

7 The sound of silence

Rhetorical coercion, Democratic acquiescence, and the Iraq War

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The Iraq War has been accused of, among other things, alienating young Muslims and revitalizing the Islamist threat, distracting the US government from the "war on terror" properly conceived, breaking the US Army and the military's reserve components, and estranging America's allies. The war has yet to be blamed for contributing to global warming. And yet it could, not just because the US military's inefficient vehicles in Iraq and Afghanistan produce many greenhouse gases, but because the debate over these wars, their conduct and their legacy has led to the destruction of innumerable trees. Eager to learn how the United States might avoid such needless and costly wars in the future, journalists (Gordon and Trainor 2006; Isikoff and Corn 2006; Ricks 2006), pundits (Fukuyama 2006; Rich 2006), and scholars (Dueck 2004; Flibbert 2006; Freedman 2004; Kaufmann 2004; Monten 2005; Mueller 2005; Western 2005a) have all sought to understand how the United States came to launch a misguided war against Iraq and how that war, once undertaken, could have been bungled so badly.

Many of the proposed answers revolve around asserted motives including the influence of a neoconservative cabal and its dreams of falling autocratic dominoes, Bush and Cheney's ties to the oil industry, "unfinished business" for those who had played leading roles in the 1991 Gulf War, and the impact of the September 11 attacks on decision-makers' tolerance for risk. Motives are important as driving forces of human behavior, but they are often unknown, even to the actors themselves, and are perhaps in principle unknowable. Even more importantly, these motives, whatever they were, are only the beginning of the story insofar as the Bush administration still had to effectively legitimate the war with Iraq – that is, to provide publicly acceptable reasons or justifications for the war.

The concept of "threat inflation" speaks directly to this point. President George W. Bush and his aides, it is claimed, exploited the "bully pulpit" to frame the national dialogue on Iraq and the looming prospect of military action, and manipulated intelligence to exaggerate the threat Iraq posed to the United States and US interests. Leading Democrats remained relatively quiet, silenced by their party's dovish reputation and their fear of seeming soft on security and perhaps also by an atmosphere of "militarized patriotism." We argue, however, that these explanations are either problematic or at least insufficient to account for the constrained

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nature of the pre-war debate and specifically for leading Democrats' accession to a large zone of consensus.

We maintain that the successful legitimization of the Iraq War was made possible by the effective fixing of the meaning of the September 11 attacks in terms of the "War on Terror." Elsewhere we have explained how and why this particular narrative became relatively "hegemonic" (Krebs and Lobasz 2007). Here we explain how this dominant narrative hindered the potential opposition in the debate over the looming Iraq War. Leading figures who might have been expected to resist the administration's program of aggressive democratization contested its claims only at the margins. We argue that they were the victims of successful "rhetorical coercion": a strategy that seeks to rhetorically constrain political opponents and maneuver them into public assent to one's preferred terms of debate and ideally to one's policy stance (Krebs 2006; Krebs and Jackson 2007). The administration's triumph was not inevitable, and thus its particular rhetorical strategies – implying an operational relationship between Al Qaeda and Hussein's Iraq, emphasizing the domestic brutality of Hussein's regime even in unrelated discussions about weapons of mass destruction, confusing warranted suspicions about Iraq's biological and chemical weapons programs and stocks with lingering concerns about continuing nuclear weapons research – were relevant to the outcome. Nevertheless, the consolidation of the War on Terror had already heavily stacked the deck in the administration's favor.

We should note at the outset that we are uncomfortable with the concept of "threat inflation" that organizes this volume. It implies that threats exist independent of the viability of their articulation, that they can be objectively measured, as can the degree to which they are exaggerated. It suggests that the legitimization of national projects is sometimes, even often, unproblematic, that the construction of a national consensus calls for explanation only when it departs from "reality." Proceeding from a more social ontology, we hold that threats are necessarily socially constructed and that the assertion of threat and of threat inflation are equally and inherently political interventions. We believe legitimization and the construction of (zones of) consensus to be always problematic, always worthy of explanation. In our view, the question should be framed differently. Rather than inquire why the Bush administration's "inflation" of the Iraq threat succeeded, we instead ask: how and why did the administration succeed in carrying the nation to war?

Our essay proceeds in four sections. First, we argue that the usual explanations of the successful "inflation" of the Iraq threat are insufficient. Second, we briefly present the familiar interpretation of the September 11 attacks – what we call the War-on-Terror narrative – that became dominant. Third, we show how it, in combination with existing representations of Iraq and its leadership, structured the subsequent contestation over the war. In the conclusion, we reflect on the relationship between structure and agency – that is, whether things might have turned out differently.

Existing arguments and their flaws

The war in Iraq and especially the subsequent revelation that its chief justification – the alleged existence of active Iraqi research programs to develop and acquire

weapons of mass destruction and of sizable chemical and biological weapons stocks – was mistaken has led scholars to accuse the Bush Administration of having hyped, or "inflated," the threat Iraq posed. They claim that sufficient evidence was available prior to the onset of combat operations to have cast severe doubt on the administration's charges, and the war won popular assent only because the threat had been so exaggerated. While these accounts highlight factors of substantial import, they are ultimately not satisfying.

First, some correctly note that presidents in the United States enjoy particular authority with regard to foreign affairs. Thanks to the deference historically accorded the president, Congress' abdication of its responsibilities, and the executive's control over classified information, they argue that presidents' preferred frames dominate public debate, particularly in foreign policy (Kaufmann 2004: 37–43; Western 2005b: 108–109, 117–120). However, attributing Bush's success to his institutional position alone overstates presidents' power to set the terms of debate (frame) and to lead public opinion (persuade), even on matters about which they care deeply. The bully pulpit's influence is often overblown, and on a wide range of issues – including national security – presidents have served more as "facilitators" who reflect and perhaps intensify and channel widely held views than as "directors" who lead opinion or impose dominant frames (Edwards III 2003).¹ When presidents "go public," they *can* effectively shift policy and shape legislation, but only when their stance is popular (Canes-Wrone 2005; Kernell 2007). The recent rise of cable television and, arguably, of a generally more independent media has further undercut presidents' (already limited) capacity to control public debate. Presidents have many times faced substantial opposition and have been compelled to abandon pet projects abroad. The fact that leading Democrats typically did not vocally oppose the Iraq War is, therefore, the central puzzle.

Second, and closely related, John Mueller has observed that politicians (and by extension the media) accede to representations of threat because the political and reputational costs of underplaying risks exceed the costs of exaggerating them (Mueller 2005). This calculus can explain the long history of threat representations among democratic politicians, and it can account for the weakness of congressional opposition to war. The problem, however, is that this logic tends to overpredict: if Mueller were right, moves toward war would rarely meet with resistance, yet efforts to legitimate threats have hardly proved universally successful, even when the president leads the charge. The same problem bedevils Jane Cramer's argument, in this volume, that a post-World War II "militarized patriotism" accounts both for the lack of vocal opposition to Bush's drive for war and for the absence of an assertive media (Cramer 2009). In fact, the list of failed recent presidential efforts to build support for particular threats abroad is long – among others, Reagan on Lebanon, El Salvador, Grenada, and especially Nicaragua; G.H.W. Bush on Haiti; Clinton on Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq, and Kosovo.

Third, it is commonly argued that potential Democratic opponents went along with the Iraq War because they feared the accusation that they are soft on national security – a perception, and political vulnerability, that dates to Vietnam or even the "loss" of China. Republicans, the argument goes, have "owned" the security issue

and have enjoyed an advantage when debate occurs on its terrain. While this logic seems intuitive, it overstates Democrats' reluctance to challenge Republicans on security questions. Recall, for example, the fits that congressional Democrats gave Reagan over Contra aid, despite his efforts to paint them as Soviet sympathizers or their unwitting dupes. Nor did Republican critiques of Clintonian engagement with China have much traction. Republicans have, according to polls, enjoyed greater trust on national-security matters, at least until recently, but that has not always silenced Democrats or ensured Republicans' triumph. Moreover, this presumes that Democrats could not themselves have deployed a powerful security argument to counter the drumbeat for war. However, they might have argued – and in fact some did and many more recently have – that war in Iraq would distract from the central mission of the War on Terror: the campaign against Al Qaeda. If this claim was unavailable to most Democrats, it was not because Republicans “owned” security, but because the dominant War-on-Terror narrative bound Iraq into that larger struggle.

Fourth, it is often suggested that the executive branch's control over intelligence, combined with limited congressional oversight, confers overwhelming informational advantages (Kaufmann 2004: 37–41; Western 2005a: Ch. 6). Mueller (2005: 228) has further argued that the public typically harbors “irrational fears about remote dangers,” is uninformed, and is easily influenced.² That informational asymmetries exist, that they favor the chief executive, and that the manipulation of information occurred in the case of the Iraq War is beyond doubt, yet it is not clear that it was *causally* critical. If Kaufmann (2004) is right that there was enough information publicly available to demonstrate that Iraq was not an imminent threat, then the manipulation of intelligence cannot have had the effects he and others have ascribed to it. What becomes puzzling is why the administration's misrepresentations and misleading statements carried the day over the discrepant evidence.³

Fifth, many have pointed to the mainstream media's uncritical presentation of the administration's claims as contributing to the skewed public debate (Jamieson and Waldman 2003: Ch. 6; Kaufmann 2004: 44–45; Massing 2004; Western 2005b: 127–128). Yet if the press did in fact abdicate its professional obligation as government watchdog, the question is why it did so. In fact, existing studies suggest that the mainstream media is *generally* more dependent than independent, more mirror of official debates than participant in them. When the opposition is vibrant, the press can be feisty: criticism in official circles opens space for coverage of criticism outside Washington. When the opposition is itself relatively silent, voices not represented in the official debate are ignored. The media thus “indexes” high-profile debates, and these dynamics are only exacerbated in times of war (Bennett 1990, 2004; Cook 1998; Mermin 1999).⁴ To the extent that journalists do criticize, they do so *within* the terms of the Washington consensus. The media's relatively uncritical presentation reflected Democrats' inability to advance a strong and unmitigated opposition. Again, the relative silence of leading Democrats calls for explanation.

Sixth, observers have invoked the psychology of risk to explain why threats may be inflated relatively easily and how the Iraq threat was made plausible. Human

beings tend to overestimate risk, particularly with regard to rare events over which they feel they have no control. The September 11 attacks aggravated this, leading Americans to see still far-off concerns (Iraq's acquiring nuclear weapons) and low probability events (Iraq's sharing such weapons with Al Qaeda) as more imminent and more likely (Huddy *et al.* 2003; Sunstein 2003). With decisions made on the basis of possibility rather than probability, the Bush administration's case for invading Iraq seemed strong. However, this account is not supported by data. As late as February 2003, a majority of Americans said the United States should not attack Iraq without the United Nations' imprimatur, suggesting that they distinguished between possibility and probability (Kull *et al.* 2003–2004).

These claims about “threat inflation” and the Iraq War highlight important dynamics, but they are incomplete. They are rooted in arguments that tend toward overprediction, and many point back to a critical under-explained question: why did most leading Democrats either support the administration or at best offer a modest critique? Any adequate account of how the Iraq threat was successfully “sold” must be based upon a more general argument that can explain both the dogs that bark (when the assertion of a national-security threat successfully takes hold) and those that do not (when such assertions fail to hold sway). They must explain why and how actual or at least conceivable arguments to the contrary are marginalized (or not) and why and when a vibrant political opposition coalesces (or not). This is equally true of “inflated” and “uninflated” threats, at least in regimes that permit a modicum of political contestation.

The notion of threat inflation implies that how political actors represent circumstances is critical. Yet the causal mechanisms in these existing accounts focus seemingly on everything *but* the language and rhetorical strategies employed in the construction of consent. We argue that, to understand how the Iraq War was made possible, one should explore the legacy of the September 11 attacks on US political discourse, in conjunction with other genealogical elements. “September 11” was not just a political resource cynically deployed by administration figures to create the impression that the Iraqi regime was somehow responsible and thus to facilitate a war they had wanted all along (Freedman 2004: 18–20; Kaufmann 2004: 16–19, 46). Supporters of the Iraq War certainly did associate the Hussein regime with the attacks, but this was made possible by the way in which “September 11” was represented and its meaning fixed in place.

The meaning of 9/11

The conventional wisdom has been that 9/11 “changed everything.” “History begins today,” Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage recalled telling Pakistan's intelligence chief. Yet neither the Bush administration's militarized and unilateral policies of aggressive democracy promotion nor their legitimating discourse were radically new (Gaddis 2004; Leffler 2004). Faced with an event that demanded an interpretive response, US elites unsurprisingly fell back on older tropes. Multiple interpretations remained possible, however, and these strove to dominate the public sphere. But only one – that favored by the Bush administration – did.

The administration's narrative has been widely noted and need not be belabored. Within days, Bush and his advisers consistently portrayed the attacks as the latest stage in a terrorist "war" on "America" and its "values." Deploying a series of binaries, they contrasted the goodness and virtue of America with the "evil" of her terrorist adversaries, the freedom that Americans prized with the despotism that her enemies represented, the victims' commitment to civilization with the "evildoer" perpetrators' barbarism. "Evil" could not be negotiated or reasoned with, violence had to be met with violence, and a "war on terror" was proclaimed (Bostdorff 2003; Jackson 2005; Silberstein 2004).

The United States was thus cast as victim, blameless for the perpetrated outrage: the horrific attacks were not a response to its deeds and misdeeds abroad. This claim was central to several strands of argument, which variously saw the attacks as a backlash against globalization, as rooted in popular frustration with repressive government at home, and as part of an intra-Arab and Muslim civil war. At the core of these contending accounts lay a common narrative element: "we" were attacked because of "who we are," not because of "what we have done."

This narrative soon proved dominant. In reportage, national identity discourse—including the invocation of core American values and the demonization of the enemy—overshadowed all others in the ensuing weeks (Coe *et al.* 2004; Hutcheson *et al.* 2004). The administration's political opponents rallied behind not only the president's policies, but his rhetoric. "Save for a few criticisms of [Bush's] offhand remarks about a 'crusade' and wanting Osama bin Laden 'dead or alive,'" one scholar observes, "no significant domestic public criticism of [Bush's] discourse about evil was voiced" (Bostdorff 2003: 293). Public opinion surveys over the coming years questioned not whether the United States should engage in a War on Terror, but rather how that war might be most effectively waged. As Lustick concludes, "The War on Terror has thus achieved the status of a background narrative" (Lustick 2006: 17). Five years after the attacks, many self-identified progressives continued to criticize the administration's approach on this terrain, re-inscribing the War on Terror as the defining discourse of the age (Judd 2006).

There was a prominent alternative of course. In this narrative, "we" were attacked precisely because of "what we have done": financially and politically assisting repressive regimes, giving Israel unquestioned political support and implicitly sanctioning its occupation of Palestinian territory, spreading neoliberal economic policies and threatening traditional ways of life. In short, on September 11 the United States reaped what it had sowed. Overall, however, this narrative made little headway beyond those predisposed to it: opinion remained steady between 2001 and 2004 in denying that US wrongdoing abroad was primarily responsible for the September 11 attacks (Kohut *et al.* 2004). Explaining why this alternative failed to make much headway is itself an important question, and one we have taken up elsewhere (Krebs 2008; Krebs and Lobasz 2007). For our purposes here, it suffices to note that the War-on-Terror narrative swiftly came to dominate the national security imaginary.

The war on terror, rhetorical coercion, and the invasion of Iraq

As the Bush administration worked to frame Iraq as a "gathering storm," it maintained that Iraq either had acquired or would soon acquire weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, that this development would spark intolerable instability in a region of strategic significance, and that Iraq might share nuclear weaponry with non-state actors who could not be deterred. At least in principle, such justifications can be countered, and the administration might have faced substantial opposition. Yet leading Democrats passed up this opportunity to challenge its central claims. Why? We argue that the dominance of the War on Terror narrowed the space for debate over foreign policy and led many Democrats to hold their tongues. The established terms of debate after September 11 had repercussions that extended well beyond those first months after the World Trade Center towers fell. Moreover, challenging the war in Iraq required challenging a portrait of Saddam Hussein as evil and as a terrorist, terms in which he had long been cast. A large and critical group of Democrats, whose national profiles might have bolstered the opposition to war, shied away from criticizing the popular president leading the War on Terror: while a handful jumped enthusiastically on the Iraq bandwagon, many others quietly favored invasion or at most criticized unilateral action. Countering the president's clarion call was seen as unsustainable in the post-9/11 rhetorical environment.

Some conservatives began calling for the invasion of Iraq immediately after the September 11 attacks, but the president's own rhetoric was notably restrained until the 2002 State of the Union. Following that address, in which Bush famously (or perhaps notoriously) characterized Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as comprising an "axis of evil," the president's depiction of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime remained consistent.⁵ Hussein supported terrorism, sought and possessed weapons of mass destruction, killed and tortured "his own people," and could not be trusted. As Bush put it in the State of the Union:

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens—leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections—then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.

(Bush 2002a)

In the months that followed, Bush and other leading administration figures repeated and reinforced this portrait of Iraq and its regime. In the late summer and early fall of 2002, as the administration launched an aggressive campaign to sway public opinion, three additional elements were grafted on to the basic narrative. First, previously acceptable risks with regard to Iraqi weapons programs were no longer tolerable in the wake of September 11 (see also Susskind 2006). Second, Iraq was a

“grave and growing” danger. Third, Saddam Hussein hated (and was not merely hostile to) America and its values. Through the start of major combat operations, the administration did not waver from these core arguments (Bush 2002c, 2003 a,b).

Many have noted how administration figures regularly slyly mentioned Iraq in the same breath as the September 11 attacks, implying an operational link with Al Qaeda where there was none (Freedman 2004: 18–20; Kaufmann 2004: 16–19), but the administration’s rhetoric, widely reflected in media coverage (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005), forged more durable bonds between the Iraqi regime, Saddam Hussein, and the War on Terror. By regularly referring to Iraq as a member of the “axis of evil,” Bush and key administration spokespeople suggested that the Iraqi regime and its president were on the same moral plane as “the terrorists” and were probably terrorists themselves. By emphasizing that the Iraqi regime killed its own citizens, the administration elided any distinction between the state terror in which Iraq had engaged and the international terrorism to which the United States had been subjected. By maintaining that the Iraqi regime had “something to hide from the civilized world,” Bush placed it in the realm of barbarism, where Al Qaeda prominently resided. By emphasizing Saddam Hussein’s unyielding hatred of the United States and its values, Bush and others suggested a common agenda with Islamist terrorists. By continuously focusing on Saddam Hussein, rather than on Iraq or even its regime, Bush suggested a further parallel with Osama bin Laden; their organizations reflected their leaders’ political programs and personal pathologies, in contrast to democracies in which law, not personal whim, ruled. The link between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda was established not just through blunt tactics of continual misrepresentation, but perhaps more through these subtle rhetorical deployments that capitalized on the relatively settled meaning of September 11, reflected in the dominant discourse of the War on Terror.

Part of the reason for the Bush administration’s success in fashioning a link between Iraq and the War on Terror lies in the very nature of discourse on terrorism. Terrorism threatens the very logic of inside/outside that sustains the modern nation-state, and states consequently respond by asserting anew their territorial identity, reimposing a geopolitics of identity and difference, and emphasizing the primacy of territorial defense (Coleman 2004: 88–93; Keohane 2002). As Americans daily reproduced this statist counterterrorist discourse, it seemed natural to posit close links between Al Qaeda and a state sponsor, as the administration regularly insinuated. Not any state could have been reasonably inserted into that role, but Iraq was a prime candidate, largely because it had already been well established in US politics that Saddam Hussein and his regime were demonstrably evil and terrorist.⁶

The rhetorical treatment of Saddam Hussein and Iraq in the decade after the first Gulf War further helps explain why the essential terms of the administration’s frame went largely uncontested. As early as October 1990, President George H. W. Bush depicted Saddam Hussein as “Hitler revisited,” and he regularly suggested that Hussein was as great a threat as Hitler, that the invasion of Kuwait was akin to Hitler’s invasion of Poland, and that the world’s failure to respond forcefully to

Hussein’s aggression would equal British and French appeasement at Munich in 1938 (Bush 1990 a,b,c,d). “In most of the West,” Lance Morrow notes, “Hitler is the 20th century’s term for [the] Great Satan,” and to invoke Hitler is to evoke “evil’s icon” (Morrow 1991, 2003: 137–138). This characterization of Saddam Hussein was echoed in the press, and thus in January 1991 nearly as many West Virginians identified Saddam Hussein as the most evil statesman of the twentieth century as named Hitler (West Virginia Poll, 23 January 1991, www.poll.orpub.com). Like Hitler, Saddam was not only brutal but evil: his appetite for fearsome weapons was insatiable, and he was an inveterate aggressor who could be neither permanently contained nor appeased.

Rhetoric equating Saddam Hussein with Hitler and Baathist Iraq with Nazi Germany did not taper off much during the 1990s. In 1998 Clinton’s secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, called Saddam Hussein “the most evil man the world has seen since Hitler” (Bennet 1998), and this portrait of Iraq’s president had become so well entrenched that, in “person on the street” interviews conducted that same year, citizens based their analysis of Iraq on the Hitler analogy (Wilgoren 1998). Hussein’s credentials as a figure of imposing evil were thus well established by the time Bush included his regime in the “axis of evil.” In issuing an ultimatum to Iraq in March 2003, Bush invoked past Western errors and alluded to Hitler: “in the 20th century, some chose to appease murderous dictators . . . In this century . . . a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this Earth” (Bush 2003b). Representing Saddam Hussein as a pathetic petty tyrant, as one who aspired to be Hitler but lacked the competence or the resources, was theoretically available to anti-war forces, but it flew in the face of a decade-old discourse that had treated Iraq as a threat to national security on par with Nazi Germany.

The second rhetorical engine driving the case for war was that Saddam Hussein and his regime were terrorists, and this also found support in the rhetoric of the Clinton administration. Eschewing the Hitler analogy himself, Clinton argued from the beginning of his presidency that Saddam Hussein was responsible for acts of terrorism. After discovering an Iraqi plot to assassinate former President George H.W. Bush, Clinton authorized missile strikes against Iraqi intelligence assets, announcing that “Saddam Hussein has demonstrated repeatedly that he will resort to terrorism or aggression if left unchecked” (Clinton 1993). Whether this was an appropriate use of the terrorism label or not, it was widely repeated by administration figures and in the press throughout the Clinton years. American newspapers openly speculated that Iraq had a hand in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and Iraq was fingered for other potential and actual terrorist activity at home and abroad (Broad and Miller 1998; Erlanger 1998; Sennott 1995; Weiner 1993). The image of Saddam Hussein as terrorist had struck sufficiently deep roots that George W. Bush could credibly accuse him of “harboring terrorists and the instruments of terror, the instruments of mass death and destruction” (Bush 2002d). Like the barbaric terrorists, his regime had no place in the family of civilized nations.

This rhetorical history left Americans well disposed to see Saddam Hussein as capable of committing or at least supporting the most nefarious acts, and the administration’s rhetorical efforts to link his regime to the horrific attacks of

September 11 tilled a fertile soil and swiftly brought forth fruit. Bush's representations of Hussein were by no means irrelevant – the seeds required active cultivation to pierce the surface – but linking Iraq to the War on Terror was hardly an imposing task (Althaus and LARGIO 2004: 795–799; FOYLE 2004).⁷ This articulation was essential in undercutting Democrats who might have otherwise opposed war with Iraq. As Bush put it, “you can’t distinguish between Al Qaida and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror . . . because they’re both equally as bad and equally as evil and equally as destructive” (Bush 2002b). One cannot negotiate with unquestionable evil, one can only wage war against it. Thus, the United States was compelled to invade Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.⁸ Given the dominance of the War-on-Terror narrative, opponents of war with Iraq had few rhetorical resources with which to challenge these “logical” steps leading down the path to war.

Opposition to the war among Democrats was muted. True, Democrats in the Senate only narrowly authorized military force against Iraq, voting 27–21 for Joint Resolution 114, and Democrats in the House of Representatives voted down the resolution, 81–126. But nearly all leading Democratic figures and particularly the front runners for the presidential nomination supported the war in its essence, even if some took issue with the details (Western 2005a). At the leadership level, there was by the summer of 2002 “broad bipartisan support for ousting” Saddam Hussein by “a military invasion if other options fail”: in other words, by the summer before the war, the question of the Iraqi regime’s removal was, even among Democrats, not if, but when and how (Dao 2002). Party leaders made it “very hard,” according to Senator Dianne Feinstein, for lower-ranking Democrats to speak out against the war. A “rift” reportedly emerged between the party leadership and prospective presidential candidates, on the one hand, and rank-and-file Democrats on the other, and the rift was even greater between Beltway Democrats and the core Democratic constituency outside Washington. Opponents of the war, both inside and outside Congress, were placed “on the defensive” (Traub 2004; VandeHei 2002).

Part of the reason for this group’s public acquiescence to the invasion of Iraq lies in the rhetorical obstacles erected after September 11. The establishment of the War on Terror as the organizing narrative in foreign policy, in combination with the existing portrait of Saddam Hussein as evil and as a terrorist, deprived leading Democrats of socially sustainable arguments with which to oppose the administration. In short, these Democrats were “rhetorically coerced”: they had been left without access to the rhetorical materials needed to craft an acceptable rebuttal.⁹ What they could do – and what they did – was raise questions about the timing and circumstances of an invasion. The boundaries of sustainable rhetoric had been narrowed after September 11, limiting the space for vocal opposition.

What arguments did Democrats offer, and why could they make at best limited headway in post-9/11 politics? First, a small number of Democrats, some quite prominent in the party, opposed an invasion of Iraq from the very beginning, arguing that the status quo was tolerable and sustainable.¹⁰ Senator Ted Kennedy maintained that “there are realistic alternatives between doing nothing and declaring unilateral or immediate war. War should be a last resort, not the first response.” He, along with Senator Robert Byrd, accused the administration of pushing for war so

as to divert the nation’s attention from the faltering economy and the rash of corporate corruption scandals with ties to the White House. These Democrats did not argue that Saddam Hussein was not a threat or that he could be turned aside with sweet reasonableness. Rather, they suggested that containment, combined with a continued inspections regime, remained an adequate response to an Iraq that had been weakened by a decade of economic sanctions (“Senate to Debate” 2002).¹¹ Former Clinton deputy William Galston similarly argued, “We should contain Hussein, deter him and bring him down the way we brought down the Evil Empire that threatened our existence for half a century – through economic, diplomatic, military and moral pressure, not force of arms” (Galston 2002). By invoking the Cold War, Galston suggested that evil need not be destroyed or conquered. Yet such a view of evil was difficult to sustain after September 11. The War-on-Terror narrative, to which Democrats had acceded and which they reproduced, implied that evil could not be tolerated. Nor could Democrats challenge the long-standing charge, made first by a fellow Democrat, that Saddam Hussein supported terrorism. If the evil of transnational terrorism could be eliminated only through the application of military force – that is, war – and if Saddam Hussein was in fact a fellow terrorist, then there was little reason not to apply those same means to Iraq in pursuit of the consensus goal of regime change.

Second, other Democrats suggested that the costs of a war would be prohibitive and that the United States had higher priorities on which to expend resources. Senator Mark Dayton claimed that “we know that the United States would defeat Iraq and depose Saddam Hussein. But we don’t know the cost in bloodshed, destruction and subsequent occupation. And we don’t know the consequences of violating our national principle of not starting wars.” Former Vice President Al Gore likewise challenged the administration’s priorities, arguing that an invasion of Iraq would jeopardize the campaign against the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks and undermine US global leadership; the United States needed to focus on ensuring the safety of nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union and on rooting out Al Qaeda. A minority of congressional Democrats challenged the administration’s claim that Iraq was in fact a “grave and growing danger,” maintaining instead that Iraq posed a *continuing*, not an immediate and imminent, threat.

Yet the administration’s rebuttals were compelling in the post-9/11 public sphere, for reasons that should now be clear. While it sought to some extent to respond by adducing evidence that the Iraqi threat was in fact pressing, it also contended that the criterion of imminence that critics had applied was irrelevant and that the argument revealed how little its political opponents grasped the realities of the threats facing the United States. In its 2002 *National Security Strategy*, the administration had argued that imminence was, as a criterion for war, outmoded, for the September 11 attacks had proved that one could not wait until forces gathered at the border. While the administration did insist that the costs of invasion and reconstruction would be far lower than the critics forecast, the articulation of Iraq to the War on Terror put potential critics in the uncomfortable position of having to argue that they would sacrifice national security for the sake of a few dollars. Finally, attempts to insert space between Iraq and the War on Terror, along the lines

Gore had suggested, failed to comprehend how firmly the two were now linked in public discourse.

In the post-September 11 rhetorical space, Democratic politicians who might normally have helped lead a vigorous opposition to the invasion were relatively silent or at least very tempered in their criticism. This was less because they had been persuaded of the Bush administration's logic and factual claims than because the fixing of the War on Terror as the dominant discourse after September 11 had deprived them of winning arguments, of socially sustainable avenues of reply.¹² They were the victims of successful rhetorical coercion. Recognizing that their justifications for opposing the war were unlikely to gain rhetorical traction, many Democrats either jumped on the administration's bandwagon or offered a more modest critique. Democrats could, and did, argue that violating Iraq's national sovereignty, as opposed to the pursuit of non-state actors like Al Qaeda, required the imprimatur of the United Nations and the support of the international community. This argument carried much weight with the American public: just a month before the invasion began, a clear majority of Americans opposed going to war without UN sanction (Kull *et al.* 2003:04: 569–570). But this was necessarily a far weaker form of argument that already conceded the administration's most fundamental points. Nor was it particularly constraining to the Bush administration, which co-opted such selective multilateralist critiques by recasting the issue: would the United Nations uphold its own previously articulated commitment to shut down Iraqi WMD and ballistic missile programs (Western 2005a: 201–206)? The administration also correctly predicted that Americans' objections to a unilateral course of action would fall away once the war began. Over the long run, thought the administration, their view of the war would be shaped by the success and/or the cost of the operation, not the lack of UN approval.

Democratic politicians undoubtedly possessed varied reasons for withholding vigorous criticism of the administration's plans for war in Iraq. We do not have access to internal memos that might lay out the logic behind these politicians' policy choices, and even these documents might very well be strategically framed, undermining their value for revealing "true motives." Since we cannot here – and probably no research can definitively – establish what motives were in fact paramount, our purpose has been more modest: to establish the plausibility of an account centered on rhetorical coercion. Rhetorical coercion, we believe, is an essential piece of the story, even in "straightforward" accounts of anticipated political punishment for opposing the war. Had arguments against removing Saddam Hussein from power by military means been socially sustainable, opposition to the war would not have been politically costly. The combination of existing representations (Iraq as personified in Saddam, Saddam as Hitler revisited and as a terrorist) with the post-9/11 War on Terror narrowed the space for sustainable political debate. To have opposed the war in Iraq would have seemed to toss in the towel in the unquestioned War on Terror, and to have opposed the pursuit of the War on Terror because of a dispute over the (unilateral military) means seemed, given the all-too-concrete costs of the September 11 attacks, to misplace one's priorities.

Conclusion

As the war in Iraq festers, as the numbers of wounded and killed American and Iraqi soldiers and civilians climb ever upwards, as America's foreign policy elite searches desperately for a way to extricate the United States from the morass without sparking a region-wide conflagration, as the prospect of an Iraq Syndrome, paralleling that which followed the Vietnam War, looms, making sense of how this situation arose and was legitimated is necessarily of great import. For those who think they understand how the United States became embroiled in Iraq – through a combination of ideology, institutional prerogatives, deception, and psychological pathology – this essay seeks to demonstrate what a more rhetorical perspective may contribute to our comprehension of the implications of September 11 and the road to war in Iraq.

Dominant narratives deeply shape political contestation and policy outcomes. The administration's successful campaign to bring the United States into war with Iraq hinged on a post-9/11 rhetorical environment dominated by the War on Terror. In this context, and given the characterizations of Saddam Hussein and Iraq prominent in US political rhetoric since the first Gulf War, the link between Al Qaeda and Iraq that would buttress the invasion was eminently sustainable. The burden of proof fell on those who denied that Iraq was a central front in the War on Terror. Potential opponents were rhetorically hemmed in, unable to offer a powerful case against the administration's aggressive policy.

The foregoing argument conveys an air of inevitability regarding the outcome of the Bush administration's push for war with Iraq. Indeed, in the moment, during the debates of fall 2002 and winter/spring 2003, there was little Democrats could have done to have waylaid a Bush administration determined to launch a war. But, viewed through a longer time-frame, the outcome was far from inevitable. The Bush administration need not have cast the perpetrators and planners of September 11 as "evil-doers," and it need not have called for an expansive War on Terror – even if it had opted for a militarized response. The administration certainly had much discretion about how broad or narrow a War on Terror it would pursue. And Democrats might have given voice to an alternative to the War on Terror, accepting the short-run political costs that resistance would have entailed in favor of the long-run flexibility that it might have afforded. Once Democrats assented to the War on Terror, however, the rhetorical resources available to them in the run-up to war in Iraq were meager indeed. At that point, preventing the march to war may well have been impossible, but leading Democrats might nevertheless have taken a braver stance. When the war turned sour, a consistent Democratic opposition would have profited. Instead, during the 2004 presidential primaries, nearly all the Democratic candidates were compelled to explain why they now opposed a war that they had earlier authorized. Their arguments were often reasonable, but they came off as tortured. Had Sen. John Kerry voted initially against the war, he might have claimed the White House. Accepting such political gambles, however, would have required leading Democrats to have long time horizons and be risk acceptant, which politicians often do not and are not. We have argued that the political opposition faced

an unenviable set of circumstances after September 11 that impeded, but certainly did not eliminate, its capacity to oppose either the War on Terror or the war in Iraq.

The War on Terror need not always be with us. Discourse is always subject to challenge and is always laced through with contradictions. Hegemonies may be disrupted, creating space for political change. As contradictions accumulate, the space for resistance grows as well. The stubborn lack of progress with regard to security or development in Iraq, the climbing casualties among civilians and soldiers alike, and the regular revelations regarding the manipulation of pre-war intelligence caused Bush's approval rating to plummet and led to a stunning Democratic victory in the 2006 midterm elections. Increasingly Americans endorsed the view that the war was not justified in the first place and that, even if it was, the United States was now doing more harm than good and should withdraw. While criticism of the war grew immensely, it remained too often divorced from any criticism of the War on Terror. The failures of Iraq opened a space for resistance to this dominant narrative, but Democrats, for the most part, remained trapped within the War on Terror.¹³ Even the 2008 Democratic President elect of US Barack Obama (Obama 2008), reproduced that narrative, even while he downplayed its more Manichean elements. Challenging hegemonic understandings is never easy, but it is essential if alternative policies are to be not only envisioned but socially and politically sustained.

Notes

- 1 See also Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Sobel 2001. But see Cohen 1997.
- 2 However, public opinion is *collectively* rational (Page and Shapiro 1992), and the operative mechanism appears to be elite cueing. The problem regarding Iraq was that elites spoke largely with a single voice – highlighting again the relative silence of the Democrats.
- 3 Of course Kaufmann may be wrong, and information contradicting the administration's claims may not have existed or may have lacked credibility. On the contemporaneous plausibility of the administration's assessments regarding Iraqi WMD programs, see Jervis 2006.
- 4 The reasons for indexing include, among others: the efficiency of relying on official sources; the predictability and credibility of official sources; the interests of major news corporations; and the journalistic norm of "balance." With regard to the use of force abroad, journalists' concerns about appearing unpatriotic also foster subservience to official narratives. For critical views of "indexing," see Edwards III 2003: 172–183; Wood and Peake 1998.
- 5 This conclusion is based on a careful reading of every presidential address related to Iraq between September 2001 and March 2003, located in Public Papers of the Presidents [hereafter PPP], <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/> (Accessed 15 August 2008).
- 6 Moreover, other conceivable candidates – such as Afghanistan and Sudan – were not sufficiently state-like to sustain allegations that they had facilitated the attacks' remarkable coordination. Thanks to Bud Duvall for this observation.
- 7 Thrall 2009, in this volume, focuses on the public's predispositions, and this argument seems to us complementary, rather than competing.
- 8 A final noteworthy element is that Congress had overwhelmingly approved the Iraq Liberation Act in October 1998, and Clinton himself had publicly endorsed regime

change as a US objective the following month. These moves narrowed the rhetorical space available to potential opponents in 2002–2003, since many Democrats had voted in 1998 in favor of regime change.

- 9 Space constraints prevent us from presenting the theoretical logic of rhetorical coercion in greater detail. For more on this mechanism, see Krebs 2006; Krebs and Jackson 2007.
- 10 The most prominent among these early opponents – Senators Robert Byrd, Carl Levin and Edward Kennedy – are the exceptions that prove the rule: old lions of the party, they could speak freely because they held secure seats and no longer harbored aspirations for national office.
- 11 This was apparently the view, before the war, among many military officers: see Ricks 2002. For an academic endorsement of containment, even of a nuclear-armed Iraq, see Mearsheimer and Walt 2003.
- 12 Western (2005: 197–198) similarly, if briefly, suggests that Bush's framing of the war "boxed in" opponents.
- 13 Questions about the War on Terror finally began to penetrate the mainstream in 2006: see Fallows 2006; Lustick 2006; Mueller 2006. For specific suggestions about what an opposition hegemonic project would look like, well beyond the War on Terror, see Lakoff 2004; Tomasky 2006.

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