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# Realism, Liberalism and the Iraq War

**Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry**

The 2003 Iraq War was one of the great disasters in the history of American foreign policy. This conclusion is by now, and for good reason, very widely accepted. In the years since the war, however, other, less useful conventional wisdoms have formed. Among these, none is more salient – or more misleading – than the notion that the war was a product of liberalism. This view has been promoted and endlessly repeated by prominent academic realists such as John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Barry Posen, Christopher Layne and Michael Desch. These academic realists were early and vocal critics of the war, which they indict as the product of essentially liberal American foreign-policy impulses, manifest in both liberal-internationalist and neo-conservative circles.

In the realist critics' telling, the Iraq War was part of a more general post-Cold War liberal expansionism that led the United States to militarily intervene in more places and advance increasingly ambitious goals of democracy promotion and regime change. As they see it, American foreign policy in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of unipolarity lacked external restraints, and thus attempted to realise long-standing Wilsonian liberal agendas for the transformation both of oppressive regimes and of the international system itself. For the academic guardians of realist wisdom, the unipolar moment was a dangerous opening for American liberal idealism to pursue a revisionist agenda sure to create

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**Daniel Deudney** is Associate Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. **G. John Ikenberry** is Albert G. Milbank Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University.

disorder. What the world needed instead, in the words of Stephen Walt, was the 'taming of American power'.<sup>1</sup>

This picture of the ideological origins of the Iraq War, and its relationship to realism and liberalism, is fundamentally flawed. As with any war, there are many actors, threads of justification and debates about its causes that confound any simple story.<sup>2</sup> But the Iraq War, we argue, was straightforwardly the result of the pursuit of American hegemonic primacy. Its origins flowed readily from an ancient and prominent body of realist thought that argues that international order comes from concentrations of power, rather than from shifting balances of power. This primacist agenda was amplified in its urgency and seriousness by an acute experience of vulnerability to weapons of mass destruction, potentially unrestrained by deterrence, thus harkening back to another body of earlier, but recently neglected, realist thought about security and interdependence.

The principal architects of this ill-fated venture, all accounts agree, were vice president Richard Cheney, secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld and deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz. There are many ways to describe the political ideologies of these three figures, but 'liberal-internationalist' is not among them. For all three, the primary objective of the war was the preservation and extension of American primacy in a region with high importance to American national interests. They viewed Iraq as a regional revisionist state with a demonstrated record of chemical-weapons use and a long-standing ambition to acquire nuclear weapons, posing an inevitable military threat to American forces and allies in the region. For these hegemonic realists, the decisive defeat of Iraq also promised to provide a worldwide demonstration of the capacities and willingness of the United States to defend its global position against challengers such as North Korea and Iran, and to dispel lingering doubts created during the Clinton years about America's willingness to use force.

The academic-realist account of the ideological origins of the Iraq War emphasises the influence of neoconservatism. All accounts of neoconservatism point to its hybrid character, partially liberal and partially primacist.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that the academic realists indict neo-conservatism, they are also implicitly indicting a strain of realism as well as a version of lib-

eralism. Thus the debate about the ideological origins of the Iraq War is an intramural dispute among realists as much as a clash between realism and liberalism. Furthermore, the academic realists blame the 2003 invasion on the strain of liberal internationalism that emphasises the promotion and spread of democracy and idealist humanitarianism. In reality, most liberal internationalists opposed the war. What support they did offer was largely based on an appreciation of the acute security threats posed by the diffusion of weapons of mass destruction, and the violence interdependence they produced, as well as the imperative to maintain and strengthen multilateral arms-control regimes.

### **Varieties of realisms**

Since the middle years of the twentieth century, the heights of American academic international-relations theory have been commanded by a succession of influential theorists who call themselves realists. The first wave were European émigrés, such as Hans Morgenthau, John Herz, Arnold Wolfers and Henry Kissinger, as well as the native George Kennan and Robert W. Tucker, who saw themselves as tutors to the unworldly Americans and dispellers of national American idealism. These realists not only brought the prestige of European intellectuals, but also placed themselves in a line of thought traced back through an illustrious ancestry of historians and political theorists – Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Ranke and E.H. Carr.<sup>4</sup> Continuing the realist lineage in the later decades of the twentieth century, figures such as Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, Samuel Huntington and Robert Jervis exercised great intellectual influence inside the academy, as well as speaking insightfully to the contemporary puzzles of American foreign policy. Over the last two decades, the mantle of leadership has fallen to a new generation of academics, most notably John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, William Wohlforth and Barry Posen. Academic realists have had influence far beyond their numbers in part because they largely eschewed successive waves of social-scientific methodological revolution, which generated often trivial and obscure findings. They were also influential because their foreign-policy advice could support an extremely wide range of policies. On the burning questions of the time – conducting the Cold War,

nuclear strategy and the Vietnam War – prominent academic realists spoke with great clarity on all sides of the debate.

The diversity of realist policy advice is rooted in the great variety of realist theory. Realism is not a single theory but rather a cluster of related – and often conflicting – schools of thought about the basic questions of political order, both domestic and international. Realists clash in answering the fundamental question: where does order and security in international politics come from? Three varieties are particularly important for understanding the ideological origins of the Iraq War. One school, ‘equilibrium’ or ‘balance of power’ realism, holds that order and security arise from a distributed or balanced configuration of power, and posits that states should – and will – resist efforts by any state to establish a dominant position. A second major realist school, ‘hegemonic’ realism, holds that order requires concentrations of power, and provides an agenda for how preponderant states can provide order and sustain their position. Where balance-of-power realists see an equilibrium of power as the source of international order and stability, hegemonic realists maintain that order derives from concentrations of power. A third school, ‘interdependence’ realism, relatively neglected in recent decades, advances the view that high levels of security interdependence (present when mutual vulnerability is very high) make international anarchy unacceptably perilous, and it suggests that effective government will and should consolidate at successively larger scales.

Each of these schools has an ancient lineage; their insights have been handed down and repeatedly rediscovered. Sometimes the schools work together, but often they are at sharp odds, making realism as a body of theory and practice both extremely comprehensive and internally conflicted. Furthermore, some of these realist theories have close affinities to various liberal and other schools of international political thought, while others are antithetical. The schools of realism have such an enduring presence not simply because of the sophistication of their theories or the antiquity of their lineages, but also because they address problems that recurrently confront societies and leaders in political life.

In addition to this variety of substantive theories, realism is cleaved by the division between the theoretical–academic and practical–operational.

Academic theorists develop and test general propositions, and seek to speak truth to power, by offering policy advice from outside of government. In contrast, what might be termed operational realists populate the diplomatic and military decision-making positions in states, where they are forced on a continuous basis to make time-urgent judgements with limited information and often with far-reaching consequences. Classical theorists of realism often held positions of political power, and wrote on the side or in retirement. However, the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, has been marked by a new stratum of full-time university realist scholarship, which in its volume and sophistication is historically unprecedented. In the American context, academic realists speak from positions in universities and commonly attempt to derive their advice from the larger theories of realism. Operational realists, by contrast, eschew theory and are first and foremost concerned with guiding and conducting American foreign and military policy. Despite these profound differences, realists of all varieties and stations emphasise that successful statecraft – and especially the execution of war – is as much an art as a science. For good theory to produce good outcomes, it must be accompanied by practical prudence, thick situational knowledge and organisational competence, as well as the smile of Fortuna – simple good luck.

### **Balance-of-power realism and the Iraq War**

Vocal realist critics of the Iraq War cast themselves as the embodiment of realist insight generally, but in reality they mainly hail from the balance-of-power school.<sup>5</sup> This line of realist thought and practice emphasises that international order is ultimately based upon a distribution of power among the leading states that is roughly balanced. In this view, power checks power, and the tendency of states to expand almost inevitably evokes balancing counter-actions by other states. This brand of realism found its classic expression in the practice of the European balance of power and the periodic struggles against hegemonic mastery by a succession of leading states from the Habsburgs to the Third Reich.<sup>6</sup> It was particularly relevant during the Cold War, and provided the intellectual foundations for the doctrine of containment, the extended alliance system along the rimlands of Eurasia, and strategies of nuclear deterrence.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar system, the sudden emergence of the United States as the unipolar power posed, for balance-of-power realists, a signal set of dangers. Unchecked by a peer rival, the United States was able to pursue expansive agendas for changing the regimes of smaller states and the imposition of American preferences everywhere. As the order stemming from the balance of power was undermined, America became a source of disorder. American foreign policy became driven less by the exigencies of inter-state rivalry and more by domestic ideological preferences and interest groups. Overwhelmingly, these domestic impulses were liberal in character, manifest in an attempt to remake the world in the image of American liberal democracy and capitalism. Thus in the 1990s, the United States pushed the expansion of NATO across the Warsaw Pact states and into the periphery of the former Soviet Union, riding roughshod over Russian objections.<sup>7</sup> The United States began to deploy military force for humanitarian assistance and to change the internal regimes of smaller states deemed illegitimate by American standards. Somalia, Kosovo, Haiti – the United States intervened in the pursuit of its expanded vision of a world order modelled on America itself and its preferences.<sup>8</sup> In sum, without a threat, the United States became over-committed in places that had little to do with fundamental national-security objectives, and where the capacity of the United States to achieve favourable outcomes was often limited. Believing it was no longer in a realist world, in this view, America could pursue the universal realisation of a liberal world order with all the means at its disposal.

Given this supposed trajectory, the Iraq War was a natural next step. The move by the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11 to inflate the threat of terrorism, and to postulate liberal-democratic regimes as the solution, provided the writ for a war of democratic imperialism against Iraq. Repeated proclamations by the Bush administration of the need to ‘rid the world of evil-doers’ and to bring the ‘blessings of liberty’ to oppressed peoples everywhere were, for the balancing realists, the smoking gun of liberal culpability for the Iraq invasion.<sup>9</sup> As much of the political establishment and public opinion was rushing to endorse the Bush administration’s call to arms, the restraint realists stood firm and vocally condemned the

war as an ill-conceived 'war of choice' based on inflated estimates of Iraqi capabilities and motivations. They predicted that the forceful imposition of democracy in the alien culture of Iraq was surely doomed to fail. In short, the Bush administration's justification for the invasion as a war for freedom constituted a textbook case of American liberal-democratic imperialism, overconfidence in military power and cultural ignorance.

There was no doubt in the realist critics' minds that the ultimate culprit for this imbroglio was American liberal-democratic ideology. These critics pointed to a variety of arguments that rooted the Iraq invasion in the American regime and its distinctive principles of legitimacy and order. For liberals, no regime is ultimately legitimate unless it rests upon the consent of the governed, and free peoples have both an interest and responsibility to roll back the iron hand of oppression. In this view, America is first and foremost an idea of freedom – and it is in the ultimate interest of the United States to bring about a free world. A corollary liberal claim that also seemed to lead to the Mesopotamian expedition was 'democratic peace theory', according to which liberal democracies do not make war on one another. Saddam Hussein had been a particularly murderous tyrant who had repeatedly sacrificed large numbers of his citizens to both his domestic dictatorial ambitions and foreign aggressions. This made him the ideal poster child for membership in an 'Axis of Evil' and a compelling target for the virtuous wielding of American military might. Simplistic versions of these sorts of arguments deployed by the Bush administration provided, according to restraint realists, unmistakable evidence that the Iraq War was at its heart a liberal war.

### **Hegemonic realism and its playbook**

A fundamental fallacy afflicts the academic realist critics of the Iraq War – they falsely identify their branch of realism with realism in general. In fact, the crucial fact overlooked by such critics is that the venture makes perfect sense in terms of the logic and policy prescriptions of the *hegemonic* school of realism. While all versions of realism have distinguished pedigrees, the hegemonic version of realism arguably appeared before the balance-of-power version – making an appearance in Thucydides's account of the

Peloponnesian War. The view that order comes from an imbalance of power – rather than a balance of power – is also central to the realist understanding of the state, which is based, as Max Weber classically observed, on a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. For this school of realism, order, inside and out, comes from concentrations of power. Hegemonic realists view international history as cyclical, with periods of order based on concentration, giving way to periods of disorder as power disperses to more actors.

Like their equilibrium rivals, hegemonic realists also look to modern European history, with the example of Pax Britannica as a hegemonic order based on British naval and mercantile dominance.<sup>10</sup> In this account, this long

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period of order and relative peace was followed by a hegemonic interregnum out of which emerged Pax Americana. Among the leading theorists of this version of realism are E.H. Carr, Robert Gilpin, Paul Kennedy and William Wohlforth.<sup>11</sup> An even stronger version of this line of thinking appears in the ‘offensive realism’ of Mearsheimer, which holds that states seek security by sustaining regional hegemony, a view that would seem to align with the policies of American primacists in the Middle East.<sup>12</sup>

Hegemonic realists argue that a leading power provides order to the overall system by promulgating and underwriting a set of rules and institutions that add regularity and predictability for actors large and small. The leading state plays a distinct role unlike the roles of the smaller powers, thus adding a degree of functional differentiation to international politics. A hegemonic order is not based solely on the preponderant power of the leading state but also on its capacities – and willingness – to solve common problems that face all states in the system. The hegemonic order gains durability and legitimacy as the leading state embodies and promulgates a model for organising societies with wide application and appeal. Although hegemonic orders are based on concentrations of power, they fall short of being empires because the lesser powers retain their formal sovereignty as well as considerable room for manoeuvre and even influence on the leading state.

Like its equilibrium-realist sibling, hegemonic realism provides a play-book for policymakers on effective courses of action. Most importantly, a

hegemonic state must take measures to prevent the emergence of potential challengers while avoiding commitments that exceed available resources. In assuming the role of hegemon, the leading state is required to use military force more often than smaller states, but to do so in ways that do not undercut the legitimacy of its preponderance or excessively tax its capacities. The ideal situation for a hegemonic state is when the secondary states share its regime principles and ideologies, which gives its position legitimacy and lowers the costs of policing and imposing order on recalcitrant outliers.

In playing the role of hegemon, the leading state must prioritise those places within its sphere that have the greatest power potential. In addition, the leading state must assume an enlarged and extended set of interests that are not just its own, but encompass the important interests of its clients. Furthermore, a hegemonic state must be conservative of scarce military resources, and thus should be particularly attentive to making sure that its military actions have a wide demonstration effect, unambiguously signalling its superior capacities, credibility and resolve. Faced with rising rivals that exceed its capacity to fully dominate, the hegemonic playbook recommends selective retrenchment and appeasement, as well as domestic rejuvenation of its power assets. In sum, hegemonic realism, a major variant of realist theory, underpins a distinctive hegemonic statecraft that differs in important ways from the practices recommended by balance-of-power realists.<sup>13</sup>

With the rise of the United States to global prominence, the hegemonic versions of realist thinking and policy have tended to flourish within American foreign- and defence-policy circles. Unlike balance-of-power realism, the policy audience for hegemonic realism is limited to leading powers. As the United States has come to play the role of hegemon on successively larger scales, the operational-realist mindset has naturally gravitated toward the practices of hegemonic realism, even in the absence of academic support. And conversely, the balance realists speak and propose policy in directions that are often at wide variance with the actual policy tendencies of the American national-security state.

Despite these fundamental differences, all schools of realist theory share in common a recognition that translation from general theory to specific policy is more art than science. Stepping from abstractions derived from

theories of history and political order to concrete decisions of foreign policy is fraught with ambiguities, uncertainties, potential for misperception and slippages of all kinds. Good theory can lead to disastrous policies, and good policies do not always derive from general theories.

### **The Iraq War and hegemonic realism**

The Iraq War, far from being contrary to realism and the embodiment of liberal agendas, is straightforwardly intelligible as a hegemonic-realist war. This is true despite the fact that it might have been a poor application of hegemonic realism and was in many crucial ways bungled in its execution. Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were all seasoned operatives with extensive experience in defence and foreign policy. More importantly, all three had been associated, in the decade before the war, with efforts to enunciate a post-Cold War American grand strategy centred on the maintenance of American primacy and preventing the emergence of a peer competitor.<sup>14</sup> And all three had viewed Saddam Hussein as a threat to American hegemony in the pivotal region of the Middle East, and particularly the Persian Gulf.

Containing two-thirds of the world's recoverable petroleum reserves, the Gulf had been viewed by US policymakers as vital to the American hegemonic system – and the United States had made major efforts to forge alliances, recruit clients and subsidise friendly regimes in the region. American hegemonic grand strategy in the Middle East never attached any significance to political democratisation, and the United States had forged close relations with a variety of autocratic and feudal monarchical regimes who routinely violated Western and American norms of human rights and political accountability. The oil resources of the Middle East were even more important to pivotal American allies in Europe and East Asia than they were to the United States itself.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the long American involvement in the region had been extremely beneficial to large and politically influential American oil companies, banks and defence contractors. Given all of this, American hegemonic security thinkers did not view the protection of this regional order from challengers as at all problematic.

To American policymakers, there was no doubt that Saddam Hussein posed a revisionist threat to the American order in the region. The Iraqi

government had invaded Kuwait, and it held a vision of pan-Arab national consolidation that marked for elimination the *ancien régimes* in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates. Furthermore, the Persian Gulf War of 1991, in which Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz had played prominent roles, was viewed as a great political–military triumph, the only clear-cut American military victory since the end of the Second World War. By the late 1990s, however, this accomplishment was starting to unravel. Given Iraq’s oil resources, it was just a matter of time until the regime would pose another significant threat to regional order. If Iraq was in 2002 greatly weakened by sanctions, American policymakers viewed this as an opportunity to eliminate a clear rival before his power was rebuilt. Not surprisingly, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz had all publicly urged the overthrow of the Hussein regime for more than a decade before the actual 2003 invasion.

Furthermore, a decisive overthrow of the Iraq regime would serve another goal of the primacists – the demonstration of American military–technological superiority. Of the three principal advocates of the war, Rumsfeld was particularly interested in showing off the new potency of the advanced conventional weapons that the United States had been acquiring, at great expense, since the end of the Cold War. The expectation was that a quick and decisive American dispatch of the Iraqi regime with high technology and low American casualties would send a general message of ‘shock and awe’ to other potential revisionist states that might encroach on America’s extended interests. The primacists thought that the hesitancy of the Clinton administration in using the full weight of America’s military advantages had undermined the credibility of American commitments and sown doubts about American resolve. A quickly victorious war against Iraq would not only remove a chronic threat in the vital Persian Gulf region, but also shore up the hegemonic reputation of the United States across the board.

Democracy promotion was among the many rolling rationales for the war offered by the Bush administration. As the post-invasion situation in Iraq deteriorated, the administration increasingly stressed the objective of turning Iraq into a liberal democracy. The academic-realist critics of the war point to this coercive democratisation agenda as evidence for the essentially liberal wellsprings of the invasion. It is more plausible that the promo-

tion of democracy was a solution proffered by the Bush administration to simultaneously sustain public support for the war and provide a template for post-war Iraqi reconstruction. Democracy was not the core objective: it emerged both as a means to legitimate the war and as a programme for making Iraq into a new pillar of the hegemonic American order in the region.

### **Interdependence realism and the Iraq War**

Despite the compelling logic of invading Iraq for the primacists in Washington, it is hard to imagine the war occurring without the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the spectre of terrorism with weapons of mass destruction. Although this new threat loomed large in the decision-making calculus of the Bush administration, the school of realist thought that offers insight into this type of security problem – interdependence realism – has had little recent salience among academic realists. While equilibrium and hegemonic realisms have a vibrant presence in the realist academy, the arguments of the interdependence school have been largely shunted aside by academic realists at the same time that they have become important for the liberal school wrestling with the multi-sided patterns of rising global interdependence.

The core insight of the interdependence school of realism is arguably the most basic and the earliest of realist ideas. Its core idea is that anarchy, understood as the absence of government, is incompatible with the minimum level of security necessary for human survival in a situation where political actors are readily capable of inflicting lethal violence on one another.<sup>16</sup> Claims about the perils of high levels of violence interdependence in situations without government sit at the centre of many seminal realist texts. Classic statements of this insight are found in Thucydides's account of the Corcyran civil war and in Hobbes's rendering of the state of nature as the situation in which life is not only nasty and brutish, but also potentially short. This basic postulate of interdependence realism illuminates the logic of why government is necessary in particular territorial spaces. It is only after anarchy has been abridged at the national level that international relations among polities becomes possible.

This elemental insight of interdependence realism has, over the last several centuries, been grappling with the consequences of steadily higher

levels of violence interdependence on successively larger scales, produced by the new technologies of interaction and destruction provided by the industrial revolution. The realisation that the potency of industrial warfare had rendered inter-state anarchy in the European state system intolerable for security, and that some authoritative exit from anarchy was necessary, was voiced by many beginning in the late nineteenth century. The classic expression of these ideas in the realist canon appears in the work of E.H. Carr, whose statements on realism in the late 1930s are widely recognised – and celebrated – by realists as landmarks in the re-emergence of realism as a dominant approach to security across the rest of the twentieth century and beyond. Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* famously lays out the logic of hegemonic order, but also in its final pages advances the argument that nation-states of less than continental scale have been rendered militarily obsolete, and that consolidations were both necessary and to be expected, an argument developed by Carr in subsequent works.<sup>17</sup>

This idea was next deployed by realist theorists grappling with the implications of nuclear weapons for world politics. The idea that nuclear weapons had created high levels of military interdependence on a global scale, making necessary some exit from – or substantial moderation of – inter-state anarchy, was voiced by many during the first decade of the nuclear era.<sup>18</sup> Its classic realist formulation appears in the work of John Herz and Hans Morgenthau, who both stated in very strong terms the essential logic of the security-interdependence school of realism in the nuclear era.<sup>19</sup> This diagnosis of vulnerability was accompanied by a wide array of potential remedies, ranging from James Burnham's proposals for pre-emptive nuclear attack and 'rollback',<sup>20</sup> to plans for full world government, with a middle position advancing arms control and disarmament as a step to moderate anarchy but not fully escape it.

Despite the straightforward logic of the Herz and Morgenthau application of the basic postulate of the interdependence school of realism, most academic realists abandoned these views in favour of deterrence, as a means for states to both sustain their independence and also avoid cataclysmic destruction.<sup>21</sup> Deterrence was, conceptually, a radically novel solution to the problem posed by high levels of violence interdependence in anarchy,

but its political implications were extremely conservative, as world politics could remain anarchic but would be freed – if all went well – from political consolidation or total war. Even within the deterrence consensus, however, there was considerable variation between those who viewed deterrence as a permanent solution and those who viewed it as a temporary stopgap to be incrementally complemented with arms control and disarmament of increasingly comprehensive scope.<sup>22</sup>

Although academic realists had all but forgotten the early realist-interdependence view of nuclear weapons, it made a surprise appearance in the 1980s in president Ronald Reagan's embrace of nuclear abolition.<sup>23</sup> The fact that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev also held such views laid the basis for the far-reaching transformation in US–Soviet relations and the major nuclear-arms-control treaties that marked the settlement of the Cold War.<sup>24</sup> Both leaders voiced the essential interdependence-realist reading of the nuclear revolution, that the threat of catastrophic nuclear war was so great that major alterations in inter-state relations and international institutions were necessary to avoid disaster. Such thinking remains anathema to almost all academic and operational realists, but George Shultz, Reagan's secretary of state, has continued to advance the nuclear interdependence-realism agenda of Global Zero, at both the operational and academic levels, and in alliance with many who subscribe to this view of the nuclear revolution but eschew the realist label.<sup>25</sup>

In the wake of the Cold War, the nuclear problem has mutated into a much less manageable challenge, as the diffusion of nuclear weapons to ever smaller states has upended traditional calculus of both balancing and hegemonic maintenance. Even more ominously, the prospect that very small non-state actors will gain possession of nuclear weapons and inflict devastating attacks on major American cities gave new salience to the insights of nuclear interdependence realism.<sup>26</sup> This spectre is further amplified by the possibility that increasingly potent biological weapons are becoming more accessible to small states and terror organisations. For balance and hegemonic realists, these new violence capabilities are particularly problematic because they are not readily deterrable; even attribution of attacks is dauntingly difficult.

11 September 2001 brought vulnerability to weapons of mass destruction to the top of the American national-security agenda suddenly and unexpectedly, and in a manner not solvable with the deterrence approaches of the Cold War. The anthrax attacks in the weeks following 9/11 further heightened the sense of American insecurity, and turned the previously abstract scenario of biological-weapons attack by terrorist groups into a credible threat. These new, severe vulnerabilities made the core insights of interdependence realism suddenly relevant in new ways. Without the ability to deter, and without the ability to maintain impermeable borders, the capacity of governments to provide minimum security is called into question.

By all accounts, this new set of vulnerabilities was acutely perceived by the Bush administration. Even before autumn 2001, vice president Cheney and his staff had been focused on the biological-weapon threat. The diagnosis was straightforwardly interdependence-realist in character, operationally perceived. The remedy pursued by the Bush administration was to aggressively eliminate the particular actors with pre-emptive attacks and a preventive war.<sup>27</sup>

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*Anthrax attacks  
heightened the  
sense of insecurity*

In making the case for these interventions, the administration connected dots that were not there. On the basis of no evidence and against logic, they attributed the 9/11 attacks to Saddam Hussein and they exaggerated the evidence about the scope of the Iraqi nuclear-weapons programme. This did not seem implausible given that the Iraqi dictator had extensively used poison gas on his rebellious citizens and had, secretly and in clear violation of international treaty obligations, sought to acquire both nuclear and biological weapons. Just as the hegemonic realists had been primed to argue that the elimination of the Iraqi regime was necessary for the protection of the American regional hegemonic order, so too the realist-interdependence logic seemed to point to aggressive action, captured in Cheney's famous 'one percent doctrine'. In the words of Ron Suskind, Cheney's post-9/11 conviction was that 'if there was even a 1 percent chance of terrorists getting a weapon of mass destruction – and there has been a small probability of such an occurrence for some time – the United States must now act as if it

were a certainty'.<sup>28</sup> In sum, the rationales for the war developed by the Bush administration had firm foundations not only in hegemonic realism, but also in the logics of interdependence realism, making it a doubly realist war.

### **Realists and liberals speaking truth to power**

The chief architects of the Iraq War were clearly not liberal internationalists. They did rely, however, on arguments drawn from both hegemonic realism and interdependence realism. Like realists, liberals were conflicted and divided about the war.<sup>29</sup> In blaming liberal internationalism, realist critics not only neglect the powerful realist logics behind the invasion of Iraq, but also fundamentally misunderstand why it was that some liberal internationalists came to support it. As such critics see it, liberal internationalists supported the war as part of democracy promotion, and they understand liberalism more generally as essentially an idealistic agenda for the improvement and elevation of international life.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, liberal support for the war, however reluctant, was based on a set of concerns that had more in common with interdependence realism than with the idealist version of Wilsonianism. Firstly and most importantly, liberal internationalists hold a diagnosis of security vulnerability that emphasises violence interdependence. They, like the realist-interdependence school, see the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction in the hands of revisionist states and terrorist organisations as a dangerous new form of interdependence. This is not an idealist rationale, but rather the recognition of a severe security threat posed by novel developments generated by technological advance. Secondly, in their remedy to rising violence interdependence, liberal internationalists sharply depart from the realist-interdependence approach, advancing international arms control and security-regime building rather than preventive war and hegemonic rule. Iraq's repeated violation of international law, arms-control treaties and UN Security Council resolutions posed a dangerous challenge, not to American hegemony as such, but to an international order of mutual restraint and cooperative problem-solving. Thirdly, liberal internationalists see the establishment and maintenance of broad international coalitions as vital responses to new security vulnerabilities, and hold that unilateral measures, such as the Bush administration's

Iraq policy, undermine the international cooperation necessary for a real and enduring new international security regime.<sup>31</sup>

The academic-realist critics of the Iraq War were speaking for the equilibrium version of realism. The war's primary instigators were hegemonic realists who also drew on diagnoses of new security vulnerabilities emphasised by interdependence realists. While the academic realists had largely abandoned such arguments, the operational realists tasked with actually conducting foreign and military policy were nevertheless confronted with new acute manifestations of violence interdependence for which the academic speakers of truth to power had little purchase. Neglected by academic realists, the threats posed by violence interdependence came to be a central focus for liberal internationalists, too.

Faced with responding to the new violence interdependences, however – dramatically revealed by 9/11 and the anthrax letters – the hegemonic operational realists in the Bush administration seized upon the Burnhamite agenda of pre-emption and preventive war. For this programme, and in contrast to the thinking of liberal internationalists, the international system of arms-control and security governance stood as impediments to their unilateral efforts, and their actions had the effect of damaging the regime as ongoing and internationally legitimate responses to these vulnerabilities.

The re-emergence and growth of academic realism across the latter part of the twentieth century promised to provide better guidance to statecraft in dealing with the timeless problems of security and international order – in other words, speaking truth to power. Yet ironically, academic realism, while becoming more sophisticated, became narrower, by dropping the insights and arguments of the violence-interdependence school of realism that flourished in the middle years of the twentieth century. And the academic realists, while claiming to be acutely attentive to the real world of power politics, became remarkably blind to the logics of hegemonic realism and their importance for the foreign policy of the American hegemonic state. Most consequently, by abandoning the insights of the interdependence school, academic realists have limited the ability of realism to grapple with urgent and severe new vulnerabilities arising from cascading technological interdependence. If academic realists seek to return to engaging the

pressing security issues of this time, they will find themselves necessarily building from the abandoned starting points of the interdependence school. As they do, they will find themselves in the seasoned company of liberal internationalists and other globalists who have, in the meantime, been grappling with these realities.

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## Notes

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- 3 Brian C. Schmidt and Michael C. Williams, 'The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War: Neoconservatives Versus Realists', *Security Studies*, June 2008.
- 4 For surveys of the realist tradition, see Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations Since Machiavelli* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).
- 5 The modern formulation of balance-of-power theory is Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1979). For discussions of Waltz and the classical literature on the balance of power, see John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds, *Realism and the Balance of Power: A New Debate* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2003); and Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths, and Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
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- <sup>10</sup> See Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Naval Mastery* (London: The Ashfield Press, 1976); and Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987).
- <sup>11</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1951); William Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 1, Summer 1999; and Stephen D. Brooks and William Wohlforth, *The World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- <sup>12</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). See also G. John Ikenberry, ed., *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- <sup>14</sup> The idea of pursuing a post-Cold War grand strategy of primacy – with a goal to 'prevent the emergence of a new rival' – was put forward in a secret five-year Defense Planning Guidance paper in March 1992, written primarily by under-secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz, and serving under-secretary of defense Richard Cheney. See Patrick E. Tyler, 'U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop', *New York Times*, 8 March 1992, p. A1. For an account of the ideas and officials behind this strategic guidance, see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), pp. 208–15.
- <sup>15</sup> For an early call for American seizure of the oil fields in response to embargoes, see Robert W. Tucker, 'Oil: The Issue of American Intervention', *Commentary*, January 1975.
- <sup>16</sup> Daniel H. Deudney, 'Regrounding Realism: Anarchy, Security, and Changing Material Contexts', *Security Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, Autumn 2000, pp. 1–42.
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- <sup>18</sup> See Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought During the Thermonuclear Revolution* (Routledge, 2016); and William E. Scheuerman, *The Realist Case for Global Reform* (London: Polity, 2011).
- <sup>19</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The Four Paradoxes of Nuclear Strategy', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 58, March 1969, pp. 25–35; and John Herz, *International Politics in the Atomic Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).
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- 21 For this evolution, see Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
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  - 26 Fred Charles Iklé, *Annihilation from Within: The Ultimate Threat to Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
  - 27 Jack Snyder characterises this impulse as a form of offensive realism, or a variant of what he calls the 'myths of empire'. See Jack Snyder, 'Imperial Temptations', *National Interest*, Spring 2003.
  - 28 Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
  - 29 See Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
  - 30 An important source of this view of liberalism is Walter Russell Mead's argument that twentieth-century American liberal-internationalist foreign policy is based on 'Wilsonianism', a programme for betterment and humanitarianism. See Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001).
  - 31 European opposition to the Iraq War, shamelessly derided by the Bush administration and its partisans, was based on a disagreement not of ends but of means. For a vivid account of this debate, see Elizabeth Pond, *Friendly Fire: The Near-Death of the Atlantic Alliance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); and Frederic Bozo, *A History of the Iraq Crisis: France, the United States and Iraq, 1991–2003* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). See also G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition: Essays on American Power and International Order* (London: Polity, 2006).