

A Roundtable on Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*

Cameron D. McCoy, Nathan J. Citino, Molly M. Wood, Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, Aaron O'Connell, and Melvyn P. Leffler

Introduction, Roundtable on Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*

Cameron D. McCoy

C*onfronting Saddam Hussein* is focused on the role of U.S. grand strategy in displacing Saddam Hussein from power, and the invention of the “Vulcans” (i.e., a team of experts to tutor President George W. Bush in the field of foreign policy) and their analysis of the costs and benefits of America’s invasion of Iraq and military commitment to the war on terror. Melvyn P. Leffler points out, “Although [the Vulcans] often have been treated as a unified group espousing a militant, hegemonic, and missionary role for the United States, they in fact had different interests and proffered diverse advice [to Bush]” (28). It is in this vein that Leffler is able to convincingly highlight the subtleties involved in George W. Bush’s thinking and actions associated with the planning and preparation of U.S. forces to invade Iraq in March 2003.

In *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, Leffler is less concerned with arguments regarding whether President Bush misled the United States into war with Iraq and more concerned with *why* the United States made the critical foreign policy decision to go to war, which leads to *who* exactly was *most* responsible for this ultimate decision. To address these areas of interests, Leffler keenly takes the reader on a journey through war rooms, Texas ranches, policy briefings, and Camp David that provide illuminating and compelling portraits of Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush.

With this in mind, Leffler’s opening chapter, “Saddam Hussein” is a powerful account of the complex and seemingly fearless international figure. Born into turbulence in 1937, Saddam is subject to the dark side of life in a world rife with instability. “Children mocked Saddam because he had no father. With no real friends, he learned that to survive he had to be tough, cunning, and self-sufficient. His given name, Saddam meant ‘one who confronts,’ and he did so as a young boy—fighting, stealing, lying, and inflicting cruelty on little animals” (1). Saddam Hussein would naturally embrace his aggressive predilections, which led to his presidency of Iraq in July 1979. From 1979 to 2001, Hussein’s violent rampage and reign of tyranny would remain fixed on his desire for personal greatness and propagating a dominant Iraq with global influence.

With Hussein drawing outside the lines of international

fair play, *fear* eventually drove the Bush administration to pursue the goal of invading Iraq. Even with the alarmist narrative of a determined rogue leader in Hussein, Leffler makes it clear that America’s decision to invade Iraq was less about ideology or some misguided missionary zeal to spread a special brand of U.S. democracy and more about jettisoning Saddam Hussein. While it has been more than 20 years since the events of 9/11—at the time—the majority of Congress, members of the Bush administration, mainstream media, as well as U.S. and foreign intelligence groups genuinely believed Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Therefore, the thought of another, and possibly imminent, terrorist attack pushed key decision makers to outsize a constructed myth, even though Hussein was never linked directly to the events of 9/11.

Despite clear evidence that Saddam had no attachment to the events of 9/11, President Bush still viewed Hussein as evil, conniving, and shrewd. Along with the ominous threat of al-Qaeda, which was eminently real in the eyes of many, President Bush believed an Iraq policy focused on regime change was the proper course of action. Along with his key principals (Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney) President Bush would steer U.S. goals in a direction that highlighted Hussein’s barbarism, lack of adherence to international sanctions and weapons inspections, blatant armed antagonism, nuclear weapons program potential, human rights’ violations, and his previous uses of chemical and biological weapons.

For the Bush administration this alarmist narrative would birth the term “coercive diplomacy.” The Bush administration had to undoubtedly position Hussein as a clear and credible threat of military action for successful diplomacy to work; for example, Bush believed “that the process of moving an increasing number of American forces into a position where they could attack Iraq might convince the Iraqis to end their defiance” (105). According to Condoleezza Rice, the Bush administration had two options: increase international pressure and force Hussein to turn over his WMD or overthrow his regime by force (109). However, Leffler highlights the limitations of this “coercive diplomacy,” which was the possibility that Saddam might not possess weapons of mass destruction. For President Bush, compliance on the part of Hussein was essential, but he needed consensus across all U.S. agencies; Hussein was still a gathering threat in Bush’s estimation, which again, was driven by assumptions and fears rather than concrete and verifiable intelligence, according to Leffler.

Such passages provide the necessary context and

remind the audience that shotty intelligence mixed with anxiety, fear, anger, and political expediency easily warped cabinet priorities and views to make the world more peaceful. While Bush will have his critics regarding the invasion of Iraq, Hussein's record of brutality, aggression, and obstinance were significant enough to influence Bush's priorities, aims, and calculations. Along with Leffler, Charles Duelfer, a former inspection monitor with close links to the CIA and the State Department observed the following, "[Saddam Hussein] 'was not a cartoon. He was catastrophically brilliant and extremely talented in a black, insidious way,' [Leffler added] much like Joseph Stalin, the leader Hussein most wanted to emulate. He was obsessed with his legacy, eager to be seen in the tradition of Nebuchadnezzar and other great Iraqis. His aspirations were clear: thwart Iran, defeat Israel, and dominate the region. To achieve his goals—to bequeath his imagined legacy—he still yearned to acquire weapons of mass destruction (240–241).

Even while highlighting Hussein's resolve, Leffler astutely calls strict attention to Bush's patience in not being eager for war, still, Bush was devoted to the strategy of "coercive diplomacy," which he genuinely believed could alter Hussein's defiant behavior. It is important to note that these were unprecedented times for the entire Bush administration when it came to Saddam Hussein. Even in this respect, President Bush's miscues and shortcuts cannot be forgotten, which is where Leffler ends *Confronting Saddam Hussein*.

While *Confronting Saddam Hussein* does not introduce anything revelatory to the audience, Leffler does offer two things that stood out to this reviewer: as more and more information is published about America's invasion of Iraq, it still may be too early to tell how history will judge George W. Bush as a wartime president. Lastly, when it comes to the conversations surrounding a compelling and dysfunctional era of war and terror, Leffler's analysis of this critical event is refreshing and furnishes a window into the complexities of early 21st century politics and war without making his book political.

Review of Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*

Nathan J. Citino

Long ago, as a first-year graduate student at Ohio State University, I read Melvyn P. Leffler's book *A Preponderance of Power*.¹ Tackling it was a shared rite of passage for Ph.D. students in U.S. foreign relations: "a preponderance of paper," we joked, though we heaved even weightier tomes in Michael J. Hogan's seminar during the fall of 1993.² The book sought to transcend earlier debates over whether Soviet or U.S. actions were more responsible for starting the Cold War. It remains the best account of how "national security" grew into the capacious concept that animated postwar American military and foreign policy bureaucracies, defining and justifying a global anticommunist mission to safeguard a particular vision of domestic society.

Leffler's latest book, a study of George W. Bush's road to the Iraq war, also analyzes U.S. foreign policy from the perspective of the American national security bureaucracy. A less capacious study than *Preponderance*, it does not relate foreign policy to the domestic sphere except to note that Republican officials urgently desired to restore their party's reputation for protecting U.S. national security after September 11, 2001.³ The author begins with his account of being present in Washington, DC, on 9/11 and witnessing the city's response to the terrorist attacks. The book also

examines the Bush administration's reaction to 9/11, its conceptualization of the War on Terror, Bush's decision to invade Iraq as part of that effort, and the bruising internal battles over what came to be known as Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Confronting Saddam Hussein is therefore an insider's account of Iraq policy based on the library of official memoirs published over the last twenty years, as well as interviews with former Bush administration figures that Leffler arranged mainly through Eric Edelman, who was a staff member for Vice President Dick Cheney. Leffler's interview subjects included Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz; Cheney's chief of staff, "Scooter" Libby; National Security advisors Condoleezza Rice and Steven Hadley; National Security Council official Elliott Abrams; Anti-Terrorism Czar Richard Clarke; Secretary of State Colin Powell; and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns. He also consults the report of Britain's Iraq Inquiry (the "Chilcot Report"), which underlines the lack of an equivalent official reckoning for the Iraq debacle in the United States.

The perspective that emerges is consequently how the officials who launched the Iraq war understand it in retrospect. Although critical of the president for not addressing hard questions about what would follow Saddam Hussein's removal from power, Leffler ultimately sympathizes with Bush's challenges in navigating the post-9/11 security environment and with his visceral dislike for Saddam Hussein. Interpreting the Iraq war as a distinct set of unfortunate policy errors, Leffler retains a faith in the overall benevolence of U.S. power. "We must improve," he writes in the preface (xviii), echoing previous liberal internationalist criticisms directed at the architects of the Vietnam War and other foreign policy disasters: intentions were good but mistakes were made.

Leffler sets out to correct what he regards as misconceptions about the war. The most important fallacy for him is that Bush was pushed around by advisors who were obsessed with Iraq. "This is wrong," Leffler writes (60). His argument again takes me back to my grad student days, when I read scholarship by Stephen Ambrose, Richard Immerman, and other "Eisenhower revisionists."⁴ Just as they showed that President Dwight D. Eisenhower was not manipulated by his vocally anticommunist secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, Leffler insists that Bush—rather than Cheney or the neoconservatives—made the crucial decisions about Iraq. He credits Bush with pursuing "coercive diplomacy," the policy of preparing and even mobilizing for war in order to compel Saddam to disarm and comply with United Nations resolutions (111). He also points to Bush's initial reluctance after 9/11 to go after Saddam.

However, the evidence suggests that unlike Ike, Bush showed a lack of presidential leadership. Leffler repeatedly notes that Bush "knew his top Cabinet officers were feuding" but preferred not to adjudicate disputes between his subordinates and "for the most part did not interfere" (237). Leffler writes, for example, that "[Condoleezza] Rice and [Stephen J.] Hadley seemed unable or unwilling to overcome divergent views, and the president did not intercede and resolve the disputed issues" (154). He concludes that "Bush stood atop the morass of postwar planning and did little to uplift it" (237).

Seen in this light, "coercive diplomacy" seems less like a calculated strategy of military preparation in order to avoid war and more like bureaucratic drift toward it. Relations between the State Department and Cheney's office became so dysfunctional, Edelman revealed, that he had to meet discreetly with Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Grossman asked, "has the president decided for war? Edelman said he did not think so" (155).

The bureaucratic clashes over Iraq that Leffler describes mostly concerned which principals within the administration would dominate policymaking. Despite internal conflict, there were no strong administration voices arguing against war. Leffler notes that Powell's well-known "Pottery Barn" warning about invading Iraq was based on a memo drafted by William J. Burns entitled "Iraq: The Perfect Storm." But Powell did not oppose war in a crucial meeting with Bush on August 5, 2002, and infamously made the case for it later at the United Nations. The establishment voices cautioning against invading Iraq were outside the administration. These included Brent Scowcroft, the national security advisor for George H.W. Bush; the senior Bush's secretary of state, James A. Baker III; and even Henry Kissinger (154–55).

Leffler targets other "misconceptions" without challenging more important administration claims. For instance, he questions accounts of the war that stress the importance of ideology. He distinguishes hawks Cheney and Rumsfeld from neoconservatives such as Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith and Wolfowitz. Yet even Feith supported war not out of an ideological commitment to remake the Middle East in America's image but "to eliminate a regime that engages in and supports terrorism and otherwise threatens US vital interests." Feith's "motive was simple: 'self-defense,'" Leffler writes. "Whether a good or bad idea, there was little idealism here; not much missionary fervor" (98).

Leffler notes that officials cited the danger posed by Saddam's weapons, rather than democracy promotion, as the main rationale for the invasion. Once no significant WMDs were found, Bush "shifted to a more ideological discourse, stressing that the United States had to make democracy work in Iraq" (248). Leffler reserves his most negative assessments for the administration's failure to plan for the postwar occupation. That is low-hanging fruit, to be sure, and ground covered early on by journalists.⁵ In the chapter "Mission Awry," Leffler recalls how General David Petraeus "asked what he was supposed to do when he got to Baghdad. What then? He got no answer" (212).

My principal criticism of *Confronting Saddam Hussein* is that it accepts the administration's packaging of the Iraq invasion as part of the post-9/11 "War on Terror." Leffler can therefore give Bush the benefit of the doubt by presenting a completely unrealistic estimation of Saddam's aims and capabilities: "Might he seek again to annex Kuwait? Might he try to destroy the Zionist state he despised? . . . Might he seek to gain leverage over the region's petroleum pricing and shape world oil markets? . . . Might he coordinate with terrorist groups who were seeking their own WMD and hoping to kill Americans, challenge American power, and expel the United States from the Middle East?" (20).

This framing emerges from Leffler's parallel biographies of Bush and Saddam, which obscure the disparity in power between the two leaders. He partially excuses Bush because of the "poorly assessed" intelligence provided to the president by his briefer, Michael Morell, although he notes that the president and his advisors were "already predisposed" to believe alarmist reports (85). These claims were questioned at the time: "the president had every reason to believe, based on the intelligence he was receiving, that Hussein possessed biological weapons, could develop chemical weapons rapidly, and aspired to restart his nuclear programs. He had every reason to worry about Hussein's dealings with terrorists, regardless of whether or not the Iraqi dictator had a collaborative relationship with [Osama] bin Laden" (145–46).

In short, Leffler's "War on Terror" framing yields a sympathetic account of Bush's earnest yet ultimately flawed and tragic attempts to grapple with unprecedented threats. He does not consider how 9/11 provided officials with a political opportunity to push through a long-sought,

bipartisan policy of regime change. Nor does he situate this policy within a historical pattern of imperial American relations with Iraq and the Middle East. He mentions pre-9/11 U.S.-Iraqi relations, but these are offhand references not really incorporated into the analysis. For instance, in his biography of Saddam he notes that the Iraqi leader "may . . . have garnered support from CIA agents" (3) following his botched 1959 assassination attempt on Iraqi prime minister 'Abd al-Karim Qasim at a time when the Ba'ath party was violently purging communists.

Actually, the Eisenhower administration formulated the first U.S. policy of regime change in Iraq. Advocates of regime change back then compiled questionable intelligence into a National Intelligence Estimate⁶ to make their case, just as Bush administration officials did in 2002 (165). John F. Kennedy regarded the Iraqi Ba'ath as a modernizing, anti-communist force friendly toward Western oil interests, though nearly a decade later, under a new Ba'athist government, Iraq would prove otherwise by nationalizing its petroleum industry in cooperation with the Soviets.⁷ The CIA then cooperated with Israel and the Shah of Iran in supporting a Kurdish revolt in northern Iraq.⁸ Saddam proved useful to Washington in the brutal war against revolutionary Iran until he claimed Kuwait and American officials discovered that he was an evil dictator.⁹ This context is essential to assessing the intent behind reports about Saddam's "affinity for torture" (97) and Bush's signature anti-Saddam remark: "After all, he gassed his own people" (83).

Neither the torture and killing of communists and suspected communists during the first Ba'athist government in 1963, nor the use of chemical weapons by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, including the 1988 Halabja attack, particularly troubled U.S. officials when Iraqi actions were seen as advancing American interests.¹⁰ Over half a century, patronage and coercion defined the pattern of U.S.-Iraqi relations. Intervention of one kind or another had a long history. Bill Clinton's administration imposed sanctions with catastrophic humanitarian and economic consequences, patrolled no-fly zones, nurtured a Kurdish quasi-state, carried out punitive bombings, and gave support to Iraqi exiles intent on overthrowing Iraq's government.¹¹ This history challenges the portrayal of the Iraq invasion offered by Leffler's interlocutors and frames it not as a new departure for the "War on Terror," but as the culmination of a long-term imperial relationship.

Since my grad school days, many U.S. foreign relations historians have developed the desire and capacity to more fully study the consequences of American power for other societies. To his credit, Leffler addresses the horrendous consequences of the war, including the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, although he thinks mostly in terms of the implications for American prestige. His statement that Bush "did not achieve his goals at acceptable cost" seems more appropriate to a public-policy seminar and misplaced given the human toll of the administration's actions (249). Ghaith Abdul-Ahad has vividly captured the destruction of Iraqi society by the United States in his memoir, *A Stranger in Your Own City*. The author contests the logic used by Bush to justify the war: "why were the only options for us as a nation and a people the choice between a foreign invasion and a noxious regime led by a brutal dictator?"¹² Leffler's book confirms the obvious truth that unless we confront these more fundamental questions, something like the Iraq invasion will happen again, perhaps soon. We won't improve.

Notes:

1. Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA, 1992).

2. See Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2, *The Roaring of the Cataract: 1947–1950* (Princeton, NJ, 1990).

3. For a study that addresses domestic politics and culture after 9/11, see Mary Dudziak, *War-Time: An Idea, Its History, and Its Consequences* (New York & Oxford, UK, 2012).
4. See Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, vol. 2, *The President: 1952–1969* (New York, 1984); and Richard H. Immerman, “Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist: An Agonizing Reappraisal,” *Diplomatic History* 14 (Summer 1990): 319–42.
5. See, for instance, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq’s Green Zone* (New York, 2006).
6. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v12/d210>.
7. See Weldon C. Matthews, “The Kennedy Administration, Counterinsurgency, and Iraq’s First Ba’thist Regime,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (November 2011): 635–53; and Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq* (Stanford, CA, 2021), cited by Leffler on p. 253, n. 2.
8. See Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (New York & Oxford, UK, 2014), 65–125.
9. On the “Myth of the Middle East Madman,” see R. Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 83–112.
10. See Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge, UK, 2007), 183.
11. See Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); and Douglas Little, *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat*, 2d ed. (Chapel Hill, NC, 2022), 107–113.
12. Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, *A Stranger in Your Own City: Travels in the Middle East’s Long War* (New York, 2023), 35.

Review of Mel Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*

Molly M. Wood

After agreeing to participate in this roundtable, I spoke with *Passport* editor Andy Johns about approaching my contribution as if I was assessing the book for possible adoption for my “9/11 and the Global War on Terror” course. As co-chair (with Justin Hart) of the SHAFR Teaching Committee and the first Teaching Institution representative on SHAFR’s Council, I believe that our organization can do more to support our members in our roles as teachers, especially at the undergraduate level, since many of us end up at institutions that do not have graduate programs in history.

Accordingly, as I read Mel Leffler’s new book, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*, I considered how I might use it in my course for upper-level history majors. What sort of framework could I develop so that students, most of whom now have no living memory of 9/11 and the aftermath leading to the war in Iraq, will understand not only what happened, how it happened, why it happened, and what happened next, but also how we go about discovering what happened. Leffler’s preface provides a good starting point for discussions about sources and methods—and motives—for tackling a topic of recent history as challenging as U.S. policy and decisions after 9/11.

In his preface, Leffler describes his initial experiences in the United Kingdom, in 2002–2003. He struggled to interact with students at Oxford University, who raised legitimate questions about U.S. post-9/11 policy decisions in real time. He admits his own discomfort in the role of “American foreign relations scholar” expected to explain, and “often forced to defend, the logic of policies I did not fully grasp nor necessarily support” (xii). After returning to the United States he continued to think about the Bush administration’s responses to 9/11 in the wider historical context of U.S. foreign policy through the twentieth century. This explanation of his initial interest in the topic, and some discussion about his previous work as a historian, would

allow me to initiate a conversation with students about what, exactly, Leffler means by “historical context” or “historical perspective,” concepts that are often difficult for undergraduates to grasp at first.

As Leffler notes, the dearth of declassified primary documents available even more than ten years after 9/11 likely meant we were still years, perhaps decades, away from the first initial round of detailed historical analysis based on government documents. But then he met Eric Edelman, a foreign service officer who had worked in the State Department during the Clinton and Bush administrations and in Vice President Cheney’s office in 2001–2002. Edelman, a longtime student of U.S. foreign relations, provided access to key individuals Leffler needed to interview to make this project possible. It is those personal interviews, conducted between 2010 and 2021, that make this book a valuable reassessment of the Bush administration’s responses to 9/11, especially the decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

Understanding the research and interview process and looking through the book’s bibliography provides useful topics for discussion with students about the challenges and methodology of writing recent foreign relations history, the limitations of classification, the use of memoirs written by key players, the value of journalistic accounts of key events and the differences between journalism and history, and the methodology associated with conducting personal interviews. Ultimately, how do historians put their sources and evidence together and make sense of it?

After the useful preface, Leffler begins with two background chapters on Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush. The chapter on Hussein reveals much about the Iraqi leader’s rise to power that will be new to general readers and especially students, most of whom do not even recognize the name “Saddam Hussein.”¹ Leffler stresses Hussein’s poverty-stricken background, his ambition, his steady consolidation of power, his brutality, and his pragmatism, which might be better characterized as an opportunistic lack of ideological conviction. It was his acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (initially biological and chemical), his proven willingness to use them, and his increasing support of terrorist groups that kept him on the national security radar even after the disastrous Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and the American-led coalition’s overwhelming defeat of Iraq’s military in 1991.

Hussein not only remained in power, but he consistently obstructed U.N. mandated weapons inspectors through the Clinton and first Bush administrations. He also increased his support for international terrorist groups. This chapter will be crucial for students to begin to understand the urgency the Bush administration would later feel about the potential dangers posed by Hussein.

The chapter on George W. Bush introduces students to Bush’s foreign policy team and the general climate in the administration when Bush was inaugurated. While the CIA and counterterrorism experts stressed the growing danger of terrorism from Al-Qaeda, Bush’s advisors generally did not see the same threat level before 9/11. Our students should be provided with the appropriate context and background on the origins and growth of Al-Qaeda in order to assess the Bush administration’s responses to 9/11 and to understand Leffler’s findings and the arguments he is building.

Leffler acknowledges, for instance, that initial assessments of the Bush administration’s response to 9/11 and onset of the “Global war on Terror” tended to downplay Bush’s role in decision-making, stressing instead the influence of some of his advisors, particularly Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and their apparent preoccupation with Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Leffler’s findings largely discredit

that assumption. He emphasizes instead the shock and atmosphere of fear caused by 9/11 and Bush's deep sense that he was responsible for preventing another attack and protecting the American people.

Bush, of course, decided to pursue Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, though he was frustrated by a lack of planning and slow forward movement. In spite of the widely reported "See if Saddam did this" remark about 9/11 that Richard Clark attributes to Bush, Leffler instead focuses on Bush's initial caution and resistance to action against Hussein. Increasingly, however, in the atmosphere of tension after 9/11, which was exacerbated by the anthrax scare, Bush worried about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction program. The fear was not that Hussein would attack the United States directly but rather that he would make those weapons available to terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda.

While there will much new material for students to absorb, what I would want to emphasize through much of the book is the process that Leffler has followed and historians in general undertake in questioning and challenging initial assumptions about how and why foreign policy decisions are made and how those initial understandings and explanations can be revised and re-evaluated when additional information becomes available (in this case, via the extensive personal interviews).

As he was in the process of decision-making about Hussein and Iraq and gauging the threat level posed by terrorists, Bush was receiving mixed messages from advisors. The examples Leffler cites will provide another opportunity to discuss with students how presidents receive information from various advisors and then decide on a course of action. As Leffler notes, Bush received many contradictory assessments. Among other things, he "was told that Iraq was not linked to 9/11 and that Hussein's relations with al Qaeda were probably spasmodic and opportunist, yet he was receiving information that those ties might be more extensive than previously realized and that al Qaeda's quest for weapons of mass destruction more earnest than anticipated" (92-93). Leffler is not excusing Bush's apparent unwillingness to make a decision about Iraq; rather, he is presenting a convincing volume of evidence from multiple sources about Bush's thought processes and the strategy described as "coercive diplomacy."

It is helpful that Leffler stresses Bush's mindset. He was not at all eager to go to war, but he was haunted by fears that Hussein's weapons of mass destruction would fall into the hands of terrorists. He was also deeply offended by Hussein's brutality. An exploration of this analysis of Bush and his advisors with students might benefit from some comparisons with other decision points about sending American soldiers into combat in the modern era.

In the aftermath of 9/11, and even after strong action had been taken against the Taliban in Afghanistan, there was still no clear consensus on Iraq. But the fear of "what if" remained strong. The 9/11 Commission Report would find after several years of work that a "failure of imagination" in the national security community was one of the reasons why the 9/11 plot was successful. Noting that I have students read the abridged version of the 9/11 Report in my class, it is likely I would use this opportunity to make the comparison to Pearl Harbor and perhaps challenge with this counterfactual: What if Bush "failed to imagine" Saddam Hussein successfully building nuclear weapons and teaming up with Al-Qaeda in the future? And did not decide to invade Iraq? And then that very scenario occurred?

We now know, of course, that no weapons of mass destruction were found. Domestic terrorism is now deemed a higher national security threat than foreign-born terrorism, and American troops remained in Iraq and Afghanistan for essentially twenty years with little to

show for it. But then there is that "historical perspective" that Leffler emphasizes. He has impressively captured the atmosphere in the White House and the cautious approach Bush took, which remained mostly hidden from the public at the time events were unfolding. He has been able to do this because when he conducted his interviews, as he explains in his preface, he

invited officials to tell me what they thought they were trying to do and why. I encouraged them to describe the environment in which they were working, the emotions they felt, and the pressures they encountered. I asked them about the policy process, about who was making policy, and how decisions were shaped.

I questioned them about President Bush, his role, and his strengths and weaknesses (xv).

The final chapters of Leffler's book analyze what went wrong in Iraq, and why things went wrong so quickly. Leffler covers familiar territory when he examines the failure of the administration and the military to plan for what some have referred to as "catastrophic success" on the battlefield. In other words, no one in the administration or the Pentagon seemed much interested in what would happen in Iraq once Hussein was removed from power. Bush and his advisors were certainly aware of this problem, but Bush was more focused on the search for weapons of mass destruction. As Leffler comments, "President Bush stood atop the morass of postwar planning and did little to uplift it" (237).

Bush's administration, Leffler concludes, was animated by fear, and Bush himself was acutely aware of his responsibilities as president and his failure to protect Americans from the attacks on 9/11. By all accounts, however, Bush acted with a calm that others around him noted, as well as a reassuring self-confidence. And above all, he remained certain that Hussein was truly an evil tyrant who remained a threat as long as he was in power. Leffler writes tellingly, "Bush decided to confront Hussein—not to invade Iraq" (245). Was this decision hubris? Or genuine confidence in American power and global responsibility? Leffler's conclusions will challenge students to embrace the complexities of history and historical understanding of decisions made by real people living in a particular time and place.

Will I assign this book for my course? Yes. It helped me to achieve greater clarity on the Bush administration's decision-making after 9/11, and it presented a more nuanced assessment of Bush himself, all of which will hopefully make me more effective in the classroom. Moreover, the book is filled with opportunities to discuss not only the events under consideration, but the methods associated with researching and writing foreign relations history. We need to keep teaching those skills to our students.

Note:

1. Information such as this would be helpful to undergraduate teachers, as students' knowledge about the principals involved in 9/11 has declined in recent years. In the first ten to fifteen years after 9/11, the students I taught in my U.S. survey had some memory of the event, were familiar with the names George W. Bush, Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, and had heard the word "Al-Qaeda" but did not know what it was. A significant majority of them believed Saddam Hussein was connected in some way to 9/11, whether or not they knew of Bin Laden's role in it.

Orthodoxy Without Archives: Review of Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*

Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut

Melvyn P. Leffler is one of the most eminent scholars working in the field of American diplomatic history. His most famous book, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (1992), has been described as “a field-defining work that analyzed how and why the postwar policymakers acted as they did.”¹ In writing *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, Leffler notes that he hoped to write a “big book” about George W. Bush “resembling the volume [he] had written about the transformation of American foreign policy during the Truman years” (xiii).

In positing Bush as a figure analogous to Truman, Leffler seeks to offer a corrective to “too many accounts that stress the lying, the manipulation, and the preconceived predilections” of the president’s advisers.² Instead, Leffler focuses on the sincerity of the president’s “fears, his sense of responsibility, and his concern for homeland security” (xvii). However, in this review I would like to raise the question of whether it is even possible, in this day and age, to write a book about the origins of the Iraq War that is comparable to one about the origins of the Cold War. At the very least I would like to suggest that the methodology employed in *Confronting Saddam Hussein* is far inferior to what we have come to expect from traditional diplomatic history.

The limits of Leffler’s methodology may be most apparent when we examine the issue of “threat inflation” in the period leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Threat inflation refers to the tendency among political actors to overstate threats in order to advance particular interests.³ It operates through “lying, spinning, and withholding information,” all of which are “forms of deception” that can be “contrasted with truth telling,” as the international relations scholar John Mearsheimer has observed.⁴ The question of threat inflation, therefore, speaks directly to Leffler’s thesis regarding the sincerity of the president and his top advisers.

The question of threat perception and representation presents itself immediately in Leffler’s first substantive chapter on the Bush administration’s response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. That chapter places a particular focus on a mysterious series of anthrax letter attacks that began almost immediately after the 9/11 hijackings. According to Leffler, it was not the “predilections” of Bush or his advisers that turned the administration’s attention to Iraq in the fall of 2001, but rather these anthrax attacks. One attack included the statement “Death to America. Death to Israel. Allah is great” (68).

According to Leffler, such statements proved that “Al Qaeda’s interest in anthrax was real” (69). Moreover, they confirmed what American intelligence officials already “knew from their own lived experience”—that Saddam Hussein, equipped with weapons of mass destruction, was an unacceptable danger to the world (86). “Eric Edelman, Cheney’s national security expert, put it this way: civilian policymakers thought Saddam had WMD; al Qaeda wanted WMD; Saddam celebrated 9/11: hence, attention naturally gravitated to Iraq” (87).

Leffler’s use of Edelman’s statement as evidence of the administration’s good faith is instructive in that it cues readers to questions of methodology. In his preface, Leffler notes that “Eric” (Edelman) is not just a historical actor in the play that he is narrating, but rather a personal friend in real life. It was Eric that “strongly encouraged” Leffler to write a book on the Bush administration’s response to 9/11. Leffler notes that as a diplomatic historian trained in the

old style, he was reluctant to write about the recent past, especially because of the “paucity” of declassified primary source documents. To get around this methodological problem, Eric assured “Mel” that “he would help secure interviews with many of the leading policymakers in the Bush administration” (xiv). Still, Mel demurred. He had “not relied on interviews” for his earlier scholarship and he questioned how much he could “gain from talking to former policymakers whose ability to spin” might exceed his “ability to probe” (xiv).

But Eric was persuasive, and Mel went through with the book. However, the anthrax episode represents a case in point about the reliability of interviews as historical sources. While Edelman insists that “attention naturally gravitated to Iraq” as the source of the anthrax attacks, that association was anything but natural. It was rather carefully orchestrated. For example, on October 14, 2001, the *Guardian* ran a story claiming, on the basis of anonymous government sources, that Iraq was responsible for the attacks.⁵ The next day, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a column claiming the same.⁶ On October 18, Senator John McCain took to the airwaves of *The Late Show* with David Letterman to report there was “some indication” that the anthrax came from Iraq, and that if that should turn out to be the case then “some tough decisions are gonna have to be made.”⁷ A week later, ABC chief investigative correspondent Brian Ross reported that “four well-placed and separate sources” had informed him that the anthrax included bentonite, a “potent additive [that] is known to have been used by only one country in producing biochemical weapons—Iraq.” Bentonite was, Ross, added “a trademark of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s biological weapons program.”⁸

In October 2001, the American public was traumatized by the awesome spectacle of the crumbling World Trade Center playing on endless repeat on American news networks. In this highly sensitive moment, a frightened public was desperate for a demonstration of power to allay its fears. McCain, along with so many anonymous government sources, gave the public a locus upon which to fix their anxiety.

Subsequent FBI investigations uncovered no evidence that Iraq or Al-Qaeda were involved in the attacks. On the contrary, an August 2008 FBI report concluded that Bruce E. Ivins, a virologist working for the U.S. chemical weapons program at Fort Detrick, had been solely responsible.⁹ However, rather than plainly stating the facts of what happened, Leffler invokes standpoint epistemology and defers instead to the “lived experience” of his official informants. As a consequence, the line between what happened and what the Bush administration believed or said becomes quite murky before disappearing all together.

Leffler’s credulity in accepting at face value official accounts of the source of the anthrax attacks is of a piece with his larger approach to the idea of “intelligence failures” leading to the Iraq War. To present the administration’s case in the most sympathetic light possible, Leffler repeatedly conflates Hamas and Al-Qaeda, and conflates threats to Israel with threats to the United States. The logic of Leffler’s analysis runs essentially like this: Israel is a U.S. ally, Hamas is a threat to Israel, and Iraq supports Hamas; therefore, Iraq is a threat to the United States.¹⁰

In addition to Iraqi support for Palestinian militant groups, Leffler also stresses the existence of an Al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Islam training camp in Iraqi Kurdistan (120), without noting that that part of Iraq was in a U.S. no-fly zone and therefore not under Iraqi sovereignty), and that Ansar al-Islam had been founded in 2001 for the express purpose of overthrowing Iraq’s secular regime and establishing an Islamic state.¹¹ Leffler also emphasizes the presence of future Al-Qaeda leader Abu Mu’sab al Zarqawi in Baghdad for medical treatment for a few weeks in the spring of 2002, but he presents no evidence of Zarqawi

meeting with or having any operational ties to Iraq's government (134).¹² In what may be the most specious claim of all, Leffler conflates *accusations* with *evidence* when he writes that "some new evidence, however wrongheaded, accelerated anxieties, such as claims that Iraq sought uranium from Niger" (107).¹³

Much of Leffler's analysis of the prewar intelligence revolves around the question of whether the administration's disaster scenarios constituted mere "flights of fancy" or realistic assessments of actually existing threats (135). Though Leffler does not mention it, the phrase "we can't wait for the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud" was the constant refrain of Bush administration officials as they built their case for war.¹⁴ It was through such rhetorical sleights of hand that seven in ten Americans came to believe that Iraq was responsible for 9/11.¹⁵

Leffler makes no effort to explain how so much of the public could become so deeply misinformed. On the contrary, his thesis disqualifies from the outset the notion that the administration engaged in any lying or manipulation. He does, however, eventually concede that "the president and his advisers often exaggerated the 'intelligence' they had about Iraqi nuclear programs and the regime's links to al Qaeda" (173). Logically, it is hard to see how exaggerating "intelligence" doesn't constitute lying or manipulation.

The question of whether the administration was being cynical or naive in presenting its case to the public receives very little analysis in Leffler's book. Indeed, the whole question of the causal force of ideology is rather confused in Leffler's analysis. In his prior emphasis on the president's sincerity, he emphasizes the depth of Bush's ideological convictions. At various points in the book we learn that Bush was "spurred by his faith in God and American values" (77); that he was "inspired by religious conviction [and] convinced that God wanted all humankind to be free" (203); that he had "zeal for freedom" (204); and that "he read his Bible and believed that freedom was God's gift to humanity" (246).¹⁶ Leffler even goes so far as to describe Bush's "faith and his beliefs about the superiority of democratic capitalism and American institutions" as "beautifully captured in his introduction to the National Security Strategy Statement of 2002" (308, n. 20).

However, when it comes time to narrate the decision for war, Leffler's emphasis displaces the "president from the center of the policymaking process where he unquestionably belongs" (xvii) and shifts instead to the supposedly non-ideological, realist concerns of his advisers. Here we learn that the president's advisers were not in any way "motivated by missionary fervor or idealist impulses." On the contrary, "their motives were more pedestrian and more compelling" than that. They were in fact the hardheaded national security concerns that they "have emphasized again and again in their memoirs and interviews." In short, their "motive was simple: 'self-defense'" (98).

There seem to be two obvious problems with Leffler's simple self-defense thesis. The first is that the emphasis on this supposedly non-ideological motive stands in contradiction to Leffler's other claims about the president's "zeal for freedom" and the like. Late in the book, Leffler seeks to resolve this contradiction by claiming that Bush only "shifted to a more ideological discourse" about freedom after the post-invasion failure to find WMD (248). Not only does this "discursive shift" call into question the supposed sincerity of the president's rhetoric, but Leffler's timeline does not check out. All of the quotes above are descriptions of Bush's ideology prior to the invasion and subsequent failure to find WMD.

A more significant problem with Leffler's theory of a simple self-defense motive is that it understates the degree to which the concepts of national security are in and of themselves ideological. In other words, as a general rule aggressors don't think of themselves as aggressors. The

government of Iraq could undoubtedly have put forward a rationale for its 1980 invasion of Iran or its 1990 invasion of Kuwait in which it made a case that it was simply acting in "self-defense." For many scholars, ideology is what allows actors to believe whatever it is that is most convenient to believe at any given time.¹⁷ But rather than probing whatever discursive or material structures underlay this or that statement of what constitutes "American national security," Leffler is content to accept the administration's public rhetoric at face value.

In theory, a historian could gain some analytical leverage on historical actors by comparing what officials say in public with what appears in the contemporaneous record of private meetings and interagency communications. This, of course, can and should make historical actors nervous. It suggests that they might at some point be held accountable for their decisions and actions. (One can only dream of a universal jurisdiction in which legal accountability might be possible.) This nervousness explains why, as Leffler reports in his preface, "most of Bush's advisers were eager to talk and inform." For these advisers, "the written record would never illuminate precisely what they had experienced" (xv).

As someone who "spent most of [his] academic career examining documents in archival boxes," Leffler states that he disagreed and still disagrees with his informants on this point. He insists that he remains a "firm believer in the power of written evidence" and therefore resolved to employ interviews and memoirs "to supplement and complement the written record, not replace it" (xv). But while Leffler claims this in the preface, the question remains: what written record?

Secrecy is not only the "first refuge of incompetents," it was the guiding philosophy of the Bush administration's theory of a "unified executive."¹⁸ As historian Matthew Connelly observes, "To get at the true motivations animating American foreign policy, historians typically discount what politicians say in public and read lots of once-secret documents. The most important of which are gathered together and published by the State Department in *The Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*."¹⁹ However, in the case at hand, there are exactly zero *FRUS* documents pertaining to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Nor does it appear that Leffler dug in many archival boxes.²⁰ He did not visit any presidential libraries, nor did he employ the general records of the departments of state or defense—sources usually considered the gold standard of evidence for diplomatic history.

The question of research methodology speaks directly to the issue of historical accountability. Leffler's collaboration with Bush administration officials to produce an account of Bush administration policies has the effect of absolving those officials of historical responsibility for the harm they caused in the world.²¹ On this score, Leffler concedes that "it is appropriate to blame Bush and his advisers" for the catastrophic outcomes that attended the decision to invade Iraq. But he insists that "the failures in the aftermath of 9/11 should not be attributed to the president alone or exclusively to his administration. The failures were the nation's failures, the failures of the American people—not all, but many" (250–51).

But in making this argument, Leffler pays no attention to the ways in which public opinion can be shaped by those in power. Rather than attributing the catastrophic outcomes that befell Iraq, the region, and the world to the poor judgment of the Bush administration, Leffler seeks to cast the invasion as an act of nature for which no one in particular can or should be held responsible. In his view, "Tragedy occurs not because leaders are ill-intentioned, stupid, and corrupt; tragedy occurs when earnest people and responsible officials seek to do the right thing, and end up making things much worse" (252). This conclusion from one of the country's most eminent historians might bring

great comfort to those who wield great power and influence, but it will hardly do as an effort to “grapple earnestly with the dilemmas of statecraft” (252). A dilemma of statecraft is when a state has to choose between two options—in this case between force and diplomacy. Knowledge experts (not to mention an overwhelming international consensus), clearly, consistently, and publicly warned of the utterly predictable consequences that would flow from choosing war.²² The Bush administration clearly made the wrong choice and should have been held to account. *Confronting Saddam Hussein* fails utterly to provide this account.

Historian Jeffrey Kimball once described Cold War post-revisionism, the school of interpretation with which Leffler is associated, as “orthodoxy plus archives.”²³ However, in this case, Leffler has presented a new orthodoxy regarding the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but without so much as the benefit of an archival source base. *Inshallah*, other interpretations employing a more rigorous methodology will still be forthcoming.

Notes:

1. Charles Edel, “Introduction: Truth, Justice, and the American Way” in “Reflections on Melvyn Leffler’s Long Career,” *Texas National Security Review* (Sept 6, 2018): 4.
2. Leffler does not cite these accounts or otherwise situate his own interpretation within the historiography.
3. Christopher J. Coyne and Abigail R. Hall, *Manufacturing Militarism: U.S. Government Propaganda in the War on Terror* (Palo Alto, CA, 2021), 19.
4. Coyne and Hall, *Manufacturing Militarism*, 7.
5. David Rose and Ed Vulliamy, “Iraq ‘behind US anthrax outbreaks,’” *Guardian*, Oct 14, 2001.
6. “The Anthrax Source,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 15, 2001.
7. “One Month After 9/11, McCain Said Anthrax ‘May Have Come From Iraq,’ Warned Iraq Is ‘The Second Phase,’” *Think Progress*, Aug 1, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080804231243/http://thinkprogress.org/2008/08/01/mccain-anthrax-iraq/>.
8. “Anthrax Investigation/ Bentonite,” ABC Evening News, Sunday, Oct 28, 2001, <https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/716233/>; “Troubling Anthrax Additive Found; Atta Met Iraqi,” ABC News, Oct 29, 2001, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=92270&page=1>.
9. Transcript of Amerithrax Investigation Press Conference, Washington, D.C., Aug 6, 2008, <https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2008/August/08-opa-697.html>.
10. Note, for example, the formulation in Leffler’s conclusion, where he accuses critics of the Bush administration of ignoring “Hussein’s links to terrorists and the ongoing havoc caused by acts of suicidal terror” (252). The “acts of suicidal terror” in question were directed at Israel and not the United States.
11. Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004):19.
12. In his February 2003 UN address, Colin Powell made the Iraq-Zarqawi connection a central piece of his argument for war. In the days following that speech, “there was a 30-point jump [from 38 to 68 percent] in the number of Americans who felt convinced of a link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda.” See Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, “Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration’s Rhetoric,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 3 (2005): 531. Powell later walked back the Iraq-Zarqawi claim. See Christopher Marquis, “Powell Admits No Hard Proof Linking Iraq to Al Qaeda,” *New York Times*, Jan 9, 2004.
13. Approximately half of Isikoff and Corn’s *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York, 2006) is devoted to untangling the sordid effort to fabricate evidence of Iraq seeking uranium from Niger.
14. On the origins of the “smoking gun/mushroom cloud” metaphor, see Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, 35.
15. Dana Milbank and Claudia Deane, “Hussein Link to 9/11 Lingers in Many Minds,” *Washington Post*, Sept 6, 2003.
16. For an alternative take on Bush’s brand of “Self-help Methodism” as mere campaign gimmick, see Jacob Weisberg, *The Bush Tragedy* (New York, 2008), 82.
17. See, for example, Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne, eds., *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New Histories* (New York, 2023), 1–7.
18. On the secrecy as the “first refuge of incompetents,” see the

broader discussion of the sociology of government secrecy in Matthew Connelly, *The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals About America’s Top Secrets* (New York & London, 2023), 327. On the centrality of official secrecy to the Bush administration’s philosophy of government, see Weisberg, *The Bush Tragedy*, 157–58, 173–79.

19. See Connelly, *The Declassification Engine*, 252.

20. Leffler does frequently cite declassified documents databases such as the National Security Archive and various online reading rooms. But as Connelly observes, “every time we cite an online source as if we found it in a library and read it on paper, we are denying reality.” See Connelly, “What I Learned from Thirty Years at the Bleeding Edge of Historical Research,” in Richard H. Immerman (ed.), *H-Diplo Forum on Scholars and Digital Archives: Living the Dream?* (October 6, 2021), 11. This methodological problem is particularly pronounced in Leffler’s frequent references to the “Rumsfeld Papers.” By Rumsfeld Papers, Leffler does not mean the Rumsfeld Papers that are housed at the U.S. Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Whereas the Library of Congress collection contains 345,000 separate items in 946 containers for a total of 398 linear feet and 35 microfilm reels, Leffler refers instead to the “archive” that can be found at Rumsfeld.com. That commercial website was assembled by Rumsfeld himself and features a collection of documents “hand-selected” from Rumsfeld’s “personal collection” for the express purpose of supporting the claims advanced in his 2011 memoir, *Known and Unknown*.

21. The extent to which the book absolves decisionmakers of historical responsibility for the consequences of their actions may explain why it has been received so enthusiastically by neoconservative ideologues such as John Bolton and Robert Kagan. In this connection, the book might usefully be situated within what historian Samuel Moyn describes as the ongoing project of ideological restoration in the wake of the Trump presidency. See Kagan’s endorsement on the book jacket; Bolton’s review in the *Wall Street Journal*, Feb 21, 2003; Moyn, “Robert Kagan and Interventionism’s Big Reboot,” *The New Republic*, Feb 14, 2023.

22. As the Bush administration prepared its invasion, Patrick Tyler of the *New York Times* observed that “the fracturing of the Western alliance over Iraq and the huge antiwar demonstrations around the world this weekend are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.” See “A New Power in the Streets,” *New York Times*, Feb 17, 2003. On world opinion surveys, and the Bush administration’s misrepresentation thereof, see Coyne and Hall, *Manufacturing Militarism*, 57–60.

23. Orthodoxy in this instance denotes interpretive deference to the official view in Washington. On post-revisionism as “orthodoxy plus archives,” and Leffler as an exponent of post-revisionism, see Bruce Cumings, “‘Revising Postrevisionism,’ or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 551, 561–63.

Review of Melvyn Leffler *Confronting Saddam Hussein*

Aaron O’Connell

Melvyn Leffler has been a giant in the field of international history for years, and his latest work is likely to influence debates over the Iraq War for a generation to come. The book’s principal purpose, the preface explains, is twofold: to understand “why the United States decided to invade Iraq and why the war went awry so quickly.”¹ On the first question, he finds most of the popular explanations of the Bush administration’s motivations overly simple—or dead wrong—and resolves to correct them.

In Leffler’s telling, the war in Iraq was neither a war for oil nor a war of revenge. Bush did not come into office hoping to topple Saddam Hussein or to convert Iraq into a democracy, although he campaigned for, and sincerely wanted, a more confrontational policy than Democrats had pursued under President Clinton. Nor was Bush uninformed or passive in the war-planning process; neither Vice President Dick Cheney, nor Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld, nor their hawkish staffers pushed an inattentive chief executive into war, as some have previously alleged.²

Rather, Leffler concludes, President Bush drove the decision-making from the outset with one overarching goal: to prevent another terrorist attack on the American homeland. Invading Iraq was one step towards that goal, and Leffler thinks Bush earnestly believed that toppling Hussein would decrease the threat of another attack. That is why he first pursued a deliberate strategy of coercive diplomacy to convince Hussein to disarm while always making it clear to his advisors and the American people that if he did not, a war could follow.

Leffler's analysis of Bush's motivations is fair up to a point, but his case would have been strengthened considerably had he taken up the counterarguments more directly and either refuted them or placed them in a broader context. Take the issue of whether Bush wanted to remove Hussein prior to al Qaeda's attacks. A number of high-level aides and Cabinet officials were present at the president's early NSC meetings on Iraq -- the first of which occurred just ten days after his inauguration -- and later alleged that Bush's national security team was developing plans to go after Iraq as soon as he took office. What of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's remarks to then-RAND researcher Seth G. Jones that "from Day One, it was Iraq, Iraq, Iraq"?³ What of the statements of Bush's first treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill, who later argued that "from the start, we were building the case against Hussein and looking at how we could take him out and change Iraq into a new country. And, if we did that, it would solve everything. It was all about finding a way to do it. That was the tone of it. The President [was] saying, 'Fine. Go find me a way to do this.'"⁴

Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld also had a pre-9/11 plan for regime change in Iraq—or at least a notion of one. "Sanctions [against Hussein] are fine," he told Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Rice on February 2, 2001, "but what we really want to think about is going after Saddam. . . . Imagine what the region would look like without Saddam and with a regime that's aligned with U.S. interests," he argued. "It would change everything in the region and beyond it."⁵

Rumsfeld may only have been exploring options but his senior staffers started drafting plans. On April 24, 2001, some five months before the 9/11 attacks, Rumsfeld's special assistant for policy matters sent Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz an eight-page memo with the unambiguous title "A Strategy to Liberate Iraq." The memo's three-phase plan sought to overthrow Saddam by arming the now-discredited Iraqi National Congress (INC) with advanced tank-killing missiles (TOWs and Javelins) and supporting their operations with "aggressive U.S. military responses" that could "inflict maximum damage on Saddam, key regime forces and other pillars of support."

This was much more than quiet encouragement for a coup, which the memo rejected as infeasible. Rather, "A Strategy to Liberate Iraq" called for "positioning US (and allied) military forces to support and exploit opportunities," and included an initial target list for U.S. air strikes: "Special Republican Guard, Special Security Office, Presidential Security, Republican Guard units deployed against opposition enclaves." It noted that Saddam might deploy tanks in response, but should he move against INC forces, Iraq's "massed armor makes an inviting and lucrative target for U.S. (and allied) forces."⁶

Aren't these documents and statements evidence of a pre-9/11 desire to remove Hussein? Isn't this more than just a more aggressive policy, but early indications that Bush's top advisors and perhaps the president himself, were considering toppling the Iraqi government before the 9/11 attacks? Two of the three speakers above (O'Neill and Armitage) later became outspoken critics of the Iraq war, so their recollections may be suspect, but Rumsfeld was as much of an administration insider as it is possible to be.

He not only discussed these ideas generically; under his watch, Defense Department senior officials took early steps to make them a reality, all before the planes hit the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

Leffler next turns to the immediate post-911 period, when the administration declared the Global War on Terror and established its goals and priorities. He rightfully notes that Afghanistan, not Iraq, was the president's primary focus in those early days, even though Wolfowitz pressed for an attack on Iraq at Camp David just five days after 9/11. Bush demurred, and for Leffler, this is important evidence that "the president did not think Saddam Hussein was the source of the attack" or "linked to 9/11."⁷ For additional evidence on this critical point, Leffler offers statements by close aides and Cabinet officials: Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet; Bush's CIA briefer, Mike Morrell; National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and her deputy, Steve Hadley—all of whom told the president repeatedly that Al Qaeda, not Iraq, were the perpetrators, and all of whom believed the president accepted those conclusions.

Here too, addressing the counter-evidence more directly would have strengthened Leffler's case. What of the president's remarks to his War Cabinet on September 17 saying that he believed "Iraq was involved [in the 9/11 attacks], but I'm not going to strike them now"?⁸ What of Bush's remarks to counterterrorism advisor, Richard Clarke, on the evening of September 11—after the CIA director had already attributed the attacks to Al Qaeda—to "see if Saddam did this. See if he's linked in any way"? (Leffler notes this exchange but does not make much of it.) What of Bush's remarks to the press more than a year after 9/11 that "you can't distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror" because the two "work in concert"? Aren't these pretty good indications that the president wrongly thought Hussein was connected to the 9/11 attacks or, at least, to the attackers?

The president's motivations are again front and center as Leffler explores whether Bush's march towards war stemmed from a reasonable desire to prevent more terrorist attacks or a less reasonable missionary impulse to democratize Iraq. Leffler is clear where he stands on this issue: throughout the summer of 2002, he writes, "Bush rarely engaged in idealistic talk about democracy-promotion. If he took military action to enforce Iraq's compliance with UN resolutions, he hoped that regime change would lift the shackles on the Iraqi people and nurture freedom throughout the region. But he was motivated by his perception of threat, not by dreams of a democratic Iraq."¹⁰

After several years of researching this issue, I am convinced that President Bush was motivated by both goals. Despite his assertion in the 2000 campaign that the United States should avoid nation-building, Bush committed himself to precisely that policy immediately after 9/11 and spoke of it regularly. This wasn't just starry-eyed idealism; it was his explicit plan for ensuring Iraq would not pose a threat to the United States after Saddam was ousted. Simply removing Saddam or his WMD was never the president's only goal. He wanted to make Iraq a democracy and a partner in the War on Terror, and he thought invasions and then elections were the best way to accomplish that goal.

We know this because the president spoke about it before the war began. "As our troops advance, we'll be behind the lines, improving everything," he told an aide shortly before the war. "And they're going to embrace freedom. And they'll also demand that their lives be made better. And we're ready. We're not just going to end the terror. We're going to reconstruct Iraq."¹¹

The president didn't just say he wanted democracy in Iraq; he ordered the Pentagon, State Department, and other elements of the executive branch to plan for its

implementation a full eight months before the war began. In August 2002, Bush signed a National Security Policy Directive (effectively, written orders from the president to the relevant departments and agencies) titled “Iraq: Goals, Objectives, Strategy,” which named eight goals for a post-Saddam Iraq and outlined a strategy for achieving them. Only one of the goals concerned weapons of mass destruction; most of the others were transformative, nation-building goals, such as creating an Iraq that “respects the basic rights of all Iraqis—including women and minorities; adheres to the rule of law and respects fundamental human rights, including freedom of speech and worship; and encourages the building of democratic institutions.” To accomplish these goals, the NSPD continues, the United States must “demonstrate that the US and coalition partners are prepared to play a sustained role in providing security, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction aid in support of this vision” in a way that “prepares for the transition to an elected Iraqi Government as quickly as practicable [emphasis added].”¹²

These are not just dueling quotes. NSPDs are about the most formal statements of policy a White House can produce; once issued, they are effectively marching orders for the executive branch. Given what the “Iraq: Goals Objectives Strategy” NSPD says, it seems incontrovertible that turning Iraq into a democracy was one of those end states. And lest there be any doubt that a democratic transition was an explicit war goal, let us leave this point with a quote from President Bush himself, who stated as much in an interview in 2015. “Remember, we’re trying to win—and the definition of win, by the way, we said this all along, is [for Iraq to be] an ally in the war on terror and a functioning democracy.”¹³

Leffler again pushes against the popular consensus when discussing the motivations of Bush’s top advisors, who he claims were singularly focused on preventing another attack, with no ulterior motives in pressing for the invasion. “Hawkish advisers like Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Libby and their neoconservative friends, like Wolfowitz and Feith, were not inspired by missionary fervor or idealistic impulses,” Leffler asserts. “Their motives were more pedestrian and more compelling, ones they have emphasized again and again in their memoirs and their interviews.” In the end it was all about “self-defense.”¹⁴

Well, maybe. But the key to this claim is how one defines “self-defense,” and Bush and his top advisors did so expansively. Take Secretary Rumsfeld’s “Strategic Thoughts” memo, penned less than three weeks after the 9/11 attacks, which Leffler references as proof that preventing another attack was the only relevant motive. I read that document very differently. It is “widely assumed that U.S. will strike soon and exclusively at Al-Qaida in Afghanistan,” the memo begins. “It would instead be surprising and impressive if we built our forces up patiently, took some early action outside of Afghanistan, perhaps in multiple locations” to topple “another key State (or two) that supports terrorism.” This strategy, Rumsfeld claimed, would do much more than target the Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan, it would “strengthen political and military efforts to change policies elsewhere.” Syria would end its military occupation of Lebanon. Other countries (names redacted) would dismantle their WMD programs or risk their destruction. The entire region would be transformed. “If the war does not significantly change the world’s political map,” Rumsfeld told the president, “the U.S. will not achieve its aim.”¹⁵

Is re-organizing the world’s map really self-defense? Only in the most attenuated sense of the word. The references to Syria, Lebanon, and at least two other states whose names are redacted make it clear that the Bush administration’s goal was larger than removing the Al Qaeda terrorist threat; it was to communicate to the world

that supporting terrorism might invite a violent American response. By this logic, the president could have struck Iran too, or Syria, or North Korea, for that matter, to achieve Rumsfeld’s demonstration effect. Had he done so, would anyone think that counted as self-defense too?

Besides these questions of interpretation, there are also a few small errors in the book that require correction but do not diminish the argument or the author’s credibility. First, Hamid Karzai did not “take Kandahar” in December 2001; in fact, while Karzai was negotiating the surrender of the city, his rival, Gul Agha Sherzai, seized the governor’s palace and installed himself there. (American special operators were ordered not to accompany Sherzai, but the on-site Green Beret commander violated his orders and did so anyway.)

Second, Leffler alleges that by the fall of 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists “had murdered almost 4,000 Americans,” but that number is off by roughly 1,000, as the 9/11 attacks killed 2,902 Americans and Al Qaeda’s two other successful attacks—the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings and the 2000 USS Cole bombings—killed twenty nine.¹⁶ Third, General Petraeus was the commanding general of the 101st Airborne Division, not the 82nd Airborne Division. Finally, a minor typo: footnote 10 in chapter 4 references the 9/11 Commission Report, page 236, as evidence that General Franks was denied permission to do early war planning on Iraq, but that information comes from page 336 of the 9/11 Commission Report, not page 236.¹⁷

It’s often said that journalism is the first draft of history, and if that is true, then Leffler’s *Confronting Saddam Hussein* is perhaps the second draft—better than what came before, but still incomplete, since most of the sources remain classified. Nonetheless, his book is a service to all scholars of international relations and military history, as it casts a skeptical eye on the conventional wisdom of the war, and links arguments with evidence better than most earlier accounts. As more documents become available, future scholars will decide for themselves whether Leffler’s take on Bush’s motives is too generous or a useful corrective to the war’s early polemicists. Personally, I incline toward the former.

Notes:

1. Melvin P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (New York & Oxford, UK, 2023), xvii.
2. These allegations may be found in Lou Dubose and Jake Bernstein, *Vice: Dick Cheney and the Hijacking of the American Presidency* (New York, 2006); and in Michael Moore, dir. *Fahrenheit 911* (2004; New York: Dog Eat Dog Films, Miramax).
3. For Armitage’s remarks, see Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan* (New York, 2010), 124–5.
4. Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, The White House, and the Education of Paul O’Neill* (New York, 2004), 86.
5. Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty*, 85.
6. All of the quotes in this paragraph come from Chris Williams, special assistant for policy matters to Undersecretary of Defense Wolfowitz, “A Strategy to Liberate Iraq,” April 24, 2001, Digital National Security Archive, George Washington University.
7. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 57, 80.
8. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York, 2002), 99.
9. “Remarks by President Bush and President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia,” September 25, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020925-1.html>.
10. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, 172.
11. Robert Draper, *To Start a War: How the Bush Administration Took America into Iraq* (London & New York, 2020), 350.
12. The NSPD is summarized in Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York, 2004), e-book, 302–5 of 974. A copy of the unclassified version of the memo may be found in “From Condoleezza Rice re Principals’ Committee Review of Iraq Policy Paper,” October 29, 2002, Rumsfeld Papers, <https://papers.rumsfeld.com/library>.
13. Interview with President George W. Bush, December 1, 2015, in Timothy Sayle et al., eds., *The Last Card: Inside the George W. Bush’s Decision to Surge in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY, 2019), e-book, Apple

Books, Chap. 8. Loc. 516 of 1,147.

14. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, 98.

15. Donald Rumsfeld, "Memorandum for the President: Strategic Thoughts," September 30, 2001, National Security Archive Briefing Book, No. 358, Doc. 13, National Security Archive, George Washington University. See also Douglas Feith, *War and Decision* (New York, 2008), 66, where Rumsfeld pushes for an attack on "at least one non-Al Qaeda target—e.g. Iraq."

16. Deaths from specific terrorist attacks may be queried in the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), Global Terrorism Database (GTD), <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/about/>, accessed May 29, 2023. A summary of attacks by year may be found at GTD, "American Deaths in Terrorist Attacks," START, 2015, https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_AmericanTerrorismDeaths_FactSheet_Oct2015.pdf.

17. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York, 2004), 336.

Author's Response

Melvyn P. Leffler

I want to express my appreciation to Andrew Johns for orchestrating this roundtable. I also want to thank the participants for taking the time to review *Confronting Saddam Hussein*.

Before addressing the specific remarks of the commentators, I want to summarize the essential themes of my book. I do so because the conclusions in the book are not highlighted in any of the reviews. I stress four key themes: fear, power, hubris, and dysfunction. These themes should not escape the attention of readers, because the conclusion of the book is entitled "Fear, Power, Hubris." Fear, power, and hubris shaped Bush's decisions, and dysfunction helps to explain why the effort to confront Saddam Hussein turned into a tragedy. I show that the president feared another attack, one that might be more catastrophic than the one that had occurred on 9/11. I go on to stress that "fear alone did not shape the president's strategy of confrontation. Bush's sense of American power—its capacity to achieve what it needed to do—was equally important." I then say that "fear and power were an intoxicating brew when reinforced by hubris, a sense of exceptional goodness and greatness" (245–46).

Readers of this roundtable might also miss my overall assessment of Bush. Throughout, I show that Bush was in charge of Iraq policy, but this does not mean that I argue he did a good job. Quite the opposite! I conclude that "he failed because his information was flawed, his assumptions inaccurate, his priorities imprecise, and his means incommensurate with his evolving ends." Although I stress that his advisers did not deliver the help he needed, I also emphasize that "personally, he was unable to grasp the magnitude of the enterprise he was embracing, the risks that inhered in it, and the costs that would be incurred." In sum, his strategy was flawed, and it led to tragedy (249, 244, 237).

At the same time that I hold Bush responsible for the tragedy that unfolded, I seek to explain why he acted as he did. I show that Iraq was not a major preoccupation of his when he assumed the presidency, although he did despise Saddam Hussein and did embrace the strategy of regime change that had been adopted by the Clinton administration in 1998 (and was so dear to some neoconservative advisers like Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz). Nonetheless, Iraq was not a priority matter for George W. Bush prior to 9/11, and regime change, even for his neoconservative advisers, did not mean an American invasion of Iraq.

I illuminate the president's fears after 9/11, his feelings of guilt over the attack that had occurred, and his sense that he had a responsibility to prevent another one. I

describe and analyze the information and "intelligence" he was receiving, and I highlight its ambiguities and challenges. I depict the options he had before him, and I explain the strategy of coercive diplomacy he embraced. I emphasize that that strategy was flawed. But I also stress that Bush hoped that Saddam Hussein would invite back the inspectors, reveal and relinquish his (alleged) weapons of mass destruction, flee, or be assassinated.

In other words, I also argue that the Iraqi dictator had agency. He could have acted differently. After 9/11, he could have immediately allowed UN inspectors to return; he could have condemned the attacks on 9/11 rather than applaud them; he could have stopped cheating on the sanctions; he could have ceased challenging U.S. planes enforcing the no-fly zones; he could have terminated his links to terrorist groups and his support of suicide bombers; and he could have done much more to clarify that his regime had destroyed its weapons of mass destruction. He chose not to do these things. His defiance mattered.

My book cuts against the grain. It empathizes and criticizes; it seeks to explain, not simply to condemn. I recognize that my account is a first cut at the history of the decision-making that led to the invasion of Iraq. I assume that mountains of classified material will someday be available to my successors. And I readily acknowledge that these new archival materials might show that I am mistaken about any number of things. Meanwhile, however, I hope readers will take the time to ponder the texture and complexity of my account, and not simply react to defend predilections that might not be as well founded as they think.

In this regard I especially appreciate Molly Wood's thoughtful review of the book. I am delighted that she thinks the volume will serve her students well and will make them think about both methodological and substantive questions. She correctly highlights my emphasis on the fears and emotions of policymakers, and she wisely emphasizes the mixed messages that Bush was receiving from his advisers. There was no clear consensus on what to do with Iraq after 9/11, although there was agreement that Saddam Hussein was a ruthless dictator and a dangerous opportunist. Wood stresses, correctly, how important it is for students to ponder what would have happened if Bush did nothing to confront Hussein—and then the Iraqi dictator decided to "team up" with terrorists who attacked the United States again or who murdered Americans abroad.

Although these scenarios were unlikely, they remained more likely than the events of 9/11 had been when 19 terrorists with boxcutters flew jet planes into the twin towers and the Pentagon, killing about 3000 people. Unlikely scenarios haunted U.S. officials, and Molly Wood is smart to use the book as an instrument to prod students to think carefully about the roles of emotion, memory, experience, and "intelligence" in the making of American foreign policy.

Given my respect for his work, I am gratified that Aaron O'Connell acknowledges that my book is better than previous accounts, but hardly dispositive. I agree that my account "is incomplete," because most of the sources are still classified. But I do not agree that the book suffers from a failure to deal with the "counter-arguments"—that is, a failure to dwell on evidence that has often been repeated in popular accounts but is not (in my judgment) very convincing.

For example, O'Connell criticizes me for not considering the evidence that Bush wanted to topple the regime in Iraq from the time he took office. Actually, I do think Bush wanted to topple Saddam Hussein, but it was not a priority of his and it was not deemed feasible. Prior to 9/11, the risks and costs outweighed the anticipated benefits. When Christopher Meyer, the British ambassador, went to

Texas to talk to Bush's advisers before the administration took office, he found that Iraq was simply a "grumbling appendix" (31–32).

While O'Connell alludes to Rumsfeld's comments to Secretary of State Colin Powell, as recited by Secretary of Treasury Paul O'Neill, and criticizes me for not grappling with this evidence, he does not inform readers about the written memoranda, congressional testimony, and interviews that I actually do employ to outline Rumsfeld's position regarding Iraq (44–47). I point out that pre-9/11, both Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were concerned with Iraq (and Iran and Libya and North Korea) because of missile developments in those countries and their alleged aspirations to develop, or their assumed possession of, weapons of mass destruction. I emphasize that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were concerned about the ability of the United States to wield its power in a future crisis and their fear of "blackmail" and self-deterrence.

Yet I also stress that Rumsfeld had no acceptable plan, even by his own admission. And although I do summarize Wolfowitz's position about toppling Hussein's regime (44–45, 81), I do not dwell on his eight-page memo of April 2001 because that memo was never considered by the president or his principal advisers and never acted upon by the military planners. Instead, I chose to dwell on the memorandum that was written by Zal Khalilzad, Condoleezza Rice's NSC expert on Iraq, a memo that was actually considered by the president's principal advisers and then put aside. The memo, according to Khalilzad, "laid out a series of options **short of full-scale invasion** that the president **could consider** if he decided to topple Saddam's regime [my emphasis]" (46–47). But the principals could not resolve their differences, and the president had nothing to decide. There were no orders to update war plans, and no indication that Iraq had become a top priority for the president. The point in my book is that 9/11 made a big difference.

O'Connell also implies that Bush was obsessed with Iraq after 9/11 and that I do not pay much attention to the evidence suggesting that obsession. He selects a quotation from Bob Woodward's book, *Bush at War*, in which the president was quoted as saying "I believe Iraq was involved, but I'm not going to strike them now." However, he conveniently leaves out the next sentence: "I don't have the evidence at this point."¹

In *Confronting Saddam Hussein*, I actually dwell on the evidence that the president was receiving, and I fully explain what he was thinking, doing, and saying immediately after 9/11 (I include his comments to Dick Clarke, the counterterrorism expert). I point out, among other things, that in the initial days and weeks after 9/11, Bush had many opportunities to link Iraq to 9/11 publicly, but he carefully refrained from doing so. At the same time, I also show that Bush said privately that he would come back and address the issue of Iraq after he dealt with Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. He declared both privately and publicly that his Global War on Terror would make no distinction between terrorists who wanted to kill Americans and humiliate America and the regimes that harbored them. Addressing the issue, however, did not mean that Bush had then decided to invade Iraq (51–98).

O'Connell also criticizes me for stressing that Bush was principally motivated by his fears of another attack and for not acknowledging that democracy-promotion and nation-building were his goals from the outset. Here again, O'Connell simplifies my argument. I do argue that fear and security were the president's principal motives, but I also state again and again throughout the book that Bush did believe that, if the United States invaded Iraq, it should promote freedom and democracy. In other words, I make a careful distinction between motives and goals.

Bush went to war because of his concerns about

protecting the American homeland, safeguarding U.S. security, projecting American power, and maintaining credibility, but he did hope to produce a more democratic and free Iraq as a result. If the United States had to act out of self-interest and use its awesome power to overthrow an evil dictator, he took comfort in believing that he would offer something superior to the benighted Iraqis whose lives Americans would be enriching (201, 245–46).

That was Bush's hubris, a point I stress again and again throughout the book (although the reviewers almost completely ignore it). But Bush's attitudes about the benefits of democracy and freedom were not shared by some of his most important advisers, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. This is why O'Connell is mistaken when he stresses the importance of the NSC paper titled "Iraq: Goals, Objectives, Strategy." I carefully deal with this paper (152–54, 204ff.) and show that, although it was approved by the president, it was not executed with any commitment or proficiency.

O'Connell believes this NSC directive constituted "marching orders," but Bush's subordinates did not march. They feuded, argued, and procrastinated. There was no real money assigned for reconstruction or nation-building. There was no agreement on who would run Iraq after the invasion. There was no decision on what to do with the Iraqi army. The confusion was palpable. Bush's top NSC advisers—Condoleezza Rice and Stephen Hadley—understood this, and Hadley decided in January 2003 to try to iron out the command relationships with a new National Security Policy Directive (NSPD 24).

This directive, however, assigned oversight to Rumsfeld, who cared not a whit about promoting democracy and freedom and nation-building. Here again, I present a complicated picture indicating that President Bush did care about democracy and freedom (although that was not what motivated his decision to invade), yet he did little to prepare for the nurturing of democracy, freedom, or nation-building. Key issues were not addressed until March 2003, just a few weeks before the invasion, and even then, the most critical issues were not resolved. I fault Bush precisely because he took command but executed poorly. He relied too much on Rumsfeld. And it is critical to keep in mind that Rumsfeld ran the Defense Department, not Wolfowitz, and that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz had very different concerns and priorities (204–37, 244).

In some respects, Nate Citino's critique overlaps with O'Connell's. Citino thinks that my problem is that I retain too much "faith in the overall benevolence of American power." That is a misreading of *Confronting Saddam Hussein*. While I do believe that policymakers' fears were real, and I empathize with them, that does not mean that I believe that U.S. power was employed wisely. Power can be used prudently or imprudently. It can do good and it can do harm. My book argues that too much fear and too much hubris inspired the imprudent use of American power. Citino errs when he says that I am concerned primarily with American prestige. Tragedy occurred not because American prestige was damaged, but because of the loss of lives—mostly Iraqi—and because of the geostrategic, economic, political, and social consequences that befell both countries (246–52).

I also believe that the tragedy was not simply the product of U.S. decisions. The Iraqi regime had agency; Saddam Hussein had agency. Citino blames the invasion of Iraq on America's imperial past and hegemonic disposition. He thinks that U.S. covert operations against Iraqi communists in the 1960s, Washington's indifference to Hussein's use of chemical weapons in the 1980s, and its application of sanctions in the 1990s explain the invasion of Iraq. "Over half a century," he writes, "patronage and coercion defined the pattern of U.S.-Iraqi relations." The invasion of Iraq, he stresses, was "the culmination of a long-term imperial relationship."

I believe his views are simplistic. The United States has had “imperial relationships” with lots of countries, but Washington rarely deploys hundreds of thousands of troops to take over a country. What is vexing about Citino’s critique is that it denies agency to Iraqis and to Hussein and ignores the contingent nature of events—the shock of 9/11. He denounces the sanctions imposed by the United States in the 1990s, sanctions that did have terrible humanitarian consequences. But he does not mention why the United States imposed sanctions or why the United States was enforcing no-fly zones. He does not explain that Hussein purposely exploited the suffering of Iraqis to shape public opinion abroad.² He does not explain that the sanctions were the result of Hussein’s aggression, development of weapons of mass destruction, employment of chemical weapons, ruthless slaughter of Kurds and Shi’a, and violation of UN resolutions.

In my opening chapter I present a portrait of Saddam Hussein that addresses his accomplishments, brutality, egregious misjudgments, and dangerous opportunism (1–21). That portrait seeks to assign agency to the Iraqi regime as well as to the U.S. government. I think that is a good way to understand decision-making and to illuminate bilateral relations in the international arena (although I do pay much more attention to Washington than to Baghdad).

Citino faults me for not “considering” how 9/11 provided officials with “a political opportunity to push through a long-sought bipartisan policy of regime change.” Actually, his criticism is not that I fail to consider it; it is that I (mostly) reject it. I do so not because it is altogether wrong, but because I consider “political opportunism” a narrow, reductionist account of the reverberations of 9/11. The events of that day wreaked death and destruction in Washington and New York; the events of that day engendered fear, sorrow, humiliation, and outrage throughout the nation. Among officials, there was genuine fear of another attack—fear that should it occur again, the United States might gravitate toward a garrison state; worry that another attack would discredit the administration and ruin the reputation of the Republican Party as the protector of U.S. national security.

Attention gravitated to Iraq because it was regarded as a potential source of chemical or biological weapons for terrorists who were eager to attack again with even more devastating weapons. The focus on Iraq may have been misplaced, as I conclude, but the fears were genuine, based on the lived experience of grappling with Saddam Hussein’s erratic, adventurous, and ruthless behavior in the past, his actions in the present, and his prospective challenges in the future. The ongoing reporting about the erosion of sanctions and his growing self-confidence, coupled with new “intelligence” about his chemical weapons programs, however wrongheaded in retrospect, produced genuine alarm in the fall of 2001 (18–21, 44–45, 53–67, 82–92, 246).

This brings me to Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicuttt’s critique. He focuses on the anthrax scare in the weeks and months after 9/11 and boldly asserts that U.S. officials lied about it, inflated its significance, and wrongly blamed it on Iraq. He cites a few newspaper articles from the time and quotes an excerpt from a letter in an envelope that contained anthrax spores: “Death to America. Death to Israel. Allah is great.” He then asserts that “according to Leffler, such statements proved that Al Qaeda’s interest in anthrax was real.”

That is a puzzling and erroneous simplification of the evidence I present. I describe the “threat matrix” at the time, which highlighted the likelihood of additional attacks. I explain that when U.S. covert operators entered Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan, they found unmistakable evidence that Al Qaeda did want to acquire chemical and biological weapons. I show how difficult it was to identify the sources of the anthrax and explain why attention gravitated to Iraq: because these things happened

while Hussein’s newspapers were applauding the attacks and new information was suggesting that Hussein was stepping up his programs of weapons of mass destruction.

Wolfe-Hunnicuttt cites a transcript of a press conference regarding a 2008 FBI study showing that Iraq was not involved in the anthrax episode, and he seems to think that study should have affected attitudes and perceptions in 2001.³ He accuses me of “epistemological” weakness, but his own methodological fallacies seem to far outweigh my own. Worse, he implies that policymakers attributed the 2001 anthrax scare to Iraq. That was not the case. What the scare did do was heighten fears that Iraq might be a future source of chemical or biological weapons for a terrorist attack. These fears were exaggerated, but they were very real. As I write in my conclusion, officials “conflated the evil that Hussein personified with a magnitude of threat that he did not embody” (82–92, 251–52).

Throughout his critique Wolfe-Hunnicuttt misconstrues my intentions, distorts my arguments, and shows a baffling unfamiliarity with the available sources. He asserts that my intent was to write a big book about George W. Bush that resembles the one I had written about Truman, and he faults me for not doing so. But he does not tell readers that in my preface I state that I quickly realized that I could **not** write a comprehensive overview of the administration’s policies (xiv). This book is not an effort to replicate what I did in *A Preponderance of Power*, and in no way do I try to compare Bush to Truman.

Wolfe-Hunnicuttt also claims that my analysis is distorted by my friend Eric Edelman, the former adviser to Dick Cheney and former undersecretary of defense. At the end of his critique Wolfe-Hunnicuttt alludes to my “collaboration” with Bush administration officials. These statements are a strange distortion of the facts. As I write in my preface, I did not even know Eric Edelman before I began working on this book. He had not been a friend. He was someone I met at a conference at UVA’s Miller Center and whom I knew indirectly because he was once in a discussion section led by my close academic friend Frank Costigliola. Edelman did encourage me to write this book and did help to arrange interviews with Steve Hadley, Paul Wolfowitz, Scooter Libby, and Dick Cheney. But why would one conclude that interviewing these people meant “collaborating” with them?

Edelman, moreover, did not facilitate all my interviews. Robert Jervis, the renowned scholar of international relations and U.S. “intelligence” failures, introduced me to Michael Morell, Bush’s CIA briefer; Lee Hamilton, the former congressman and head of the Woodrow Wilson International Center, introduced me to Colin Powell; my former student Richard Sokolsky introduced me to Richard Clarke, the counter-terrorist expert; my colleague Philip Zelikow helped to arrange interviews with Condi Rice and Robert Zoellick; my former grad student Eric Mahan introduced me to Seth Carus, one of Cheney’s bioterrorist experts; and Michael Schneider, a friend and former official in the USIA, helped arrange an interview with William Smullen, Powell’s close assistant.

Wolfe-Hunnicuttt goes on to criticize me for not using “the general records of the departments of state or defense” or the records of presidential libraries. This is a curious charge, since he should know that these records have not been declassified and opened for research at the National Archives or the George W. Bush Library. He condemns my use of the digital websites associated with the Rumsfeld, Feith, and Bill Burns memoirs without demonstrating that it would have been better to ignore them. He sneers at my use of the websites and reading rooms of the executive departments and government agencies, notwithstanding the fact that most scholars believe that these materials greatly enrich the history of recent American foreign relations. Overall, I suspect that his displeasure with

Confronting Saddam Hussein is not because it is history “without archives.” It more likely stems from the fact that the careful use of the accessible American, British, UN, and Iraqi documents, as well as the public statements, congressional testimony, and oral interviews of leading officials, presents a challenge to his deeply held convictions and ideological predilections.

In addition to his specious claims about sources and methodology, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt misleads readers about key aspects of *Confronting Saddam Hussein*. The book, for example, does not “absolve” George W. Bush. I conclude by underscoring his shortcomings and those of his advisers: “He delegated too much authority and did not monitor the implementation of the policies he approved. He did not order people to do things or criticize them for their failures. He did not insist on rigorous process. . . . He was indifferent to the nasty bickering among his subordinates. . . . [He] disliked heated arguments, and therefore did not invite systematic scrutiny of the policies he was inclined to pursue. He did not ask his advisers if invading Iraq was a good idea” (244, 235–37, 251–52).

And it is not just the big issues that Wolfe-Hunnicuttt gets wrong. He also errs on many small points. Illustratively, he says that I do not tell readers that the part of Iraq in which Ansar al-Islam training camps were located was not under Hussein’s control. In fact, I state this twice: once on page 107 and once on page 139. He faults me for not clarifying that the notorious terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had no operational ties to the Iraqi government. Actually, I note on page 139 that covert CIA agents in the region specifically reported that they saw no evidence that al-Zarqawi’s followers were linked to Hussein.

While Wolfe-Hunnicuttt misconstrues much of my book, he does bring up an important point that Citino and O’Connell also mention. He criticizes “the simple self-defense thesis.” I do emphasize Bush’s desire to prevent another attack, but readers of *Confronting Saddam Hussein* will also see that I stress repeatedly that officials were not “simply” worried about an imminent threat of another attack. Key policymakers, including conservative nationalists like Cheney and Rumsfeld as well as neoconservatives like Wolfowitz and Feith, were extremely concerned with the “looming” or “gathering” threat emanating from rogue states with weapons of mass destruction, like Hussein’s Iraq. They worried that such capabilities might allow dictators to “blackmail” the United States and check the future exercise of U.S. power.

Although the president appeared most concerned with the imminent threat, he too was worried about maintaining Washington’s capacity to wield power in the future. His Global War on Terror and his decision to confront Saddam Hussein were inspired by a fear of additional attacks and by the need to defend the United States, but concerns about the long-term exercise of U.S. power were ever-present. Mine is not a simple analysis. By stressing self-defense, I do not exclude other compelling considerations. That is why I write that when officials launched the Global War on Terror and focused on confronting Saddam Hussein, “they were seeking to safeguard the nation from another attack, save American lives, avoid the opprobrium that would come from another assault, and preserve the country’s ability to exercise its power in the future in behalf of its interests” (quote on 98; see also 44–45, 87–89, 155–56, 158, 247–88).

This observation brings me back to O’Connell’s critique. Like Citino, he thinks that I overstate the self-defense thesis, and he cites Rumsfeld’s “Strategic Thoughts” memo as evidence of imperial ambitions. O’Connell deploys the much-used quotation from that memo: “If the war does not significantly change the world’s political map, the U.S. will not achieve its aim.” But what was Rumsfeld’s aim in this document? He began the memo by saying that “the U.S. strategic theme should be aiding local peoples to rid

themselves of terrorists and to free themselves of regimes that support terrorism”; and he concludes by stating that “a key war aim would be to persuade or compel states to stop supporting terrorism. The regimes of such States should see that it will be fatal to host terrorists who attack the U.S. as was done on September 11.”

I would not say that this memorandum denies America’s global ambitions, but I do think it emphasizes that the objective was to wield power in order to prevent another terrorist attack. In fact, the last two bullets of the memo underscore the goals: “End of [redacted] support of terrorism; End of many other countries’ support or tolerance of terrorism.”⁴

This Rumsfeld memorandum is also useful to address the issue of “ideology.” Readers should note that although Rumsfeld wanted to change more than the government in Afghanistan (he wanted to change “another key state or two”), he said nothing about promoting democracy or freedom. He stressed that the goal was to dismantle or destroy WMD capabilities and terminate support for terrorism. Similarly, when Rumsfeld subsequently began to draw up a war plan for Iraq, he and General Tommy Franks, the head of CENTCOM, agreed that the assumptions about goals should be “regime change and WMD removal.” There was nothing about freedom or democracy—no missionary fervor (100–101).

This is why throughout my book I use the word “hubris” rather than ideology. “Hubris,” in fact, was the title of a scathing book written by two of the administration’s fiercest journalistic critics.⁵ The notion of hubris emanates from Greek mythology and highlights a dangerous mixture of over-confidence, over-ambition, arrogance, and pride. The Greeks often noted that excessive pride was a tragic flaw in human behavior. For the Bush administration, it was hubris to believe that there was only one system (democratic capitalism) that could prove its utility to humankind; it was hubris to think that Iraqis would embrace American occupation forces; it was hubris to assume that people regarded freedom as more important than security and safety and identity. Bush did believe these shibboleths. His naiveté about the goodness of his own country was palpable (74–77, 251).

Although an ideological argument might capture some of the thinking of Bush, Wolfowitz, and Feith, it does not help much to explain officials like Cheney, Rumsfeld, Tommy Franks, and many others. Hubris, however, is something they all shared; hubris and a sense of victimhood. They all believed the United States had been unfairly attacked. They all believed that they could overcome their fears and protect American security (broadly defined) by exercising U.S. power. They all believed that Iraqis would be thrilled by their liberation. They miscalculated. They failed. Their hubris led to tragedy.

I hope readers will take the time to read my book carefully and discuss it with their students. I hope they will reflect on the interplay of four key factors: fear; power; hubris; dysfunction. Although it is easy to criticize Bush and his advisers for the tragic invasion and occupation of Iraq – and we should, I think it is pedagogically more useful to examine their motives, actions, and aspirations -- and to ponder why the results turned out so badly. *Confronting Saddam Hussein* seeks to clarify the challenges that inhered in the assessment of threats. It also illuminates the difficulties encountered in the conduct of coercive diplomacy and the employment of American military force. My goal is neither to champion the use of coercive diplomacy and military power or to denounce their utility. Rather, I hope to encourage discussion about **when** and **how** to use them wisely, effectively, prudently.

Notes:

1. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York, 2002), 99.
2. Samuel Helfont, *Iraq Against the World: Saddam, America, and the Post-Cold War World* (New York and Oxford, UK, 2023); Amatzia Baram, "The Effect of Iraqi Sanctions: Statistical Pitfalls and Responsibility," *Middle East Journal* 54, no.21 (Spring 2000): 194–223.
3. While the FBI study was carefully done, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt seems unaware of the comprehensive reassessment of the anthrax episode undertaken by the National Academy of Sciences in 2011 that I cite in note 64 on p. 269.
4. Memo for the President, September 30, 2001, by Donald Rumsfeld, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc13.pdf>.
5. Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York, 2006).

THE TONOUS AND WARDA JOHNS FAMILY BOOK AWARD



The Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association invites submissions for the 2024 **Tonous and Warda Johns Family Book Award**.

The prize honors Tonous Hanna and Warda Paulis, who immigrated to the United States from Syria in 1900, married in 1906, and became U.S. citizens along with their children in 1919. Tony and Warda Johns, as they became known, emphasized the importance of education, hard work, and philanthropy to their children and grandchildren, and had a deep and abiding love for their adopted country and its history. These values—shared by so many other immigrants to the United

States—profoundly shaped the lives of their descendants. In celebration of these ideals and in recognition of Tony and Warda’s continuing influence on their family, the Johns family created this endowment in the hope that Tony and Warda’s legacy will be felt and appreciated by the PCB-AHA community and that the award will encourage and recognize excellent historical scholarship.

The **Tonous and Warda Johns Family Book Award** will recognize the outstanding book (monograph or edited volume) in the history of U.S. foreign relations, immigration history, or military history by an author or editor residing in the PCB-AHA membership region.

Copies of books submitted for consideration for the award should be sent directly to each of the three members of the prize committee by **February 15, 2024**. More information is available at <https://www.pcbaha.org/tonous-and-warda-johns-family-book-award>.

Questions about the award or inquiries regarding donations to the endowment should be directed to Michael Green, PCB-AHA executive director, at michael.green@unlv.edu.

The Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association was organized in 1903 to serve members of the American Historical Association living in the western United States and the western provinces of Canada. With over 4000 members, it is one of the largest professional historical organizations in the United States.