

What Caused the Iraq War? A Debate. Part 1 of 2

by [Daniel Nexon](#) on 2013-07-30 in [Duck- 15 Comments](#)

Editor's Note: This is a guest post by [Alexandre Debs](#) and [Nuno P. Monteiro](#), both of Yale University. In it, they discuss the causes of the Iraq War, a subject of some [recent discussion](#) at The Duck of Minerva. This post discusses their forthcoming International Organization [article](#), which is now available as an "online first" piece and will be free to download for the next two weeks. Tomorrow we will run a response by David Lake [now available [here](#)].

In a forthcoming article in *International Organization*, "[Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War](#)," we introduce a new theory connecting power shifts to war. Our theory provides novel answers to these questions on Iraq. Contrary to widely shared views according to which the war was caused by misperceptions and other irrational behaviors on the part of Saddam Hussein and the Bush Administration, we argue that the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq can be accounted for strictly within a rationalist framework.

Below we make four specific points on the causes of the Iraq War and then contrast our view with David Lake's *International Security* article "[Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War](#)" ([PDF](#)), where he argues that the Iraq War should prompt a behavioral revolution in the study of the causes of war. We conclude with brief implications for theory and policy.

Our Argument

Our first point is that the United States' main motivation for invading Iraq on March 20, 2003, was to prevent suspected Iraqi nuclearization, which Washington thought would bring about a large and rapid shift in the balance of power in favor of Iraq. During the run-up to the invasion, the U.S. government's *casus belli* rested on suspicion that Saddam was developing WMD — including nuclear weapons — thus presenting an imminent threat. Iraq's nuclear acquisition would represent a large and rapid power shift that would make Saddam immune to any externally-driven regime-change efforts, ending his vulnerability to U.S. military action. The cost of war against a non-nuclear Iraq, in contrast, was expected to be relatively low, as U.S. forces would, given the precedent of the 1991 Gulf War, no doubt prevail. Specifically, the cost of a preventive counter-proliferation war against Iraq was expected to be orders of magnitude smaller than the expected cost of deterring, not to mention deposing a nuclear-armed Saddam. This difference accounts for U.S. insistence in guaranteeing Iraqi non-nuclear status, if necessary by force.

Second, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led U.S. decisionmakers to attribute more worrisome consequences to suspected Iraqi nuclearization, thereby accounting for the timing of the war. Iraq had been suspected of not abiding by the terms of the post-Gulf War cease fire, which precluded the country from developing WMD, but an invasion did not happen until the events of 9/11 undermined the U.S. administration's trust in the intelligence community's ability to detect security threats in a timely manner. In the aftermath of the attacks, the Bush Administration became particularly worried, based on flimsy intelligence, with the possibility of an Iraqi nuclear handoff to a terrorist group for use against the U.S. targets. The U.S. administration's higher sensitivity to a low probability event (Iraq's nuclear acquisition) made peace harder to sustain. In this sense, the invasion of Iraq represented the paradigmatic application of the '[one percent doctrine](#),' attributed to Vice President Dick Cheney. This doctrine suggests that, in the post-9/11 security environment, the United States must deal with 'low-probability, high-impact' events as if they were certain. Thus the United States acted as if Iraqi nuclearization were all but certain and launched a preventive war, which subsequently proved mistaken.

Third, the war was the result of the imperfect information U.S. leaders possessed about the Iraqi WMD program and their inability to eradicate uncertainty about the status of Iraq's nuclear program. Enjoying a preponderance of power and determined to avoid the repetition of 9/11, the United States demanded incontrovertible evidence of Iraq WMD disarmament. Unable to obtain it, U.S. policymakers feared that Iraq would be tempted to build a nuclear weapon and place Washington before a *fait accompli*. Under mounting pressure, Saddam agreed in September 2002 to let U.N. inspectors in for the first time in nearly four years. Still, these inspections produced ambiguous results. At the same time, based on the intelligence available to most Western governments, "[a] responsible judgment could not have been that the [WMD] programs had ceased" ([Jervis 2010](#), 155). This uncertainty underpinned a broad political consensus in Washington that Saddam intended to acquire a nuclear arsenal, justifying support for the war. Based on this rationale, the United States decided to launch a preventive war that ultimately proved to rest on mistaken grounds. Only after the war would it become clear that Iraq possessed no WMD and had no consistent WMD programs.

Finally, our theory helps account for why Washington launched an attack against Iraq rather than North Korea, a state that in fact possessed a nuclear-weapons program and would ultimately go nuclear. In our view, U.S. interactions with North Korea in the run-up to its nuclear acquisition display a key difference vis-à-vis Iraq: given Pyongyang's ability to impose heavy costs on the United States and its allies using its conventional "sea of fire" strategy in case of a military conflagration, the cost of a preventive war against North Korea was expected to be much greater than that of a war against Iraq. By the same token, the effect of North Korean nuclearization would be relatively small, given the limited range of policy options available to the United States even vis-à-vis a non-nuclear North Korea. This meant that preventive war against North Korea was not rationalizable.

Alternative Approaches

For some, it is impossible to provide a rationalist account of the Iraq war. In an important article, David Lake [argues](#) that the Iraq War highlights the need of a behavioral revolution in international-relations theory.

To begin with, Lake is quite generous towards the rationalist framework, giving it “two cheers” and conceding that it captures most of the strategic tensions of the case. Nevertheless, Lake argues that the rationalist framework suffers from two shortcomings that ultimately warrant a behavioral revolution. First, the two main causes of conflict in the rationalist framework — information and commitment problems — are constant features of the world system. Therefore, according to Lake, they cannot explain why the United States invaded Iraq and not other countries, such as North Korea. Second, for Lake, the war was caused by irrational factors: cognitive biases and self-delusion. Washington did not obtain the best information about the cost of the war and ignored evidence that Iraq had terminated its WMD program. Saddam Hussein, for his part, did not assess the level of U.S. resolve and sent mixed signals aimed at multiple audiences, including domestic and regional enemies as well as the United States.

In our opinion, Lake is actually *too* generous toward the rationalist framework. According to him, “[b]argaining theory suggests that a fundamental cause of the war, and a key bargaining failure, was Iraq’s inability to commit credibly not to develop WMD or share the resulting technologies with others, including terrorists.” ([Lake 2010/2011](#), 23) We agree that this is *the* fundamental friction that contributed to the war. However, this dynamic is *not* accounted for by the existing rationalist framework. The reason is that in the traditional framework, power shifts are exogenous, *i.e.*, they “just happen.” In this sense, the rationalist framework cannot speak of a state’s attempt to acquire military means and of the danger this poses for peace.

In our work, we address this shortcoming and analyze a state’s decision to acquire nuclear weapons as a costly investment with delayed returns. We find that under perfect information, peace always prevails, no matter how large is a potential shift in the balance of power. Put simply, if a state expects a significant negative shift in the balance of power, and can perfectly detect the militarization attempt that would produce it, it may always issue a credible threat of preventive war, thereby deterring the other state from making the costly military investment in the first place. Realistically, however, information is imperfect and militarization attempts may not be detected. War may therefore occur because a state cannot commit to refrain from attempting to acquire military means covertly.

As Lake writes, information and commitment problems are prevalent in the international system. If Lake sees this feature as a shortcoming of the rationalist framework, we see it as a strength: it focuses on fundamental features of the international system. Contrary to what Lake claims, however, this does not mean that the rationalist framework has no predictive power. While the information and commitment problems are “constant” features of the international scene, their severity — which determines the likelihood of war — depends on the strategic environment. We thus find that war is more likely, everything else equal, as the quality of the information one state has about possible militarization attempts by others decreases, and as the shift in the balance of power resulting from such attempts increases relative to the cost of preventive war. As we argue above, we can then explain why the strategic relationship with Iraq after 9/11 was especially conducive to war.

Does the realization, *ex post*, that Iraq had dismantled its WMD programs mean that U.S. concerns were “unreasonable”? The rationalist framework cannot explain the origin of preferences. In this case, it cannot explain why the Bush Administration saw potential Iraqi nuclearization as causing such a momentous shift in the balance of power. It can, however, help us understand how a decisionmaker weigh the risk of different options as a function of the strategic environment. As we explain above, a rational decisionmaker would be more prone to prosecute a war against Iraq after 9/11 than against other likely targets.

Does the realization, *ex post*, that the U.S. administration was highly resolved (*i.e.*, that it had a high-intensity preference for avoiding Iraqi nuclearization) mean that Saddam was irrational in entertaining his doubts? The rationalist framework argues that enemies have incentives to exaggerate their resolve. Furthermore, Saddam did possess a strategy to placate the United States. First he hoped that Russia or France would oppose a U.S. invasion and that, if such efforts were unsuccessful, he could produce enough casualties that U.S. public opinion would turn against the military campaign. Ultimately, these efforts were stymied by U.S. power preponderance. Still, Saddam’s strategy, if risky, was not irrational.

Lake may be right that multiple audiences played a role in explaining Saddam’s strategy. Indeed, Saddam refused to acknowledge the fact that his nuclear program had been dismantled, despite repeated U.S. requests to do so. This could be due to the fact that, as the Iraq Survey Group concluded, Saddam wanted to draw the benefit of strategic ambiguity when dealing with Iran, Israel, and domestic audiences.

Yet accommodating the role of multiple audiences does not mean that we should abandon the rationalist framework. There is indeed a large and growing rationalist literature on the effect of domestic audiences on international conflict (see, among others, [Fearon 1994](#), [Schultz 1998](#), [Smith 1998](#), [Ramsay 2004](#), [Slantchev 2006](#), [Debs and Goemans 2010](#), [Debs and Weiss 2013](#)). More importantly for our purposes, a focus on multiple audiences may not necessarily improve the explanatory power of our theories; it may in fact obscure it. After all, Saddam had been speaking to multiple audiences for more than a decade before the U.S. invasion. The fundamental dynamic leading to the war, therefore, did not stem from Saddam’s need to deal with multiple audiences. Rather, war was caused by Saddam’s inability to commit to refrain from investing in nuclear capabilities, coupled with U.S. concern that it might not detect an Iraqi nuclearization in time.

Conclusion

The controversy surrounding the United States' decision to invade Iraq, which endures ten years later, continues to trigger some important questions for IR theory. While Lake encourages IR theorists to abandon the rationalist framework, we believe we should develop it further in order to take into account the specific challenges raised by Iraq. In our view, the important shortcoming of the existing rationalist framework highlighted by the Iraq war is that it treats power shifts as exogenous. Yet a key concern surrounding the invasion was the possibility that Iraq would *produce* a shift in the balance of power by acquiring nuclear weapons. Once we amend the rationalist framework to deal with endogenous power shifts resulting from states' decision to militarize, we can capture many of the strategic considerations surrounding the war and can explain why the United States invaded in Iraq after 9/11. Our forthcoming article attempts to do so.

Arguing that the United States' decision to invade Iraq can be understood in the rationalist framework does not amount to an endorsement of that decision. Scholars may, perhaps even should, enter the political debate on such momentous decisions, but their first duty is to develop theoretical frameworks capable of explaining historical patterns. The rationalist framework, rooted in a long tradition of analyzing the causes of war based on the features of the strategic environment, has so far proven capable of doing so. Alternative approaches may also generate unique and powerful predictions. For now, however, we believe that a behavioral revolution is unnecessary.

Finally, much in the historical debate about Iraq mirrors the current policy debate about U.S. options vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear program. Some scholars have recently suggested that a war against Iran was the "least bad option," ([Kroenig 2012](#)) arguing that the cost of a preventive war against Iran is small relative to the effect of Iran's nuclearization. We disagree ([Debs and Monteiro 2012](#)). The cost of a preventive war against Iran would be high. Even a limited strike against Iran's nuclear program would present significant costs, given that key facilities are located near population centers or buried deep underground. Furthermore, a limited preventive strike is highly unlikely to end the Iranian nuclear program, which would proceed, perhaps even intensify, in its aftermath. At the same time, given the limited options the United States possesses in dealing even with a non-nuclear Iran and the robustness of the U.S. and Israeli nuclear deterrents, the effect of Iranian nuclearization would be relatively low when compared with the costs of a strike. A preventive war against Iran is therefore not a desirable option.

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What Caused the Iraq War? David Lake Replies to Debs and Monteiro

by [Daniel Nexon](#) on 2013-07-31 in [Duck- 6 Comments](#)

*Editor's Note: This is a guest post by [David Lake](#), who is the Jerri-Ann and Gary E. Jacobs Professor of Social Sciences and Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego. It responds to an article published in *International Organization* by Alex Debs and Nuno Monteiro. Their [post](#) on the subject appeared yesterday. The [article](#) will be ungated for approximately two weeks.*

“[Known Unknowns](#),” by Alex Debs and Nuno Monteiro (DM), newly released electronically by *International Organization* in advance of its publication this fall, is an important addition to the bargaining theory of war and adds new insights to the causes of the Iraq War of 2003. Since DM challenge several points in my *International Security* article ([PDF](#)) on bargaining theory and the Iraq War, let me respond briefly.

The key innovation in the model is that investments in military capabilities by the Target (T , Iraq in the case) produce changes in the probability of military victory only with some lag, thus opening a window for the Deterer (D , the U.S.) to launch a preventive war. The lower the costs of war, the more uncertain D is about T 's program, and the more effective the war is likely to be in eliminating the threat to D , the greater the chance of preventive war and the greater the likelihood that the war will be mistaken. This is a nice addition to the basic bargaining model with important implications that go beyond the Iraq case on which the theory is based.

From the outset, I want to clarify that we agree far more than we disagree, including about the central tension between Iraq and the U.S., the effects of 9/11 on the timing of the Iraq War, and the difference between Iraq and North Korea. Debs and Monteiro engage in the product differentiation usual in academic scholarship — highlighting differences rather than commonalities — but the latter are large and overwhelm the points of disagreement, in my view.

By endogenizing the decision to invest in new military capabilities, Debs and Monteiro convert the problem of credible commitment (on which I focus) into a problem of asymmetric information (on which they focus). In their model and empirical interpretation, the problem was not that Saddam Hussein could not commit **not** to develop WMD in the future, but that the U.S. was uncertain about whether a program existed and might provide an opportunity for a “breakout” that would adversely change the probability of victory in a future war. This makes a lot of sense and captures something of decision-making within the Bush administration in the run-up to the war. But it remains a puzzle why Saddam could not demonstrate that he did not have active WMD programs underway. DM argue that it is hard to prove a negative, which is true. But the point is that Saddam did not try but, rather, intentionally obfuscated both his intentions and his actions throughout the 1990s and through the return of the United Nations weapons inspectors in December 2002. Given the clear intention of the U.S. to launch a preventive war by fall 2002 (see below), one might think Saddam would have had every incentive to come “clean,” but he did not. My argument, following much of the literature on the Iraq War, is that Saddam was speaking to multiple audiences including Iran and his potentially rebellious Shiite majority and hoped to deter the latter by promoting continued uncertainty over his weapons programs. DM argue further than their model does not require obfuscation from the problem of multiple audiences — and this is true, analytically — but it misses a central feature of the actual bargaining failure.

Second, the model hinges on uncertainty about T 's military program. But where was the uncertainty about Iraq in 2002-2003? Even if the Bush administration was “fixing” the intelligence around the policy, it remains true that nearly everyone and certainly everyone in the administration was absolutely convinced that Iraq was developing WMD. Given this belief, we are back in a world of “full information” — even if that information was wrong. What mattered in the final decision was not the facts but the belief that Iraq was engaged in weapons development. In turn, given the Bush administration's belief and the publicity surrounding this belief, we are still left with the puzzle of why Saddam did not capitulate in the face of almost certain war. As I argued in my essay, why the Bush administration held this mistaken belief — one not shared with the earlier Clinton administration — and why Saddam did not capitulate at the final hour remain unexplained by bargaining theory.

Finally, for preventive war to be rational, DM correctly deduce that it cannot be “too expensive” and must be “effective” in removing the threat. But here the Bush administration grossly erred in deeply consequential ways. In particular, it defined effectiveness purely in terms of removing Saddam from power and did not consider the possibility of internal anarchy that followed. The failure to consider the costs of governing Iraq after regime change may have been intentional — to realistically estimate the costs would have made plain that the war would be expensive and less likely to be effective in removing future threats to the U.S., and thus would have received significantly less support from the American public. Or it may have simple stupidity, though I remain suspicious of this interpretation. Nonetheless, this failure to consider realistically the costs of the war and postwar reconstruction was clearly “irrational” but hugely consequential. DM are correct to focus on costs and effectiveness, but unfortunately ignore how and why the Bush administration utterly failed to produce accurate estimates of these key variables.

The nub of the matter is that I emphasize factors that fall outside the bargaining model: the multiple audiences of Saddam that complicate the standard two-party bargaining game, the skewed beliefs of the Bush administration and their origins in psychological dispositions, and the failure of the U.S. to consider the likely postwar governance costs. DM present a fully rationalist model that can explain the origins of the Iraq War. But that one can pose a rational model that

predicts preventive war does not make it the right model or necessarily do justice to the facts of the case. As someone often portrayed as a rationalist and defender of rationalist theory, this is an admittedly unusual and possibly ironic position for me to take. Non-rationalists have always complained that the discipline privileges any rationalist explanation over other possible explanations, a stance I have often taken and for which I plead guilty. In this case, however, strict adherence to rationalism and the bargaining model as currently construed – even with DM's important extension – still misses essential aspects of the politics and decision-making that led to the most disastrous and mistaken war of our time.

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What Caused the Iraq War? Debs and Monteiro reply to Lake

by [Daniel Nexon](#) on 2013-08-06 in [Duck- 2 Comments](#)

Editor's Note: This is a guest post by [Alexandre Debs](#) and [Nuno P. Monteiro](#), both of Yale University. In it, they discuss the causes of the Iraq War, a subject of some [recent discussion](#) at The Duck of Minerva. This (surprise) third installment responds to David Lake's [post](#), which itself was an engagement with Debs' and Monteiro's [article](#)—and its [summary post](#) at The Duck of Minerva.

We thank David Lake for writing a [thoughtful response](#), Daniel Nexon for offering a platform to discuss this important issue, and readers of *The Duck of Minerva* and *The Monkey Cage* for engaging [our argument](#).

As Lake mentions in [his response](#), we share many views. Here, we'll just focus on our differences, which also seem to underlie several reactions by readers in the comments to [our initial post](#). We would also like to offer some points of clarification. We'll center on three topics, from the most empirical to the most theoretical: how much of the Iraq War our theory explains; our contribution to the 'rationalist' framework; and the status of 'rationality' in IR theory more generally. Let us address these in turn.

The causes of the Iraq War

The first point on which we'd like to elaborate is to clarify what our theory does and does not do about Iraq. Is it a complete account of the run-up to the Iraq War? Of course not. In claiming that the Iraq war can be explained within the rationalist framework (*i.e.*, without requiring that actors act in non-rational ways), we do not claim to capture all the features of the case. No theory — no useful theory — can provide a complete explanation of a phenomenon as complex as a war. Theories are useful when they highlight important aspects of a certain phenomenon, shedding light on dynamics that were previously in the dark and allowing for comparisons between different cases.

Like all social scientists, we constantly have to decide the proper balance between close description of a case and applicability to other ("out-of-sample") cases. There is no magical solution to this, and reasonable people can reasonably disagree. We strove to find what was, in our view, the minimally sufficient description of the case that had the potential to generate generalizable claims about the causes of war.

Our theoretical view is that, first, as states become less certain of detecting other states' militarization attempts, war becomes more likely; and, second, for any given level of uncertainty about this, as the cost of a preventive war lowers relative to the shift in the balance of power it is meant to avoid, war becomes more likely.

The U.S. preponderance of power that characterizes the post-Cold War lowered the cost of U.S.-led preventive wars. Washington can now act against most (non-nuclear) adversaries without facing the danger of possible escalation against another great power. At the same time, U.S. power preponderance increased the potential magnitude of the shift in the balance of power produced by WMD-acquisition by a non U.S.-aligned state. Then, the 9/11 attacks also had an impact on both key issues above. They lowered U.S. confidence in detecting potentially catastrophic developments on time. Plus they worsened the perceived consequences of WMD acquisition by states with which Washington enjoys poor relations.

Combining the effects of U.S. power preponderance with 9/11, then, our theory highlights why the likelihood of a preventive war against Iraq went up after 2001. Note that theories rarely make "point" predictions (*i.e.*, predictions about specific events) so we're not claiming that our theory retro-predicts the Iraq War. Rather, we claim that the logic above highlights the reasons why a war was more likely after 9/11 and against Iraq instead of, say, North Korea or Iran, who would be able to impose heavier costs on the United States and its allies.

Our focus on these dynamics leaves plenty of room for other views to complement our account of the war. [Lake's view](#) of the role of misperception and multiple audiences in the run-up to the war, for example, sheds light on important aspects at play in the run-up to the Iraq War.

Our point is that given the dynamics highlighted by our theory, these misperceptions and multiple audiences were not necessary for the war. Therefore they are not really "causes" of the war. Put differently, if our aim is to describe what happened in this important historical case (and there's nothing wrong with that), then misperception and multiple audiences must be an important part of the story. If, however, our aim is to understand what caused the war — why against Iraq? why not earlier? why did such a vast swath of the U.S. political system support the war? — then the key issue is, as we show, the lack of certainty about the absence of Iraqi WMDs conjoined with the low expected cost of a war when compared with the potential consequences of a WMD-armed Iraq.

Still, in our view, there is no reason to deny the promise of non-rational approaches to this or any other cases of war. We agree with Lake that a behavioral revolution might bear fruitful insights. To do so, however, we urge scholars who favor such an approach to use irrationality as a starting point, not a concluding remark. What biases stemming from irrationality (that are not already captured by [extant work on misperceptions](#) and [bureaucratic decisionmaking](#)) should IR

theory incorporate? What is the universe of cases that such a theoretical move could better explain? Saying that war happened because President Bush chose to invade Iraq is a truism that applies to this case but has no insight to offer on other cases.

Does this mean the Bush Administration suffered from no biases or misperceptions? Of course not. We believe the Bush Administration's assessment of the situation in the run-up to the war was based on an exceptionally high standard of evidence of the absence of WMD in order to rest its case against Iraq. Yet, support for the war in the months preceding it was vast. In fact, ten years later we still debate whether a hypothetical Gore Administration (the most relevant counterfactual in terms of U.S. decisionmaking) would have gone to war against Iraq. ([Some say yes; others say no.](#)) This indicates that the Bush Administration, much as its views may have been on one end of the risk-aversion spectrum, was certainly not alone in its analysis. Our theory provides an explanation for why this was so. Given the potential consequences of undetected Iraqi nuclearization and the inability to prove it would not happen, the war was rationalizable by most relevant actors.

At the same time, we believe the Bush Administration's misperception about the existence of an Iraqi WMD program is often itself misunderstood. For example, Lake writes in his post:

But where was the uncertainty about Iraq in 2002-2003? Even if the Bush administration was 'fixing' the intelligence around the policy, it remains true that nearly everyone and certainly everyone in the administration was absolutely convinced that Iraq was developing WMD. Given this belief, we are back in a world of 'full information' — even if that information was wrong. What mattered in the final decision was not the facts but the belief that Iraq was engaged in weapons development.

Not so, in our view. U.S. officials were *not* certain that Hussein was militarizing. The problem was that they were also not certain that Hussein was *not* militarizing. They could not rule out this possibility nor could they be certain that they would catch future militarization attempts in time — *i.e.*, before Iraq succeeded in obtaining WMD. Fearing the consequences and the inability to prove a negative, they believed (wrongly, as it turned out) it was time for urgent action.

Certainly, the U.S. administration went to great lengths to “sell” the war and pressed on the urgency of action. Critics who “see through” these attempts may be frustrated, and with the benefit of hindsight discredit the intentions of U.S. policymakers. Furthermore, the extent to which WMD served as the real motivation or merely as a useful political line can remain a matter of debate. Nevertheless, it remains possible to account for the behavior of the key U.S. actors within a rationalist framework. 9/11 lowered U.S. tolerance to the risk if WMD acquisition by adversary states. The balance of power made war more likely against Iraq than against other likely but more powerful targets, such as Iran or North Korea. Under these circumstances, and given the cost of inaction, a rational decisionmaker could doubt the benefit of waiting for additional information.

More generally, the Iraq War case is one in which the overwhelming preponderance of analyses, both scholarly and in the popular discourse, focuses on psychological, irrational, even conspiratorial explanations that emphasize the Bush administration's attempts to manipulate the available evidence to further the case for war. Faced with this situation in which all arguments are on one side, we think there's much value to [Burke's logic](#) of shifting the small weight of one's reasons to the other side — in this case, back to rationalist explanations — in order to gain a better grasp of the case and, equally important, to be able to extract implications from this case to others.

Finally, and this is possibly the thorniest question anyone who tries to explain the Iraq War has to address: Does our theory justify the war? More sharply, are we apologists of the invasion of Iraq in 2003? Certainly not. *Qua* social scientists, our job is to figure out the dynamics at play in making (this) war possible. Doing so does not mean that, *qua* citizens, we think the war was a good idea. In fact, one could make the opposite argument with similar ease. By highlighting the mechanisms that, in our view, caused the war, we hope that our work will contribute towards finding better solutions to future cases of a similar kind. Specifically, our theory highlights how the conditions that made war an attractive solution in the Iraq case (U.S. power preponderance and a perception that Iraqi nuclearization would have dire consequences) also made the war more likely to be mistaken. An optimist might say that this could contribute to dissuading policymakers from launching a war in future cases of a similar kind.

Power shifts and the causes of war

The rationalist framework is a canon of scholarship attempting to understand the causes of war based on the strategic interaction of rational decision-makers, where “rational” means that decisionmakers have well defined preferences and choose the best action available given the information they possess.

The [key insight](#) of the rationalist framework acknowledges that war is costly and destructive, creating a puzzle: why aren't decisionmakers able to bargain reach a peaceful settlement as an alternative to war? To explain war, we must understand why bargaining fails.

The traditional rationalist framework proposes two main mechanisms that may lead even rational decisionmakers to go to war. One is an information problem:

if decisionmakers are imperfectly informed about each other's resolve or capabilities, they may press too hard for concessions, causing war. The other is a [commitment problem](#): decisionmakers cannot commit to refrain from exploiting their future power. Therefore, if a state expects to become weaker, it may want to strike preventively in order to forestall its own decline.

Lake writes that his explanation of the war focuses on commitment problems while ours focuses on information problems:

By endogenizing the decision to invest in new military capabilities, Debs and Monteiro convert the problem of credible commitment (on which I focus) into a problem of asymmetric information (on which they focus). In their model and empirical interpretation, the problem was not that Saddam Hussein could not commit **not** to develop WMD in the future, but that the U.S. was uncertain about whether a program existed and might provide an opportunity for a "breakout" that would adversely change the probability of victory in a future war.

This redescription of our argument prompts us to make two points. First, as we show in [our piece](#), existing work in the rationalist framework cannot accommodate the commitment problem that Lake has in mind. Until now the rationalist framework focused exclusively on shifts in power — resulting from, say, different rates of economic growth — that happen exogenously and over which states have *no* control. Therefore, extant rationalist arguments cannot speak of the inability of a state to commit not to shift the balance of power. Power shifts, so to speak, just happen. So, in a sense, our contribution is to amend the traditional framework to allow for the type of commitment problem that Lake describes.

Second, we actually agree with Lake that the inability of a state to commit not to shift the balance of power *may* cause war. At the same time, we show that this requires imperfect information, which affects the incentives of *both* states. If states' actions were transparent, this inability to commit not to invest in additional military capabilities would never produce conflict. War requires that the state fearing decline be uncertain about whether it could detect another state's militarization attempts; and that the state considering militarization think that it may get away with it without being detected before its new capabilities are deployable. Put differently, it's not that we choose to focus on information problems while Lake prefers to focus on commitment problems. Rather, in the context of militarization attempts (as opposed to exogenous shifts in, say, economic power) commitment problems can only produce war in the presence of information problems. There is no "choice" to be made.

The status of 'rationality' in IR theory

A final note on the role of "rationalist" explanations and the status of "rationality" in the social science and, specifically, in the study of what causes war. Many have objected to our attempt to provide a rationalist explanation for the Iraq War. The enterprise of using rationality in explaining war may be justified on at least two levels. The first, most obvious one, is a belief that states are by and large rational in their actions. The second is that assuming that actors are rational in responding to their strategic environment offers predictive insights and falsifiable propositions. We happen to believe in both. But even if one does not believe that states tend to be rational, the second reason above makes for a powerful case in support of rationalist theories. Put simply, if a theory allows for a state to have any ill-defined preferences or act in any suboptimal way based on the information it possesses, in a way anything goes. The theory becomes unfalsifiable. It also becomes useless in terms of its application to other cases. (Although it may well be better able to describe specific cases in all their facets.)

This means that we should make an effort to develop rational accounts even of tough cases such as the Iraq War — in which the role played by misperceptions, multiple audiences, and incentives to misrepresent information all make it more difficult to understand the basic features of the situation. In short, it is useful to know whether a rational decision-maker, trying to pursue his/her interest in the strategic environment, given the information he/she possesses, would engage in war.

We suspect that in the case of Iraq a rationalist explanation raises suspicion because most IR scholars (ourselves included) find the war regrettable and therefore cast a morally skeptical eye on any argument that may seem to justify it. Although we acknowledge that value-free science is a chimerical, perhaps even undesirable goal, we hope that by making clear that explanation does not equal justification we encourage more reflection on the Iraq War from a rationalist perspective (see, e.g., [here](#) and [here](#)).

At the same time, we encourage scholars to heed David Lake's call and further pursue the avenues in which misperceptions and irrationality can improve our understanding of the causes of war. Additional work on whether there are systematic ways in which decisionmakers fall to misperceptions and make suboptimal decisions can add to the general predictive power of rationalist explanations.

Above all, we hope this debate can help move the field forward.



9/6/2014

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