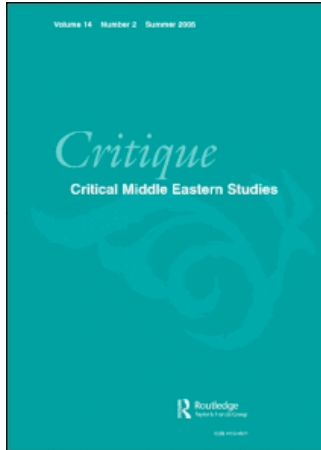


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Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713411829>

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Online Publication Date: 01 September 2007

To cite this Article: Hinnebusch, Raymond (2007) 'The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16:3, 209 - 228

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/10669920701616443

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10669920701616443>

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The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications

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The War Controversy: In Search of Theoretical Explanations

The invasion of Iraq was the most controversial and momentous foreign policy decision in recent memory. Analysts are deeply divided over explanations for the war. Compared with other wars, there appears to be an especially radical cleavage between the justifications for war advanced by its proponents—Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)—which proved to be hollow, and the actual motives and causes. Since the war, the deception practiced by the Bush administration has been exposed; but even before it was clear to ex-weapons inspectors and Iraq specialists that Saddam had no serious WMD capability and certainly not one capable of threatening the US. Robert Jervis already had dissected and discredited the claims that even a nuclear-armed Iraq posed a threat to the US, that it could not be contained, and therefore had to be taken out by preventive war; he concluded that the only thing that made deterrence appear inadequate for US purposes was the overweening ambition of the Bush administration to dominate and overthrow any regime it disliked.¹ Hence, the striking fact is that Iraq posed *little threat to the US and this was knowable* before the war; hence we are left looking for other explanations for the war. But mainstream theories of International Relations (IR) prove remarkably inadequate in providing such explanations.

Power and Security

The war is a puzzle for realist IR theory. To be sure, the war might be thought to validate some aspects of a realist world view, particularly the notion that, in the absence of countervailing power, great powers' natural tendency is to expand; hence the war is a function of the unipolar systemic structure of world order. Yet, if such an order is a permissive and probably necessary condition of the war, it is not a sufficient condition,

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¹ Robert Jervis, 'The confrontation between Iraq and the US: implications for the theory and practice of deterrence,' *European Journal of International Relations*, 9(2) (2003), pp. 315–337.

leaving driving motives unaddressed. Indeed, defensive realists like Stephan Walt, who believe security threats shape foreign policies, believed Iraq posed no threat and opposed the war; while one might expect the war to correspond to the offensive realist view that great powers never can get enough power, the theory's chief proponent, John Mearsheimer, views the competition for hegemony as largely confined to a state's own region, global hegemony as unattainable and the war therefore as irrational from the point of view of US national interests.² What is striking is how the most prestigious proponents of the school of realism in IR condemned the war on the grounds that a proper operationalization of the national interest was perverted by ideology and/or special interests in the policy process. Their views certainly coincide with those of the mainstream career foreign policy and military establishments, exemplified (ironically) in the Powell Doctrine that the US should not get involved in a war unless there is a 'clear and present threat to US national security.' While, for radical critics the war easily is accommodated to the notion of US imperialism, it is curious that realism, the main theory of power in IR, seems uncomfortable with the idea, believing that the operations of the power balance outwith states and prudent realism within should make imperialism unlikely or at least costly and futile. As such, the realist tradition affords no adequate explanation for the war.

Ideology and Culture

What went wrong from a realist point of view was that 'extremists' managed to capture US foreign policy and set it on a path at odds with the national interest. For George Soros,³ what is extreme became normal under the George W. Bush administration. Some insiders speak of a 'silent coup' by the neo-conservatives;⁴ others, of the failure of institutions that allowed a small group to impose their particular extremist views.⁵ Implied is that the US would not have gone to war under another administration or if the checks and balances had not been systematically suborned. The view that the war was an aberration faces, however, a hard time accounting for the utter absence of opposition in Congress, the silence of the corporate world and the ease with which the public was brought to acquiesce in a war that, a short time before, had been on nobody's agenda except for the clique Bush brought to power.

While the realists' attribution of ideology to the Bush administration is a term of disapproval, others have tended to take the ideology of Bush and the neo-conservatives at face value, even as benign in intention—to remove a brutal dictator and spread democracy that would benefit Iraqis—while regretting that their aims overreached US capabilities. In this view, the neo-conservatives were not extremists but merely promoting a more muscular version of the recurring US effort at a Wilsonian export of the American model. Yet if the problem was Saddam's brutal rule, why had he been supported during the Iran-Iraq war, even when caught using chemical weapons, by many of the same actors, notably Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who pushed for war in 2003 when he was not

² John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, 'An unnecessary war,' *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2003, pp. 50–60.

³ George Soros, 'The bubble of American supremacy,' *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2003.

⁴ W. Patrick Lang, 'Drinking the cool-aid,' *Middle East Policy*, 11(2) (Summer 2004), pp. 42–46.

⁵ Louis Fisher, 'Deciding on war against Iraq: institutional failures,' *Political Science Quarterly*, 118(3) (2003), pp. 389–410.

engaged in any similar atrocity. And if intentions toward Iraq were benign, why did the US destroy the country in the process of 'liberating' it; the sins of the occupation, notably the dissolution of the Iraqi state—the army, party and bureaucracy—are excused by apologists as mere mistakes but, to critics, they were symptomatic of a reckless disregard for Iraqi lives and property or, worse, as many Arabs believed and recent revelations suggest, a deliberate intention to destroy Iraq as a potential Arab power on behalf of Israel.⁶ While the neo-conservatives genuinely may have believed the muscular export of liberalism to be a noble objective, they certainly expected it to serve the special interests (Israel) they valued and were quite willing to let Iraqis pay the costs of the venture. Moreover, the neo-conservatives' unconcern for the damage they were inflicting on all the institutions that liberals expect will tame the power struggle—the UN, international law, multilateralism, etc.—suggest that a benign world order could not have been their priority. Hence, ideology cannot be treated as disconnected from interests; it is up to the analyst to uncover what interests ideology expresses or even disguises. We cannot get inside the heads of those who decided on and pushed for war to know whether they believed the rationales they put forward, but it is hardly exceptional for political actors to view the world in a way that corresponds to their interests.

The above does not mean ideology does not matter. On the contrary, ideology can be propagated to 'construct' a view of the world that then not only legitimates the actions desired but can become a social fact that frames the situation for others. Indeed, a number of analysts believe the war was made possible by the pro-war world view constructed by neo-conservative officials, conservative think tanks and media pundits; this found receptivity because of a pre-existing culture of exceptionalism that views America as morally superior—exempt from the rule that power corrupts, and hence with the right to export democratic capitalism, by force if needed. Andrew Bacevich⁷ indicates how the pervasive militarism in American culture nullifies the expectation in democratic peace theory that a public that must pay the cost of war is averse to it—rather American public opinion sees the US as so powerful that it can win war at little cost to itself and is, at the same time, so woefully ignorant of world affairs that it is easily misled by a biased media.⁸ Yet, while mass culture may have constituted little constraint on the drive to war and made Americans highly vulnerable to its advocates, the war was clearly the project of a small clique and had to be strenuously propagated with 'weapons of mass deception'⁹ and, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, by exploiting the 'politics of fear' after 9/11.¹⁰ Hence, the war hardly can be explained by Americans' proclivity for imperialism and militarism.

⁶ In *State of Denial: Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), Bob Woodward reveals that the US pro-consul, Paul Bremer, took these state-deconstructing decisions under orders from arch-neo-conservatives and pro-Israelis, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, without others in the administration even being consulted (cited in Patrick Seale, *Al-Hayat*, 15 December 2006).

⁷ Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How American's are Seduced by War* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁸ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Hyperpower exceptionalism' in: *Globalization or Empire* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 121–141.

⁹ Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq*, (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003).

¹⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Another American casualty: credibility,' *Washington Post*, 9 November 2003.

Oil and Capitalism

The obvious materialist explanation for the war is oil, popular with many critics and structuralists, in spite of the protestations of the actors (and their apologists) themselves that the war was not about oil. The argument that oil was not decisive so flies in the face of common sense that the burden of proof lies on those who deny it. It also begs the question as to why the country sitting atop the world's second largest oil reserves and which posed no threat to the US should have been targeted while North Korea, whose nuclear capabilities were real not hypothetical but did not possess oil, was spared; famously Wolfowitz attributed the difference to the fact that Iraq was 'swimming in oil.'¹¹ According to Michael Klare, a prominent analyst of oil politics:

No doubt many factors are involved—some strategic, some political, and some economic. But it is hard to believe that US leaders would contemplate such an extreme act without very powerful motives—and the pursuit of oil has long constituted the most commanding motive for US military action in the Persian Gulf region.¹²

Controlling Iraq's oil reserves and excluding rivals in a tightening oil market was, many argue, a key driver of the war and, behind this, America's twin addictions, that of its people to cheap gasoline and its corporations to billions of petrodollars. According to John Judis, the neo-conservatives believed the capture of Iraq would weaken Organization of Petroleum Exporting countries (OPEC) fatally and the continued US occupation of the country is to prevent this oil prize from being wrenched from US hands.¹³ The problem with the oil explanation is that US dependence on Middle East oil, although substantial, was still limited and the US did not need to invade Iraq in order to secure energy supplies since Saddam was no threat to the Gulf oil exporters and Iraq had no control over the oil market; while there certainly would have been no invasion had Iraq not been an oil prize, oil in itself cannot explain the war.

Another similar material explanation is that the military industrial complex had a vested interest in war (jobs, profits and careers), that sustaining it after the collapse of communism required the construction of an enemy (Middle East rogue regimes) and military aggrandizement created an environment in which the resort to force was a first rather than a last resort. There is little doubt that without America's bloated war machine and military industry, an invasion of Iraq would not even have been on the political agenda. Yet, it is not as if the military were pushing for this war: Rumsfeld and his political appointees had to override the objections of the senior generals and the career security bureaucracy.

What seems inescapable is that no single factor explanation will do. Multiple factors—interests and ideology in congruence which each other—drove the war. Geoffrey Hodgkins is not the only one who fingers the combination of Israel, oil, and American exceptionalism.¹⁴ Yet each of these elements would be more convincing if they were subsumed within a broader theoretical perspective.

¹¹ *The Guardian*, 4 June 2003.

¹² Michael T. Klare, 'Washington's oilpolitik,' *Salon.com*, 18 July 2002; and idem, 'Oil and empire? Rethinking the war with Iraq,' *Current History*, 102(662) (March, 2003).

¹³ John Judis, *The New Republic Online*, 26 April 2006.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Hodgson, on Open Democracy at <http://www.opendemocracy.net>, 13 December 2006.

From Hegemony to Empire?

The Iraq war was arguably less about Iraq than about the global role of the US. A promising point of departure therefore would be to locate the various discrete factors that drove the war within a theory of the US role in world politics—theories of ‘hegemonic stability’ (HST)¹⁵ and of US empire provide an indispensable starting point.

A hegemonic state, in the tradition of ‘hegemonic stability theory’ is qualitatively different from other states in both its vastly superior power and its global function to promote the globalization of capitalism against the fragmentation of the states system, i.e., to provide order in an anarchic world system and ensure the predictable environment and enforceable property rights needed for global capital accumulation. The hegemon provides a global currency for world trade, spreads liberal economic rules globally, forces open the closed markets of pre-capitalist or statist regimes and ensures the flow of cheap energy supplies to the global economy. Although the US hegemon has the predominant military power to play this role, hegemony rests not solely on such state-to-state power but also on US *structural power*, the power to make the rules and to structure the situation owing to the penetration of the economies of other states by US transnational corporations, their need for the massive US market, their reliance on the dollar as the international currency, the ideological hegemony deriving from US media corporations, etc.—all of these make other states vulnerable to the hegemon.

But hegemony also depends on legitimacy—many states accept it as long as the hegemon defends a world order that benefits more actors than itself. For John Ikenberry,¹⁶ the hegemon’s overwhelming power is actually unthreatening since the US is content to be an ‘off-shore balancer’ and eschews territorial aggrandizement; because, being democratic, its policy is predictable and self-restraining, not arbitrary; and because its power is exercised through multinational institutions where it is constrained by mutually agreed rules. The Iraq war, however, suggests that the US role in the world has taken a turn away from benign hegemony as predictability, self-restraint, and multilateralism no longer hold and, in the Middle East at least, the US has become a partisan player, not a balancer. Iraq may mark a watershed, as the squandering of soft power and substitution of force for consent undermines the legitimacy of US leadership.¹⁷

Perhaps the main weakness in HST is its assumption that the hegemon is uniformly a force for stability and largely beneficial. Even the versions of HST that acknowledge that the hegemon structures the world order to serve its own interests assume that, as the main beneficiary of the system, it could be expected to favor the status quo. It is difficult to reconcile this view with the US attack on Iraq, an attack that has been profoundly destabilizing and could have been predicted to be so; as Anatol Lieven observed, the US seemed intent on kicking to pieces the hill of which it is king.¹⁸

¹⁵ Realist and Marxist versions of HST are to be found in Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁶ John Ikenberry, ‘American power and the empire of capitalist democracy,’ in: Michael Cox, Tim Dunne & Ken Booth (Eds) *Empires, Systems and States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Indicative of this is the remarkable extent to which respect for the US plummeted in world opinion, with even significant majorities of Europeans seeing the US as the main threat to world peace at the time of the Iraq war. (*International Herald Tribune*, 1–2 February 2003).

¹⁸ Anatol Lieven, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Policy Brief, 25 August 2003.

The Iraq war arguably therefore requires some rethinking of HST. A central tenant of realism, that unchecked power will be abused, suggests that a strong imperialist tendency is built into hegemony and the possibly malign effects of *excessive* hegemonic power cannot be neglected; as Robert Jervis argues, 'it is the exception rather than the rule for states to stay on the path of moderation when others do not force them to do so.'—but who can force moderation on the hegemon?¹⁹ Duncan Snidel argued that 'the common presumption that ... [hegemony] is widely beneficial rests on such special assumptions that it should be rejected'; the main issue is which factors determine whether 'hegemony will be exploitative' or 'will be *constrained* to operate in the more general interest.'²⁰

Indeed, benign hegemony arguably requires special conditions that may no longer hold: a number two power (the Soviet Union) that constrains hegemonic power and gives the hegemon an incentive to maximize its coalition by tempering its ambitions; and the dominance of the foreign policy establishment by pragmatic realists, not ideologues or special interests.²¹ Even if the hegemon continues to rule the core powers by consent, what the Iraq war suggests is a coercive turn to US hegemony against those outside the circle of core and client powers, that is, states and social forces that resist hegemony which are now concentrated in a particular region, the Arab-Muslim Middle East. At the same time, however, an unconstrained hegemon is very likely to fall into 'imperial overreach.' Writers such as Michael Mann and Benjamin Barber²² may be right that the neo-conservatives' apparent imperial ambitions derived from an inflated idea of America's power, since, they argue, its military muscle, unmatched by commensurate political and economic capabilities, only increases asymmetric resistance to it. The US therefore generates not stability but an 'empire of chaos' since it is capable of overthrowing regimes it dislikes but not of reconstructing stable replacements. The line between hegemony built on consent and delivering stability and empire built on force and potentially destabilizing of world order is far thinner than HST realizes. Hence, theories of empire must be addressed and indeed, the Iraq war is the single most important event undermining the credibility of HST and bringing the idea of US empire back into mainstream discourse.

Theorists of US empire are not, in fact, talking about the classical empire of territorial conquest. Globalization theorists argue that contemporary 'empire' is a product of global capitalism, the world market and TNCs (Transnational Corporations), rather than driven by state ambitions, and that it is non-territorial because power and wealth no longer directly derive from physical control of territories which can, on the contrary, entail burdensome responsibilities.²³ The Iraq war appears incompatible with this view and, on the contrary, supports the claims of James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer that even

¹⁹ Robert Jervis, 'Understanding the Bush Doctrine,' *Political Science Quarterly*, 118(3) (Fall 2003), pp. 365–388.

²⁰ Duncan Snidel, 'The limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory,' *International Organization*, 39(4) (Autumn 1985), pp. 613–614.

²¹ Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Hegemonic Stability Theory reconsidered: implications of the Iraq war,' in Rick Fawn and Raymond Hinnebusch (Eds) *The Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Press, 2006), pp. 283–322.

²² Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (New York: Verso, 2003); and Benjamin R. Barber, *Fear's Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy* (New York, Norton, 2003).

²³ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

informal empire is still state-driven and of Chalmers Johnson that, however informal, US empire is one of global clients and military bases in which control of strategic territories remains pivotal.²⁴ That strategic territory 'swimming in oil' can be seen by empire-builders as a prize rather than a burden suggests that globalization emphatically has *not* put an end to geopolitics. Ronald Robinson's notion of empire as a system in which war puts in place largely economic instruments allowing durable exploitation of periphery states and Douglas Stokes's argument that US empire has two thrusts, one state-centric and one transnational, are more compatible with the Iraq war.²⁵ Iraq is hard to understand outside of the broader context in which, in the post-Cold War period and amidst globalization, the hegemon falls into the temptations of imperialism.

The Context of War: Oil, Israel, and Hegemony

However, the relation of empire and hegemony to the Iraq war cannot simply be assumed or thought to be self-evident, and a more specific line of further argument that links the role of oil and the Middle East to US hegemony is necessary. A key pillar of US post-World War II hegemony, as Simon Bromley shows, was the domination by US companies of the 'world' oil resources concentrated in the Middle East. Oil is a strategic commodity that everybody needs and is crucial to military power.²⁶ As Mark Rupert and Scott Soloman argue, oil emerged initially for its military indispensability to fuel naval power; then, the Allied victory in World War II, in part because Germany and Japan were denied oil resources that the US could supply in plenty, reinforced its geopolitical importance. The reconstruction of Western Europe, crucial to the expansion and sustaining of capitalism, depended on cheap Middle East oil supplies. Oil is also essential to the US version of energy intensive capitalism: the spread of the motorcar, suburbs, chemical intensive agriculture and cheap food were all dependent on cheap oil.²⁷

The US role in the oil market is, however, paradoxical. Containing any threats from either the Soviet Union or local nationalism to the (usually) cheap energy needed by the capitalist world economy which Middle East oil provided was one of the functions of hegemony that made US military power indispensable. Moreover, the alliance of US oil companies initially and thereafter of the US government with Saudi Arabia was pivotal to the oil price stability that was crucial to global economic prosperity. However, the particular way the US has exercised its 'oil protectorate' over the Middle East regularly has stimulated backlashes and periodic regional conflicts that actually put global energy security at risk. These challenges have been invariably stimulated either by a coercive intervention to sustain Western control of oil or by a linkage between oil and Western backing of Israel. Nationalist challenges

²⁴ James Petras & Henry Veltmeyer, *Empire with Imperialism: The Globalizing Dynamics of Neo-Liberal Capitalism* (London: Zed Books, 2005); and Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

²⁵ Ronald Robinson, 'Imperial theory and the question of imperialism after empire,' in: Robert F. Holland & Gowher Rizvi (Eds) *Perspectives on Imperialism and Decolonization* (London: Frank Cass, 1984); and Doug Stokes, 'The heart of empire? Theorizing US empire in an era of transnational capitalism,' *Third World Quarterly*, 26(2) (2005), 217–236.

²⁶ Simon Bromley, *Oil and American Hegemony* (Polity Press, 1991).

²⁷ Mark Rupert & M. Scott Soloman, *Globalization and International Political Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), pp. 107–132.

to Western control of Middle East oil began with Muhammed Mussadeq's nationalization of the Iranian oil industry; indigenous reaction to the subsequent CIA-sponsored coup to overthrow him would take decades to mature but it ultimately stimulated the Islamic revolution and its militantly anti-US tangent. Other major challenges to Western control of the oil market would come from the Arab world, where Arab nationalism saw a combination of Western imperialism and Zionism as the main threat and Arab nationalist control of Arab oil as the main key to challenging these forces.

By the 1970s, indeed, the main challenges to US oil hegemony were rooted in the basic contradiction in US policy identified by Sherle Schwenninger:

For more than three decades, American policy has been driven by two at times incompatible goals: the support of Israel and (indirect) control over the world's oil markets. Managing the tensions between these two goals has been one of the most important and difficult policy challenges of every president since Lyndon Johnson.

The increasing breakdown in the US effort to manage this contradiction derives from the fact that, as he argues,

US policy makers have not in practice been able to distinguish between the legitimate defense of Israel and tacit support for its illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and its overly aggressive military policy.²⁸

The scene was set for a major challenge to US oil hegemony by the formation of OPEC combined with rising oil demand in the early 1970s. However, it took an outbreak of the Arab–Israeli conflict to generate a crisis over oil. Washington's rebuff of Egyptian efforts at a diplomatic settlement of the Arab–Israel conflict led to the 1973 Arab–Israeli war and the US arms deliveries to Israel in that war, which prevented the Arab states from recovering territories occupied by Israel in the previous 1967 war and precipitated an Arab oil embargo. The embargo set off an oil price explosion and the nationalization of the oil industry throughout the region; it also forced US intervention in an effort to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict. These developments seemed to Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye to mark a decline of US hegemony as control of oil appeared forfeited to OPEC at a time when US oil self-sufficiency was declining.²⁹

The US managed, however, to turn the oil crisis to its advantage by striking a close alliance with Saudi Arabia by which it provided security in return for the Saudis' use of their position as 'swing producer' to moderate oil prices. Given the privileged position of the dollar as the international currency in which oil is sold, the new wealth of the oil producers was disproportionately 'recycled' through US banks and via arms purchases and investments in the US. US hegemony is based on the dollar as much as its military and, since the 1970s, oil hegemony reinforced US dollar hegemony, because all states needed dollars to buy oil and needed access to the American market to get them. Michael Hudson

²⁸ Sherle R. Schwenninger, 'Revamping American grand strategy,' *World Policy Journal*, 20(3) (Fall, 2003), pp. 25–44.

²⁹ Robert Keohane & Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), pp. 139–141, 190–194.

and others argue that dollar seignurage allowed the US to levy a tax on the world's economy to finance massive US military spending and imperial overreach and to impose economic measures that hurt its competitors.³⁰ After the oil price boom, the competitive position of Europe and Japan declined as the price of their energy increased, ushering in the stagflation of the 1970s; this was followed by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's attack on the European welfare state. The more limited damage of the boom to the US was very disproportionately distributed—if consumers suffered, Texas oil barons got higher oil prices, and power shifted to the military/oil industries concentrated in the Sunbelt, crucial in the rise of Ronald Reagan and the Republican Right.³¹ In 1974, the US paid out \$1.7 billion for Saudi oil but \$8.5 billion were recycled from Saudi Arabia back to the US—presumably returns from the increased price of oil to America's competitors.³² In the longer term, the US–Saudi alliance by the early 1980s had secured the stabilization of oil prices followed thereafter by a precipitous price decline that kept energy intensive US capitalism competitive.

The next episode, the 1991 Gulf war, was the result of a long chain of events, mixing, to one degree or another, US Middle East policy and oil, but it would have been unimaginable in a Middle East in which the Arab–Israeli conflict had been resolved. For one thing, it was only the stalemate in the peace process that led Saddam Hussein to think the time was right to seize pan-Arab leadership against Israel and to miscalculate that his invasion of Kuwait would spark an Arab nationalist arousal forcing the Arab states to accept its annexation. The subsequent US war on Iraq headed off a potent challenge to US oil hegemony—if Iraq had retained Kuwaiti oil fields and remained in a position to intimidate Saudi Arabia, thereby acquiring 'control' of over 40 percent of world oil reserves, it might have had the power to shape the oil market in ways inimical to US interests. While the conservative Gulf monarchies, by virtue of their security dependence on the US and their Western investments, had a shared interest with the West in ensuring stable unpoliticized access to oil at moderate prices, Iraq had no such stake. Iraq was, of course, in dire need of revenues and had to sell its oil at prices consumers would pay; but Saddam's threat to make the terms of oil sales conditional on a favorable Western policy in the Arab–Israeli conflict caught US politicians between two powerful contradictory domestic demands—for cheap gasoline and the advancement of Israel's interests. What was at stake, therefore, was not access to oil but access on *Washington's terms*, not Saddam's.³³

In the end, the war actually enabled Washington to *reinforce* its oil hegemony. The US used the war to demonstrate its continuing indispensability to protecting the world capitalist core's control of oil against Third World challenges while, in making its Gulf clients, above all Saudi Arabia, more dependent on it for their security, the conflict enhanced the American protectorate over global oil resources. The war boosted America's relative economic standing for, while Japanese and European capitalism had become more energy efficient, US capitalism, protected by the special benefits of hegemony, had built its competitiveness on low oil prices; the war ensured prices would stay low and that Gulf petrodollars would

³⁰ Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of US World Dominance* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

³¹ Bromley, *Oil and American Hegemony*, pp. 205–244.

³² Joe Stork, 'Saudi Arabia and the US,' *MERIP Reports*, October 1980, p. 26.

³³ Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East*, pp. 214–218.

be disproportionately recycled through US—not European or Japanese—banks and arms manufacturers. In addition, the US actually managed to make its imperial policing profitable by inducing its economic competitors (Germany, Japan) and clients (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait) to pay for the war.³⁴ There followed a decade in which US economic growth, outpacing that of its rivals, reestablished Washington's hitherto declining hegemonic position.

Since the 1970s, therefore, repeated crises made it clear that the single most important factor politicizing what in the post-nationalization period otherwise would have been a normal economic relationship between Western oil consumers and the Arab oil producers was the continuing Arab–Israeli conflict. And the single most important key to depoliticizing oil was, therefore, a resolution of the conflict; this was what the international community expected of the hegemon. Indeed, there was an internationally accepted formula for such a resolution—United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967, the land for peace solution that the US had cosponsored and to which it formally was committed. As part of an effort to balance between Israel and its Arab clients, the US made periodic attempts to arrive at partial solutions, but its leadership of the peace process consistently was compromised by the pro-Israeli lobby, and the more this lobby achieved dominance in the American Middle East policy process, the more the US moved away from the even-handed role expected of a global hegemon and toward becoming itself a party to the conflict. Particularly under the administration of Ronald Reagan (1981–89), Israel actually was seen as a 'strategic asset' that would act as the regional gendarme on Washington's behalf. Zionist influence has led Washington to accept—even fund—Israel's colonization of the very occupied land that had to be the basis of a compromise peace settlement. The result, as Oystein Noreng observes, is that Washington is in a state of permanent hostility with many of the key Middle East oil producers as well as regional public opinion, depriving its hegemony of legitimacy in the region and inviting periodic challenges that spill over into world crises.³⁵ According to Richard Betts, the US failed to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict precisely because its hegemonic power allowed its leaders to pay the international costs (from periodic crises) rather than the domestic costs of confronting the Zionist lobby.³⁶ In fact the US, far from paying the costs of the politicization of oil, has managed to use Middle East crises to reinforce its hegemony while offloading their main costs onto others.

It was also apparent, however, that US policy had locked the world hegemon into a pattern of repeated interventions in the Middle East which, being sharply biased against Arab/Muslim actors, tended progressively to deepen regional hostility to it. This situation, especially when combined with the 'blowback' resulting when regional surrogates fostered by the US either were overthrown or later turned against their patron's biased policies, repeatedly generated dangerous crises.³⁷ Thus, Saddam Hussein was built up by the US and the West as a counter to Islamic Iran with the result that his over-sized army posed a fateful temptation to seize Kuwait. However, the most egregious case of 'blowback,' the 9/11

³⁴ Atif Kubursi & Salim Mansur, 'Oil & the Gulf War: an American Century or a "New World Order"?' *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 15(4) (1993), pp. 1–18; Paul Aarts, 'The new oil order: built on sand?' *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 16(2) (1994), p. 1; Cyrus Bina, 'The rhetoric of oil and the dilemma of war and American hegemony,' *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 15(3) (1993), pp. 1–20.

³⁵ Oystein Noreng, *Crude Power: Politics and the Oil Market* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2002), p. 51.

³⁶ Richard Betts, 'The soft underbelly of American primacy,' *Political Science Quarterly*, 117(1) (2002), p. 23.

³⁷ Chalmers Johnson, 'Blowback,' *The Nation*, 15 October 2001.

attacks against highly symbolic targets in the very heart of the hegemon's territory, illustrates the intimate connection of oil, Israel and regional violence. Al-Qaida, whose leader initially was sponsored in part by the US against the threat that the Soviets in Afghanistan allegedly posed to the Middle East oil fields, turned against its US patron as a result of American policies growing out of the 1991 Iraq war—America's heavy post-war presence in Saudi Arabia, the heartland of Islam and of the region's oil; its continued siege of (and semi-genocidal sanctions imposed on) a defeated Iraq; and the blatant double standards by which it exempted Israel from the kinds of UN resolutions it claimed to be enforcing against Iraq.³⁸ In Slavoj Žižek's words, 'it is as if some invisible hand of destiny repeatedly ensures that US intervention only makes more likely the outcomes the United States sought most to avoid.'³⁹ The result has been that every five to ten years, a Middle East crisis, rooted in the linked struggles over oil and Israel, spills out of the region: 1956, 1967, 1973, 1979, 1982, 1987, 1990, 2001, and 2003. Moreover, animosity toward the US, with each crisis, has steadily widened—from the Arab heartland, to Iran, then Afghanistan, now to the wider Islamic world, including the Muslim diaspora in the West itself. Although Washington's response to these crises *could* have been to pursue more limited goals that accommodated the interests of Middle Eastern peoples, its *actual* response under George W. Bush since 2001 was to use its rapidly increasing military power to try to impose its will on them.

Toward an Explanation of the War

While the roles of oil and Israel in US hegemony provide the essential and specific context for the war, it actually takes the addition of several further ingredients to explain the decision for war. These additional ingredients are: (1) US global grand strategy under the administration of George W. Bush; (2) the changing US strategic position in the Middle East; and (3) the interests of Bush's ruling coalition.

US Global Grand Strategy under Bush and the Middle East

The starting point for understanding the invasion of Iraq is the grand strategy of the US under Bush—to undertake a coercive assertion of global hegemony. The Project for a New American Century frankly acknowledges this reach for hegemony. The Bush doctrine and the 2002 National Security Strategy, formulated in response to the 9/11 attacks, make explicit the coercive turn: the call for 'full spectrum dominance'; the strategy of dealing with resistance to the US not simply through traditional containment, but via 'preventive wars'; the resort to unilateralism, with *ad hoc* 'coalitions of the willing'; the view that states not with the US in the war on terrorism are against it; and the claim that only the US liberal model is legitimate, with sovereignty exempting no nation from the demand that it conform. This, of course, is all quite a change from traditional US foreign policy that was based on the *containment* of threats and that viewed hegemony as being rooted in consent derived from *multilateral* consultation, hence necessarily limited by international law and institutions and requiring a priority for diplomacy over military force. By contrast, the architects of the Bush administration strategy

³⁸ Julie Kosterlitz, 'America's track record in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan suggests that today's solutions can lead to tomorrow's problems,' *National Journal*, March 2003.

³⁹ Slavoj Žižek, 'Iraq's false promises,' <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>, January/February 2004.

had long advocated a strategy of hegemony based on the use of America's exceptional military capabilities.⁴⁰ Reshaping the Middle East is pivotal to the success of this project : while the US protectorate over 'world' oil reserves concentrated in the Persian Gulf is a pillar of its hegemony, the main resistance to US hegemony is also concentrated in the Muslim Middle East and its suppression was seen as the main test of the practical usability of US military power to enforce America's will.

The US Strategic Position in the Middle East

The 9/11 terrorist attack on the US is central to understanding the war on Iraq, even though Iraq was in no way involved in it. This attack exposed a terrible, but sub-state, threat to the US, originating in the Middle East and Muslim world, for which retaliation was necessary if American opponents were not to be emboldened; at the same time, hardliners in the Bush administration who had advocated an attack on Iraq even *before* 9/11 saw it as an *opportunity* to mobilize support for a war they thought would be decisive in transforming the Middle East to suit US interests.⁴¹

The first hurdle the Bush administration had to clear was to legitimize war on a state that did not threaten the US. The issue of WMDs was hit upon as a way to turn the 'war on terrorism' against Iraq; to do so, Bush had to claim that Saddam Hussein was linked to al-Qaida and was actively developing weapons of mass destruction that he might turn over to terrorists or use on their behalf, and hence that Iraq represented an imminent threat to the US. These claims have not only been discredited but, additionally, there is strong evidence that the war party in Washington deliberately exaggerated unreliable claims and knew Iraq was no threat to the US. At any rate, the threat was never that WMDs would be used against the US but rather that they could constrain US freedom of action in the Middle East or threaten Israel.⁴²

⁴⁰ Robert Jervis, 'Understanding the Bush Doctrine,' *Political Science Quarterly*, 118(3) (Fall, 2003), pp. 365–388; and Edward Rhodes, 'The imperial logic of Bush's liberal agenda,' *Survival* 45(1) (Spring, 2003), pp. 131–154.

⁴¹ Cabinet level insiders, notably Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neil and terrorism advisor Richard Clarke, revealed that an attack on Iraq was broached at the first National Security Council meeting of the Bush Administration; see further Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W Bush, the White House and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) and Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (Free Press, 2004).

⁴² The report of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Joseph Cirincione, Jessica Mathews, and George Perkovich, *WMD in Iraq: Evidence and Implications*, Washington, DC, 2004) concluded that Iraqi WMD capabilities were not a threat since Iraq's nuclear program had been suspended for many years and large-scale chemical weapons production capabilities were destroyed or dismantled. Moreover, there was no evidence of a co-operative relationship between Saddam's government and al-Qaida. The Carnegie report concluded that the absence of any imminent nuclear or chemical threat was knowable before the war, that the CIA's National Intelligence Estimates had been deliberately misrepresented by administration officials, and that none of Secretary of State Colin Powell's claims at the UN stood up to verification. Weapons inspector Scott Ritter (*International Herald Tribune*, 6 February 2004, <http://www.iht.com>) observed that numerous experts and former Iraq weapons inspectors had discounted the threat before the war. Compelling evidence that the administration was deliberately misleading Americans about WMDs, Iraq, and al-Qaida can be found in the following: Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, 'The New Pentagon Papers,' <http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2004/03/10>; David Corn, 'Willful ignorance,' *TomPaine.com*; John B. Judis and Spencer Ackerman, 'The selling of the Iraq war,' *The New Republic*, 30 June 2003; Seymour Hersch, 'Who lied to whom?,' *The New Yorker*, 31 March 2003; Seymour Hersch, 'Selective intelligence,' *The New Yorker*, 12 May 2003; and Scott Ritter, *Iraq Confidential: The Untold Story of America's Intelligence Conspiracy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005).

To understand the real motives behind the war and why the Bush administration saw an attack on Iraq as the solution to US problems, we need to shift the focus from security threats to the US, *per se*, toward threats to its strategic situation in the Middle East and its hegemony over the oil market. First, US oil vulnerability was on the rise. US import dependence was rising in an ever-tighter oil market with global production seemingly peaking, hence shifting the balance of power toward oil producers.⁴³ These conditions potentially made the US and the world capitalist economy vulnerable to an oil shock—historically fatal for US presidents' re-election prospects. Iraq was a solution to these potential threats for it had the world's second largest oil reserves and very low production costs. However, as long as Saddam was in power, its oil could not be used for US purposes; the sanctions the US believed essential to contain Saddam meant most Iraqi oil remained off the market. Furthermore, if Saddam were to find some way to overcome them and get out of isolation, the risk increased that he would try to use Iraq's oil for political advantage, as he had tried to do before, specifically by seeking to make access to oil contingent on US policy in the Arab–Israeli conflict.⁴⁴

What made developments in the oil market more alarming for Washington, however, was the fact that US hegemony over the Middle East and its oil was under threat by the seeming breakdown of the Pax Americana that had been constructed after the Gulf war of 1991. This hegemony rested on several pillars—the 'dual containment' of Iran and Iraq, the peace process, and the Saudi alliance—but all of these were increasingly shaky.⁴⁵ First, Iraq and Iran gradually were escaping from the isolation the US policy of dual containment had sought to impose on them. The sanctions on Iraq increasingly had been discredited for the humanitarian damage they caused the Iraqi people and were being challenged by the Arab world, while Iraq was selling oil concessions to other countries, notably Russia, China and France. As for Iran, even Western Europe was keen to engage with rather than isolate it. Although US sanctions kept its own companies out of their oil fields and markets, their rivals were penetrating both.

Second, US hegemony in the Middle East required that US support for Israel was *balanced* by alliances with Arab clients and this, in turn, required US leadership in the Arab–Israeli peace process. The breakdown of the peace process amidst continued Israeli settlement activity in the Palestinian territories and the Islamic terrorism it provoked drove an increasing wedge between the US and the Arabs who had been promised a peace settlement in reward for their support of the US in the Gulf War of 1991. However Bush, instead of continuing the balancing policies of his predecessors, adopted an overtly pro-Israeli policy that legitimized massive Israeli repression of the Palestinian *intifada* and Israeli incorporation of the much colonized Palestinian land.

⁴³ 'Strategic Energy Policy Challenges for the 21st Century,' Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University and the Council on Foreign Relations, 2001, p. 4; see also Colin Campbell, *The Coming Oil Crisis* (Brentwood, England: Multi-Science, Publishing and Petro-Consultants, 1997).

⁴⁴ John S. Duffield, 'Oil and the Iraq war: how the US could have expected to benefit, and might still,' *MERIA Journal*, 9(2) (June 2005); Mark Almond, 'It's all about control, not the price of petrol,' *New Statesman*, 7 April 2003; and Michael T. Klare, 'For oil and empire? Rethinking the war with Iraq,' *Current History*, 102(662) (March 2003), pp. 129–135.

⁴⁵ This line of analysis first was suggested by Simon Murden in a lecture at the University of St Andrews, March 15, 2005.

The conquest of Iraq was seen as an *alternative to balancing* and the key to a military version of hegemony in the Middle East that would dispense with one based on accommodation of Arab interests.

Third, Saudi Arabia traditionally had played an effective 'swing' role in securing oil and moderating oil prices at the US behest, but the US was dissatisfied with its dependence on the Saudis. A perceived decline in Saudi excess oil pumping capacity was believed to reduce the kingdom's ability to moderate oil prices; dependence on the Saudis placed constraints on US Middle East policy—they had prohibited the use of Saudi bases for continuing post-1991 war attacks on Iraq and Crown Prince Abdullah had made a high profile expression of impatience with Bush's failure to engage in the peace process; the US forces that protected Saudi Arabia were a source of discontent there and, indeed, had turned Osama Bin Laden against America; and the participation of Saudi citizens in the 9/11 attacks and in funding al-Qaida gave the neo-conservatives an opportunity to demonize Saudi Arabia in American public opinion. Saudi Arabia, feeling that the US ignored its interests, had begun looking for alternative solutions to ease its total US security dependence—through conciliating Iran and Iraq. US hegemony in the Middle East rested on its unique ability to balance special relationships with *both* Israel and Saudi Arabia, but this balance was being destabilized. The conquering of Iraq was envisioned as enabling the US to acquire a new compliant swing producer, thus ending dependence on Saudi Arabia. The conquest of Iraq would also allow the US to achieve privileged access to Iraqi oil at the expense of its economic competitors in Europe and Asia and its emerging global rival, China. The structural power deriving from oil hegemony would be restored and underlined.⁴⁶

Equally important, the war on Iraq was expected to assert decisively the *military* dimension of hegemony. Smashing Saddam Hussein, who famously had defied the US, would send the message that the limits of American military power had been overcome. Bush wanted to establish the right to attack countries the US deemed threats, and Iraq, being both weak and easily demonized, was an exemplary case to establish the precedent. An easy victory in Iraq followed by images of Iraqis welcoming US troops as liberators would demoralize Arab/Islamic opposition to US hegemony and 'prick the bubble of terrorism.'⁴⁷ The US had long sought permanent bases in the Persian Gulf region, and conquering Iraq would allow their establishment.⁴⁸ From this Iraqi base, the US could intimidate remaining resistance from nationalist states, Syria and Iran, and impose a pro-Israeli Pax Americana in the region. Furthermore, invading Iraq would allow the imposition of liberalism there and, in a domino effect, spread it to the rest of the Middle East, undermining ideologies and regimes inimical to American influence.

Obviously however, a war on Iraq carried grave risks, while the threats the US faced were neither so imminent that it had to act immediately nor immune to solutions that

⁴⁶ A US diplomatic source told an interviewer that 'a rehabilitated Iraq is the only sound long-term strategic alternative to Saudi Arabia'; See Trevor Royle, 'The World's petrol station: Iraq's past is steeped in oil ... and blood,' *Sunday Herald*, 6 October 2002; available at <http://www.sundayherald.com/print28226>

⁴⁷ Marc Lynch, 'Taking Arabs seriously,' *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2003, 81–89.

⁴⁸ Joseph Cirincione, 'Origins of regime change in Iraq,' *Proliferation Brief*, 6(5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 March 2003.

stopped far short of an invasion of Iraq. Hence, US strategic national interests cannot wholly explain the war and why these risks were accepted.

From Class Interests to Regime Interests: Bush's Ruling Coalition

An alternative, more specific explanation is that the war served the *class interests* of the establishment. Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler argue that the war served the needs of 'dominant capital.'⁴⁹ The US boom of the 1990s, which had been driven by mergers, acquisitions and the globalization of investment, was exhausted by 2000, and US capital faced a crisis of overproduction and deflation. To get out of this, they argue, an alternative strategy of inflation, which historically leads to a redistribution of wealth from labor to capital and from small to larger firms enjoying price power, was on the agenda; the main driver of inflation is booming oil prices and the single most important driver of oil prices is Middle East conflict. The problem with this explanation is that war on Iraq was an extremely risky strategy that could well destabilize the world economy that benefits from stable moderate oil prices. Nor is this view easily reconciled with the opposition to the war from the mainstream foreign policy establishment. The absence of broad corporate opposition to the war suggests acquiescence but not enthusiasm for it. As Pieterse observes, not only is there no 'capitalist necessity' in preventive war but also corporations cannot afford to be risk takers on this scale, while de-territorialized hi-tech capitalism in a world dominated by neo-liberal international economic institutions no longer has the need for territorial control of economic resources typical of the age of imperialism.⁵⁰

An alternative, more focused explanation is that the war served the interest of a *particular fraction* of dominant capital, namely the oil–arms–construction complex. Some investors in the US oil industry saw the opportunity to restore the direct ownership of oil curtailed by the rise of OPEC (and the increased profits this would allow) through the privatization of Iraqi oil.⁵¹ As Pieterse points out, energy companies are the most territorial and geo-political of all corporations.⁵² Another consideration may have been awareness of the association of conflict in the Middle East with high oil prices—especially needed for high-cost Texas producers—and high oil company profits. Nitzan and Bichler show that oil company relative performance is associated with high oil prices; that every Middle East crisis in the last 50 years has been followed by periods in which the oil majors outperform the Fortune 500 average; and that during the oil price boom of the early 1980s, oil company profits reached nearly 19 percent of total corporate profits, only to fall back to 3 percent in the late 1990s as oil prices fell. A boom for armaments firms paralleled the oil boom only to suffer decline with the oil price slump experienced by Middle East purchasers. War in the Middle East was expected to—and in fact did—drive up oil prices, oil company shares of relative corporate profits and arms spending. Yet, there is no evidence that the oil

⁴⁹ Shimshon Bichler & Jonathan Nitzan, 'Dominant capital and the new wars,' *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 10(2) (Summer 2004), pp. 255–327.

⁵⁰ Pieterse, *Globalization or Empire?*, p. 27.

⁵¹ Roger Burbach and Jim Tarbell, *Imperial Overstretch George W Bush and the Hubris of Empire* (London: Zed Books, 2004), pp. 155–157.

⁵² Pieterse, *Globalization or Empire?*, p. 20.

or arms industries collectively were pushing for or needed a war to continue to profit from Middle East crisis in the last 50 years. Indeed, given the risks to this business from war and to the overall economy from an oil shock, this scenario implies both an extremely reckless gamble and a readiness to sacrifice broader capitalist class interests to the narrow short-term interests of one, albeit pivotal, fraction of capital. The dominant classes certainly acquiesced in the war but were not the immediate drivers of it.

The extra ingredient needed is the drive for war shaped by a yet more particularistic and narrow set of interests, those of the *ruling coalition* Bush brought to power. Arguably, a different administration would *not* have gone to war with Iraq and would have pursued other less risky ways of addressing US dilemmas—such as re-starting the peace process and adjusting dual containment. After all, Iraq posed no threat to the US and war with it was on nobody's agenda until the Bush administration put it there. As Mark Rupert and Scott Solomon argue, the very particular conception of US interests and the particular coercive strategy adopted by the Bush administration reflected the special interests and identities of Bush's ruling coalition.⁵³ The Bush administration was to the far-right of the mainstream US foreign policy establishment. Its foreign policy making was dominated by a coalition of the extremist/militarist wings of both the Zionist lobby (the pro-Likud neo-conservatives) and of the arms/oil lobbies (represented by Richard Cheney and Rumsfeld). The mainstreams of these lobbies traditionally were opposed over Middle East policy, with the arms–oil lobby believing that access to oil and arms profits depended on good relations with the Arabs, and hence some even-handedness in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Although the mainstream of the oil lobby did not support the war, under Bush its extremist wing marginalized the lobby's traditional concern to appease the Arab regimes and embraced the Zionist agenda. Similarly, the mainstream of the Zionist lobby that supported the peace process in the 1990s and dominated when Labor governments were in power in Israel was marginalized by the parallel rise to power of Ariel Sharon in Israel and George W. Bush in the US.

It appears that the likes of Rumsfeld and Cheney were brought together with pro-Likud neo-conservatives like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz in the group formed to petition the Clinton administration for the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime: the Project for the New American Century, which championed a muscular US global hegemony. Hence from the beginning, US hegemony and war on Iraq had been linked in their minds. In addition to this, the 'buccaneering' wing of the oil/arms lobbies had particular interests that they thought a war might serve—the prospect was good that the occupation and reconstruction of Iraq would mean very good profits for companies, such as Halliburton, associated with the ruling coalition—as indeed it did.⁵⁴ Additionally, Bush's prospects for re-election were seen to depend on his stature as a war president.

As for the neo-conservatives, the ideologues of the war, they were intimately tied to Israel's right-wing Likud party and its policy of colonization in the occupied territories. This obstructed a peace settlement and endangered the Arab relations on which US oil access depended (particularly with Saudi Arabia); their nightmare was that the US would

⁵³ See note 27.

⁵⁴ Evelyn Pringle, 'Iraqis to Bush—Where did all our money go?' *Media Monitors Network (MMN)*, 12 September 2005.

subordinate Israel's expansionist ambitions to the appeasement of the Arab oil producers, especially Saudi Arabia (as the George H. Bush administration had done from 1990 to 1992). The alternative was the conquest of Iraq. The seizure of Iraq's pivotal oil fields would make appeasement of the Arabs superfluous; Iraq could be used to break OPEC and destabilize unfriendly Muslim oil states. In short, the seizure of Iraq would allow the US to secure access to Arab oil without Arab alliances and consent and to remove the last remaining constraints on total US commitment to the achievement of 'Greater Israel.'⁵⁵

How Bush's extremist faction was able to carry the US into a war nobody else really wanted—the 'neo-conservatization of the policy process'—is outside the scope of this paper. However, crucial to the war was the backing of the administration by the alliance of the Zionist and the right-wing 'Christian Zionist,' lobbies, the latter a movement whose literal reading of the Bible convinced its followers that Christ would reappear only after the Jews repossessed the whole 'promised land' and who viewed Islam as 'a very wicked and evil religion.'⁵⁶ Crucial also was the capture of the 'Imperial Presidency' by a 'true believer' and the abdication by Congress of its war-deciding responsibilities⁵⁷ under the threat of these lobbies that are able to target concentrated dollars and votes against any politicians who defy them. The opposition of the defense and foreign policy bureaucracies also had to be systematically

⁵⁵ Only a sampling of the extensive evidence accumulating on the role of the neo-conservative/Likud association in the Iraq war can be cited here. Their close association was suggested by Thomas Neuman of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, who exalted at the rise of the neo-conservatives: 'The Likudniks are really in charge now' (see Laurence A. Toenjes, 'US Policy toward Iraq: unraveling the web,' June, 2003, www.opednews.com). Neo-conservatives famously authored a report to Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud government (1996–99) advocating a policy of aggressive confrontation with Israel's neighbors, advice even the Israeli prime minister rejected as too risky and extreme; many of the same neo-conservatives later followed up in sponsoring a famous letter to President Clinton urging the removal of Saddam Hussein. In his magisterial account, George Packer (*The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq* [New York: Farrar Straus Girous, 2005]) concludes that the one thing the neo-conservatives had in common was 'an obsession with Israel' and a belief that the removal of Saddam Hussein would be very good for Israel. According to Joe Klein (*Time*, 5 February 2003), 'Israel is very much embedded in the rationale for war with Iraq. It is part of the argument that dare not speak its name, a fantasy quietly cherished by the neo-conservative faction in the Bush administration and by many leaders of the American Jewish Community.' According to General Anthony Zinni, a former commander of US forces in the Middle East, the neo-conservatives' role in pushing the war on Israel's behalf was 'the worst-kept secret in Washington' (quoted in Ori Nir and Ami Eden, 'Zinni charges neocons pushed Iraq war to benefit Israel,' *Forward*, 28 May 2004, <http://forward.com>). According to Philip Zelikow, a neo-conservative member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board at the time of the attack on Iraq, the 'real threat' of Saddam's WMDs was not to America: 'I'll tell you what I think the real threat (is) and actually has been since 1990—it's the threat against Israel' (quoted in the *Guardian*, 30 November 2003; and the *Daily Star*, 10 April 2004). For exhaustive documentation of the neo-conservatives' role, see James Bamford's *Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Doubleday, 2004). The fact that several of the key players most aggressively pushing the Iraqi war originally had proposed it for the benefit of another country (Israel) raises, Bamford observes, 'the most troubling conflict of interest questions.' See also Burbeck and Tarbell, pp. 96–100; Michael Lind, 'The Israeli lobby,' *Prospect*, April 2002; and Joel Beinin, 'Pro-Israeli Hawks and the Second Gulf War,' *Middle East Report*, April 2003.

⁵⁶ On the Christian Zionists see Norman Madarasz, 'A Christian fundamentalist and rational secularist united front,' *Counterpunch*, 12 January 2004; and Godfrey Hodgson, 'From frontiersman to neo-con,' *openDemocracy*, 24 April 2003.

⁵⁷ Fisher, 'Deciding on war against Iraq: institutional failures,' pp. 389–410.

overcome by the neo-conservative network appointed across their command posts.⁵⁸ Additionally, public opinion systematically was softened up by a concerted propaganda campaign led by right-wing think tanks, advertising agencies and pro-Israeli pundits, largely uncontested by a critical or even an objective press.⁵⁹ In other words, the 'checks and balances' of the American political system all failed utterly.

It remains to be seen whether they can be restored. This arguably would take some combination of imperial overreach globally with a domestic resurgence of the mainstream foreign policy establishment and a relegation of the extremist interests that Bush brought to the center of power back to its margins. Unfortunately, the Iraq episode exposed the high vulnerability to capture by special interests of the American world hegemon on whose policies the fate of all other nations disproportionately rests.

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⁵⁸ Cirincione, 'Origins of Regime Change in Iraq,' observed that the neo-conservatives are 'a textbook case of how a small, organized group can determine policy in a large nation, even when the majority of officials and experts originally scorned their views.' Secretary of State Colin Powell, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and career CIA personnel all opposed them. 'Powell's view was that Wolfowitz was fixated on Iraq, that they were looking for any excuse to bring Iraq into this (9/11)' (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1214>). See also the charge of General Colin Powell's chief of staff, Col. Lawrence Wilkerson that a 'Cheney "cabal" hijacked US foreign policy' (<http://news.ft.com/cms/s/c925a686-40f4-11da-63fg-00000e2511c8.html>). As one insider put it, the neo-conservatives 'behaved as though they had seized control of the government in a silent coup' see W. Patrick Lang, 'Drinking the Cool-Aid', *Middle East Policy*, 11(2), Summer 2004, pp. 42–46. They set up a 'shadow government,' including creation of an *ad hoc* 'special office' to cherry-pick intelligence and bypassed normal bureaucratic procedures meant to ensure objectivity and balance.

⁵⁹ Rampton and Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception*, document the abuse and failures of the media; and Burbach and Tarbell, *Imperial Overstretch*, pp. 76–124, 149–171, expose the role of rightwing advocacy think tanks.

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