

Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq

Melvyn P. Leffler (Oxford University Press, 2023), 346 pages, preface, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Michael J. Ard

In *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, distinguished Cold War historian Melvyn Leffler delivers a balanced and penetrating analysis on why President George W. Bush took the United States to war in 2003. Leffler relies on numerous interviews with key participants to supplement his careful examination of the written record. This new history will satisfy anyone interested in a compact and dispassionate treatment of what brought the United States to war and why it went awry.

The book dispatches various theories that Bush was motivated by avenging his father, or religious zeal, or manipulation by neoconservatives. What we see instead is a president beset by daunting foreign policy challenges, knocked off kilter by the 9/11 attacks, and uncertain of his overall strategy in coping with Iraq. Leffler's narrative skill

fully delineates the uncertainty and difficult trade-offs the Bush administration faced on how to secure America and defend our commitment to collective security. Although evenhanded, this book offers no apologia for the Bush administration's handling of the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Leffler sees the key drivers to war as fear, power, and hubris, which may have underlaid the causes of the war, but they did not make war inevitable. Leffler centers this story on the calculations and will of two presidents, Bush and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Ultimately, they each made crucial decisions that made the war happen. Both had opportunities to take another course that might have avoided the war.

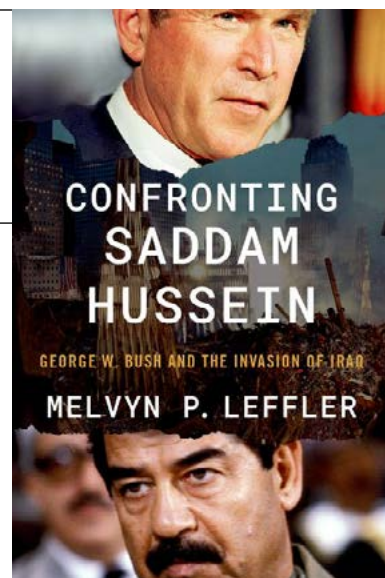
One of the book's strengths is describing the mounting psychological pressure Bush and his administration faced in the aftermath of 9/11. They were beset daily by a lengthy and alarmist "threat matrix" on possible terrorist attacks (a "god-awful idea," said presidential briefer Michael Morell), (68) and FBI Director Robert Mueller's warning of 300 potential terrorists in the United States.

The unsolved anthrax attacks that began on September 18, 2001, (letters containing anthrax were mailed to prominent politicians and US media outlets, killing five and infecting 17 others) raised the stakes for resolving ongoing Iraq challenge, which the administration viewed as getting out of control. No wonder that when the administration announced the Global War on Terrorism, it did so with the phrase, "our way of life is threatened."

Bush feared underestimating a looming threat again. Therefore, his administration concluded it could ill afford business as usual with Iraq, given its reputed weapons of mass destruction program, flouting of numerous UN Security Council resolutions, and long-established links to terrorist groups. A point Leffler might have made was that the West had been in a quasiwar with Iraq since 1991, with the country under heavy economic sanctions and with two-thirds of its territory declared no-fly zones enforced by the United States and United Kingdom.

Besides investigating causes, Leffler attempts to dispel numerous misconceptions that have since dominated interpretations of this tragic episode. For one, Leffler portrays a US president firmly in charge of his cabinet. Bush, as Leffler makes clear, also did not believe Saddam was behind 9/11, nor did his cabinet members. Moreover, neither he nor his cabinet entertained grand designs to remake the Middle East in a democratic image, at least not in the beginning.

Leffler also stresses the policy continuity from one administration to the next on Iraq; Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998.



All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

Both Republican and Democratic politicians insisted that Saddam Hussein had to go. Despite this commitment, Leffler argues the Bush administration had no plan to attack Iraq before or immediately after 9/11; there was no rush to war. Far from a portrayal of a single-minded, determined government, we find instead an administration buffeted constantly by conflicting viewpoints and independent information flows. As this account makes clear, the Bush administration in many ways was making up Iraq policy as it went along.

Ironically, given the longtime Iraq focus in Washington, the poor mechanics of US foreign policy making comes through. The administration suffered from the opposite of groupthink—instead, key advisers were querulous and divided. Bush, although in charge, was besieged by numerous different opinions on what to do. Important nodes like the IC, the Office of the Vice President, the State Department, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense offered their own perspectives on information. The overwhelmed NSC failed to achieve policy consensus. Perhaps as influential as even his closest advisers, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who shared Bush's disdain for Saddam, convinced Bush to push for more WMD inspections and a new UN resolution.

This organizational breakdown led to significant fundamentals being ignored, such as how the United States would manage the aftermath of the war. There was poor coordination on the Future of Iraq project between State and Defense—a massive failure, concludes Leffler. A report on the widespread looting and disorder that broke out after the US invasion of Panama in 1989 went unheeded. Secretary of State Powell himself, according to Leffler, could not pinpoint when Bush made Iraq the central focus. (96)

Like the Enron Corporation, which filed for bankruptcy around that time and whose leadership was famously dubbed “the smartest guys in the room,” the Bush administration featured a team of highly capable, experienced people who worked in their own information siloes and whose risk management capabilities were sorely lacking.^a Ultimately, the sum was much less than its parts.

But they were united in their concept of US power as a force for good. In 1998, Secretary of State Albright said America “stands tall and sees farther into the future than other countries.”^b This bold declaration of the fundamental righteousness of America found a willing adherent in President Bush. Coupled with self-righteousness may be a tincture of US naiveté about the world. Puzzling over the 9/11 attack, Bush mused, “I’m amazed that there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about, that people would hate us ... like most Americans, I can’t believe it, because I know how good we are.” (74)

Still perplexing is the lack of debate in the Bush administration on how the country had fared in similar wars of national policy. The Korean War damaged the Truman presidency, and the Vietnam War Johnson’s. Did Bush and his advisers not seek any lessons from these tragic histories? As the crisis grew, Bush increasingly saw war in grandiose terms, to not simply end the Iraqi threat, but even reshape the entire Middle East. Once again, “Hubris” has taken its role on the stage.

Bush’s embrace of US power and desire to expand freedom probably did not prompt him to assess the cost of an invasion. He asked US Central Command Commander Gen. Tommy Franks, can you win? But he never asked, what will come next? Leffler cites as a huge failure CENTCOM not focusing on Phase IV—the occupation after main combat operations in Iraq—a policy neither Franks nor his boss Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld seemed to care about. (207–208)

The IC likewise bears its share of the responsibility. An avid consumer of intelligence, Bush appeared to understand its limitations. Often forgotten is that before CIA Director George Tenet said, “It’s a slam dunk,” Bush had asked, “Is that all you’ve got?” Cheney may have challenged CIA on the al-Qa‘ida connection, but “intelligence analysts,” Leffler concludes, “were not bullied or intimidated.” (157) Leffler, guided mostly by the 2005 Robb-Silberman Report, concludes the White House did not press intelligence analysts to make different conclusions. Leffler avoids chasing red herrings like the purported uranium yellowcake from Niger or the fabricated reporting from the infamous Curveball source, which never influenced decision-making.

a. Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind, *Smartest Guys in the Room* (Portfolio Trade, 2003).

b. Madeleine Albright, interview on NBC-TV “The Today Show” with Matt Lauer, Columbus, Ohio, February 19, 1998, as released by the Office of the Spokesman, US Department of State.

But some key intelligence admittedly was weak, with reporting on WMD coming from Kurdish opposition groups. Still, all decisionmakers thought Saddam Hussein had WMD, even relative doves like Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage; and key foreign partners concurred. One senior adviser noted, “Nobody told Bush that Hussein did not have WMD.” No IC product or briefing doubted the reality of Saddam Hussein having a WMD arsenal. Although the 2002 Iraq National Intelligence Estimate exaggerated the threat, it was restrained compared to the intelligence reporting the principals were used to seeing.

Although ill-served by the IC, the chief policymakers never questioned their own assumptions or seriously challenged the reporting. In the end, it all boiled down to the “decider,” and Leffler is incisive in describing the administration’s contradictory policy of containing Iraq and overthrowing Saddam. Washington wanted Saddam’s cooperation on WMD while openly demanding regime change. Leffler cites an interview in which Bush said Saddam needs to go, and that Baghdad also must let inspectors return. 117–18) The diplomacy advocated by Condoleezza Rice was long on coercion but short on

diplomacy. Meanwhile, Saddam Hussein, far from yielding to threats, grew more defiant. When he could not be cajoled into changing his behavior, “US credibility itself” became at risk. (173)

In the end, the Iraq war, which started out with strong US public support, came at great cost: some 4,400 US and coalition military dead, at least 110,000 Iraqi killed (at the lower end; estimates vary widely), \$2 trillion expended, and US confidence and prestige badly damaged. Fear, power, and hubris overcame sound process, clear thinking, and prudential wisdom. This is a damning verdict by Leffler, and largely accepted wisdom today, but perhaps future historians will make a more refined judgment. By going to war, Bush administration defended an important ideal—the concept of collective security as enshrined in the UN charter—as only the United States was capable of doing. The war put an end to a significant and persistent security threat of WMD in the Middle East. Saddam was removed from power, and Iraqis—especially the Shias and the Kurds—were offered a legitimate chance to forge their own political futures. These evident benefits should be weighed along with the high costs.



The reviewer: Michael J. Ard is a former CIA officer. He is now a professor at Johns Hopkins University, where he directs the master’s of science in intelligence analysis program.