

Excusing the Iraq war?

Explaining the Iraq War; Counterfactual Theory, Logic and Evidence

Frank P. Harvey

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At a particularly fractious press call in June 2003, an exasperated George W. Bush declared: 'This nation acted to a threat from the dictator of Iraq..... Now, there are some who like to rewrite history – revisionist historians is what I like to call them.'¹ Now, after more than a decade of bloodshed, turmoil and shattered reputations, US academic Frank P. Harvey presents as clear and explicit an essay in revisionism as you could hope to find. In *Explaining the Iraq War*, Harvey sets out to establish that, 'the generally accepted historical account' of the 2003 Iraq invasion is fatally flawed by a stress on what he terms 'neocoinism' – the assigning of a primary causative role to the dominance of neo-conservative ideologues and ideology in the 2000 Bush administration. To stack this up, Harvey makes use of counterfactual theory, specifically, the wholly believable counterfactual of a Gore/Leiberman presidency which, he claims, would have felt driven to take the same course as Bush in ordering US military action.

Although dismissed by some prominent figures as a mere 'parlour game',² counterfactual analysis has gained a widespread following amongst historians and developed a substantial body of theory.³ In essence, to establish a viable counterfactual requires meeting conditions of clarity in distinguishing dependent and independent variables, cotenability (logical consistency of connecting principles) and consistency with well-established historical facts (minimal re-write). There are clearly a whole raft of theoretical issues in

1 Remarks of President George W. Bush, Elizabeth, New Jersey, 16 June 2003.

2 E.H.Carr, E.P. Thompson and Tristram Hunt have all taken this view.

3 See, for example, Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin (eds.)

Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics (Princeton University Press, 1996)

play, notably the perennial structure/agency debate, and here Harvey plumps firmly for structure – and indeed, structural determinism – in dictating the US resort to military action against Iraq. Observing that

‘...all major decisions from 2002 to 2003 were endorsed by Al Gore.....Gore’s pace, stride and movements would have been different, but not his general direction or destination. The differences [with Bush] would have been largely inconsequential in competition with the pressures to make the same big decisions that produced the path-dependent outcome.....a carefully constructed counterfactual analysis of the major domestic and foreign policy decisions leading to the 2003 Iraq war strongly supports the view that President Gore (along with most Democrats) would have been compelled to follow the same path.’ (pp. 20-21).

To be sure, Al Gore’s record in office and as a leading senator lends ample support for this view. Gore had voted for the first (1991) Gulf war and taken a consistently hawkish stand on Bosnia, Kosovo and, indeed, the 1998 ‘Desert Fox’ bombing campaign against Iraq. His running mate in 2000, Joe Lieberman, was the main author of the 1998 ‘Iraq Liberation Act’ which, for the first time, enshrined regime change in Baghdad as official US policy. Many other prominent Democrats – Richard Holbrooke, Madeleine Albright, John Kerry – held similar views on the effectiveness of ‘coercive diplomacy’.

Thus far, the argument presented is relatively uncontroversial. Iraq clearly was unfinished business for Gore/Lieberman. And any attempt to tackle Saddam Hussein’s repeated UN violations (and/or oust the regime completely) would have necessarily involved at least the credible threat of military force. This, for Harvey, effectively discredits ‘The common theme running through neoconist literature....[which is]....the strong belief that something distinct about the Bush administration constituted a *necessary* condition for war. (p. 2, emphasis in original) But this view leaves much underspecified. Few historians would dispute that there was indeed ‘something distinct’ about Bush *et al*. And most would agree

that it was this very factor that was precisely at work in both launching the Iraq war *and governing the way it was conducted*. This last point is largely ignored in Harvey's analysis, but is, I would argue, the key missing variable in establishing the likelihood (or not) of a Gore presidency following Bush's 'path dependency'.

Harvey does a convincing job of establishing overall US path dependency in the 2002-3 Iraq war run-up timeline. Gore and the leading democrats offered unwavering support for the succession of measures from late 2002 – Congressional war powers authorisation, deployment of troops, approaches to the UN – that effectively locked US policy into invasion mode by March 2003. But this begs the question of whether or not an independent Gore/Lieberman timeline would have been substantially similar. Here, the overwhelming body of evidence surely suggests it would not.

Bush's timetable for 2002-3 was dictated almost solely by the exigencies of Rumsfeld/Cheney war planning (and the congressional mid-term elections), rather than imminent Iraqi threat. Many seasoned national security heavyweights from previous US administrations – Brent Scowcroft, James Baker, Lawrence Eagleburger – had dismissed administration claims of a dramatic rise in threat level,⁴ hence the virtually unprecedented efforts by the Bush regime in perception management and propaganda. This is downplayed by Harvey, as is the avowedly revolutionary transformation in US strategy brought in by Donald Rumsfeld to the Pentagon. The centrepiece here was a declaratory policy of, if needs be, pre-emptive war.⁵ Harvey himself, and many other observers, agree that a likely Gore administration approach to Iraq and post-911 events in general would have been a full-on NATO occupation of Afghanistan – involving many thousands of troops – and the adoption of General Anthony Zinni's 1998 Iraq plan, 'Operation Desert Crossing'. (p. 305) Zinni's plan,

⁴ See, for example, John Prados, *Hoodwinked: the Documents that Reveal how Bush sold us a War* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

⁵ For an extended discussion of the Rumsfeld revolution and deep rupture with previous US thinking, see Paul Todd, Jonathan Bloch and Pat Fitzgerald, *Spies, Lies and the War on Terror* (London: Zed, 2009).

drafted in the aftermath of the Desert Fox bombing campaign, called for 400-500,000 troops to ensure both swift victory and post war stability. A main reason why Desert Crossing was left on the shelf by Cheney and Rumsfeld was that assembling forces in those numbers would have required considerably more time than the 'war-lite' option that Rumsfeld was actually able to browbeat out of the Pentagon.

There are many other underspecified antecedents in Harvey's Gore 2000 victory counterfactual. True to the minimal re-write rule, he allows 9-11 to still take place. But leaving aside the probability of a far closer Gore focus on al Qaeda – almost totally ignored during Bush's first year – a Gore administration would, from day one, have been closely involved in the Middle East and the Israel-Palestine conflict in particular. Gore had been highly active here during the Clinton administration and was acutely aware of how close agreement nearly came in 1999-2000. Gore's links with the region, and a – by no means inconceivable – positive response to Iranian overtures after 9-11 would have yielded a far wider spectrum of leverage on Iraq than was at Bush's disposal. To be sure, this does not rule out eventual US military action. As Harvey well demonstrates, Saddam Hussein was so deluded that bogus WMD posturing was seen as virtually synonymous with regime survival. (pp. 241-264). But whatever course Gore might have eventually settled on would surely not have been that of rushed discretionary war, whose aims concerned – quite apart from anything else – an opportunist assertion of US power in general.

In closing remarks, Harvey lambasts

'...what amounts to academic groupthink – like other conspiracy theories, neoconism develops an entire narrative around a simplistic first image (leadership driven) theory⁶ about the Machiavellian brilliance and

⁶ Frank Harvey is here assuming the mainstream International Relations (IR) theory division of world politics into three categories, representing individual, unit and system levels of analysis. These are generally termed first, second and third images respectively. This schema was first fully elaborated in Kenneth Waltz's influential *Man, the State and War* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1959); see also, Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

absolute power of a few ideologues who transformed US foreign policy to serve their self interests.’(p. 286)

But in asserting that the neocons ‘lost many key debates’ (concerning approaching the UN, avoiding straight US unilateralism etc.) and were thus largely peripheral to the outcome, Harvey sidesteps the elephant-sized inconvenient truth – the neocons got the war they wanted anyway.

Harvey is at pains to stress that his arguments in no way ‘condone’ a war ‘.....most people agree today was not necessary.’ (p. 291) But this is where rigid structural determinism rather loses its bearings. Since the war was ‘not necessary’, then alternatives surely must have been present. And in rejecting ‘the myth of a Bush Doctrine’ and insisting that previous US national security strategies were essentially cut from the same cloth, Harvey is courting the very level-of-analysis mis-attribution he condemns in the neoconist camp.⁷ For there clearly was a ‘Bush Doctrine’, and perhaps no incoming US administration in modern times has entered office with a more widely articulated body of plans and conceptions for its policies or made more Herculean efforts to carry them out – increasingly in the face of glaring failure and dysfunction. Where Harvey is in denial here is in refusing to countenance that the neocon intake of 2000 were not just any old US right-wingers. They were a tightly-structured, well organized clique with a wide ranging action plan – with war on Iraq as a centrepiece – that were able to indeed approach ‘absolute power’, due to unique historical circumstance and a largely figurehead president amenable to their persuasion. It may be hard to accept that a ‘Leninist clique’ could so take over and dominate a great-power’s foreign and security policy, but Lenin himself doubtless felt the same.

⁷ Like many in the dominant ‘neo-realist’ school of US international relations theory, Harvey stresses the influence of structural, world system-wide factors in shaping historical outcomes. These are generally dictated by state on state interaction. But whilst all can agree on the necessary attribution of structure as context, unpacking the actual course of events on the ground must take on individual and unit/domestic interaction in attributing contingency. This, I believe, is where Harvey’s argument suffers from level-of-analysis confusion.

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