



Orientalism, Liberal Empire, and the 2003 Iraq War

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This paper analyzes the 2003 Iraq War's origins through the lens of orientalism and within the history of liberal empire. It argues that Edward Said correctly contended that an orientalist emphasis on essential difference helped justify the war. However, Said overlooked how liberal assertions of universal values also served as a basis for empire in this case and how many opponents of the war also drew on orientalist ideas. Simultaneously, opponents of the Iraq War often used orientalist binaries and stereotypes in their arguments for restraint. It concludes that in using cultural lenses in policy analysis, scholars should pay close attention to shifting contexts and appreciate the multidirectional potentialities of cultural factors for policy.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly explanations of the roots of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq tend to cluster into three camps. Scholars in the “security school,” such as Melvyn Leffler, Frederic Bozo, and Alexandre Debs, view the George W. Bush administration's primary motive as safeguarding the United States from the threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the post-September 11 atmosphere.¹ Scholars in the “hegemony school” like Ahsan Butt, Michael Desch, and Patrick Porter contend that Bush used the terrorist and WMD threats as pretexts for a war to preserve and extend US global hegemony. They often view the Iraq War as a quintessentially liberal crusade to spread democracy and human rights.²

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¹ Joseph Stieb, “Why Did the United States Invade Iraq? The Debate at 20 Years,” *Texas National Security Review*, 6, 3 (Summer 2023), 11–28. Prominent works in this security school include Melvyn Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Frederic Bozo, *A History of the Iraq Crisis: France, the United States, and Iraq, 1991–2003* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016); Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro, “Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War,” *International Organization*, 68, 1 (Winter 2014), 1–31.

² Scholars in this school include Ahsan Butt, “Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?,” *Security Studies*, 28, 2 (2019), 250–85; Michael Desch, “America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in US Foreign Policy,” *International Security*, 32, 3 (Winter 2007–8), 7–43; Patrick Porter, “Iraq: A Liberal War

While efforts have been made to synthesize these approaches, the security-versus-hegemony binary has defined much of the debate on this conflict, especially in political science and history. However, a third cluster of scholars from disciplines like critical international-relations theory and American studies has looked at how aspects of US culture, including biases, identities, and narratives, shaped both the security-based and hegemonic rationales for war.³ Many scholars in what might be called the “cultural school” built on the work of the literary theorist Edward Said, who argued in 2003 that the Iraq War fit a pattern of Western imperialists deploying tropes about dangerous, fanatical Arabs and Muslims to justify imperialism. Said did not attribute the war’s causes solely to orientalism, but he contended that orientalist difference-making and essentializing lay at this war’s core, writing, “Without a well-organized sense that the people over there were not like ‘us’ and didn’t appreciate ‘our’ values – the very core of traditional Orientalist dogma – there would have been no war.”⁴

This article brings these three lines of scholarship further into conversation by examining how cultural factors like orientalism shaped both the definition and the pursuit of security and hegemony in relation to the Iraq War.⁵ It explores how orientalist ideas permeated the US discourse about Iraq and how, in particular, pro-war figures used orientalist notions to sell the war to the public.

Orientalism molded the case for war in several ways. Stereotypes about dangerous and irrational Arabs and Muslims shaped the doctrines of preventive war and generalized deterrence. Moreover, orientalism encouraged the adoption of narrative identities that established Americans as the enlightened bringers of modernity to the static, benighted Middle East.⁶ Finally, supporters of regime change often played on negative cultural representations of Arabs and Muslims to sell the war to a population predisposed to accept these portrayals.

For scholars in the cultural school, orientalist difference-making was central to the motivations and justifications for the Iraq War. Said depicted

after All,” *International Politics*, 55, 2 (March 2018), 334–48; Eric Heinze, “The New Utopianism: Liberalism, American Foreign Policy, and War in Iraq,” *Journal of International Politics Theory*, 4, 1 (April 2008), 105–25.

³ Scholars in this school include Melani McAlister: *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East since 1945*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jeanne Morefield, *Empires without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire: Twenty Years after 9/11* (New York: Verso Books, 2021); Ronald Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴ Edward Said, “A Window on the World,” *The Guardian*, 1 Aug. 2003.

⁵ Klaus Brummer, “Toward a (More) Critical FPA,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 18, 1 (Jan. 2022), at <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab031> (accessed 8 Dec. 2022).

⁶ McAlister, xi.

orientalism as an essentialist perspective based on the “ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority.”⁷ In his framing, imperialists believed they had the right to rule because the conquered populations were innately different from and inferior to themselves.⁸

This paper agrees that orientalist ideas are essential for fully understanding the Iraq War. US leaders both internalized these beliefs and narratives and wielded them to rally public opinion. However, it also develops two qualified challenges to Said and other scholars’ associations of orientalist essentializing and difference-making with the Iraq War by placing this conflict within the larger tradition of liberal imperialism.⁹ The heart of my critique is that scholars like Said do not get the relationship between orientalism, liberalism, and pro- and antiwar thinking exactly right. They overlook how a universalistic form of liberalism motivated the war while underappreciating how an anti-universalistic, often orientalist strain of thought motivated many of the war’s opponents.

In the history of liberal imperialism, figures like John Stuart Mill and Woodrow Wilson argued that more “advanced” Western nations had a right, if not an obligation, to rule colonized populations to transform them into self-governing modern societies.¹⁰ These liberals did not see the differences of the colonized as immutable but as historically and culturally constructed.¹¹ In this sense, liberal imperialism is coercive but anti-essentialist; its proponents believe that human rights, democracy, and modernity are potentially applicable to any culture, and they believe that a period of forcible pedagogical rule is necessary to inculcate these principles.¹² Liberal imperialists also made their own belief systems the end point of history, creating a teleological narrative of progress they used to deflect attention from the violence of imperial rule.¹³

The Iraq War was a continuation of this liberal imperialist tradition. George W. Bush and other regime-change boosters argued that liberal

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 3rd edn (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 42.

⁸ Kumar, 40; Joseph Mackay, *The Counterinsurgent’s Imagination: A New Intellectual History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 120–22.

⁹ Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1–11; Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 185–235.

¹⁰ Pitts, 1–9; Mehta.

¹¹ Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), 339–40; Mehta, 1–2; James Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 202–6.

¹² On the “pedagogy of imperialism” see Hevia, 1–29.

¹³ Morefield, *Empires without Imperialism*, 3–4, 24–25; Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2022).

democracy was a universal ideology which, if implanted in the Middle East, would address terrorism's root causes. They asserted a right to deploy overwhelming power and govern foreign societies to bring about these transformations. For these actors, it was not the "otherness" of Iraqis that legitimized invasion, as Said suggests, but their presumed similarity to Americans.

It is important not to overstate the centrality of liberal idealism in US foreign policy toward the Middle East, which historically was driven more by cold calculations about power and resources and a condescending attitude toward Arabs and Muslims.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the Iraq War occurred in a post-Cold War context in which a universalistic liberalism was surging across the political spectrum and being applied to US policy in the region in novel ways.

These dynamics were particularly powerful in the post-Cold War context in which Americans across the political spectrum, including neoconservatives and liberal internationalists, assumed the final global triumph of liberalism.¹⁵ Thus this paper's first major critique of Said and the cultural school is that, as the Iraq case demonstrates, the constructions of universality and sameness embedded in liberal imperialism can be as potent justifications for empire as orientalist assertions of difference.

The second main critique of the argument that orientalist essentializing and difference-making lie at the heart of the Iraq War is that advocates of restraint toward Iraq were more likely than regime-change supporters to view it as a poor candidate for democratization because its political culture differed essentially from that of the West. Some framed these arguments in orientalist terms about the innate backwardness of Arab societies and the exclusively Western nature of liberalism. Said and other scholars have underappreciated how anti-universalism, even when couched in racist or orientalist language, can undergird restraint and anti-imperialism. This is an important contribution to grasping the role of culture and ideas in shaping the Iraq War, as scholars have paid much less attention to the thinking of the war's opponents.¹⁶

Assessing orientalism's relationship to the Iraq War enables both criticism and synthesis of the security, hegemony, and cultural schools of analysis, all of which help explain the origins of this conflict. Scholars of the security school need to appreciate that the way leaders define and pursue interests, power, and

¹⁴ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, 3rd edn (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Matthew Jacobs: *Imagining the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹⁵ John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 3–6; Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020), 1–9.

¹⁶ Richard Maass, *The Picky Eagle: How Democracy and Xenophobia Limited US Territorial Expansion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press); Eric Love, *Race over Empire: Racism and US Imperialism, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

security is shaped by cultural forces such as orientalism. Scholars of the hegemony school need a stronger sense of how liberal imperialism's belief in its own providential mission is predicated in part on binary cultural narratives of an enlightened West and static East. Finally, scholars of the cultural school should consider how liberal assertions of universality can be as powerful in driving imperialism as classically orientalist assertions of innate difference. Thus we should be careful of viewing orientalism as an inherently pro- or anti-imperial concept, as this determination depends greatly on context.

ORIENTALIST OTHERING AND THE IRAQ WAR

Edward Said's seminal 1978 book *Orientalism* theorized a close relationship between Western cultural representations of "the Orient" and imperialism. Orientalism, he argued, is "a Western style of thought for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" premised on the construction of an essential difference between "the Orient" and "the Occident," or the West.¹⁷ The Orient was an imagined geographical and cultural space stretching from North Africa to East Asia that Western scholars defined as antithetical to the West. Europeans, and later Americans, conceived the Orient as essentially barbaric, decadent, lazy, cruel, irrational, cunning, tyrannical, and fanatical. These depictions, Said argues, did not correspond to reality, but they allowed Westerners to define themselves in opposing and superior terms: industrious, rational, mature, free, civilized, and modern.¹⁸

Said posited that the "nexus of knowledge and power" in orientalism legitimized imperial power over the Orient.¹⁹ Representations of the Orient in literature, poetry, scholarship, and films disseminated these notions throughout the culture, making imperialism seem just and natural.²⁰ Said's work drew attention to the intimate relationship of knowledge production, culture, and power, especially in terms of who represents whom and how this dynamic sustains power imbalances.²¹

¹⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 2–3. For a criticism of Said's definition of orientalism see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992), 179–86.

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 38–40; Timothy Brennan, *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), 180–83.

¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 507; Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 186–88.

²⁰ Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 3–5; Jeanne Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), 139.

²¹ Ussama Makdisi, "After Said: The Limits and Possibilities of a Critical Scholarship of US–Arab Relations," *Diplomatic History*, 38, 3 (June 2014), 657–894, 670–71; Andrew Rotter, "Saidism without Said: Orientalism and US Diplomatic History," *American Historical Review*, 105, 4 (Oct. 2000), 1205–17, 1213–15.

The following section explores three ways in which an orientalist lens provides useful insights into the US invasion of Iraq, in terms of both the ideas and identities of elites and broader cultural perceptions of the Middle East. It focuses on how emphasis on the essentially alien, dangerous, and fanatical characteristics of Arabs and Muslims influenced security-based justifications and motivations for the war.

Orientalist othering and US strategy

Said drew a strong link between orientalist “othering” and the Iraq War. He argued that without the sense that Iraqis were innately different from and inferior to Americans, the war might not have occurred. He also framed the war as part of the lineage of Western imperialism: US leaders had relied on “demeaning stereotypes” and “the same justifications for power and violence ... as the scholars enlisted by the Dutch conquerors of Malaya and Indonesia, the British armies of India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, West Africa, and the French armies of Indochina and North Africa” to justify imperial conquest.²² Said was one of many scholars to link orientalist “othering” to this conflict. The journalist Brian Whitaker, for instance, claimed, “If the Iraq War achieved nothing else, it did at least remind us that Orientalism can serve as the cultural arm of Western imperialism.”²³ Said saw the true goals of the invasion not as spreading democracy but as ensuring oil supplies and guaranteeing “the strength and domination of Israel over its neighbors.”²⁴ He asserted that “the real reasons for this war were oil and domination.”²⁵

One way that “othering” and negative associations with Arabs and Muslims influenced the case for war was through the idea that the Iraqi leadership was irrational, fanatical, and vengeful. The Bush administration argued that Saddam Hussein was constructing WMD, supporting terrorist groups like al Qaeda, and seeking revenge against the United States. They contended that such a vengeful leader could not be permitted to construct WMD and hand

²² Said, “A Window on the World.”

²³ Brian Whitaker, “Reclaiming Orientalism,” *The Guardian*, 19 June 2008, at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/jun/19/middleeast (accessed 11 Feb. 2024). See also Mubarak Altwaiji, “Neo-orientalism and the Neo-imperialism Thesis: Post-9/11 US and Arab World Relationship,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 36, 4 (Fall 2014), 313–23, 319; Debra Merskin, “The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush,” *Mass Communication and Society*, 7, 2 (Nov. 2004), 157–75, 157–58; Deepa Kumar, “Framing Islam: The Resurgence of Orientalism during the Bush II Era,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34, 3 (2010), 270.

²⁴ Edward Said, “Blind Imperial Arrogance,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 2003.

²⁵ Edward Said, “Imperial Continuity: Palestine, Iraq, and US Policy,” *youtube.com*, May 8, 2003, lecture, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgte0J1LihU (accessed 16 Aug. 2022); See also Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 95.

them to terrorists. Strategies like deterrence and containment could not handle this threat. The Bush administration therefore asserted a unilateral right to launch preventive wars to topple the governments of “rogue states” like Iraq. This reasoning formed a key part of Bush Doctrine, the administration’s main justification for war.²⁶

Scholars in the security school on Iraq have portrayed the Bush Doctrine as a strategic response to the conjoined “nexus” threat of terrorism, WMD, and “rogue states.”²⁷ This is an important point, as September 11 transformed the Bush administration’s perception of national security and drastically lowered their tolerance for risk. Top Bush officials felt a deep sense of personal responsibility for stopping potential attacks, and they widened their thinking about the likelihood and severity of attacks from terrorists and state sponsors.²⁸

By adopting an orientalist perspective, however, we can see how cultural perceptions of the Middle East also shaped the Bush Doctrine and the US conception of national security.²⁹ The Bush administration and other commentators’ portrayal of the Iraqi regime as an unstable menace gained credibility from tropes about fanatical Arabs and Muslims.³⁰ During the 1990s, conservative writers portrayed Saddam as seeking “martyrdom” and “revenge and Holy War unending” in spite of his secular nationalist worldview.³¹ In 1996, Paul Wolfowitz, later a key architect of the Iraq War, described Saddam as “driven by a thirst for revenge,” rendering useless “passive containment.”³²

After September 11, references to Saddam’s irrationality and vindictiveness increased. Former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director R. James Woolsey alluded in 2001 to Saddam’s “festering sense of revenge for his humiliation of the Gulf War.”³³ Richard Perle, an influential defense intellectual who served on Bush’s Defense Policy Board, wrote that the “tribal culture of the blood feud” undergirded Saddam’s desire for vengeance.³⁴ Wolfowitz referred to Saddam’s “enormous thirst for revenge” and the possibility that he might “use terrorists as an instrument of revenge.”³⁵

²⁶ Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), 13–14.

²⁷ Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 118, 3 (Fall 2003), 365–88; ²⁸ Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, 51–79.

²⁹ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, xviii.

³⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage, 1994), 304.

³¹ William Safire, “The Phony War,” *New York Times*, 1 Oct. 1990, A21; A. M. Rosenthal, “What Saddam Knows,” *New York Times*, 15 Jan. 1993, A15.

³² Paul Wolfowitz, “Clinton’s Bay of Pigs,” *Wall Street Journal*, 27 Sept. 1996, A18.

³³ R. James Woolsey, “The Iraq Connection,” *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Oct. 2001, A26.

³⁴ Richard Perle, “The US Must Strike at Saddam Hussein,” *New York Times*, 28 Dec. 2001, A19.

³⁵ Paul Wolfowitz, “Remarks by Paul Wolfowitz,” 16 Oct. 2002, *Iraqwatch.org*, at www.iraqwatch.org/government/US/Pentagon/dod-wolfowitz-101602.htm (accessed 3 May 2022).

The influence of Laurie Mylroie in the Bush administration and among hawkish intellectuals shows how notions of the vengeful, irrational Arab bolstered the Bush Doctrine. Mylroie was a foreign-policy intellectual who held numerous academic and think tank positions, including at Harvard and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and advised the US government on terrorism. Mylroie argued that Saddam had orchestrated virtually every major terrorist attack of the 1990s out of a desire for revenge against the United States. She claimed in a 1994 Congressional hearing, “I am not sure now that I can say that there is anything that Saddam would not do.”³⁶ Intelligence experts dismissed her conspiracy theories, but Mylroie became influential among neoconservative advocates for war. In the year 2000, she summarized her findings in a book entitled *Study of Revenge*, which Perle, Wolfowitz, and others lauded.³⁷ Wolfowitz even promoted her theories within the government in the run-up to the 2003 invasion. Christopher Meyer, the British ambassador to the United States, reported Wolfowitz mentioning “substantiated cases of Saddam giving comfort to terrorists, including someone involved in the first attack on the World Trade Center,” showing his affinity for Mylroie’s theories.³⁸

These orientalist conceptions helped discredit arguments that Saddam was sufficiently rational to be deterred, making an invasion unnecessary. For instance, political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt contended that Saddam’s main goals were power and survival. His major acts of aggression, such as the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, were responses to the lack of a clear deterrent threat from the United States. Saddam was brutal and prone to taking risks, but he was not an irrational maniac and could be deterred.³⁹ However, orientalist ideas undercut these arguments by portraying Saddam as so maniacal and vengeful that he would risk his own survival to strike the United States. Polls in late 2002 demonstrated that between 70 and 90 percent of the US public thought Saddam would eventually attack the United States with WMD.⁴⁰

³⁶ Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *US Policy toward Iraq 3 Years after the Gulf War*, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., 23 Feb. 1994, 19.

³⁷ Laurie Mylroie, *Study of Revenge: Saddam Hussein’s Unfinished War against America* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2000).

³⁸ Wolfowitz also encouraged Defense Department officials to read Mylroie’s work. See Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 232; memorandum, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Christopher Meyer to David Manning, “Iraq and Afghanistan: Conversation with Wolfowitz,” 18 March 2002, Digital National Security Archive, Targeting Iraq Part 1, 1.

³⁹ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan.–Feb. 2002, 52–55.

⁴⁰ Chaim Kaufman, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security*, 29, 1 (Summer 2004), 5–48.

There was also a strong link between orientalism and the concept of generalized deterrence, another major motive for war. Many advocates for this war believed that the United States was struck on September 11 because it had projected weakness and indecision in preceding decades by, for instance, retreating from Lebanon and Somalia after being attacked. As Ahsan Butt argues, the Bush administration concluded that forcefully deposing the Iraqi regime would reestablish generalized deterrence, or the reputation for resolve and overwhelming power, thereby preventing further terrorism. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld illustrated this concept in a memorandum on September 11: "We need to bomb something else [other than Afghanistan] to prove that we're, you know, big and strong and not going to be pushed around by these kinds of attacks."⁴¹ Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith reiterated this logic in a memo to Rumsfeld, arguing that striking Afghanistan but not larger targets like Iraq "may be perceived as a sign of weakness rather than strength."⁴²

The generalized deterrence argument for war was culturally specific, reflecting orientalist assumptions that Arabs and Muslims detested weakness, did not understand reason, and required a disciplining hand.⁴³ Influential orientalist scholars such as Raphael Patai and Bernard Lewis promulgated these arguments before and after September 11. Patai's 1973 book *The Arab Mind* portrayed Arabs as impervious to reason and moral appeal but susceptible to shows of power. Neoconservatives referenced his work often, and it became influential among segments of the military and State Department into the 2000s.⁴⁴ Lewis was one of the most influential figures in shaping the Bush administration's views of the Middle East, meeting often with top officials after September 11.⁴⁵ Lewis told Cheney, "One of the things you've got to do to the Arabs is hit them between the eyes with a big stick." Cheney and his deputy Scooter Libby apparently found this claim persuasive.⁴⁶

Lewis explained the "Muslim rage" behind September 11 as stemming from civilizational resentment of Western advancement but also the belief that the United States was "feeble and frightened and incapable of responding."⁴⁷ Now that the United States appeared "soft and pampered," Arab hatred "is no

⁴¹ Ahsan Butt, "Why Did the United States Invade Iraq," 271.

⁴² Memorandum, Douglas Feith to Donald Rumsfeld, "Strategic Planning Guidance for the Joint Staff," 18 Sept. 2001, Digital National Security Archive, Targeting Iraq Part 1, 1.

⁴³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 295.

⁴⁴ Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, 4th edn (Tucson: Recovery Resources Press, 2014); Brian Whitaker, "It's Best Use Is as a Doorstop," *The Guardian*, 19 June 2008.

⁴⁵ Bernard Lewis, *Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian* (New York: Viking, 2012), 329–31.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, "Breaking Ranks," *New Yorker*, 31 Oct. 2005, 54.

⁴⁷ Bernard Lewis, "Targeted by a History of Hatred," *Washington Post*, 10 Sept. 2002, A15.

longer tempered by respect or constrained by fear.”⁴⁸ In a visit with Rumsfeld on 19 September 2001, he said, “Iraq needs to be liberated, and Middle East nations would respect the use of force.”⁴⁹ Lewis later reported that Cheney believed that “the image which we should avoid is that we are a harmless enemy and an unreliable friend.”⁵⁰ Douglas Feith further reflected this attitude in telling one military officer in 2002, “You don’t understand Arabs. You need to tell them what we’re doing. They respect strength.”⁵¹

These orientalist ideas undergirded generalized deterrence as part of the case for war, especially in the public discourse. Analysts frequently referenced notions of “awe” and “face” among Arabs, arguing that deploying high-tech military power would transform Arab “contempt” for the United States into awestruck deference. The influential former CIA analyst Reuel Marc Gerecht linked this concept to Iraq: “Only a war against Saddam Hussein will decisively restore the awe that protects American interests abroad and citizens at home.”⁵² Alluding to Arab cruelty, Gerecht reasoned that “weakness in the Middle East never goes unpunished.”⁵³ The right-wing historian Victor Davis Hanson, whom Cheney read and invited to private meetings, agreed, writing that September 11 resulted from the “national weakness and timidity which prompted these attacks” and arguing that the decisive use of force would dispel this image.⁵⁴

Said posited that the construction of “orientals” as irrational, fanatical, and cruel motivated and justified imperial conquest from the height of the European empires to contemporary US foreign policy. These ideas influenced how US leaders constructed security threats like Iraq and the appropriate responses to them. These leaders then used these ideas as rhetorical cudgels in the public conversation to discredit alternative strategies, inflate the Iraqi threat, and legitimize war.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Bernard Lewis, “September 11 in Historical Perspective,” Speech at Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 Oct. 2001. ⁴⁹ Butt, 276.

⁵⁰ Barton Gellman, *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 231–32.

⁵¹ Draper, *To Start a War: How the Bush Administration Took America into Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 188.

⁵² Reuel Marc Gerecht, “Crushing al Qaeda Is Only a Start,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 Dec. 2001, A18.

⁵³ Reuel Marc Gerecht, “They Live to Die,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 April 2002, A26. See also Norman Podhoretz, “How to Win World War IV,” *Commentary*, Feb. 2002, 20.

⁵⁴ Victor Davis Hanson, *An Autumn of War: What America Learned from September 11 and the War on Terrorism* (New York: Anchor, 2002), 92, 154. See also Charles Krauthammer, “Victory Changes Everything,” *Washington Post*, 30 Nov. 2001, A41.

⁵⁵ Krebs, *Narrative*, 145–72; Iver B. Neumann, “National Security, Culture, and Identity,” in Myriam Dunn Cavely and Victor Maeur, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, 1st edn (New York: Routledge, 2009), 111–20.

Cultural representations of the Orient and the Iraq War

A second link between orientalism and the Iraq War is that cultural representations of Arabs and Muslims in the United States have dehumanized and homogenized these groups. In Melani McAlister's words, "The shape of US responses to September 11 emerged not only from rational debates about policy but also through the cultural work done by media accounts, popular culture, and television images."⁵⁶ These "cultural scripts" fomented hostility toward Middle Easterners and bolstered the plausibility of certain aspects of the case for war.⁵⁷

Representations of Arabs and Muslims in US media and culture stressed decadence, exoticism, and backwardness even before the United States assumed a major role in the Middle East after 1945.⁵⁸ In movies and television, as Jack Shaheen shows, Arabs are "brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, rich dimwits, and abusers of women."⁵⁹ During the 1990–91 Gulf crisis, media portrayed Iraq's leadership as inherently violent and sexually aggressive, reinforcing a sense of otherness.⁶⁰ After September 11, orientalism and Islamophobia intensified in US culture, a trend which some scholars called "neo-orientalism." This referred to a mode of representing the Middle East as both alien and inferior while identifying Islam as the root of this backwardness.⁶¹ Many scholars have argued that the history of orientalism in US culture and post-September 11 Islamophobia predisposed many Americans to accept, if not desire, violence against Middle Easterners, priming the public for war with Iraq.⁶²

In general, the Bush administration emphasized the moderation and equal citizenship of US Muslims, but numerous Americans still conceived of

⁵⁶ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, xxiii. See also Said, *Covering Islam*, 163–5.

⁵⁷ Melani McAlister, "A Cultural History of War without End," *Journal of American History*, 89, 2 (Sept. 2002), 439–55.

⁵⁸ Said, *Covering Islam*, 163; McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 8.

⁵⁹ Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2009); Tim Jon Semmerling, *Evil Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

⁶⁰ Anne Norton, "Gender, Sexuality, and the Iraq of Our Imagination," *Middle East Report* 173 (Nov.–Dec. 1991), at <https://merip.org/1991/11/gender-sexuality-and-the-iraq-of-our-imagination> (accessed 13 Feb. 2024); Purnima Bose, "The Canine-Rescue Narrative, Civilian Casualties, and the Long Gulf War," in Jon Simons and John Louis Lucaites, eds., *In/Visible War: The Culture of War in Twenty-First-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 193–210.

⁶¹ Mohammed Samei, "Neo-orientalism? The Relationship between the West and Islam in Our Globalized World," *Third World Quarterly*, 31, 7 (2010), 1145–60; Ali Behdad and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "Neo-orientalism," in Brian Edwards and Juliet Williams, eds., *Globalizing American Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 283–89.

⁶² Edward Said, "The Essential Terrorist," *The Nation*, 14 June 1986, 195.

Muslims as “the enemy” in the War on Terror. A survey of polling data demonstrates that while a “relatively tolerant” attitude toward Muslim and Arab Americans existed after September 11, distrust of these groups surged in the following years.⁶³ Polls in 2001 and 2002 found 59 percent of respondents supporting extra scrutiny for people of Arab descent at airports and 76 percent wanting to reduce immigration from Muslim-majority countries.⁶⁴ In several 2002 polls, between 60 and 71 percent of Americans believed that the Muslim world considered itself at war with the United States.⁶⁵ Moreover, after September 11 there was a seventeenfold increase in hate crimes against Muslims and Arabs, showing significant antipathy toward these groups.⁶⁶

Orientalism encouraged Westerners to see the “East” as a hostile monolith, and advocates for war built on these associations by portraying Iraq and al Qaeda as a unified threat. The Bush administration touted dubious evidence to assert that these groups were operational allies.⁶⁷ Bush conflated al Qaeda with Iraq shortly before the US invasion: “The terrorist threat to America and the world will be diminished the moment that Saddam Hussein is disarmed.”⁶⁸ The *Wall Street Journal* editors insinuated an Iraqi–al Qaeda relationship not from evidence but from their shared hatred of the United States: “It’s not hard to see that Saddam and bin Laden share common goals . . . expel the Americans from the Middle East, control the Arabian oil fields, identify with the Palestinians to destroy Israel.”⁶⁹ These views also crept into private government assessments.⁷⁰ As one 2002 Defense Department briefing asserted, the basis of their partnership was “shared objectives and animus toward the US.”⁷¹

In fact, Iraq was not a major state sponsor of terrorism compared to states like Iran, and the United States never found evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda

⁶³ Clark McCauley and Jennifer Stellar, “US Muslims after 9/11: Poll Trends 2001–2007,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 3, 3 (Sept. 2009), 35–47; Costas Panagopoulos, “Arab and Muslim Americans and Islam in the Aftermath of 9/11,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 70, 4 (Winter 2006), 608–24.

⁶⁴ Panagopoulos, 613; Henry Weinstein, “Racial Profiling Gains Support as Search Tactic,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 Sept. 2001.

⁶⁵ Panagopoulos, 612; US Department of Justice, *Confronting Discrimination in the Post-9/11 Era: Challenges and Opportunities Ten Years Later*, 2011, at www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2012/04/16/post911summit_report_2012-04.pdf (accessed 30 Oct. 2022), 4.

⁶⁶ Panagopoulos, 609; US Department of Justice, 4.

⁶⁷ George W. Bush, “Transcript of President’s Remarks on Iraq Resolution,” *New York Times*, 27 Sept. 2002, A18.

⁶⁸ “Bush’s Speech on Iraq,” *New York Times*, 18 March 2003, A14.

⁶⁹ Editorial, “Iraq and Al Qaeda,” *Wall Street Journal*, 25 Oct. 2002, A10. See also Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “Getting Serious,” *Weekly Standard*, 19 Nov. 2001, 7; Fouad Ajami, “Two Faces, One Terror,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 Nov. 2002, A12.

⁷⁰ George W. Bush, “Bush’s Speech on Iraq,” *New York Times*, 18 March 2003, A15.

⁷¹ Briefing, US Department of Defense, “Assessing the Relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda,” 16 Sept. 2022, US Intelligence in the Middle East, 2.

had an operational relationship.⁷² These myths nonetheless encouraged the public to see Iraq as an imminent threat.⁷³ An October 2002 poll found that two-thirds of Americans believed that Saddam had a hand in September 11, and a March 2003 poll found that 80 percent of Americans believed that if the United States did not topple Saddam, Iraq would soon help al Qaeda execute a major attack.⁷⁴

The Bush administration's case for war benefited from a culture of suspicion toward Arabs and Muslims even if Bush did not openly endorse orientalist stereotypes. Their tendentious case for war gained plausibility among the public in part because of the underlying layer of negative cultural conceptions of these groups as cruel, duplicitous, and fanatical.

Orientalism and US identity

A final link between orientalist "othering" and the Iraq War is that orientalist binaries shaped how many Americans viewed themselves and the US role in the world, reinforcing narrative identities that encouraged war. Many scholars have stressed the importance of narrative in foreign affairs. As Ronald Krebs argues, narratives are "how human beings order disordered experience and impart meaning to themselves and their world."⁷⁵ By constructing narratives, leaders define the values, membership, and goals of a political community while also establishing the boundaries of legitimate discourse. They are inherently selective and simplifying stories that enable leaders to legitimize certain actions and discredit others. Successful narratives play on deeply rooted cultural beliefs and assumptions to achieve "discursive dominance."⁷⁶

While scholars in the hegemony school have noted that dreams of transforming Middle Eastern politics motivated neoconservative and liberal support for the Iraq War, they have not explored how orientalist beliefs

⁷² US Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counter Terrorism, "Patterns of Global Terrorism: Middle East Overview," 30 April 2000, at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2000/2438.htm> April (accessed 30 Oct. 2022); Navin Bapat, Daniel Ertley, Chansonette Hall, and Mark Lancaster, "Perfect Allies: The Case of Iraq and Al Qaeda," *International Studies Perspectives*, 8, 3 (Aug. 2007), 272–86.

⁷³ Krebs, *Narrative*, 163.

⁷⁴ Carroll Doherty and Hannah Hartig, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11," 2 Sept. 2021, *pewresearch.org*, at www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11 (accessed 31 Oct. 2022). ⁷⁵ Krebs, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4–14. See also Purnima Bose, *Intervention Narratives: Afghanistan, the United States, and the Global War on Terror* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 2–3; Narasimhan Ravi, "Looking beyond Flawed Journalism: How National Interests, Patriotism, and Cultural Values Shaped the Coverage of the Iraq War," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 10, 1 (2005), 45–62.

shaped the underlying narratives that legitimated these visions.⁷⁷ Said argued that Western orientalists defined themselves in part by defining the East as their polar, essential Other. European imperialists imagined themselves as benevolent and rational by creating the dangerous, child-like oriental subject, who needed a benign ruler to guide him toward civilization.⁷⁸ The United States has long seen itself as an exceptional nation with a providential mission to combat tyranny and bring freedom to the world.⁷⁹ Americans formed these narratives in part by contrasting themselves with a benighted, despotic East.⁸⁰ As Jeanne Morefield argues, “it is precisely at the intersection between American narratives about the ‘other’ and American narratives about ‘who we are’ that much contemporary foreign policy discourse in the United States ... finds both validation and cover.”⁸¹ Through these narratives, Americans granted themselves the authority to oversee world politics and rule other peoples.

After September 11, there was a synergy between US narrative identities and orientalist binaries that promoted ventures like the Iraq War. In particular, the idea of this war as a campaign to sow democracy in the Middle East echoed the orientalist binary of a primitive East needing the West’s reforming hand. The Bush administration and liberal and neoconservative hawks believed that political transformation in the Middle East was the key to undercutting terrorism’s roots. Often citing an influential 2002 United Nations report on underdevelopment in Arab societies, they pointed to authoritarianism, religious radicalism, and socioeconomic stagnation in the region.⁸² Bush speechwriter David Frum spelled out the connections between this underdevelopment and US national security:

The Middle East is now a region of overpopulation and underemployment, where tens of millions of young men waste their lives in economic and sexual frustration. The region’s oppressive regimes stifle their people’s complaints about every local grievance, and direct their rage outward instead: to Israel, to America, to the infidel West, until one day that rage devoured 3,000 lives in New York.⁸³

⁷⁷ Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 61–81; Porter, “Iraq: A Liberal War after All,” 340–46; Krebs, 145–72.

⁷⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 1, 49; Meghana Nayak, “Orientalism and ‘Saving’ US State Identity after 9/11,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8, 1 (2006), 54–58.

⁷⁹ Phillip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁸⁰ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, xi.

⁸¹ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 142.

⁸² Thomas Friedman, “Bush, Iraq, and Sister Souljah,” *New York Times*, 8 Dec. 2002, C15.

⁸³ David Frum, “The Truth,” *AEI.org*, 25 Oct. 2002, at www.aei.org/articles/the-truth (accessed 2 Nov. 2022).

One goal of the Iraq War, according to neoconservative Michael Ledeen, should be to “support a vast democratic revolution to liberate all the peoples of the Middle East from tyranny,” which would dry the wells of angry, radicalized young men that stagnant Arab societies produced.⁸⁴ The Middle East in general was “one of the most intellectually absorptive places on earth,” Reuel Gerecht argued, that would easily receive Western direction.⁸⁵ This rationale was particularly important to pro-war liberals, who believed that the War on Terror should be a global campaign for liberal values. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, for example, argued that the United States must help the Middle East “create better governance, to build more open and productive economies, to empower their women and to develop responsible media” to reduce religious extremism’s appeal.⁸⁶

The “Bletchley II” meeting at the Virginia conference center in November 2001 illustrates the orientalist idea of the Middle East as a blank slate for US designs. Paul Wolfowitz asked AEI president Christopher Demuth to organize a private meeting of Middle East experts who could consider the nature and long-term trajectory of the War on Terror. Nicknamed as a successor to the British code-breaking exercise at Bletchley Park during World War II, this panel featured Lewis, Gerecht, the neoconservative intellectuals Fouad Ajami and James Q. Wilson, and *Newsweek* columnist Fareed Zakaria. One participant summarized their conclusions: “We’re facing a two-generation war. And start with Iraq.” Iraq was both vulnerable and threatening, but if it became a democracy it could spark massive political change in the Middle East, paving the way to victory in the War on Terror. Bush, Cheney, Rice, and Wolfowitz all found the report stimulating, with Rice calling it “very, very persuasive.” This meeting not only displays the orientalist notion of remaking the passive, stagnant Middle East, but also shows that advocates of this idea had access to elite policymakers before the Iraq War.⁸⁷

Indeed, numerous pro-war thinkers after September 11 revived orientalism in calling for a new imperialism to govern nations like Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq where terrorists often found refuge. Fouad Ajami, who described the US invasion as “The Foreigner’s Gift,” believed that Iraq needed “the interim stewardship of a modern-day high commissioner” to facilitate “a reformist project that seeks to modernize and transform the Arab landscape.” Bush

⁸⁴ Michael Ledeen, “The War on Terror Won’t End in Baghdad,” *Wall Street Journal*, 4 Sept. 2002, A22.

⁸⁵ Reuel Marc Gerecht, “The Restoration of American Awe,” *Weekly Standard*, 12 May 2003, 18.

⁸⁶ Thomas Friedman, “Thinking about Iraq,” *New York Times*, 8 Dec. 2002, A21. See also Fareed Zakaria, “Why Do They Hate Us?” *Newsweek*, 4 Oct. 2001, 22–28.

⁸⁷ Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 83–84.

and Cheney met with Ajami before the invasion, and Cheney cited him in an August 2002 speech to support the idea that Iraqis would celebrate the arrival of US troops.⁸⁸ *National Review* editor Rich Lowry called for a US “protectorate” in Iraq that would represent “a return to an enlightened paternalism toward the Third World, premised on the idea that the Arabs have failed miserably at self-government and need to start anew.”⁸⁹ Some pro-war liberals, such as Michael Ignatieff, also endorsed an imperial role for the United States, which he argued must reorder the entire Middle East.⁹⁰ Said contended that the idea of Iraq having its own history, agency, and complexity played little role in this mind-set. He wrote that the war’s boosters “fabricated an arid landscape ready for American power to construct there an ersatz model of free market ‘democracy’.”⁹¹

Finally, the idea of the Iraq War as part of a Clash of Civilizations built on and reinforced orientalist binaries. This term was coined by Bernard Lewis in a 1990 essay, although it became associated with political scientist Samuel Huntington. Lewis aimed to explain the rise of anti-Western hostility, extremism, and terrorism in parts of the Islamic world. He believed that Islam had failed to adapt to modernity and that Muslims resented the rise of Western power and the stagnation of their societies. The United States became the target of Islamic rage because of its power, prosperity, and modern lifestyle, which enticed Muslims away from the true faith.⁹² Lewis plugged September 11 into the Clash framework, describing it as the latest violent incident in an ancient conflict.⁹³

As the next section explores, the relationship between the Clash thesis and the Iraq War is complicated, but the widespread influence of this idea after September 11 reified orientalist binaries and bolstered stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. It also reinforced the US narrative identity of benevolence and innocence by treating Islamic violence as a product of civilizational pathologies, obscuring the role of US policies in creating the extremist threat.

⁸⁸ Fouad Ajami, “Iraq and the Arabs’ Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, 82, 1 (Jan.–Feb. 2003), 2–18; Ajami, *The Foreigner’s Gift: The Americans, The Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

⁸⁹ Rich Lowry, “End Iraq,” *National Review*, 15 Oct. 2001, 33; Max Boot, “The Case for American Empire,” *Weekly Standard*, 15 Oct. 2001, 27; Morefield, *Empires without Imperialism*, 7.

⁹⁰ Michael Ignatieff, “The American Empire: The Burden,” *New York Times Magazine*, 5 Jan. 2003.

⁹¹ Edward Said, “Orientalism,” *Counterpunch.org*, 5 Aug. 2003, at www.counterpunch.org/2003/08/05/orientalism (accessed 9 Aug. 2022).

⁹² Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 1990, 47–60; Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), xxv–xxvii.

⁹³ Lewis, *Crisis of Islam*, 137–65.

LIBERAL UNIVERSALISM, ORIENTALISM, AND THE IRAQ WAR

Liberal universalism and the case for war with Iraq

Thus far, this paper has shown several ways in which orientalist beliefs contributed to the motives and justifications of the Iraq War within the US government, policy establishment, and culture. Nevertheless, there are problems with Said's analysis of this conflict. Said and others argue that Western imperialists used orientalist "othering" of the East as essentially different from and inferior to the West to justify conquest, control, and paternalistic reform. He summarized this logic: "'they' were not like 'us,' and for that reason deserved to be ruled."⁹⁴ Jeanne Morefield echoes this argument, writing that the "emphasis on the fixed, liberal-democratic character of certain peoples and the equally fixed non-liberal-democratic character of others provided the foundations for the logic of 'regime change' that justified the 2003 invasion of Iraq."⁹⁵

This argument, however, overlooks key facets of the Iraq War's historical context, especially the rise of a universalistic streak in post-Cold War liberalism. Before delving into this argument, it is important to establish a few methodological points. This paper approaches liberalism with close attention to context, viewing it as a loose set of principles that exhibits continuities over time but also meaningful situational variations.⁹⁶ These principles include individual human rights, progress, rationality, pluralism, tolerance, open economic competition, and skepticism about concentrated power.⁹⁷ In contrast to some scholars in the hegemony school, this paper does not treat liberalism as essentially pro- or anti-imperial, as liberal ideas are historically and theoretically capable of supporting or critiquing empire.⁹⁸

Leaders like Bush, as well as neoconservative and liberal champions of the Iraq War, believed that liberal values were universally applicable, that most Iraqis were eager to embrace democracy, and that remaking Iraqi politics would be easy given the universality of these ideals.⁹⁹ Within this milieu, it was less "difference-making" than an emphasis on similarity and

⁹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, xx.

⁹⁵ Morefield, *Empires without Imperialism*, 201.

⁹⁶ Pitts, *Turn to Empire*, 4–5; Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 187–89.

⁹⁷ Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *American Historical Review*, 99, 4 (Oct. 1994), 1043–73; Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?," *Political Theory*, 42, 6 (Dec. 2014), 682–715; Fawcett, *Liberalism*, 4.

⁹⁸ Andrew Fitzmaurice makes this critique of scholars like Uday Mehta and Michael Desch, who tend to essentialize liberalism as imperialist. See Andrew Fitzmaurice, "Liberalism and Empire in Nineteenth-Century International Law," *American History Review*, 117, 1 (Feb. 2012), 122–40.

⁹⁹ Porter, "Liberal War," 334–48; Nicholas Kitchen and Michael Cox, "Just Another Liberal War? Western Interventionism and the Iraq War," in Amitav Acharya and Hiro Katsumata, eds., *Beyond Iraq: The Future of World Order* (London: World Scientific, 2011), 65–84.

value-universalism that made war seem right and necessary. As Jennifer Pitts argues, value-universalism can be understood as a “hegemonic universalism” whose acolytes “assumed that their own society’s beliefs constituted universal moral standards to which others would ultimately conform.”¹⁰⁰ This does not mean that orientalism cannot help us understand these impulses in US foreign policy but that scholars need to approach the relationship of liberalism, imperialism, and orientalism with greater nuance and more attention to shifts in context.¹⁰¹

The post-Cold War period witnessed a surge in triumphant liberal value-universalism that reshaped the way many policymakers and intellectuals viewed the US role in the world. Francis Fukuyama argued that the US victory in the Cold War signaled “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”¹⁰² Neoconservatives such as Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and the writers Robert Kagan and William Kristol proclaimed that the United States should use this moment to spread liberal values as widely as possible while solidifying its status as the undisputed superpower.¹⁰³ Liberal internationalists such as Samantha Power and Michael Ignatieff similarly contended that the United States had a responsibility not only to spread democracy but to intervene in humanitarian crises.¹⁰⁴

These groups had some differences; for instance, liberal internationalists believed that the United States should spread these values through international law and multilateral institutions, whereas neoconservatives disdained these entities as constraints on US power. But they both supported what Benjamin Miller calls an “offensive liberalism” that would maintain and extend a global liberal hegemony and transform authoritarian rivals into free-market democracies.¹⁰⁵ This mind-set also reflected the surge of human rights discourse in the policy establishment in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as a sense of optimism stemming from the “third wave” of democratization in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and South America.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Jennifer Pitts, “Empire and Legal Universalisms in the Eighteenth Century,” *American Historical Review*, 1 (Feb. 2012), 92–121, 120. See also Desch, “Liberal Illiberalism,” 7–43.

¹⁰¹ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 267.

¹⁰² Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *National Interest*, 16 (Summer 1989), 3–19, 4.

¹⁰³ Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America’s Destiny* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1996); Michael Ledeen, *Freedom Betrayed: How America Led a Global Democratic Revolution, Won the Cold War, and Walked Away* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁴ Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 378–406.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin Miller, “Explaining Changes in US Grand Strategy: 9/11, the Rise of Offensive Liberalism, and the War in Iraq,” *Security Studies*, 19, 1 (2010), 26–65.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Stieb, “The Vital Center Reborn: Redefining Liberalism between 9/11 and the Iraq War,” *Modern American History*, 4, 3 (2021), 285–304; Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today,” *American Quarterly*, 56, 1 (March 2004), 1–18.

Official grand strategies reflected this universalist consensus. President Clinton's national security adviser, Anthony Lake, referenced the "universal appeal" of liberal ideals in announcing the doctrine of "democratic enlargement" in 1993.¹⁰⁷ The Bush administration endorsed a similar view in its 2002 National Security Strategy, describing the Cold War as "a decisive victory" for "a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise."¹⁰⁸

This idealism shaped the political movement in the 1990s to replace the containment strategy toward Iraq with regime change. The Democratic Senator Robert Kerrey reflected this thinking in 1991: "yearning for democratic processes is a natural and universal human characteristic ... it is a fundamental aspect of human dignity which cuts across all national, religious, ethnic, and economic barriers."¹⁰⁹ The 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, which Kerrey sponsored, called for the United States to seek Saddam's ouster and to "promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime."¹¹⁰ As historian Lawrence Freedman argues, these liberal values motivated US policymakers and politicians to reject containment, a realist-minded strategy that prioritized minimizing Iraq's military reach rather than transforming its political system.¹¹¹ This liberal universalism helped build a bipartisan "regime change consensus" toward Iraq within the US policy establishment even before September 11.¹¹²

This liberal value-universalism intensified after September 11 and became a major part of the both the Bush administration's motives for invading Iraq and their broader foreign-policy approach. While key figures like Bush and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice had recommended a more restrained foreign policy before September 11, after the attacks they fervently embraced a liberal foreign-policy paradigm, including the idea of democracy, human rights, and free-market capitalism as universal goods that US power should advance.¹¹³ In their arguments for regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan, they held that

¹⁰⁷ Anthony Lake, "From Containment to Enlargement," speech, Washington, DC, 21 Sept. 1993.

¹⁰⁸ Condoleezza Rice and George W. Bush, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," in John Ehrenberg, Patrice McSherry, Jose Sanchez, and Caroleen Sayej, eds., *The Iraq Papers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 81–84, 83.

¹⁰⁹ *Cong. Rec.*, Senate, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., 27 Feb. 1991, 4403.

¹¹⁰ The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, Public Law 338, 105th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congress.gov*, 31 Oct. 1998, at www.at.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/h1998 (accessed 22 Sept. 2022).

¹¹¹ Lawrence Freedman, "Iraq, Liberal Wars, and Illiberal Containment," *Survival*, 48, 4 (Winter 2006), 51–65.

¹¹² Joseph Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics, 1991–2003* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 187–88.

¹¹³ Rice and Bush. On this transformation see James Traub, *The Freedom Agenda: Why America Must Spread Democracy (Just Not the Way George Bush Did)* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 99–122.

states' right to sovereignty depended not just on their external actions but on the extent to which their regime type and internal behavior conformed to liberal standards.¹¹⁴ They argued further that world order must be founded on a community of capitalist democracies, following the idea that these regimes are inherently more peaceful and cooperative, while autocracies are more aggressive. Bush, for instance, declared on the eve of the invasion, "The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder."¹¹⁵

The Bush administration seized on September 11 to advance the goal of toppling Saddam Hussein and evoked the mission of spreading of liberalism as part of their case.¹¹⁶ In the 2002 State of the Union, Bush declared, "America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations, and no nation is exempt from them."¹¹⁷ In a June 2002 speech promulgating the Bush Doctrine, he asserted, "Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, in every place."¹¹⁸ Even erstwhile "realists" like Rice embraced universalism, proclaiming that principles such as "free speech, equal justice, respect for women, religious tolerance, and limits on the power of the state ... are universal."¹¹⁹

This vision of transforming Middle Eastern politics hinged on the idea that liberal democracy was universal.¹²⁰ Numerous accounts show that top administration officials privately referred to the universality of democracy and human rights in the lead-up to war, suggesting that these were genuine motives and not mere ideological cover stories. Brent Scowcroft, a longtime Republican policymaker and skeptic of the war, recalled his former protégé Rice saying, "We're going to democratize Iraq" with an "evangelical tone."¹²¹ Democracy was listed as a war aim in planning documents for the

¹¹⁴ Jeremy Moses, "Liberal Internationalist Discourse and the Use of Force: Blair, Bush, and Beyond," *International Politics*, 47 (2010), 26–51; Desch, "Liberal Illiberalism," 14–15; Heinze, "New Utopianism," 116–17.

¹¹⁵ George W. Bush, "Full Text: George Bush's Speech to the American Enterprise Institute," *The Guardian*, 27 Feb. 2003, at www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/27/usa.iraq2 (accessed 29 July 2024). On liberal ideas of democracy and world order see Michael Desch, "Benevolent Cant? Kant's Liberal Imperialism," *Review of Politics*, 73, 3 (Fall 2011), 649–56; Kitchen and Cox, *Western Interventionism*, 75–77.

¹¹⁶ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 334–35.

¹¹⁷ George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," 2002, in Andrew Bacevich, ed., *Ideas and American Foreign Policy: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 444–47.

¹¹⁸ George W. Bush, "West Point Commencement Speech," 2002, in Bacevich, 446–48, 446.

¹¹⁹ Condoleezza Rice, "Wriston Lecture," *American Presidency Project*, 1 Oct. 2002, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=79793&st=iraq&st1 (accessed 23 July 2018).

¹²⁰ Bush, "State of the Union Address." ¹²¹ Goldberg, "Breaking Ranks."

invasion.¹²² Bush, moreover, embraced value-universalism, in part from his devout Christian faith.¹²³ The Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky recalled that the White House called him a few days after his book *The Case for Democracy* came out to arrange a meeting with Bush. Sharansky contended that “democracy is for everybody,” and he framed the War on Terror as a “global war between the forces of terror and the forces of democracy.” He recalls Bush showing real enthusiasm over his book, even citing specific pages. Bush told a reporter, “If you want a glimpse of how I think about foreign policy, read Natan Sharansky’s book ... it’s a great book.”¹²⁴

The Bush administration’s use of this universalistic language helped build a militant consensus among neoconservatives as well as among Democrats and liberals.¹²⁵ The neoconservative William Kristol argued that for too long US leaders had “assumed that certain parts of the world are somehow not interested in freedom and democracy.”¹²⁶ The liberal George Packer similarly declared, “a liberal foreign policy starts with the idea that the things US liberals want for themselves and for their own country – liberty and equality ensured by collective actions ... should be America’s goal for the rest of the world.”¹²⁷

Supporters of the Iraq War contended further that the occupation would succeed because Iraqis were a modern, educated people. Well-connected exiles like the head of the Iraqi National Congress Ahmed Chalabi and the influential author Kanan Makiya frequently made this argument, lending it a veneer of credibility. Makiya, for instance, wrote in late 2001 that “Iraq’s infrastructure, its middle class, its secular intelligentsia, its high levels of education ... are all reason for thinking that a new kind of westward political order can ... be set up in Iraq.”¹²⁸ Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, who was personally close to these exiles, echoed these ideas, referring to the “talented” and

¹²² Condoleezza Rice, “Principal’s Committee Review of Iraq Policy Paper,” *Rumsfeld Papers*, 29 Oct. 2002, at https://papers.rumsfeld.com/library/default.asp?zoom_sort=0&zoom_query=Iraq+goals+objectives&zoom_per_page=10&zoom_and=0&Tag+Level+1=-1%7Eo&Tag+Level+2=-1%7Eo (accessed 2 Nov. 2022).

¹²³ Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 603–4.

¹²⁴ Natan Sharansky, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 239–44.

¹²⁵ Stieb, *Regime Change Consensus*, 164.

¹²⁶ Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *What’s Next in the War on Terrorism*, 107th Cong., 2nd sess., 7 Feb. 2002, 20.

¹²⁷ George Packer, “America’s Age of Empire,” *Mother Jones*, Jan.–Feb. 2003, 38. See also George Packer, ed., *The Fight Is for Democracy: Winning the War of Ideas in America and the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Thomas Cushman, ed., *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War with Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹²⁸ Kanan Makiya, “Help the Iraqis Take Their Country Back,” *New York Times*, 21 Nov. 2001, A19; Ahmed Chalabi, “Iraq for the Iraqis,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 Feb. 2003, A14.

“educated” people of Iraq as reasons why establishing democracy there would succeed.¹²⁹ Kristol likewise argued that “Iraq possesses some of the highest literacy rates in the region, an urbanized middle class, and other demographic measures that typically conduce to democracy.”¹³⁰

Regime-change supporters insinuated that the belief that Middle Eastern countries could not be democratic was racist. In a 2003 speech, Bush said,

There was a time when many said that the cultures of Japan and Germany were incapable of sustaining democratic values. Well, they were wrong. Some say the same of Iraq today. They are mistaken ... It is presumptuous and insulting to suggest that a whole region of the world or the one-fifth of humanity that is Muslim is somehow untouched by the most basic aspirations of life.¹³¹

Rice likewise rejected the “condescending view that freedom will not grow in the soil of the Middle East – or that Muslims somehow do not share in the desire to be free.”¹³² Rather than stressing the differences between cultures, Iraq War hawks emphasized the fundamental similarities of Americans and Iraqis in their values.

Of course, the Iraq War was not a pure expression of liberal idealism, and US foreign policy in the modern Middle East has demonstrated tremendous inconsistency in the realm of values. During the 1980s, the United States offered diplomatic recognition, arms sales, and economic aid to Saddam Hussein’s government to support it as a bulwark against Iran. From the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 and the start of the Gulf Crisis in 1990, the George H. W. Bush administration continued to provide Iraq with economic carrots despite its continued crimes, including the Anfal genocide against the Kurds. The Persian Gulf War, moreover, was motivated not by a desire to spread democracy but by the US aims to prevent Iraq from dominating the oil resources of the Persian Gulf as well as Bush’s goal of strengthening norms of collective security and nonaggression. The United States then imposed crippling sanctions on Iraq that contributed to a disastrous public-health crisis.¹³³

After September 11, even as the United States sought to topple rival autocrats like Saddam, it continued to back friendly dictatorships in Saudi Arabia,

¹²⁹ Wolfowitz, “Remarks by Paul Wolfowitz.” For Rumsfeld on this point see Senate Armed Services Committee, *US Policy on Iraq*, 197th Cong., 2nd sess., 19 Sept. 2002, 32.

¹³⁰ Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War over Iraq: Saddam’s Tyranny and America’s Mission* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), 23.

¹³¹ George W. Bush, “In the President’s Words: ‘Free People Will Keep the Peace of the World,’” *New York Times*, 27 Feb. 2003, A16. ¹³² Rice, “Wriston Lecture.”

¹³³ Bruce Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Egypt, and elsewhere. As scholars of the security school would emphasize, the United States almost certainly would not have gone to war without the shock and anger generated by September 11 and the belief within the Bush administration that Iraq was a security threat. Bush, moreover, leaned more on the idea of a “Freedom Agenda” as the justification for the Iraq War after the primary rationale of WMD collapsed shortly after the invasion.¹³⁴ Finally, as we have seen, the Bush administration and other boosters of the war appealed to a shared humanity with Arabs and Muslims while also exploiting orientalist stereotypes about these groups.

These points make many scholars skeptical of the argument that liberal ideals were anything more than a propaganda tool to justify a war based on security motivations or the raw assertion of power.¹³⁵ But this should not be seen as an either/or situation. Universalistic liberal impulses existed alongside and in tension with cold realpolitik and persistent cultural biases, but they nonetheless played critical roles in shaping the decision to invade and forming the grounds of public debate.¹³⁶ The belief in democracy’s universality, and the relative ease of implanting it in foreign nations, motivated policymakers to see the war as both benign and practically feasible.¹³⁷ Moreover, the Iraq War was part of a larger attempt to spark a democratic transformation of the region that the Bush administration believed would undercut terrorism’s causes. More broadly, the war was framed in a liberal understanding of global order as rooted in the idea that liberal, capitalist democracies neither foster terrorism nor go to war with each other.¹³⁸ Finally, the Bush administration did attempt, however haphazardly, to fulfill its promise to build a democracy in Iraq. Bush rejected recommendations from figures like Rumsfeld to quickly draw down US forces and instead committed to a long-term occupation and intensive involvement in Iraqi efforts to form a constitution and representative institutions.¹³⁹

The importance of liberal universalism to the Bush administration’s Iraq policy is further demonstrated by its rejection of the Clash of Civilizations thesis and condemnation of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism. Bush declared in 2002 that “there is no clash of civilizations ... The peoples of the Islamic

¹³⁴ Traub, *Freedom Agenda*, 123–52.

¹³⁵ Leffler, *Confronting Saddam*, xi–xviii; Butt, “Why Did the United States Invade Iraq,” 253; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “Realism, Liberalism, and the Iraq War,” *Survival*, 59, 4 (2017), 7–26. ¹³⁶ Kitchen and Cox, “Western Interventionism,” 66–71.

¹³⁷ Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹³⁸ Porter, “Liberal War,” 338–45; Moses, “Liberal Internationalist Discourse,” 26–51.

¹³⁹ Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005); David Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation.”¹⁴⁰ He denounced al Qaeda and other extremists as “traitors to their own faith” and condemned Americans who might retaliate against Arabs or Muslims.¹⁴¹

Bush may have drawn somewhat on the Clash in portraying the War on Terror as “civilization’s fight” against barbarism and arguing that terrorists hate the United States mainly for its freedoms. However, Bush consistently referred to a clash not between the West and Islam but between the United States and the majority of the world’s nations, including most of its Muslims, on the one hand, and, on the other, “a fringe form of Islamic extremism” of groups like al Qaeda.¹⁴²

Contrast these universalistic views with a quote from President Dwight Eisenhower: “If you go and live with these Arabs, you will find that they simply cannot understand our ideas of freedom and dignity ... They have lived so long under dictatorships of one form or another, how can we expect them to run successfully a free government?”¹⁴³ Eisenhower shows a classical orientalist view of Arabs as stagnant, immature, and unsuited for democracy. Historian Salim Yaqub confirms that mid-twentieth-century US foreign policy toward the Arab world featured “a deep skepticism over the applicability of Enlightenment values to the Middle East.”¹⁴⁴ The Bush administration and other Iraq War boosters expressed a dramatically different view toward Arabs and Muslims. “They” were like “us” because they were modern, understood liberal values, and would succeed in establishing a democracy. These assumptions challenge Said’s argument that without the belief that “the people over there were not like ‘us’ and didn’t appreciate ‘our’ values – the very core of traditional Orientalist dogma – there would have been no war.”¹⁴⁵ In emphasizing orientalist difference-making as the core justification for the Iraq War, Said underestimates the potential for the liberal presumption of universal values to provide powerful rationales for imperial projects such as the Iraq War.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ Bush, “West Point Speech.”

¹⁴¹ George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress,” *Whitehouse.archives.gov*, 20 Sept. 2001, at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> (accessed 24 Oct. 2022).
¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 97.

¹⁴⁴ Salim Yaqub, “Imperious Doctrines: US–Arab Relations from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush,” *Diplomatic History*, 26, 4 (Oct. 2002), 571–91, 572.

¹⁴⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, xx.

¹⁴⁶ Pitts, *Turn to Empire*; Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*, 218–40.

Value-particularism and opposition to war with Iraq

A second problem with the main argument of Said and other scholars of the cultural school about the Iraq War is that opponents of the war stressed the differences between US and Iraqi political cultures more often than did proponents of war. Some contended that these differences were historically contingent and therefore mutable, while others echoed orientalism by emphasizing the innate backwardness of Arabs and Muslims. Either way, numerous skeptics of the war saw the political differences of Iraq, especially its lack of experience with democracy, as reasons to avoid war and eschew projects of democratization.

Their arguments reflect different levels of value-particularism, or the idea that one culture's values and structures may be incommensurable with or inapplicable to other cultures.¹⁴⁷ For example, George Kennan argued in a particularist vein in 1951, "we could not expect to see the emergence of a liberal—democratic Russia along American patterns" and that Americans should cease "our inveterate tendency to judge others by the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves."¹⁴⁸ For Kennan, the irrelevance of democratic values in Russian history was a reason to focus on limiting Soviet power rather than trying to change Russian society.¹⁴⁹ Other versions of value-particularism have been based in more explicitly racial terms. During the early twentieth century, for example, many stalwart opponents of US imperialism in the Philippines and Cuba were racists and orientalists who did not believe that these societies could ever be democratic and who wanted to prevent US society from becoming "contaminated" through contact with these peoples.¹⁵⁰

This lineage raises questions about the idea that orientalist difference-making was vital to the justification for war rather than a reason for restraint. Skeptics of regime change pointed to the alien qualities of Iraqi politics as a reason for restraint throughout the 1990s. Richard Haass, who designed the US containment strategy while working on the National Security Council under George H. W. Bush, argued against trying to topple Saddam following the Gulf War. He judged that "the prospects for democratization in the Arab world must be assessed as bleak" given its sectarian divides and lack of experience with democracy.¹⁵¹ In his memoir written after the Gulf War, Colin

¹⁴⁷ Robert Frazier, "Kennan, 'Universalism,' and the Truman Doctrine," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 11, 2 (Spring 2009), 4–5.

¹⁴⁸ George Kennan, "America and the Russian Future," in Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 135–6. ¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 138–54

¹⁵⁰ Maass, *Picky Eagle*, 12–42.

¹⁵¹ Richard Haass, "The Middle East in the Post-war Period: Political Stability and Operations," paper, 8 Feb. 1991, OA/ID 01584-003, National Security Council, Richard Haass Files, Working Files, George Bush Presidential Library, 2.

Powell used orientalist language to deride the idea that if Saddam was overthrown “he would have necessarily been replaced by a Jeffersonian in some sort of desert democracy where people read *The Federalist Papers* along with the Koran.”¹⁵²

Opponents of regime change reiterated these themes in debates during the Gulf War. The liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. used openly orientalist language in opposing interference in Iraqi society, saying that the region was “characterized from time immemorial by artificial borders, tribal antagonisms, religious fanaticisms.”¹⁵³ The neoconservative writer Irving Kristol described Arabs as “a radically different people from us” who could not be reshaped according to US preferences.¹⁵⁴ The conservative columnist George Will mocked the “supreme political hubris of believing in ‘nation-building’” in Iraq, reasoning that Iraq lacked “the social, institutional, and moral preconditions” for democracy.¹⁵⁵

In debates about Iraq following September 11, many opponents of war further stressed the differences of Iraqi and US political cultures.¹⁵⁶ Some did so in a non-essentialist way by focusing on the country’s recent history. The historian Fawaz Gerges claimed that the “building blocks” of democracy did not exist in Iraq, not because of an essential Arab allergy to democracy, but because the Baathists had crushed civil society and stoked sectarianism.¹⁵⁷ Brent Scowcroft stated that “you cannot with one sweep of the hand or the mind cast off thousands of years of history” and questioned the idea “that inside every human being is the burning desire for freedom and liberty, much less democracy.” By embracing universalistic delusions, he argued, the United States would destabilize the Middle East.¹⁵⁸

Conservative and libertarian opponents of the war drew heavily on value-particularism. Some were “paleoconservatives” who believed in a more isolationist foreign policy and held that values like democracy and individualism were innately Western rather.¹⁵⁹ Their emphasis on Arab difference was essentialist and orientalist. The Hoover Institution fellow Ken Jowitt argued that

¹⁵² Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 513.

¹⁵³ Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *US Policy in the Persian Gulf*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., 4 Dec. 1990, 84.

¹⁵⁴ Irving Kristol, “After the War, What?,” *Wall Street Journal*, 22 Feb. 1991, A21.

¹⁵⁵ George Will, “Stay Out of Carnage in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, 4 April 1991, A22; Will, “The Imperial Conservative,” *Washington Post*, 18 April 1991, A20.

¹⁵⁶ Adam Garfinkle, “The Impossible Imperative? Conjuring Arab Democracy,” *National Interest*, 69 (Fall 2002), 156–67.

¹⁵⁷ Fawaz Gerges, “Illusions of Iraqi Democracy,” *Washington Post*, 8 Oct. 2002, A20.

¹⁵⁸ Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam,” *Wall Street Journal*, 15 Aug. 2002, A12.

¹⁵⁹ George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2016), 178–207.

the war was premised on “the mistaken belief that American culture, ideology, institutions, and psychology are universal.”¹⁶⁰ Democracy was “unintelligible, unacceptable, and unworkable in Iraq.” The *American Conservative* magazine was founded in 2002 by the far-right politician Patrick Buchanan in part to oppose the neoconservative march to war with Iraq. Its writers stressed the violent and despotic political culture of the Arab world: “The only leader who could hold the nation together was the iron-fisted Saddam.”¹⁶¹ Analysts from the libertarian Cato Institute also stated that Iraq lacked “supportive cultural values” for democracy and was mired in a “deeply paternalistic ... traditional tribal culture.”¹⁶²

The Clash of Civilizations thesis provides an additional angle for reconsidering the relationship between orientalist difference-making and the Iraq War. Many scholars, including Said, have argued that the Clash thesis provided an ideological basis for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁶³ Melani McAlister maintains that the Clash formed the “silent justification for its invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.”¹⁶⁴ However, this argument oversimplifies the Clash idea’s ambiguous relationship to the Iraq War and misreads the thinkers who developed it.

Huntington expanded Bernard Lewis’s Clash concept to argue that in the post-Cold War world, geopolitics was defined by competition between sealed civilizational blocs, including Islam against the West, rather than ideologies. Like Lewis, Huntington viewed this conflict as stemming from the ahistorical essences of these blocs: “They flow from the nature of the two religions and the civilizations based on them.”¹⁶⁵ Huntington rejected value-universalism, arguing that the West was unique in its commitment to democracy, individual rights, and the rule of law. These values did not compute in other societies because they were based on a particular Western experience, so there was

¹⁶⁰ Ken Jowitt, “Rage, Hubris, and Regime Change,” *Policy Review*, April–May 2003, 40.

¹⁶¹ Eric Margolis, “Iraq Invasion: The Road to Folly,” *American Conservative*, 7 Oct. 2002; Gary Rosen, *The Right War? The Conservative Debate on Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2–5.

¹⁶² Patrick Basham, “Can Iraq Be Democratic?” *cato.org*, 5 Jan. 2004, at www.cato.org/policy-analysis/can-iraq/be-democracy-0 (accessed 1 Nov. 2022); Leon Hadar, “Pull the Plug on Iraq Fantasy,” *Baltimore Sun*, 6 Nov. 2003, A15.

¹⁶³ Dag Tuastad, “Neo-orientalism and the New Barbarism Thesis: Aspects of Symbolic Violence in the Middle East Conflict(s),” *Third World Quarterly*, 24, 4 (Aug. 2003), 591–3; Hamid Dabashi, *Post-orientalism: Knowledge and Power in a Time of Terror* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 277; Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 141; Edward Said, “An Unacceptable Helplessness,” *counterpunch.org*, 18 Jan. 2003, at www.counterpunch.org/2003/01/18/an-unacceptable-helplessness (accessed 5 Aug. 2022).

¹⁶⁴ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 287.

¹⁶⁵ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 2nd edn (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 211.

little point in trying to spread these values to other cultures.¹⁶⁶ In fact, trying to do so would exacerbate the Clash of Civilizations and prompt an angry Islamic backlash. Huntington opposed the Iraq War these grounds.¹⁶⁷

Lewis's application of the Clash thesis to Iraq was far more ambiguous. He suggested at times that democracy and constitutionalism were alien to the Middle East.¹⁶⁸ Before the Iraq War, he told an interviewer, "Democracy ... is the parochial custom of the English-speaking peoples for the conduct of their public affairs, which may or may not be suitable for others."¹⁶⁹ In his memoir, he also distanced himself from this war, arguing that in his meeting with top Bush officials after September 11 he had recommended that the United States recognize a "Free Government of Iraq" and support an indigenous revolt against Saddam's regime. As for a US invasion, he claimed, "I did not recommend it. On the contrary, I opposed it."¹⁷⁰

This account conflicts with other reports that Lewis supported the war as a way to prove US mettle to the Arab world and transform Middle Eastern politics. He often signaled, especially after September 11, that the Middle East might be ready for gradual, top-down democratization. Numerous accounts, such as the Bletchley II episode, contradict Lewis's memoirs and suggest that he did support the invasion. He had also signed an open letter in 1998 lobbying Clinton for regime change in Iraq.¹⁷¹ While he may have been skeptical of transplanting US values to foreign societies, he often argued that different forms of democracy might be possible in the Middle East, pointing in one AEI conference to "older traditions in the Middle East, based on Islamic ideology, of government by law, consent, and contract."¹⁷² He contended that there were "democratic oppositions" in countries like Iran and Iraq, "people who share our values ... and would like to share our way of life" who could take charge if the United States toppled their autocratic leaders.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁶ Samuel Huntington, "The West: Unique, Not Universal," *Foreign Affairs*, 75, 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1996), 30–35.

¹⁶⁷ "Samuel Huntington, Author and Political Scientist, Dies," *New York Times*, 28 Dec. 2008, A10.

¹⁶⁸ Lewis, "Historical Perspective."

¹⁶⁹ Ian Buruma, "Lost in Translation: The Two Minds of Bernard Lewis," *New Yorker*, 14 June 2004.

¹⁷⁰ Lewis, *Notes on a Century*, 328, 342.

¹⁷¹ Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf, "Open Letter to the President," *iraqwatch.org*, 19 Feb. 1998, at www.iraqwatch.org/perspectives/rumsfeld/openletter.htm (accessed 13 March 2023).

¹⁷² Notes, National Security Council, Office of the National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, Box 342, folder: Future of Iraq [5], AEI Meeting Summary, "The Day After: Planning for a Post-Saddam Iraq," 3 Oct. 2002, George W. Bush Presidential Library, 9. See also Lewis, *Notes on a Century*, 343–6.

¹⁷³ Bernard Lewis, "The Revolt of Islam," *New Yorker*, 19 Nov. 2001.

Historian Zachary Lockman suggests that the core paradox of Lewis's work is that while he was pessimistic about the political evolution of the Middle East, he also came to believe that the United States could defuse Muslim rage by reforming Iraq in a democratic direction.¹⁷⁴ Lewis may have also tactically shifted his views to retain influence in elite policy circles.

The Clash thesis may have been orientalist in many ways, especially its portrayal of Islam and the West as opposite and eternal enemies. However, the consequences of this idea for foreign policy were less straightforward. By no means did the Clash thesis set the intellectual groundwork for an imperialist foreign policy. For Huntington, the innate and alien backwardness of Islam was a reason to oppose Western imperialism and the Iraq War. Lewis is harder to pin down, but he at least partially viewed the essentially different nature of Islam and the Arab world as reasons to be careful of liberal imperialism.

Said and others have argued that orientalist "othering" created pretexts for imperial actions like the Iraq War. The evidence presented in this section has suggested that the opposite relationship is often the case. The emphasis on dramatic, even innate, differences was a major motive for many opponents of the pursuit of regime change in Iraq from the Gulf War to 2003.

CONCLUSION

The first half of this article showed how orientalist beliefs motivated and justified the Iraq War by looking at how stereotypes and binaries influenced policy, public discourse, and narrative identities. This demonstrates the explanatory power of Said's argument that an orientalist emphasis on cultural differences and civilizational hierarchies undergirded both European and US imperialism into the twenty-first century.

Nonetheless, this way of using orientalism does not explain the entirety of the ideas, mind-sets, and assumptions that drove the US invasion of Iraq. This paper has argued that assertions of sameness and universality were equally powerful spurs to empire in this case, if not more so, especially in the historical context of post-Cold War liberal triumphalism.

That does not mean, however, that the Iraq War as a liberal imperial project lacked strong orientalist valences, only that Said and other scholars have not always posited the most accurate relationship between liberalism, orientalism, and empire. The war's architects assumed liberalism's universality without soliciting views on Iraq beyond a small circle of like-minded exile intellectuals and orientalist scholars. Iraqis, like previous imperialist subjects, received

¹⁷⁴ Lockman, *Contending Visions*, 251.

almost no role in defining what was “universal.” This perspective, moreover, erased Iraqi suffering from US power in the preceding decade of war and sanctions, reifying notions of US benevolence.¹⁷⁵ As Said put it, central to the “imperial perspective” is “constructing history from one’s own point of view, seeing its people as subjects whose fate can be decided by what distant administrators think is best for them.”¹⁷⁶

These aspects of the Iraq War reflect Said’s enduring insight that empires are created and preserved not through force alone but through the metropole’s power to define others and subsume their histories into grand narratives. This war also affirmed the idea that the West continues to view societies like Iraq as clay for remolding, demonstrating the compatibility of liberal imperialism and orientalism.¹⁷⁷

This essay also develops orientalism as a framework for analyzing foreign policy in general. This, however, requires rethinking Said’s conception of how orientalism relates to liberal imperialism. Said treated US elites as monolithic and drew a one-way relationship between orientalist difference-making and imperialism. This essay, in contrast, has demonstrated orientalism’s relevance to pro- and antiwar ideas. Bush, for example, benefited from stereotypes about Middle Easterners in advancing his case for war, but his moral universalism challenged the traditional orientalist emphasis on the innate civilizational differences.

These observations suggest that orientalism was not a unidirectional ideology, deployed merely to justify empire, but part of the cultural atmosphere of the policy world, with multiple, often contradictory, potentialities. The methodological point here is that scholars should treat the links between policy-making, discourse, and cultural forces like orientalism as context-specific and multidirectional.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, as Melani McAlister suggests, cultural analysis of policy must disaggregate communities of interpretation and show how different segments of, for instance, the US policy establishment viewed Iraq.¹⁷⁹

Finally, this article concludes that orientalism is valuable for challenging exceptionalist narratives of US foreign policy and linking it to the history of empire. Defenders of US primacy have portrayed the United States as the “indispensable nation.”¹⁸⁰ They depict an unselfish, enlightened actor that upholds global norms and stability. They varyingly assert that the United States is not an empire or that it differs fundamentally from the exploitative

¹⁷⁵ Said, “Imperial Continuity.”

¹⁷⁶ Said, “Blind Imperial Arrogance.”

¹⁷⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 2–7; Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 149–51; Little, *American Orientalism*, 3.

¹⁷⁸ Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 43.

¹⁷⁹ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 304.

¹⁸⁰ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 176–77. For a representative text see Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Knopf, 2018).

European empires of old.¹⁸¹ As Said stated in 2003, “Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate.”¹⁸²

Looking at the policy discourse on the Iraq War through the lens of orientalism exposes the myth of the benevolent, exceptional superpower and shows the enduring strain of liberal imperialism in US history. It demonstrates that assuming the universality of a set of values and the right to use force to spread them can justify empire as much as assertions that “they” are essentially different from “us.” These ideas convinced many powerful Americans that Iraqis would welcome war and occupation, setting the stage for a massive tragedy.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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¹⁸¹ On US denial of its imperial past see Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019).

¹⁸² Said, “Blind Imperial Arrogance.”