowcroft (the national security adviser when Cheney was

George H.W. Bush's defense secretary) declared, "I've known Dick Cheney for thirty years. But I don't know Dick Cheney anymore."[56]

Rumsfeld, who has also been described as an "assertive" or "aggressive" nationalist,[57] also had very little patience with multilateral approaches – or any procedure that diminished his control over decisions and events. When he discovered that the targeting of Taliban leaders in Afghanistan was being restricted by legal considerations, "Rumsfeld was apoplectic over what he saw as a self-defeating hesitation to attack that was due to political correctness."[58] His response was to set up a secret program with blanket approval to kill or capture high-value targets, and to push for a reduction in the number of lawyers in the Pentagon.[59] He favored an expansive approach to the war on terrorism and worried that invading only Afghanistan would be viewed as too timid.[60] Together with Cheney, he emphasized to Bush and the public the threat posed by Saddam and drove Iraq policy in a more hawkish direction.[61] He generally showed little concern for the opinions of other governments or their publics and was famously dismissive of traditional U.S. allies, especially those in "Old Europe" like France and Germany.

In the lead-up to war, the multilateralism-unilateralism debate within the Bush administration saw Secretary of State Colin Powell increasingly isolated as the voice for proceeding slowly and through the UN. Unlike Rumsfeld, Cheney and Wolfowitz, he was in no hurry to confront Iraq in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.[62] Consistent with his penchant for seeking solutions through partnerships and international institutions,[63] Powell pushed for a multilateral approach that included UN resolutions and renewed inspections as the best way to manage Iraq's WMD threat while reconstituting a semblance of the broad coalition that came together to confront Saddam in 1990. In August 2002, Powell met with Bush and made the case that multilateralism was important for political reasons and that involving the UN in some capacity was the only effective way of achieving widespread international support. "It's nice to say we can do it unilaterally," he told the president, "except you can't."[64]

In the end, Bush took the advice of Rumsfeld and Cheney over the advice of Powell. This outcome resulted partly from the process by which foreign policy was formulated during Bush's first term, which systematically favored aggressive and unilateralist arguments on Iraq over more moderate ones.

Dysfunctional Decisionmaking

Given his relative lack of experience and his advisers' strong opinions and assertiveness, Bush was unusually dependent on them for ideas and information and tended to choose among options as presented by them. [65] Under these circumstances, the way that advice and information flowed to the president became crucially important for shaping outcomes. In two respects, this process was not conducive to a careful weighing of costs and benefits.

First, the process for deliberating and aggregating advice and information was ineffective. In theory, this should have been coordinated by Rice in her position as national security adviser. However, Rice was in a difficult position. She was less experienced than the administration's foreign policy heavyweights, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Powell, and had neither their connections in Washington nor their large bureaucracies to support her. As a result, the interagency process was dysfunctional, according to more than one observer, and competing

views were not systematically discussed and reconciled.[66] Rice herself tended to affirm what she felt the President wanted to hear and to defer to his more experienced advisers rather than offer her own opinions.[67] In the end, she allied with Rumsfeld and Cheney over Powell on the question of how to approach Iraq.[68]

In the absence of a strong coordinating system in the White House, most of Bush's advice and information came from those who had the most access to him. This was clearly Rumsfeld and Cheney. Cheney had the President's ear more than any other adviser; Bush reports that the vice president was the only cabinet member with whom he had a standing, weekly meeting.[69] Cheney was in many ways the gatekeeper for Bush, controlling what advice and information made its way to the president.[70] He could even make it appear that advice from his office had originated elsewhere, so that he could "independently" agree with it in his own consultations with Bush.[71] For his part, Rumsfeld was a highly effective bureaucratic infighter, skilled at controlling information and getting his way.[72] Skirting Rice, he visited Bush regularly and in secret, so that Powell and other advisers would not know the extent of his access, and sought to prevent military leaders from communicating directly with the president.[73] In comparison to the more superficial group meetings with his other advisers, the "real work" was done in meetings with Cheney and Rumsfeld,[74] who "called most of the shots."[75]

Thus, in the end, as one former NSC official recalls, Bush "was informed by talking to a relatively small set of advisors."[76] Even Powell, who never developed a close personal relationship with Bush, found himself "frozen out" by the White House at times.[77] This meant that the President's decisions on Iraq were based on a narrow set of viewpoints and disproportionately shaped by the two most hawkish and unilateralist of his principal advisers, Cheney and Rumsfeld.

A second weakness of the decisionmaking process concerned the production and handling of policy-relevant information. The critical information that should have informed debates – and, ultimately, the President's decision – over the unilateralism-multilateralism choice was systematically presented in a way that enhanced the costs of multilateralism and made a unilateral war seem justifiable and even urgent.

An extensive information campaign took place before the Iraq War, with the objective of exaggerating the threat and downplaying the risks.[78] Much of this biased information had percolated up from within the executive branch. For example, an alternative intelligence unit was established by Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith at the Pentagon, the Office of Special Plans, with the goal of gathering information on Iraq's alleged connections to WMD and terrorism and to do so unencumbered by the normal interagency vetting process. Much of this intelligence was gathered by non-specialists and was unconfirmed, and yet it was passed on as authoritative to other parts of the government and to the media, often through the Vice President's office. Because the intention of this effort was to find as much incriminating information as possible, not to objectively weigh all information available, it tended to confirm the most threatening portrayals of Iraq and to minimize the cost estimates of going to war.[79]

The question of how long and costly the war would be offers another stark example of decisionmaking with poor information. Post-invasion policy was handed over to the Pentagon apparently because Rumsfeld wanted control, but Rumsfeld subsequently showed little interest in anticipating and planning for the problems that might arise with reconstruction and security. The Department of Defense more generally did not have the experience or expertise

to anticipate the issues that might arise.[80] A group at the State Department comprising the Future of Iraq project had been studying postwar questions and had developed the most knowledge in the government on the likely challenges facing the United States. They were nevertheless shut out of the Pentagon's discussions, at the behest of Cheney and Rumsfeld and to the dismay of Powell and retired general Jay Garner, whom Rumsfeld had tapped to oversee postwar reconstruction. Cheney and Rumsfeld did not trust the State Department to adhere to the party line on Iraq. [81]

The failure to consider these issues seriously may help explain why predictions from Bush's key advisers were so wildly off the mark. On the question of how long the war would last, obviously a key component for determining its material and political costs, Bush's advisers were systematically and almost inexplicably optimistic. Wolfowitz guessed seven days and Rumsfeld predicted "five days, five weeks or five months, but it won't last any longer than that," while Bush himself apparently never tried to estimate the length of the war.[82] Cheney averred that U.S. forces would be "greeted as liberators" and even in private intelligence briefings predicted that "we'll probably back ourselves out of there within a month or two."[83] More generally, Cheney systematically minimized the costs of invasion – and maximized the benefits – in both his public statements and his briefings to other decisionmakers. According to McClellan, Cheney had a "rose-colored view of Iraq."[84] Predictions of a quick and painless war were at odds with independent assessments being conducted at the time. [85]

Information and advice was further biased as a result of the Bush administration's practice of marginalizing or dismissing those who offered contrary points of view. Again and again, with respect to war planning, diplomacy and intelligence issues, perceived loyalty was valued over appropriate expertise or healthy debate.[86] As a result, decisions were ultimately made by "a largely closed group composed of members who had strong ideological beliefs but limited practical experience or serious area expertise."[87] This explains why a classified RAND report recommended after the invasion that the administration set up "some process for exposing senior officials to possibilities other than those being assumed in their planning."[88]

There is reason to believe that Bush and his closest advisers never engaged in the sort of careful deliberation and cost-benefit analysis that might have led them to reconsider the decision to invade Iraq unilaterally. Tenet and Powell both report a lack of deliberation over the threat posed by Iraq and the decision to go to war, and Paul O'Neill, Bush's first treasury secretary, recalls of the Iraq discussions that "there seemed to be no apparatus to assess policy and deliberate effectively."[89] The decisionmaking process was instead designed to reaffirm initial judgments and justify a pre-determined outcome, with little discussion of the tradeoffs involved in bypassing the UN and working without a large coalition. As Jack Snyder notes, "In real life, as opposed to the world of imperial rhetoric, it is surprising when every conceivable consideration supports the preferred strategy."[90]

In the end, the poor quality of this process was ultimately Bush's responsibility, and his style of decisionmaking exacerbated its perverse effects. Officials who worked closely with Bush have noted his lack of inquisitiveness and his tendency not to ask follow-up questions of his advisers.[91] After returning to Washington from Iraq, two months after the invasion, Garner offered the president a lengthy briefing on the deteriorating situation and was surprised when the latter failed to ask any questions.[92] Bush's usual strategy was to delegate and not to second-guess once decisions were made; according to Rumsfeld, he "did

not worry decisions to death."[93] McClellan offers the following description of Bush's leadership style: "President Bush has always been an instinctive leader more than an intellectual leader. He is not one to delve deeply into all the possible policy options – including sitting around engaging in intellectual debate about them – before making a choice. Rather, he chooses based on his gut and his most deeply held convictions. Such was the case with Iraq."[94] While they might seem harshly critical in retrospect, these characterizations of Bush's decisionmaking are consistently reported by those who worked closely with him. By his own admission, he did not "do nuance."[95]

The combination of an experienced and highly motivated set of advisers and a president unlikely to gather and analyze information on his own lent the former an enormous degree of influence. We thus had a president utterly dependent on inputs – information and advice – designed to cast multilateral options in a negative light.

CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF CONSTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP

Multilateralism offers practical benefits to leaders, especially by increasing support abroad for policies that might otherwise be viewed as controversial. However, multilateralism also has disadvantages in terms of constraining leaders from implementing policies as they see fit. This makes unilateralism tempting in certain cases, namely when there is a need for acting swiftly, when there is little to gain through burden sharing, when anticipated political opposition is low, and when core national security interests are at stake. While most observers agree that these conditions were not met in the case of the 2003 Iraq invasion, the Bush administration nevertheless chose to pursue a largely unilateral policy, bypassing the UN Security Council and invading in contravention of international law and without a meaningful coalition. In the end, this approach proved costly: it engendered widespread opposition, left the United States fending for itself in Iraq, and dramatically increased the material and political price of the policy.

I emphasize three sets of factors that combined to generate a very low tolerance for costly constraints, and therefore for multilateralism, in the confrontation with Iraq. First, the events of September 11, 2001, produced a newfound sense of vulnerability in Washington that served to limit patience and political considerations in dealing with foreign threats, actual and perceived. Second, several key administration officials were ideologically predisposed toward unilateralism and aggressive foreign policies, and September 11 strengthened their hand and allowed them to impose their policy preferences. Finally, the decisionmaking process within the Bush administration was dysfunctional and not conducive to the objective weighing of cots and benefits. Lacking foreign policy experience and not prone to seeking and analyzing information himself, Bush made decisions based on the input of relatively few advisers, chief among them Cheney and Rumsfeld, who were skeptical of the UN, international law, and the value of coalitions.

An interesting feature of this episode is that Bush did go to the UN initially. He made his case against Iraq in a speech before the General Assembly in September 2002 and later sought Security Council Resolution 1441 as a way to ratchet up pressure on Saddam. He did not approach the international community in the spirit of multilateralism, however. In his General Assembly speech, following Cheney's advice and guidance, he more or less confronted the UN and offered its membership a take-it-or-leave-it offer: support the United

States or not.[96] After describing his view of the danger posed by Iraq, he turned the spotlight on his audience, presenting the situation as a challenge to the credibility of the UN: "All the world now faces a test, and the United Nations a difficult and defining moment….Will the United Nations serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be irrelevant?" The President also made it clear that unilateralism was a viable option if the international community failed to act with the United States. "[T]he purpose of the United States should not be doubted," he warned.

The downside of Bush's approach is that he never pursued *constructive* leadership at the UN. He struck a course and asked others to follow without engaging their concerns or allowing them to shape policy in a meaningful way. He wanted the political cover of the UN but not the input of its members. The short-term result of this approach was to undermine the effectiveness of U.S. policy in Iraq. As Bruce Jentleson noted a year after the invasion, "The Bush administration's largely unilateral strategy of winning the peace in Iraq is proving far more difficult, dangerous, and expensive than advertised."[97] In the long run, the danger of this approach lies in the loss of credibility and influence for the United States at the UN, a trend that is already in evidence.[98] During a time when U.S. influence seems to be in decline, presidents will increasingly need the UN to pursue objectives of a global and transnational nature, whether related to security or countless other concerns.[99] As U.S. ambassador to the UN Susan Rice accurately notes, "Now more than ever, Americans' security and wellbeing are inextricably linked to those of people everywhere. Now more than ever, we need common responses to global problems. And that is why America is so much better off – so much stronger, so much safer and more secure – in a world with the United Nations than we would be in a world without it."[100] Successful foreign policies will increasingly require effective leadership at the UN.

Engagement with the UN has additional, long-term benefits that should not be overlooked. First, even if the United States is reluctant to participate in UN-based initiatives, leaders in Washington should keep in mind that such initiatives increasingly will procede despite a lack of leadership from the United States. As changes in institutions and rules occur, the United States has an interest in being at the table and helping to shape outcomes that will affect its interests. Examples include the evolution of relatively new institutions, such as the International Criminal Court and the Human Rights Council, and the future of key regimes that are in flux, including global climate change, arms control and nonproliferation, the Law of the Sea, and the structure of the Security Council. In all of these cases the United States arguably has been too passive and detached in recent years.

Second, U.S. presidents need a long-term strategy to convince the world once again of American authority, that is, that the United States is credibly and legitimately bound by international institutions.[101] Coercion is no substitute for constructive leadership, and in any case the United States benefits from a robust set of multilateral institutions and legal rules that serve its interests quite well. After all, it was the United States that took the lead in shaping today's global order. While unilateralism is sometimes unavoidable and appropriate, presidents should be reminded that these institutions and rules are politically useful to the United States in the long run precisely because they are occasionally inconvenient and require policy adjustments to accommodate the interests of others.

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