

Iraq war and diversionary foreign policy politics essay



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On 20 March 2003, the American forces invaded the Republic of Iraq. This marked the beginning of a major war which in the long run became one of the most castigated foreign involvements of the United States in its history. Although on the surface; it was a part of the greater ' War on Terror' which was declared in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. But political scientists and historians have debated on the real motivations of this war. In this paper, an attempt will be made to explain the decision to invade Iraq using the Diversionary War Theory which implies that the growing unpopularity and domestic discontent during President Bush's first term significantly contributed towards the decision to invade Iraq. The paper shall conclude saying that treating Iraq War as a Diversionary War is naïve given the evidence available.

Description of Theory

Diversionary War Theory is an international relations theory that is used to explain a particular use of force by any country which is actually intended to divert the population's attention from its domestic problems. The crux of the theory is that when a leader is threatened by domestic problems (political or economic), he will look forward to options that will distract his nation from domestic problems and unite them for a single cause. The most effective way to do this is to popularize an external threat and present one's government as a stalwart against that threat. Therefore; in times of war (with another country), the support for any country's leader greatly amplifies due to the ' rally round' the flag effect'.

The independent variable in this theory will be domestic political and economic problems that threatened the power of the American President.
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These include all those problems that could have contributed to an electoral defeat for George W. Bush in the 2004 Presidential elections. The paper will mainly focus on the political and the economic ones. The dependent variable is the decision to initiate a war. In this case, the decision to invade Iraq will be treated as a variable dependent upon the growing domestic discontent with the policies of the government.

There are several kinds of evidence that can be used to test this theory. To develop an overall picture of the domestic discontent, various economic indicators can be used to highlight the worsening state of the economy. Other than that, social indicators can be used to develop an understanding of the dissatisfaction of the American population with its government. Though, the most important piece of evidence is the approval ratings of George W. Bush from the day he assumed office till one year after the start of the Iraq War. A careful analysis of these ratings coupled with what people thought about President Bush before and after the war can be used to test whether or not a Diversionary War was a profitable thing to initiate.

Application and Analysis

Iraq had been a problem for the United States since the Gulf War in the early 90s. After United States' decision to back Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the Gulf War, Iraqis had developed a stern dislike for the Americans, and vice versa. Following the Gulf War, the United Nations passed Security Council Resolution 687 which prohibited Iraq for carrying on with its weapons of mass destruction program. It also stated that the existing weapons were to be destroyed under a UN Special Commission. Most of these weapons were destroyed but United States still suspected that Iraq had not halted its

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program completely. All this suspicion regarding Saddam's intentions plus the impetus provided by the global ' War on Terror' pictured Iraq as an external threat. The people inside President Bush's Cabinet that opposed the invasion were sidelined and the United States went on with a full-scale invasion of Iraq on 20 March 2003. Apart from Iraq's suspected possession of weapons of mass destruction, the other reasons stated by some government officials included, Saddam's suspected harboring of Al-Qaeda terrorists and Iraq's poor human rights record. President Bush said in his ultimatum speech from the White House:

We are now acting because the risks of inaction would be far greater. In one year, or five years, the power of Iraq to inflict harm on all free nations would be multiplied many times over. With these capabilities, Saddam Hussein and his terrorist allies could choose the moment of deadly conflict when they are strongest. We choose to meet that threat now, where it arises, before it can appear suddenly in our skies and cities. (Bush)

So, in short President Bush said that it was ' Now or Never'. He said that if Iraq was left to its own device, it would present an ever greater threat to the United States in the future. This was the official story that was fed to the masses by the American government.

Today, many political scientists and historians disagree with these official reasons. The international relations theory that some use and which is being tested in this paper is the Diversionary War Theory. According to this ideal explanation, the decision to invade Iraq was made in order to unite the American nation and distract them from the poor economic performance of

the Bush Presidency. This is partially true. The economic and social conditions under President Bush were not ideal. The tax cuts in 2001 undermined the Social Security and contributed to a rise in the poverty level. The poverty rate increased from 11.3% to 12.7% between 2000 and 2004 (Greenberg 273). Moreover, the unemployment rate had also increased from 4.2% in Jan 2001 to 6.3% in June 2003 (US Department of Labor). All these indicators pointed towards a poor economic performance which would have certainly increased the amount of discontent among the general population. Therefore, people argue that President Bush would have lost the 2004 reelections if he would not have taken the decision to invade Iraq as his domestic performance was not very appreciable. The patriotic fervor ignited by the Iraq War and the 'rally round' the flag' effect might have contributed to President Bush's reelection in 2004.

The evidence for this however is a little less convincing. Two different studies have refuted the claim that Bush's reelection was a product of his decision to invade Iraq. Eichenberg and Stoll concluded in 2004 that the casualty toll in Iraq actually worsened Bush's approval ratings. If there had not been a war, Bush would have still won the elections as his approval ratings would have been around 60% (Eichenberg and Stoll). Moreover, another study by Karol and Miguel in 2005 suggested that Bush would have won the 2004 reelections by a landslide even if he would not have invaded Iraq (Karol and Miguel). These two studies show that the political fortune of President Bush was not threatened by the relatively poor performance of the economy. He would have managed to get reelected without a diversionary war. This

seems to suggest that the Iraq War was not launched with a diversionary incentive.

On the other hand, the Iraq War had a temporary positive impact on the approval ratings of George W. Bush. Another study done by Eichenberg, Stoll and Lebo in 2006 gives evidence for this. Immediately after the invasion of Iraq, President Bush's popularity ratings increased by 15 percentage points (Eichenberg, Stoll and Lebo 789). But this was only a temporary spike. The same study found that President Bush's ratings started to go down after United States started experiencing casualties in Iraq. By August 2004, the approval ratings were down to 50% from 67% at the start of the war (790). This shows that the 'rally round the flag' effect was only visible in the very early stages of the war; as the war progressed and Americans started dying in Iraq, the popularity of President Bush also took a negative turn.

Given the evidence above, if we do a cost-benefit analysis; we will realize that a diversionary war was not in the best interests of the President and the ruling political party. Even though, in the short-term, it spiked up President Bush's ratings, but, in the long-run it left a dark mark on his political career. The political legacy of George W. Bush was severely injured by the Iraq War. If President Bush would not have invaded Iraq, he would have still won the elections of 2004 (like the evidence suggests) and he would have also secured a respectable political legacy. In the long run, Iraq War turned out to be a net negative for President Bush. Therefore, explaining the decision to invade Iraq in terms of diversionary foreign policy becomes very difficult.

Conclusion

The evidence seems to suggest that explaining Iraq War in terms of the Diversionary War Theory will be sheer political naivety. The domestic situation was not as bad as to threaten the political future of George W. Bush and therefore using diversionary foreign policy to secure political future would have been an irrational thing to do.

The failure of Diversionary War Theory to describe the Iraq War lies in the plethora of reasons that led to this war in the first place. It cannot be denied that a Baathist Iraq posed a security threat to the United States and if it were allowed to continue its suspected WMD program, United States' security and political interests would have been threatened severely in the long run. In addition to this, the political influence of the then Vice-President Dick Cheney over President Bush's policy were strong and Dick Cheney had visible interest in the invasion of Iraq. This was because he was a former CEO of the oilfields services giant Halliburton and therefore had a vested interest in the company's ambitions as it was assigned huge projects in Iraq after the commencement of the war. There are other theories which pertain to the American desire to destroy the backbone of OPEC and take control of Iraq's oil. These theories basically say that the neo-conservative lobby successfully forced President Bush's to make a decision that would benefit them. The neo-con plan was to sell Iraq's oil and break the dominance of OPEC by flooding the world market for oil (Palast).

Conclusively, it can be said that treating Iraq War as a Diversionary War is not a good idea. The very fact that the commencement of the Iraq War coincided to an extent with the Presidential elections should not shroud our <https://assignbuster.com/iraq-war-and-diversionary-foreign-policy-politics-essay/>

understanding of the political and international situation that led to Iraq War becoming a reality. There were many reasons and factors that contributed to this war and if we chose to treat Iraq War as a diversionary war, we will end up ignoring all the other reasons that contributed to it. There is a margin of possibility that the decision to invade Iraq might have had diversionary incentives, but the evidence to prove that seems either inconclusively or unauthentic.