

protesters held up placards that read “A village in Texas is missing its idiot” (or variations thereof), referring to President George W. Bush. However, historian Melvyn Leffler takes strong exception to that characterization in this impressive new book.

Leffler does conclude that the “invasion of Iraq turned into a tragedy” (p. xvii) in that it “exacted a huge human, financial, economic, and psychological toll on the United States” (p. 250), enhanced Iranian power in its area, divided America’s European allies, besmirched America’s reputation, heightened anti-Americanism and perceptions of American arrogance, dampened hopes for peace among Arabs and Jews, sundered trust in government, and caused faith in the American way to slip. But he also argues that this disaster did not come about, “as some accounts have it, because of an inattentive chief executive, easily manipulated by neoconservative advisers” (p. xviii). In fact, Leffler argues, Bush:

always was in charge of the administration’s Iraq policy, and he did not rush to war. Haunted by the catastrophe on [September 11, 2001], he grappled with unprecedented threats, identified Iraq as a potential danger, developed a strategy of coercive diplomacy, and hoped [Iraqi president Saddam Husayn] would bow to American pressure. He went to war *not* out of a fanciful idea to make Iraq democratic, but to rid it of its deadly weapons, its links to terrorists, and its ruthless, unpredictable tyrant (pp. 248–49).

Leffler is on sound ground about democracy promotion. As political scientist Bruce Russett noted, the democracy argument rose in significance only *after* the security arguments for going to war proved to be empty.¹ And international political econ-

IRAQ

Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq, by Melvyn P. Leffler, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 368 pages. \$27.95 cloth, e-book.

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In 2003, there was considerable protest both in the United States and around the globe as the American invasion of Iraq loomed. At anti-war demonstrations some

1. Bruce Russett, “Bushwacking the Democratic Peace,” *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 4 (2005): 395–408. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3577.2005.00217.x>.

omist Francis Fukuyama wryly observed that a prewar request to spend “several hundred billion dollars and several thousand American lives in order to bring democracy to . . . Iraq” would “have been laughed out of court.”² Moreover, when pollsters supply a list of foreign policy goals they find that the American public rather consistently ranks the promotion of democracy lower — often *much* lower — than goals like combating international terrorism, protecting American jobs, and strengthening the United Nations.³

However, Leffler also suggests that Bush’s administration never really grappled with the key motivation for its war: “whether invasion and war were more desirable outcomes than the status quo, however frightening, had not been evaluated” (p. 246). Crucial to this was a deeply flawed assumption that Iraq presented a major security threat to the US and to the region because it might develop weapons of mass destruction and give them to terrorists or come to dominate the area by using them or threatening to.

In fact, concludes Leffler rather dimly, Bush “was unable to grasp the magnitude of the enterprise he was embracing, the risks that inhered in it, and the costs that would be incurred” (p. 249). Moreover, he “did not invite systematic scrutiny of the policies he was inclined to pursue,” and he “did not ask his advisers if invading Iraq was a good idea” (p. 244). And no one even “mentioned the possibility that [Saddam] might not have the weapons they assumed he had” (p. 184).

Together with his advisers, Bush, Leffler suggests, was essentially helpless: “Like many Americans, the president and his advisers could not help but conflate the evil that [Saddam] personified with a magnitude of threat that he did not embody” (pp. 251–52). That is, the threat Iraq presented was massively exaggerated. There

are potential comparisons with Russian president Vladimir Putin’s decision-making before his regime-toppling efforts in Ukraine last year.

However, others did get the “threat” right at the time. These included dozens of academic specialists, a few insiders, the leaders and populations of several allied countries, and presumably protesters like the ones holding up the “idiot” placards. Unlike Bush and his advisers, they could help conflating threat with evil.

To “dominate,” Iraq would have needed to have an effective army. However, its army, as Leffler points out, simply collapsed and evaporated when the 2003 invasion took place, as had happened 12 years earlier in the Gulf War of 1991. Effectively, the war-makers of 2003 embraced conflicting assumptions: that Iraq’s military forces could easily be walked over — something of a premise for the invasion, which proved to be accurate — and that this demoralized and supremely incompetent military (deeply distrusted by Saddam) presented a coherent international threat.

Eventually Iraq might have obtained nuclear weapons, although it is relevant to note that it had taken 27 years for the less dysfunctional Pakistan to do so. But, even if he got the weapons (or even lesser weapons of “mass destruction”) and then branched them to “dominate” or “blackmail,” Saddam would find that he was confronted not by a set of fearful supplicants but by a coalition of opponents that had thousands of the weapons — something that had happened in 1990 when Iraq invaded neighboring Kuwait. As 33 top international relations scholars argued in a *New York Times* advertisement published on September 26, 2002, “Even if Saddam Hussein acquired nuclear weapons, he could not use them without suffering massive U.S. or Israeli retaliation.”⁴ That is, as analyst Jeffrey Record noted,

2. Francis Fukuyama, “US Parties and Their Foreign Policy Masquerade,” *Financial Times*, March 7, 2005, www.ft.com/content/8d319304-8f3a-11d9-a70f-00000e2511c8.

3. John Mueller, *War and Ideas: Selected Essays* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 152.

4. “War in Iraq is Not in America’s Interest,” available on the website of the University of Maryland’s Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at https://sadat.umd.edu/sites/sadat.umd.edu/files/iraq_war_ad_2002_2.pdf.

“there is no convincing evidence he would have been undeterrable.”⁵

And if nuclear weapons had been handed over to terrorists, their origins could likely be readily determined through nuclear forensics. As already-former national security advisor Brent Scowcroft put it in a prewar *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, there was absurdity in assuming that Saddam would give the weapons to “terrorists who would use them for their own purposes and leave Baghdad as the return address.”⁶

Leffler points out that any connections the Iraqi leader had with terrorist groups were not with al-Qa’ida but with ones attacking Israel at the time during the Palestinian uprising called the Second Intifada (pp. 86, 244, 249, 252). Six months before the invasion of Iraq, neoconservative guru Norman Podhoretz, deeply concerned about this development, strongly advocated expanding Bush’s “axis of evil” “at a minimum” to embrace Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority. And Podhoretz emphasized that it might “be necessary for the United States to *impose* a new political culture on the defeated parties.”⁷ Whether such an extravagant alarmist agenda enhanced the ardor of the neocons in the Bush administration goes unaddressed in the book.

At the same time however, it seems likely that Leffler would agree with an Army War College study concluding that, in launching their war against Iraq, US leaders seemed to have believed that other actors would not react. But Iran, a comember with Iraq on Bush’s (and Podhoretz’s) “axis of evil” hit list, had a huge incentive to make the American occupation of neighboring Iraq as miserable as possible, and the study concludes that Iran “appears to be the only

victor” of the war.⁸ Moreover, Islamist terrorists from around the world were drawn to the fray, something warned about by outsiders before the US invasion.

Whether or not a Texas village has become whole again may be a matter of debate. However, along with Bush’s 2001 invasion of Afghanistan — which proved to be an abject failure and was also likely unnecessary — the consequences of his policies have been horrific. Various tallies, including ones accepted by Leffler (p. 249), conclude that the 9/11 wars have resulted in the deaths of 100 times more people than perished in the initiating terrorist attack. In fact, that death toll is far higher than the one exacted by American nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.⁹

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5. Jeffrey Record, “Back to the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine?” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 85.

6. Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2002, www.wsj.com/articles/SB1029371773228069195.

7. Norman Podhoretz, “In Praise of the Bush Doctrine,” *Commentary* 114, no. 2 (Sept. 2002): 28.

8. Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak (eds.), *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007–2011* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2019), 639.

9. Credible estimates of the number of deaths from the 1945 atomic bomb blasts range from 110,000 to 210,000. See Alex Wellerstein, “Counting the Dead at Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 4, 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/08/counting-the-dead-at-hiroshima-and-nagasaki>.