

## The Iraq War and Agenda Setting

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This essay takes concepts from early examples of a literature that is seldom used in foreign policy analysis—the literature on agenda setting in the U.S. government—and applies it to the case study of the U.S. decision to launch Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. After a brief case history, the essay examines various core themes in the agenda-setting framework, and finds that concepts such as policy communities, focusing events, and policy windows can help explain the U.S. decision to go to war. The purpose of the essay is not to advance the current state of agenda-setting research, whose focus is usually not on explaining decision-making processes within the executive branch; the purpose, instead, is to revive an older framework of analysis from the agenda-setting field and demonstrate its utility in examining foreign policy behavior. The essay suggests that the agenda-setting literature could offer similar insights to many other examples of foreign policy decision making, and concludes by suggesting a handful of broader lessons of the agenda-setting paradigm for the analysis of national behavior.

The U.S. decision to intervene in Iraq was, in the view of some observers, the result of a classic groupthink process. To others, it stemmed from one or another cognitive error—perhaps wishful thinking, or cognitive dissonance, or bad analogies. A more traditional way to view the decision would be in rational actor terms: President George W. Bush and his key aides defined their objectives, considered alternatives, weighed the risks and benefits of each, and selected the option that maximized benefits and minimized risks. To the extent that the decision to invade has been studied at all, the results tend to imply one of these well-known theories to explain the choice—theories such as groupthink, groupthink, cognitive errors, or pure rational action. But one much less frequently used concept—the literature on agenda setting—offers at least as much insight into the question of why the United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and may be useful in cases well beyond the Iraq War in explaining national security choices.

This essay's goal is not to advance the state of research on key debates in the agenda-setting literature. That insightful and by now quite extensive literature has come a long way from the contributions of the sources I will rely upon—but its focus is most often on domestic politics, and especially agenda-setting within the Congress.<sup>1</sup> Another area of agenda-setting focus, and the one that deals most often

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Walker (1977), Sinclair (1985), Taylor (1998), and Edwards and Wood (1999). Other areas of specific focus include the work of Eavey on bureaucratic control of agendas (see, for e.g., Eavey and Miller 1984), and the role of presidential rhetoric on public agendas (see Cohen 1995).

with foreign policy, is in the area of the media's effect on agendas.<sup>2</sup> My purpose is to look back to some of the original writings in this field, to revive an older and more general framework of analysis, and to demonstrate its utility in examining a part of the governmental foreign policy process that is seldom the focus of agenda-setting works: the executive branch. My argument is not that the framework outlined here applies to all decision-making situations, or that, alone, it can explain the decision to invade Iraq. It does, however, throw such a useful light on the OIF decision that it may well be useful in assessing other decisions as well. As I will stress, truly accurate portraits of national-level decision making can only be drawn using a variety of frameworks and perspectives.<sup>3</sup> The agenda-setting approach is one among a number of insightful approaches that can aid analysis.<sup>4</sup>

### The Decision to Attack Iraq

For a decade before the election of George W. Bush as President, many of the men and women who would become his top foreign policy advisers argued for several major propositions. Two of the leading ones were that American power ought to be vigorously asserted to bring order to a potentially disintegrating post-Cold War world, and that Saddam Hussein had to be removed from power. The first of these goals had been on the minds of key Republican foreign policy leaders for nearly a decade: the writer James Mann contends that the roots of the Iraq war can be found in the 1992 Defense Policy Guidance (DPG), drafted at the tail end of the first Bush administration. “The underlying rationale” for OIF “was both broader and more abstract: The war was carried out in pursuit of a larger vision of using America's overwhelming military superiority to shape the future,” he contends (Mann 2004b).

Mann explains that the author of the first DPG draft was not, as commonly reported, Paul Wolfowitz, but Zalmay Khalilzad—later a main player on U.S. Iraq policy. The most enthusiastic early reader was then-Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney. And a second version of the report, allegedly “toned down” after the first draft had been publicly revealed, in fact preserved—and in some ways even extended—the core ideas of American dominance offered in the first draft. In fact, a continued argument for U.S. power could have been expected, because the official given responsibility for editing and revising the draft was I. Lewis (“Scooter”) Libby, then serving as principal deputy undersecretary of defense for strategy. Rather than walking away from the idea of American predominance, Mann writes, “Libby's rewrite encompassed a more breathtaking vision: The United States would buildup its military capabilities to such an extent that there could never be a rival.” It also built up the suggestion that the United States would “act to ensure events moved in ways favorable to U.S. interests”—an early statement of what was to become the preemption doctrine in the second Bush administration. When the draft was done, Defense Secretary Cheney “took ownership of it,” according to Khalilzad.

Mann draws a number of lessons from the episode. One is that an especially crucial player in the second Bush administration—Richard Cheney—was a bold, aggressive thinker years before 9-11. A persuasive analysis in *The New Republic* by Spencer Ackerman and Franklin Foer (2003:17–18) agrees: They describe, for ex-

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, McCombs and Shaw (1972), Cook et al. (1983), Manheim (1986), Kosicki (1993), and Van Belle (1993, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> John Lewis Gaddis (2002) makes an excellent extended argument on this score; see, especially chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>4</sup> In the research for this continuing project, I have conducted interviews with a number of former senior government officials, from working level to cabinet level in the administration of George W. Bush, to supplement the numerous published sources of information on the Iraq war. My agreement with the interview subjects was for anonymity, and so they will be cited only by number.

ample, Cheney's unsuccessful battle in the first Bush administration to shift U.S. Soviet policy away from Mikhail Gorbachev and toward an effort to collapse a tottering Soviet Union and promote democracy. Their sources pointed to a willingness, even then, on Cheney's part to "circumvent the typical bureaucratic channels to gain advantage over his rivals." In retrospect, Cheney probably felt he had been right about the Soviet Union: Gorbachev did not survive; Yeltsin, for whom Cheney had urged support, had arisen to power in Russia and proved a friendly, if unsteady, interlocutor; and the Soviet Union had collapsed in a wave of democratic reforms. If Dick Cheney learned a lesson from the event, it was probably to trust his instincts, to favor rollback rather than incrementalism, to scoff at those who saw all problems as "intractable," and to favor bold moves.

The importance of expressions of American power to many men who would become senior officials in the second Bush administration was joined by, and closely related to, a second foreign policy preoccupation: that Saddam Hussein must be driven from power. During the first Gulf War, Hussein had revealed aggressive regional ambitions; afterwards, U.S. intelligence found him to have been much closer to a nuclear arsenal than had been thought. This episode seems to have cemented several beliefs on the parts of key members of the U.S. national security policy community: that Saddam would do anything to obtain weapons of mass destruction; that he was skilled in concealing his WMD programs from inspectors; that U.S. intelligence tended to underplay, rather than exaggerate, emerging threats; and that no scenario would safeguard U.S. interests short of regime change (Mann 2004a: 182–183, 234–238). Even as of May 1991, therefore, President George H. W. Bush had signed a presidential order authorizing the CIA to spend over a hundred million dollars on various covert operations to "create the conditions for [the] removal of Saddam Hussein from power" (Mayer 2004:61). Dealing with Saddam would directly support the first goal, of restoring American credibility: George Packer (2005:36) suggests that the conservatives saw Iraq "as a test case for their ideas about American power and world leadership."

During the 1990s, a group of dedicated anti-Saddam activists emerged, largely outside government (because most of them were Republicans), who worked together to understand and promote the issue—and who would later assume senior policy positions in the administration of George W. Bush. This group kept abreast of developments in Iraq; spoke to Iraqi exile groups and leaders; published articles and op-eds on the Iraq issue; held conferences and informal meetings on the subject; lobbied members of the administration and Congress to get tougher on Saddam; and fed key information about Saddam's behavior to U.S. and international news media. By the late 1990s, they had become convinced that U.S. policy toward Iraq—and its twin pillars of economic sanctions and no-fly-zones—was collapsing, that time was on Saddam's side.<sup>5</sup> Their policy recommendations centered largely around plans—such as one developed by leading Iraqi exiles, including Ahmed Chalabi—that envisioned a Bay of Pigs-style regime change option (Mayer 2004:58–72). Chalabi made his case in the draft plan called "End Game" by claiming that "The time for the plan is now. Iraq is on the verge of spontaneous combustion. It only needs a trigger to set off a chain of events that will lead to the overthrow of Saddam" (Hersh 2001:58).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This process was well underway by 2000. Even Hans Blix (2004:53–54; Interviewee 13) stresses this fact in his book, noting the "sanctions fatigue" that was afflicting leading powers at the time, the popular outrage at the effects of the sanctions. Baghdad was becoming filled with businessmen; the oil-for-food program was enriching Saddam and strengthening his hold on power—ironically, creating just the sort of kleptocracy that would prove unable to function as an effective government, thus consigning Iraqi infrastructure to a gradual decline, requiring vast new investments to rescue—something U.S. planners did not recognize until it was too late.

<sup>6</sup> Former CIA case officer Robert Baer reports being briefed on the End Game plan in August 1994, by which time, according to Baer, it had been "well shopped around Washington" (Baer 2002:188). See also Gordon and Trainor (2006:12–13). For an early critique of such strategies, see Byman, Pollack, and Rose (1999). These concepts

In February 1998, this group of anti-Saddam activists sent President Clinton a letter recommending that regime change in Iraq become a major foreign policy priority.<sup>7</sup> The letter claimed that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction, and charged that the existing policy of containment was "bound to erode," and "only a determined program to change the regime in Baghdad will bring the Iraqi crisis to a satisfactory conclusion." Iraq "is ripe for a broad-based insurrection," the letter contended. "We must exploit this opportunity." Signatories of the letter included a host of people who would become senior officials in or advisers to the Bush administration, the defining core of the group of anti-Saddam activists: Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, Paul Wolfowitz, Elliot Abrams, Richard Armitage, John Bolton, Paula Dobrianski, Zalmay Khalilzad, Peter Rodman, Donald Rumsfeld, David Wurmser, and Dov Zakheim.

In October 1998, partly under the prodding of this same group, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act.<sup>8</sup> It provided for assistance to radio and television broadcasting into Iraq, \$97 million in military assistance to "democratic opposition organizations," and humanitarian assistance to Iraqis living in liberated areas. That November, President Clinton stated that containment of Saddam was insufficient, and committed the United States to regime change. In January 1999, Secretary of State Madeline Albright took this message throughout the Middle East—bringing with her on the trip State's "special representative for transition in Iraq," an official charged with developing a strategy to "create the environment and pressures inside Iraq" to overthrow Saddam Hussein (Perlez 1999:A3). Little practical actions came of these statements, however, and even as the Iraq Liberation Act was passing in the Congress, Secretary of Defense William Cohen tempered expectations by saying that Clinton "was not calling for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein" (Loeb 1998:A17). As it became clear that the Clinton administration was not interested in near-term regime change, Chalabi and others turned more of their attention to the anti-Saddam policy activists outside government (Mayer 2004:64–65).

During the campaign, both Bush and Cheney threatened to take action in Iraq. "If I found in any way, shape or form that he was developing weapons of mass destruction," Bush said, "I'd take 'em out"—a reference, he quickly claimed, to the weapons, not to Hussein himself (Lancaster 2000). In a later television appearance, Bush quipped: "I will tell you this: If we catch him developing weapons of mass destruction in any way, shape, or form, I'll deal with him in a way that he won't like." Cheney, when asked about the "take 'em out" quote, said that "If in fact Saddam Hussein were taking steps to try to rebuild nuclear capacity or weapons of mass destruction, we'd have to give very serious consideration to military action to stop that activity" (Lemann 2001:34).

A number of quiet, largely behind-the-scenes clues also hinted that they planned a greater emphasis on Saddam Hussein's regime. One account, from June of 2000, suggests that an adviser to Bush mentioned during a briefing session that "we ought to have been rid of Saddam Hussein a long time ago," and implied that candidate Bush agreed with the sentiment (Lancaster 2000:A1).<sup>9</sup>

became an initial basis for post-9/11 Iraq planning, but once CENTCOM was fully engaged, they were dropped; Interviewees 5, 6, 7, 9.

<sup>7</sup> A good, although skeptical, account of the group and the text of its letter can be found at [www.disinfopedia.org](http://www.disinfopedia.org).

<sup>8</sup> The Iraq Liberation Act, PL 105–338, October 31, 1998; available in full text, among other places, at: <http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/iraq/libact103198.pdf#search=The%20Iraq%20Liberation%20Act>.

<sup>9</sup> During the election, several newspaper and magazine analyses predicted that a Bush administration would deal more forcefully with Iraq (Mufson 2000:A1). Condoleezza Rice was quoted in June 2000 as saying that "regime change is necessary," without laying out a specific timetable (Seib 2000:A24).

*Bush Administration Enters Office*

Once George W. Bush was elected, key members of the new administration quickly turned their attention to Iraq. In January 2001, even before Bush had been inaugurated, Vice President-Elect Cheney reportedly asked outgoing Secretary of Defense William Cohen to brief President-Elect Bush. He did not, however, want the “routine, canned, round-the-world tour,” according to Bob Woodward’s account; instead, he “wanted a serious discussion about Iraq and different options.” . . . Topic A should be Iraq” (Woodward 2004:9).

On January 30, 2001, the new Bush national security team held its first NSC meeting. This session is recounted at length in the Ron Suskind book on former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill, *The Price of Loyalty*. O’Neill describes a session heavily focused on Iraq at which Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, President Bush, and others seemed intent on taking action soon. O’Neill contends that the next NSC meeting, on February 1, also focused on Iraq (Suskind 2004:73–74, 85–86). My own interviews did not support O’Neill’s version of events: others who participated in these meetings, or spoke directly to participants in them, describe a much less focused discussion, and certainly not one that implied any near-term intention to take on Iraq directly. What was clear to many in the administration was that sanctions were collapsing, that Saddam was growing stronger by the year, and that U.S. policy badly needed attention (Interviewee 7). What a new policy would become, however, was far from clear; and no one with whom I spoke read the meeting as an indication that George Bush was anxious to go after Saddam (Interviewees 3, 15).

These early questions and discussions morphed into an administration-wide debate about the future of sanctions against Iraq, proposals for new models of “smart sanctions,” and dialogue about various plans to move against Saddam short of an all-out U.S. attack. At both the principals’ and deputies’ levels, options were examined that included coups and support for opposition or insurgent groups within Iraq. The broad goal was to put more pressure on Saddam Hussein, but beyond that there was little consensus of what precisely the United States should do or how far it should go. But there was little urgency to the debates, no clear goal, a fragmented policy process, no focusing event to rally policy change, and—apart from a decision on a revised sanctions program—the result was inaction. One report suggests that the “process swiftly became bogged down in bitter interagency disagreements” and “remained stuck” in “gridlock” until September 11 (Burroughs et al. 2004:234; Interviewees 3, 4, 9, 11, 15).

Planning did continue, however. Between May 31 and July 26, 2001, the deputies committee met several times to discuss options for how to push Saddam’s regime toward collapse. Their resulting proposal, called “A Liberation Strategy,” seems to have been a cobbled-together set of initiatives—increased support for opposition groups, tighter economic sanctions, more intrusive weapons inspections, more muscular use of no-fly-zones, and other U.S. military presence in the country—designed to make Saddam more uncomfortable and his people more tempted to revolt (Woodward 2004:21). But it did not envisage direct U.S. military action, and little immediate result came of the plan.

*Aftermath of September 11*

There is little question that the attacks of September 11, 2001 brought a new urgency, and readiness to take bigger risks, to the administration’s thinking on Iraq. Unsurprisingly, given all that had gone before, some administration officials reportedly began thinking about Iraq just hours after the attacks. On September 11 itself, for example, one aide to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld made notes suggesting “that Rumsfeld had mused about whether to “hit S. H. at same time—not

only UBL.” Rumsfeld also asked for analysis to be done about the possible connection between Iraq and Osama bin Laden (Woodward 2004:25). That same evening, President Bush made the decision to focus the U.S. response to the attacks both on terrorists and on “those who harbor them” (Woodward 2002:30). For advocates of action against Iraq, the invitation to push Saddam Hussein front-and-center in the U.S. answer to 9-11 may have become irresistible.

The most detailed account of key events on the 12th and 13th of September comes from former senior NSC staffer Richard Clarke. On the 12th, Clarke writes that he confronted “a series of discussions about Iraq.” Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz argued that the Al-Qaeda attack could not have been launched without help, probably Iraqi help. Eventually, the group settled on an Afghanistan-first approach—but it was clear to everyone that a “broader war on terrorism” was brewing that was likely to draw in other countries (Clarke 2004:30–31).<sup>10</sup> On the evening of September 12, President Bush pulled Clarke and two of his aides into a small conference room. “Look,” Clarke quotes the president as saying, “I know you have a lot to do and all . . . but I want you, as soon as you can, to go back over everything, everything. See if Saddam did this. See if he’s linked in any way.” After Clarke said there was no evidence of Iraqi support for Al-Qaeda, Bush said, “Look into Iraq, Saddam,” and left (Clarke 2004:32).

Meanwhile, in those first days, senior Defense Department officials turned immediately to Iraq as well. Between September 11 and 15, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary Douglas Feith wrote several memos urging action against Saddam Hussein; on the 13th, Feith sent a classified fax to Third Army headquarters in Atlanta directing planners there to develop a plan for seizing Iraq’s southern oil fields—a concept closely tied to the long-standing plans for exile-based operations—within 72 hours. By the Camp David meetings on the 15th, the Defense Department arrived with an official proposal for taking on three initial targets in the war on terror: Al-Qaeda, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq—and not necessarily in that order (Gordon and Trainor 2006:16, 19–20; Interviewee 9).

On September 15, during those Camp David sessions, Wolfowitz took the opportunity to push Iraq again, arguing that taking down Saddam would be easier than uprooting the Taliban (Woodward 2002:83–84). The group decided to defer a direct confrontation with Iraq—but all agreed that the question would recur, and President Bush specifically stated his belief that Iraq was somehow involved in the 9-11 attacks (Woodward 2002:91, 99). On September 16, Bush told National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice that “We won’t do Iraq now, we’re putting Iraq off. But eventually we’ll have to return to that question” (Woodward 2004:25–26). Different participants left the meeting with different interpretations: State officials believed they had effectively quashed the discussion of going after Iraq; Defense Department officials thought they had essentially won—the President had agreed that Iraq could be a target; the question was only timing (Interviewees 3, 4, 9, and 11). Paul Wolfowitz would later say that, “To the extent it was a debate about tactics and timing, the President clearly came down on the side of Afghanistan first. To the extent it was a debate about strategy and what the larger goal was, it is at least clear with 20/20 hindsight that the President came down on the side of the larger goal” (Wolfowitz 2003).

On September 17, President Bush signed an order for war in Afghanistan—an order that also asked for military plans for going to war in Iraq. On the 18th and 19th, the Defense Policy Board met to discuss Iraq and hear the comments of Ahmed Chalabi, who talked of Iraq as a breeding ground for terrorists and promised that overthrowing Saddam would not be difficult. Policy Board chief Richard Perle would later tell *Vanity Fair* that Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld “was getting

<sup>10</sup> Bob Woodward (2002:49) describes what must be the same meeting in nearly identical terms.

confirmation of his own instincts. . . . He seemed neither surprised nor discomfited by the idea of taking action against Iraq” (Burroughs et al. 2004:236; another account of this meeting can be found in Mayer 2004:70–71).

For Vice President Cheney, the attacks—according to a variety of knowledgeable sources in public reports, and also according to his own public statements—would seem to have accelerated his commitment to radical, pro-democracy reorientation of the Middle East. Just as he advocated a decade earlier for abandoning incremental measures and taking a sledge hammer to the problem of the Soviet Union, so now he came out in full force for a similar strategy toward the seemingly intractable problems of the Arab and Islamic worlds. One report quotes a “friend” of Cheney’s as saying that the Vice President now believed that “what you had to do was transform the Middle East” (Ackerman and Foer 2003:20; Interviewee 14).

On November 21, 2001, after a National Security Council meeting, President Bush pulled Rumsfeld aside, and told him to update his war plans for Iraq (Woodward 2004:1–3). There is every indication, as one account puts it—quoting senior officials close to the president—that Bush “understood instantly after September 11 that Iraq would be the next major step in the global war against terrorism, and that he made up his mind” to deal with Saddam Hussein “within days, if not hours, of that fateful day” (Kessler 2003:A1). All accounts are agreed that the president continued to hope that war could be avoided, but was at the same time determined to remove Hussein from power. On December 28, 2001, U.S. Central Command chief General Tommy Franks provided a detailed briefing on possible Iraq war plans to the president at his Crawford ranch (Woodward 2004:52–64). “Is this good enough to win?” the president asked Franks, and Bush recalls Franks replying that it was. Bush told Woodward “we weren’t ready to execute then,” but that he left the meeting “with two things on his mind: ‘Saddam’s a threat. This is an option’” (Woodward 2004:66).

Another press report, this one from the fall of 2002, quoted sources in the U.S. government as suggesting that a de facto regime change decision was made in late 2001. “President Bush’s determination to oust Iraq’s Saddam Hussein by military force if necessary was set last fall without a formal decision-making meeting or the intelligence assessment that customarily precedes such a momentous decision,” suggests the *USA Today* article, co-written by the paper’s senior defense and intelligence reporters. The debate after that time, their sources contended, “has been about the means to accomplish that end.” Condoleezza Rice admitted that “There wasn’t a flash moment. There’s no decision meeting. But Iraq had been on the radar screen—that it was a danger and that it was something you were going to have to deal with eventually” (Diamond et al. 2002).

Recently revealed documents from the United Kingdom have shed additional light on the decision process during early 2002. In anticipation of a visit by British Prime Minister Tony Blair to Crawford in April, Blair’s foreign policy adviser David Manning visited Washington and reported back to Blair on his findings. Condoleezza Rice’s “enthusiasm for regime change,” he wrote in a March 14, 2002 memo—is “undimmed. But there were some signs, since we last spoke, of greater awareness of the practical difficulties and political risks” (Manning 2002). On Sunday, March 17, Paul Wolfowitz lunched with British Ambassador Sir Christopher Meyer. According to the confidential memo, that Meyer wrote to London about the meeting, the trend toward war was obvious, with Wolfowitz arguing for a focus on Saddam Hussein’s atrocities as the rationale and scorning the idea of a military coup to topple Saddam. The Iraqi generals all “had blood on their hands,” Wolfowitz reportedly said. “The important thing was to try to have Saddam replaced by something like a functioning democracy” (Meyer 2002, 2005).

A month after that conversation, on July 23, 2002, the British Cabinet met with Prime Minister Tony Blair to discuss the emerging Iraqi war plan and U.S. policy. Present at the meeting were such principals as the defense secretary, Geoffrey Hoon; the foreign secretary, Jack Straw; the head of MI6, Sir Richard

Dearlove (code-named “C”); Tony Blair’s chief of staff, Jonathan Powell; and several others. In the main, these men were reporting back to one another on what they had heard from their contacts in Washington. The “memo” is actually an official set of notes recounting what was said at the meeting. The most famous passage refers to a comment from Dearlove:

C reported on his recent talks in Washington. There was a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. The NSC had no patience with the UN route, and no enthusiasm for publishing material on the Iraqi regime’s record. There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action.

The discussion then turned to a detailed recounting of specific invasion scenarios, confirming the notion that everyone in the room fully expected that war was inevitable. It “seemed clear” to Foreign Secretary Straw, according to the notes, that “Bush had made up his mind to take military action, even if the timing was not yet decided” (Rycroft 2002).

In April, during an interview with the ITV television network from England, Bush said, “I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go . . . The policy of my government is that he goes.” When asked how he planned to attain this goal, Bush replied: “Wait and see” (Woodward 2004:119–120). At about the same time, Richard Haass, then director of policy planning at the State Department, went to see National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. “I raised this issue about were we really sure that we wanted to put Iraq front and center at this point,” Haass said later. “And she said, essentially, that that decision’s been made, don’t waste your breath. And that was early July” (Lemann 2003:39).

By September 1, 2002, President Bush was telling Cabinet members that he wanted a congressional resolution authorizing force. On September 26, Bush spoke with 18 House members in the White House. “If we use force, it will be fierce and swift and fast,” he said. On October 10 and 11, 2002, the use of force resolution passed the Congress. After achieving one United Nations resolution and sustaining growing frustration with later UN debates and IAEA inspections, just after New Year’s 2003, Bush met privately with Rice and said the inspections were not working. “We’re going to have to go to war,” he told her. On March 20, 2003, the first strike of the war on Iraq signaled the beginning of OIF (Woodward 2004:188–189, 254).

### Explaining the Decision: An Agenda-Setting Framework

The literature on agenda setting offers a fresh perspective on decisions like the Iraq war, in part by offering a way to meld the impact of systemic effects and the beliefs and actions of individual decision-makers. Authors who popularized this notion twenty or more years ago set out to explain how, why, and when specific ideas move from concepts to active priorities. In this essay, I will build largely around the framework developed by John Kingdon in *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Kingdon 1984), with references to other agenda-setting works where appropriate.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> There is, of course, no single agenda-setting framework shared among all authors. Paul Light (1999:3) warns that “much of the contemporary confusion in the study of agenda-building stems from the attempt to define an ordered process where one does not necessarily exist.” Each author in this field uses a different framework; Polsby’s (1984) model, for example, differs from Kingdon’s. Polsby’s “Type A” or “acute” innovation more nearly matches the framework offered by Kingdon, and its analytical claims. Various writers stress that the sort of agenda-setting process at work will depend upon the character of the issue (Cobb and Elder 1983:14; Polsby 1984:146–149). One of the earliest treatments was Schattschneider (1960). But many core themes exist among the various works, and the major categories I use seem to find support in most treatments.

The basic question at issue for those who focus on agenda-setting processes is “How does an idea’s time come?” (Kingdon 1984:1). The agenda-setting literature is concerned with how issues get onto and move up the agenda, but by extension, it is asking the same question posed by international relations and decision-making theories: why do nation-states make the decisions they do? Kingdon explicitly follows the concept offered in the famous essay 1972 “A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice” by Michael Cohen, James March, and Johan Olsen. They argued that the policy environment is “a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work” (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972:2). Kingdon (92) describes this as an “organized anarchy” of policy problems, solutions, and advocates, and aims in his framework to describe how policies emerge from it.<sup>12</sup>

Note immediately how different the starting point of agenda setting is from traditional theories of international relations or decision making. Those traditions tend to assume a more linear, orderly world of discrete groups of senior-level national decision makers confronting problems and deciding, influenced by whatever factors are being emphasized by the theory (anarchy, cognitive flaws, socially constructed norms). An agenda-setting approach views national decisions as arising from a more complex, swirling interplay of issues, context, politics, policy advocates, and events.

Kingdon (1984:92–93) describes three separate streams of thinking and action within this organized anarchy: problem recognition; the formation and refining of policy proposals; and politics. These three streams, he contends, “come together at critical times. A problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political climate makes the time right for change, and the constraints do not prohibit action.” It is when the three streams come together—partly as a product of events, partly under the influence of policy entrepreneurs who are trying to bring them together—that national policy is made.<sup>13</sup> An agenda-setting framework, then, suggests that nations make policy—make decisions, take action, “behave” in certain ways—when a fortuitous combination of problems, options, events, and policy advocates comes together to spring an idea free from the gridlock of the political process.

This, as I will argue, is precisely the story of the Iraq war. Each piece of the agenda-setting puzzle can be found mirrored in the people and events that led to OIF.

### Background to Agendas: Policy Communities

Kingdon describes a number of specific steps or elements of the process, and the first one is his notion of “policy communities.” Within the organized anarchy of the policy world exist various incubators of new ideas. These can be policy-makers, think tanks, commissions, members of Congress, universities, individual scholars, and other sources.<sup>14</sup> The groups discuss and refine ideas, discarding some and

<sup>12</sup> Light (1999:199) prefers a behavior model to the “organized anarchy” notion because he sees a “semblance of organization and staff order” that deny an anarchic policy context. I do not see the two ideas as mutually exclusive, however: order is present, and political leaders take into account factors such as coalitions, bargaining, strategic considerations, and numerous other factors. These things, and more, will help determine which ideas survive until a policy window opens, and they do presume rational intent and organizational skill on the part of leaders. But the dynamics of the framework I use here can still be present even assuming such logical thought about policy; the objection does not deny, for example, that in the heat of a response to a focusing event, policymakers will cast around for quickly available solutions.

<sup>13</sup> Polsby (1984:99; cf also 173) sees policy as two parallel processes. “One process invents an alternative, nurtures it, floats it into the subculture of decision-makers; another process searches for ideas, finds them, renovates them for immediate use, and exploits them politically.” When the two processes merge, policy happens. Elsewhere (1984:166), he refers to three “forces” in the policy process: group interests, the intellectual beliefs of policy makers, and the knowledge of subject-matter experts. The ideas are very similar to Kingdon’s even if the particulars differ.

<sup>14</sup> Light (1999:82–103) points to a broader array of sources of new policy ideas.

developing others, and a group of specialists concerned with a particular issue develops recognized expertise, interacts with one another, and builds ideas for public policies. Such groups tend to be belief- and idea-driven, rather than interest-driven. Kingdon sees these groups as having an important influence in the first two of his three streams of public policy—the identification of problems and the nomination of policy solutions.

### *Defining Policy Communities*

Policy communities share similar ideas, outlooks, and perspectives (although for ideological or other reasons, they will differ on what policies they support). They are “a bit like academic disciplines, each with their own theories, ideas, preoccupations, and fads” (Kingdon 1984:134). Importantly, then, policy communities are not mere objective experts. They develop belief systems, operational codes, theories, and agendas; they are subject to the same cognitive and social psychological and group dynamics that affect decision makers.<sup>15</sup> The agenda-setting, epistemic community, and policy domain literatures all emphasize the importance of shared *causal beliefs* to such communities: they agree on the basic reasons *why* problems are arising, and from shared views of causation develop shared proposals for policy responses.

Finally, Kingdon emphasizes the broad strategy adopted by policy communities for promoting their ideas, and the resulting way in which the policy process ends up settling upon specific actions. The process does not work in a linear fashion in terms of problem identification leading to option generation producing choice. Instead, advocates from within the policy community develop their ideas “and then wait for problems to come along to which they can attach their solutions” (Kingdon 1984:93–94). The result is that “advocacy of solutions often precedes the highlighting of problems to which they become attached. Agendas are not first set and then alternatives generated; instead, alternatives must be advocated for a long period before a short-run opportunity presents itself on an agenda” (Kingdon 1984:215; see also Polsby 1984:157).

### *Policy Communities, Groupthink, and Social Construction*

Among other possible insights, the concept of the policy community offers a new way to conceptualize the traditional notion of “groupthink.” The groupthink model examines cases when a deep and thorough process of rational decision-making gives way to distorted decisions because of the group processes involved (see Janis 1982). Decision-makers in a group setting that is highly cohesive, insulated, and informal in its decision procedures can come to value the group itself more than the quality of its analysis. When this happens, they will crave belongingness over all else and engage in furious concurrence-seeking. The result will be a tendency for quick and ill-considered agreement, a refusal to voice personal doubts, a quashing of independent opinion, an emerging sense of the moral and intellectual superiority of the group leading to a sense of invulnerability, and the demonization of anyone who criticizes the group’s favored analysis or policies.

<sup>15</sup> The concept of “epistemic communities” shares much in common with that of policy communities. One survey article has described epistemic communities as “networks of knowledge-based experts” with shared beliefs, which play an important role especially when uncertainty requires interpretive judgment to make policy (Haas 1992:2–4). Another concept related to policy communities is the idea of “policy domains”—in many ways the same idea, just looked at through the prism of the issue area rather than the group of people who cluster around it (Burstein 1991:328). Domains on different issues are relatively independent of one another, and the combination of all issue areas generating attention and policy at a given time could be seen as the governmental agenda, in Kingdon’s terms.

All of these ills flow from the same source—the desire for concurrence.<sup>16</sup> Members need the group, and to preserve it they defend the purity and single-mindedness of its deliberations. Groupthink does not refer to a situation in which people simply agree with one another; for groupthink to be in evidence, a need for cohesion must hang over the proceedings as the primary motivation for concurrence. Seen as members of policy or epistemic communities, however, these experts' views emerge as the product of a combination of shared beliefs and more subtle conformity pressures, rather than a desperate drive for concurrence. The motive force is not membership, but long-incubated similarities in beliefs and worldviews produced by the interactions, research, debate, and mutual conformity pressures of a policy community.<sup>17</sup>

The role of policy communities also allows us to reconceptualize the way in which socially constructed norms work their way into national behavior. The route from the broad process of social construction to established policy has always been somewhat vague; many different norms are in evidence in most societies at any given time, different crowds of decision-makers reflect different norms, and it seems difficult to pin down a specific chain of causation from society-wide construction of norms to national behavior, when we know that various groups *within* societies disagree violently about what behavior is best for the state.<sup>18</sup> If, on the other hand, we refocus the lens onto specific policy communities and their belief systems, the social construction model works quite well: the processes it describes are at work within such communities; these processes generate worldviews and beliefs; and on the basis of those worldviews and beliefs, the policy communities join the swirling crowd of groups and individuals competing to influence national behavior. Some sociological literature on policy domains emphasizes the degree to which the domains themselves are “socially constructed by those active in politics” (Burstein 1991:328), and the most consistently active and relevant to national behavior are influential policy communities.

As beliefs and norms get socially constructed, the role of “causal stories” becomes terribly important. There is good psychological evidence that human beings respond to stories more than they do objective evidence or rational argumentation. Consciously and unconsciously, the factors and people responsible for the social construction of ideas use this receptivity. As one scholar has explained it, “A key element in defining something as a public issue seems to be the development of a “causal story” purporting to explain how a group comes to experience harm and to show who is to blame and must take responsibility” (Burstein 1991:331–332). When policy proposals can be defended in the context of a meaningful story, their chances for acceptance are greatly improved.

#### *Policy Communities and the Iraq War*

The group of anti-Saddam activists who urged stronger measures against Iraq constituted a form of policy community that matches closely the basic idea put forward in the agenda-setting literature. The policy community on this issue was smaller, less technically expert, and more ideologically self-defined than the broader concept at work in the agenda-setting framework. Nonetheless, the essential role of the community in this policy process mirrors that laid out in the agenda-setting

<sup>16</sup> A superb reassessment of groupthink that looks closely at the concurrence mechanism is Hart (1990).

<sup>17</sup> Polsby, too, asks whether agreement within a policy community was always the result of groupthink, or was it simply agreement among like-minded analysts? He concludes (1984:76–77) that “evidence of ‘groupthink’ is hard to pin down,” while what he calls “consensus formation” is “of overwhelming importance in enabling legislation.” The literature on epistemic communities makes the same point; see, for example, Haas (1992:20).

<sup>18</sup> In a key article in the literature, Alexander Wendt (1992) refers occasionally to “actors” and “people,” but focuses on the norms as viewed by states. Martha Finnemore’s (1996) excellent constructivist study refers repeatedly to “states” and society-level norm construction.

literature: the anti-Saddam activists discussed issues, generated and circulated knowledge, and established themselves—at least within the newly elected Bush administration—as the source of competence on a key policy decision. In Kingdon’s terms, this certainly counts as a tightly knit community, one that nurtured common views—especially causal stories about the source of instability and risk in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

These particular individuals ended up in key positions of power, it seems, by a combination of intent and happenstance. Some officials who favored the aggressive reassertion of American power recruited like-minded friends into government. Some people sounded out for major jobs (such as former senator Dan Coats for secretary of defense) demurred, leading to the selection of senior officials who became key players in the drive to war (Donald Rumsfeld). The commitment to the destruction of Saddam Hussein’s regime does not seem to have been a precondition for being named to the administration of George W. Bush; indeed, had just a few positions been filled differently—for example, a Coats/Richard Armitage team at Defense—President Bush might have received starkly different advice after 9-11. President Bush seems to have chosen Condoleezza Rice based on an evolving relationship of mutual respect and because he valued her advice—not because he had the sense she would be overshadowed by more experienced and powerful bureaucratic players in a debate on Iraq. And of course, Vice President Cheney—chosen for a host of reasons, with his anti-Saddam bona fides probably not among the leading ones, if they were mentioned at all—emerged as a leader of the anti-Saddam policy community in a manner that few outside his inner circle may have expected in 2000. The Iraq case, then, arguably suggests that a decisive policy community can emerge in a given administration without that result having been intended or expected by anyone.

This policy community then lurked beside the stream of events with ready-made options, waiting for an appropriate problem or issue or crisis to come along to which they could attach their pet project. Such a perspective helps to explain the seemingly odd connection: why, as Iraq plainly had little or nothing to do with 9-11 (and when U.S. officials were told as much, in very unambiguous terms, immediately after the terrorist attacks), did advocates of action persist in making the connection? Some have raised dark conspiracy theories, but the agenda-setting framework offers a somewhat more pedestrian explanation: the anti-Saddam activists adopted this approach because *that is what policy communities do*. It fits a natural and well-established pattern of policy advocates who are, as Kingdon explains, less interested in solving specific problems than they are in attaching their long-incubated and deeply felt pet project to problems as they arise (Kingdon 1984:129). Some former senior officials confirmed this broad view of events after 9-11: Advocates of confronting Iraq were “using the 9-11 situation to promote their Iraq preferences,” said one (Interviewee 3). Immediately after September 11, “Paul Wolfowitz was interested” in going after Iraq, said another; “Paul took his shot, because that’s how you do it.” Wolfowitz’s advocacy “wasn’t surprising to me at all. It represented intelligent people of excellent bureaucratic skills using an opportunity to press their agenda” (Interviewee 4).<sup>20</sup>

To be clear, recognizing that the Iraq decision process fits such a well-established pattern is not to endorse that process, or to suggest that it is a good way to make public policy. It is one thing to use the policy window of a health-care bill to attach a

<sup>19</sup> For a critical assessment of how these ideas came to be accepted by a self-reinforcing group of “hawkish” Democrats, see Berman (2005). One could contend that the policy community on this issue was broader than the most committed anti-Saddam activists—it also included many in the national security community who were directly supportive, or accepting, of the idea of unseating Hussein.

<sup>20</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed by British official Robin Cook in his diary, which became famous upon being published in the U.K.: anti-Saddam activists “were already focused on Iraq” before 9/11, he belied, and they saw in 9/11 “a catalyst for securing their goals for American foreign policy” Cook (2004:49).

avored provision on child welfare clinics; it is another thing entirely to use an attack by one enemy to justify a long-harbored desire to destroy a different adversary. Advocates of war with Iraq intentionally used the post-9-11 atmosphere to promote a policy option in which they fervently believed, but even people sympathetic to their goal must recognize the costs of such a procedural approach. Because the upshot was that the United States decided to go to war in a manner that—as the advocates well recognized—would keep their pet proposal immune from the usual public debate and private, governmental analysis, which is, after all, appropriate for such a momentous decision of statecraft. The result was an ill-considered, ill-planned operation.

The Iraq case also reinforces the suggestion of the agenda-setting literature to reframe our concept of groupthink. Anti-Saddam policy communities—think-tank experts, commissions, special lobbying projects—had been honing the notion of removing Saddam Hussein from power for years. In the case of Iraq, these communities played a number of critical roles. By creating self-selecting forums for dialogue and by circulating confirming evidence about Saddam Hussein's continuing aggressiveness and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, the communities served to reinforce the view of their participants. A mutual confirmation bias was at work, in which members of these policy communities continually reaffirmed the core tenets of their thinking about Iraq, raising those tenets to the level of accepted faith. In terms of both beliefs and policy options, then, the conservative policy communities on the Iraq issue came to think similarly, reinforce the similarity of their thought, encourage one another in similar views, and suggest implicit social sanctions for those who strayed from the group's accepted consensus.<sup>21</sup> And indeed, the powerful residual effect of these communities on the beliefs of their members is perhaps the single best explanation for the administration's approach to intelligence about Iraq. Policy communities (especially tightly bound ones) can thus have the effect of intensifying the cognitive effects already well underway in human decision-making settings—effects such as confirmation bias. The result, in the Iraq case, was a cramped, casual decision process in which vast assumptions were allowed to slide by without notice or debate. When an option is worked out in advance and slipped into policy during a crisis, this case suggests, it will not be subject to sufficiently rigorous debate. Advocates believe they have already thought the problem through.

### Role of the Focusing Event and Policy Windows

With policy communities laboring to develop and market policy ideas, a second step in the agenda-setting framework then enters the picture: the focusing event. Events play a major role in agenda setting by creating opportunities for advocates from policy communities to pursue well-established beliefs and to promote well-developed policy alternatives.

#### *Defining Focusing Events*

Kingdon emphasizes that the slow accumulation of indicators of trouble will not necessarily generate action.<sup>22</sup> His agenda-setting framework points toward sudden

<sup>21</sup> Polsby's (1984:75–91) account of U.S. aid to Greece and Turkey early in the Cold War emphasizes that rapid policy innovations are more likely when the "major participants in the development [of policy] are more or less in agreement about the nature of the problem to be faced." He calls this common worldview a "subcultural framework," and one was certainly at work among the Iraqi policy community.

<sup>22</sup> Other words on agenda-setting are equally strong in their emphasis on events as keys to policy action. See, for example, Andrade and Young (1996), Peake (2001:70–71), and Cobb and Elder (1983:84–85), who term the same notion "triggering devices." It should be stressed, though, that other agenda-setting models treat more seriously the incremental rise of issues to prominence; both Polsby and Light's approaches tend to emphasize that avenue more than does Kingdon's. All agree, however, that the role of a crisis in springing loose long-incubated ideas is at least one possible route to policy.

breaks from established policy rather than slow, incremental shifts. Even substantial evidence of a growing threat can be ignored, his model suggests, unless energized by a focusing event to break the policy world out of its inertia and create an opening for advocates to champion a new idea. A focusing event does not need to be world-shaking, but it must be a significant enough development that it both calls for and justifies a policy response (Kingdon 1984:95–105). Some of them, however, are intensely powerful: "Sometimes crises come along that simply bowl over everything standing in the way of prominence on the agenda" (Kingdon 1984:101).

Focusing events represent a subset of a larger phenomenon that Kingdon (1984:174–177) describes as a "policy window." Ideas developed within policy communities will generally lie dormant for years, until such time as such a window opens: a crisis occurs; a new president gets elected who is interested in an issue; and a foreign government makes an unprecedented offer. Policy ideas do not migrate into the implementation phase accidentally, but make the trip through such a window of opportunity, when the time is ripe for change. Policy windows do not remain open for long—but when one does open, "solutions flock to it" (Kingdon 1984:185), as policy advocates rush to try to attach their favored policy to the opportunity represented by the window. One lesson of Kingdon's analysis is that policymakers often do not think up new options when windows open; these opportunities are so unpredictable, and remain open for such short periods, that policymakers can only turn to policy communities for ready-made options rather than think up entirely new ones.<sup>23</sup> This magnifies the importance of policy communities in generating national behavior: they are the cultivators and purveyors of the only detailed options for government action that will be considered by senior leaders.

A focusing event or policy window has the result of joining the three streams of policy—problem recognition, development of policy options, and politics—in a way that makes change possible. Indeed, Kingdon stresses that a focusing event in and of itself is not enough to generate policy; without existing indicators of trouble that are perceived to come to fruition in the focusing event, and without pre-existing policy ideas and advocates ready to jump on the opportunity of the event, nothing will happen (Kingdon 1984:103). In the same context, Kingdon distinguishes between "problems" and "conditions." Conditions are merely situations that the policy world believes it has to put up with—facts of life that cannot be changed. Conditions morph into problems when "we come to believe that we should *do something* about them"; obviously, then, there are "great stakes" in defining the two categories, and placing various issues in one as opposed to another (Kingdon 1984:103, 115; emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup>

Critically, then, the same process of social construction and meaning-making that we found to be underway in policy communities in general continues and indeed intensifies under the glare of a focusing event. Events, one scholar explains, "have little meaning by themselves; they are given meaning by groups utilizing particular interpretive frameworks and may affect politics only when groups are ideologically

<sup>23</sup> Polsby (1984:168) agrees. A crisis "evokes search behavior from decision-makers," looking for "well-worked-out alternatives" that seem to "meet their needs," which will then be "pressed into service" whether or not they represent a precise fit. Sometimes, "the need to act is so great that measures are enacted even when no remotely sensible alternatives are available"; such moments represent "a set of opportunities for those who are prepared"—in other words, those who have "ready-made alternatives."

<sup>24</sup> The literature on epistemic communities also emphasizes the connection between such communities and the forcing function of events. Once a focusing event has occurred, policymakers call on policy communities to play a number of specific roles. Policy communities can help policymakers understand the cause and effect relationships involved in the event. They can identify various courses of action in response, and the likely consequences of each. They can describe the interrelationships among the new event and other problems or issues on the governmental agenda. They can help outline the state's national interests, and of course formulate detailed policy proposals (Haas 1992:15).

and organizationally prepared to take advantage of them” (Polsby 1984:168–169; Burstein 1991:335). A nation’s response to a focusing event is strongly influenced by the socially constructed beliefs, norms, worldviews, and policy options developed by the policy community that happens to be activated by the event.

#### *Focusing Events and Iraq*

This particular case study benefits from an obvious and intensely powerful focusing event: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. But the similarity to the agenda-setting framework does not begin and end there; in other, more specific ways, events with regard to Iraq both before and after 9-11 follow the script outlined in the agenda-setting literature.

The first part of that script contends that gradually accumulating evidence of a problem will not in itself cause a major policy change without some form of a more pointed focusing event. This was the story of the Iraq issue before 9-11: the same evidence about weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties existed on 9-10 as on 9-13, but no one in the U.S. government was talking about invasion. As we saw, the policy entrepreneurs who would later attach their project to the fallout from 9-11 had been making a more limited argument for stronger U.S. support of opposition groups; but this was going nowhere in the interagency process, and there is little reason to believe that the Bush administration would have adopted radically tougher policies toward Saddam Hussein’s Iraq without a focusing event to latch onto. But of course 9-11 did occur, and it then became the focusing event onto which the anti-Saddam activists attached their projects.

This mechanism—of pre existing policy ideas latching onto focusing events, even if the match between them is unclear—helps to explain another element of bad assumptions and poor planning that took place in OIF, the refusal to engage in more detailed long-range planning for post-war contingencies. The model that the anti-Saddam activists had been developing for years was not one of a U.S. invasion—it was based on rebel groups in Iraq, built around Kurds and Shi’ites toppling Saddam with some U.S. help, and then governing the country. How that governance would take place no one really defined, but then the stakes for U.S. planners were smaller when Iraqis would be the ones doing it. While the failure to plan more rigorously once the option shifted to a U.S. invasion seems senseless in retrospect, when seen through an agenda-setting lens, such thinking makes perfect sense: *U.S. officials were applying a pre existing policy idea to the opportunity offered by a focusing event*—and in that pre existing idea, in which Iraqis would have run the post-war phase, such assumptions made reasonable sense. The problem was not that U.S. officials were ignorant of post-war complications; the problem was that they had spent years incubating a policy option—Iraqi rebellions against Saddam supported, but not led or aided on the ground, by the United States—that had embedded a certain way of looking at the post-war phase deep into their thought process. Part of the problem may have been that anti-Saddam activists could not break out of the mental map that told them the post-war phase would take care of itself.

But the Iraq case also signals the dangers of such analytical outcomes, the problems with an opportunistic model of policy formation. As Polsby (1984:169) explains, a crisis can offer an opportunity for those with ready-made solutions to get them enacted, “but it cannot make the policy actually work afterward.” Policy advocates thus “have to be reasonably confident of the efficacy of the alternatives they propose—or they may get what they “want” and find it was not worth getting.”

#### **Role of the Policy Entrepreneur**

When a focusing event or policy window creates an opportunity to change national behavior, the person or persons who then make this happen are the “policy entre-

preneurs”—advocates determined, for one reason or another, to fight inertia, the bureaucracy, opposing interests, and anything else in their way to get the idea through the window and into law or policy. Policy entrepreneurs are active all the time, not only when windows of opportunity are open. But they also act as judges of ripeness and work to push the hardest when they perceive such a policy window to be open.

#### *Defining the Policy Entrepreneur*

Policy entrepreneurs are people willing to “invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of a future return” (Kingdon 1984:129; Polsby 1984:55, 173–174). That return could come in the form of the adoption of policies or promotion of values they support, satisfaction for being a part of the governmental policy-making machinery, personal advancement, or other benefits. They are highly motivated advocates lying in wait in and around government, on the lookout for policy windows and focusing events to justify their pet projects.

Kingdon makes clear (1984:47; see also Cobb and Elder 1983:89–90) that elected officials exercise the most influence in the process, and it is a natural extension to claim that the most effective and powerful policy entrepreneurs will be senior government officials. As one essay on epistemic communities put it: “To the extent to which an epistemic community consolidates bureaucratic power within national administrations and international secretaries, it stands to institutionalize its influence and insinuate its views into broader international politics” (Haas 1992:4; cf. also 23). The qualities of policy entrepreneurs include being able to claim a hearing from senior officials, through positional authority, expertise, or interest-group power; being known for one’s connections and political skill; and, above all, persistence (Kingdon 1984:189–190).<sup>25</sup>

Policy entrepreneurs regularly engage, Kingdon argues, in a long-term process of “softening up” to lay the day-to-day groundwork for the ultimate acceptance of their idea once a window happens to open. Their targets in this process can include the general public, the “specialized” public, and policy communities (and I would add, other officials throughout government who will have a voice in the interagency process). He describes specific mechanisms used for softening up to include introducing legislation, giving speeches, creating commissions and generating blue-ribbon panel reports, and floating trial balloons (Kingdon 1984:135–136; for a related list, see also Adler 1992:140–142). Policy entrepreneurs, then, can be seen as the human embodiment of the social construction of policy, the personification of the stories that policy communities tell (Burstein 1991:332).

#### *Policy Entrepreneurs and the Iraq War*

The role of the policy entrepreneur was pronounced in the U.S. decision to conduct OIF. More even than other cases amenable to an agenda-setting framework, the Iraq example seems highly dependent on the role of entrepreneurs—specific, key individuals, mostly within government, who (as the framework would suggest) favored long-established policy options and used the focusing event of 9-11 to advance them.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Mendelson (1993:338–339), writing about the role of epistemic communities in the Gorbachev foreign policy revolution, stresses that the leadership style of the most senior decision makers—and a leader’s need, or lack of need, to engage policy communities—can crucially affect the degree of policy community influence on policy. Leadership style is thus another piece of the policy puzzle. The mutual dependence of policy makers and policy entrepreneurs is also highlighted in Polsby (1984:171).

<sup>26</sup> One reference that discusses the notion of “unrestrained ideological entrepreneurship” in the Bush administration, and ties it loosely to Kingdon’s template, is Campbell 2004.



Paul Wolfowitz emerges as a key policy entrepreneur. Already pushing, according to many accounts, for strong anti-Saddam policy before 9-11, several sources concur that he began urging President Bush to think about an Iraq–Al-Qaeda connection in the days after September 11. Another strong entrepreneurial figure, according to many reports, appears to have been Vice President Cheney. Below their level, a variety of other officials in the Defense Department, the Vice President’s office, and elsewhere in government endorsed and pushed the recommendation to deal decisively with the problem of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Outside government, others, most notably including pundit and Defense Policy Board head Richard Perle and Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi, argued for the same course. But it was the role of key government officials—and their ability, in paraphrasing Haas’s conclusion, to “institutionalize their influence and insinuate their views into policy”—that was decisive in this case. These policy entrepreneurs had, as suggested in Kingdon’s model, been engaged in a “softening up” process for years, in precisely the ways Kingdon would expect—publishing articles, holding conferences, promoting legislation, lobbying officials, and more. In this case, of course, the role of Vice President Cheney as an entrepreneur has been well discussed—as had been the challenge such an energetic vice presidential role poses for an interagency process more commonly built around debates between appointed cabinet officials.

Interestingly, in the Iraq case, the most important policy entrepreneur may well have been the figure that veterans of the U.S. government routinely describe as the “only real policy maker in the executive branch”: the president himself. Evidence in the case study strongly suggests that George W. Bush did not have to be hauled into advocacy for OIF; he harbored such inclinations from the beginning, and quickly began sending signals that removing Saddam Hussein from power was a serious option. Because of the way the U.S. executive branch is such a president-centric system, the way that it responds so powerfully and diligently to the slightest policy hints from the president, Bush’s leanings may have exercised a decisive effect. A fascinating question that begs further thought is what happens when a president becomes policy entrepreneur, the policy-community-member-in-chief; a tentative answer suggested by this case is that the natural checks and balances within the executive branch, of varying perspectives and bureaucratic standoffs, tend to melt away—as does rigorous debate, questioning of assumptions, and careful planning. “Once the President decides,” one former senior government official told me, “then the only thing anyone cares about is making what he wants happen” (Interviewee 4). The result, though, can be a bad process. “I don’t fault the policy entrepreneurs for being entrepreneurial and pressing their case,” another official said. “What I fault is that it was so easy for them to win, and that the decision-making was so unsystematic” (Interviewee 3).

#### *Criteria for Ideas to Succeed*

Kingdon also offers some thoughts about which ideas survive once pushed forward by policy entrepreneurs, ideas that shed further light on the process that led to OIF.

At one point, he suggests three basic criteria for ideas to survive and prosper in the policy stream: technical feasibility, value acceptability, and anticipation of future constraints (Kingdon 1984:138–146).<sup>27</sup> In the Iraq case, there is little question about the second criterion: invading Iraq supported numerous values important to senior decision-makers, from removing Saddam Hussein from power to demonstrating U.S. military strength and resolve. As for the other two criteria, however, while they were at work in the Iraq decision, they were only considered in ways that have proven to be tragically incomplete. The planning process, for example,

<sup>27</sup> For similar lists, see Cobb and Elder (1983:112–124), Rochefort and Cobb (1994:15–22), and Light (1999:136–153).

examined the technical feasibility of the *initial military campaign* in great detail, and from that extrapolated to the feasibility of the complete operation, through post-conflict stabilization to occupation and the creation of a new government. The technical feasibility of post-conflict reconstruction was never assessed in any rigorous way at the principals’ level; several interviewees told me that the president’s entire *formal* briefing time on postwar Iraq amounted to a single, one-hour presentation. Meanwhile, close consideration of possible future constraints was sidetracked by the assumption that the invasion would not produce a long, drawn-out, costly occupation. These examples demonstrate the ways in which an analytical tool such as the agenda-setting framework must be completed by other perspectives—in this case, the literature on cognitive dynamics, which helps explain how theoretically objective criteria like an appreciation of future constraints can be filtered through wishful thinking, cognitive dissonance, or bad analogies.

Another point that Kingdon makes about policy making viewed through an agenda-setting lens is that it is not incremental. A gradual process of idea-generation, softening up, and coalition building goes on within policy communities, but this is more properly viewed as background noise to policy. Actual decisions—national behavior—emerge when a policy window opens long enough to let some of that noise through, and the moment feels to the participants like a sudden coalescing of opinion: people in government “speak of a ‘growing realization,’ an ‘increasing feeling’ . . . and ‘coming to a conclusion’” (1984:147). There are no new policy ideas, Kingdon suggests; existing ones merely cluster around policy windows, trying to get through. When a policy window does open, then, the policy it helps usher into being will generally be a recombination of long-proposed ideas rather than something tailored to the situation. This paradigm leads Kingdon to another conclusion: the crucial factor when a policy window opens is not what policy ideas might conceivably meet the needs it creates, but what “available alternative” is lying around, waiting to be applied. Well-developed available alternatives can elbow aside “equally worthy” concepts that do not happen to have “a viable, worked-out proposal attached” (1984:150).

Paul Light (1999:193–194) emphasizes similarly that, because of time and attention constraints on senior decision-makers, the search for policy alternatives is generally “simple-minded”—that is, “limited to the ‘neighborhood of the current alternatives.’” Neither new and innovative ideas, nor detailed assessments of the proposals loitering in the “neighborhood,” are called for. And, again stressing the importance of the president as policy entrepreneur, Light contends that this policy search will be “biased” in whatever direction the executive branch thinks the president wants to go. “If a President is interested in large-scale initiatives,” Light contends, “the search will produce large-scale initiatives.”

All of this mirrors the Iraq case quite closely. After years of broad worry about Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and some planning, never put into action, to support a military coup or exile-based surrections, 9-11 led to a “growing realization” that Saddam would have to be dealt with. More importantly, dealing decisively with Iraq was one of the few “available alternatives” for responding to a major terrorist attack: there was no global counterterrorism strategy lying on a shelf, waiting to be dusted off. As time has made clear, moreover, fighting terrorism is an enormously complicated, nuanced, self-contradictory task that does not lend itself to simple policy solutions of the sort entrepreneurs can shove through a policy window on short notice. Again, one possible interpretation of Bush’s state of mind after his December 28, 2001 CENTCOM briefing on the war plan, for example, is that it furnished precisely the sort of “available alternative” he was looking for—an available, acceptable option assembled by a general who had just won a surprisingly easy conflict in Afghanistan. The danger, of course, was that such thinking closed out the numerous other factors, from world opinion to nonmilitary aspects of postwar planning, that would play a decisive role in determining the fate of the Iraq mission writ large.

It is striking how little outside advice Bush sought, how few tough questions were asked of knowledgeable observers. He admitted to Woodward that he simply never asked Powell whether the Secretary of State thought attacking Iraq was the right thing to do. Rumsfeld himself said, “Whether there was ever a formal moment when he asked me, Do I think he should go to war, I can’t recall it” (Woodward 2004:416). As Richard Clarke has written, “I doubt that anyone ever had the chance to make the case to [President Bush] that attacking Iraq would actually make America less secure . . . Certainly he did not hear that from the small circle of advisers who alone are the people whose views he respects and trusts” (Clarke 2004:244). Again, this behavior makes perfect sense from an agenda-setting perspective: when a policy window opens, available alternatives are not likely to be subjected to laborious rethinking. Entrepreneurs are trying to push them through, and policymakers have too little time to be deliberate.

Also in this case, the system was clearly responding to hints from its chief entrepreneur—President Bush—about what he wanted. His very early suggestion that the United States was now “at war” against terrorism encouraged Defense Department officials, rushing back to Washington in the immediate aftermath of 9-11, to view their task in a certain way (Burroughs et al. 2004:234). His numerous comments about Iraq in the days after 9-11 left little doubt that he was sympathetic to a case for removing Saddam Hussein.

OIF thus occurred in part because a policy window opened, and going after Saddam Hussein was one of the few available alternatives ready for policy entrepreneurs to take up and act upon. Again, though, as I stressed in the section on social construction, it is important to think of these processes as being at work on specific groups, communities, or movements, rather than on all players in the policy world. Invading Iraq seemed an available alternative to the anti-Saddam policy community, which counted among its members many senior officials of the Bush administration as well as supportive members of the broader national security community. It is not likely that it would have seemed so attractive, as a ready-made available alternative, to a Gore administration, or a McCain administration, or even a George H. W. Bush administration. When the agenda-setting framework speaks of considerations like feasibility, value acceptability, or available alternatives, those things take on real life *as seen by specific groups of people at specific moments in history*: groups with socially constructed beliefs and norms, human cognitive limitations, the pressure of group dynamics, and so on. It is only in a set of overlapping frameworks—agenda-setting, social construction, cognitive dynamics, group dynamics, beliefs and ideas—that we can begin to capture the full richness of national behavior.

### Conclusion: A Useful Model for Foreign Policy Analysis

If the Iraq case is any guide, the agenda-setting model offers a useful template for evaluating how and why national security and foreign policy decisions get made. The decision to embark upon OIF matches very closely the agenda-setting framework: at the beginning of the Bush administration, the beliefs and options nurtured by the policy communities—as the agenda-setting literature would suggest—joined a swirling policy environment. However, as that literature also suggests, even powerful preexisting beliefs and clear options need further situational help to mature into established policy, and a hawkish view on Iraq did not get this help at first. The Al-Qaeda attacks and subsequent declaration of a Global War on Terror furnished a classic policy window—an opportunity for advocates, their beliefs, and proposals developed in policy communities, to get access to the president and other senior leaders and make a persuasive case for action. As explained above, many other, more discrete insights of the agenda-setting literature are borne out in the Iraq decision-making case.

Applying agenda-setting to the Iraq case can also generate broader insights on theories and frameworks commonly used in foreign policy analysis. A tentative list of such insights might include the following:

- *Absent any one of the four major factors outlined in the model, a policy idea might never come to fruition.* Without impassioned policy entrepreneurs in the Bush administration who favored the liberation of Iraq—had President Bush been getting advice from Jim Baker, Lawrence Eagleburger, and Brent Scowcroft, in other words, rather than Wolfowitz and Cheney—there may have been no critical mass of opinion favoring an attack. Had a relevant policy community connected to the levers of power not both developed the idea and nurtured a group of analysts passionately committed to it, the option may have seemed too unfinished to implement. And of course, without the attacks of September 11, President Bush may not have been able to generate—or seen the political viability of generating, or indeed the substantive need to generate—public support for the idea.
- *Finding the true origins of policy is elusive.* Policy communities can work an issue indefinitely until a policy window opens. Many individuals contribute to the creation and development of a policy idea. Policy entrepreneurs are needed to take an idea from its slumber in the policy community into the consciousness of government officials. A propitious event is needed to create a policy window. Given all of these (and many other) factors involved in finally bringing a policy idea to fruition, it becomes impossible to track down a simple or single origin. This conclusion is not friendly toward monocausal theories that posit a single major variable in explaining national behavior.
- *An agenda-setting perspective does not necessarily imply strong public participation in foreign policy decisions.* In fact, it may suggest the opposite. Some of the earliest works in the agenda-setting field came from political scientists concerned with issues of participation, and the degree of “true” democracy in the U.S. system (Schattschneider 1960; Cobb and Elder 1971). Despite worries that an agenda-setting avenue to decisions would intensify narrow, elite control of policy, at least one early verdict was optimistic: the broad agenda-setting process, drawing in groups outside government and generating a debate on issues, “makes allowances for continuing mass involvement” (Cobb and Elder 1971:912). This may be true for domestic issues and issues involving the Congress and a broad array of interest groups, but in the more rarified world of foreign policy—if the OIF case is any guide—an agenda-setting framework applied to decisions by the executive branch suggests the possibility for decisions of the greatest national import to be determined by extraordinarily small numbers of people.<sup>28</sup>
- *Factors such as power considerations and structural dynamics may be part of the background noise in the policy community, but they do not explain behavior* (Haas 1992:4). Behavior emerges, not from a simple linkage between ideas about the international system—such as classical realism’s emphasis on power-seeking—and policy, but from a much more complicated set of intermediary tumblers that must be engaged for the lock of policy to be opened. The agenda-setting framework helps us to understand more properly the role of the factors suggested by international relations theory:

<sup>28</sup> Of the three models of agenda-setting offered by one analysis (Cobb, Ross, and Ross 1976), for example—two of which (“outside initiatives” stemming from groups outside government, and “mobilization” in which government officials mobilize outside support) point to mass participation—the third model, “inside initiative,” most aptly describes this case. It describes a situation in which a small number of government officials can set an agenda without any meaningful outside participation.

structural dynamics, power considerations, the role of institutions and regimes, and similar notions are part of the input—contextual, normative, belief-system—to policy communities and policy entrepreneurs. They are pieces of the puzzle, not the puzzle itself.

- *Social construction is very much at work, but on a community-by-community, issue-by-issue basis.* It is not a generic, societal, or state-based process as sometimes suggested—or at least not *only* that, and on national security issues, not *primarily* that. “States” possess no singular, unified norms, beliefs, values, or operational codes that are brought to bear on policy issues. Various groups of policy-makers and policy-influencers—policy communities—have different versions of sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping norms and beliefs. Depending on who is in power, which policy community is ascendant at the moment, which focusing events create what policy windows for which issues, the policy proposals generated by these norms and beliefs work their way into national behavior.
- *The reality of the agenda-setting technique reinforces the importance of checks and balances in the decision to go to war.* If it is true that policy entrepreneurs in the executive branch will use policy windows to push forward pet projects—even including decisions to go to war—the role of the Congress in overseeing and checking the actions of the executive becomes even more important. Once the executive branch is in the grip of a set of devoted policy entrepreneurs, only the legislature will be able to mandate a more thorough debate—something that the U.S. Congress manifestly failed to do in 2002–2003.

In sum, the literature on agenda setting is an oft-ignored tool that can furnish important insights into the making of national security and foreign policy decisions. Students of such processes would benefit from a closer knowledge of this literature.

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