



### Wanting War: Why the Bush Administration Invaded Iraq

By Jeffrey Record

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Reviewed by

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President John F. Kennedy reminded scholars and pundits of their limits: “The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer—often, indeed, to the decider himself. . . . There will always be dark and tangled stretches in the decision-making process—mysterious even to those who may be most intimately involved” (Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 1999). The young President, himself an author of note, knew the difficulties of reconstructing the past and the delicate complexities of navigating the shoals of motivation. It is nevertheless imperative that national decisions, policies, and operations be dissected, analyzed, and assessed, lest we repeat our mistakes, a common failing of great powers.

Jeffrey Record, an Air University scholar-practitioner with impeccable credentials, has taken up that challenge on the war in Iraq. Drawing on

the growing record of how we entered into our second war with Iraq, Record has produced an excellent interpretative analysis of the rationale for the George W. Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq. Along with the post-Inchon phase of the Korean War and the Vietnam conflict, Record believes that Operation *Iraqi Freedom* was America’s third costly and unnecessary war of choice. In a scorching attack on the neoconservative reasoning underpinning the war, Record’s central thesis is that the decision to invade was:

*more about the United States than about Iraq. Specifically, the invasion was a conscious expression of America’s unchecked global military hegemony that was designed to perpetuate that hegemony by intimidating those who would challenge it. The invasion represented power exercised first and foremost for its own sake.*

Record skillfully weaves insights from many previous studies, including my own (*Choosing War*, INSS Occasional Paper No. 5 [NDU Press, April 2008]), into his narrative. The heart of his book is the nearly 70-page chapter 4, “The Reasons Why.” There, the author discusses the rationale, aims, objectives, and motives of the war. Among the “reasons why”—and I draw on his terminology spread over a few dozen pages—he analyzes the need to redeem the false victory in *Desert Storm*, demonstrate a new willingness to use force, assert the principle of preventive military action, intimidate North Korea and Iran, promote political reform in the region, create a regional alternative to Saudi Arabia, eliminate an enemy of Israel, vindicate defense transformation, and reestablish the imperial presidency. Record concludes by looking at the consequences of the war, which he believes will be regarded as “a horrible mistake.”

The final few pages of the book assess the war in Iraq in light of the Weinberger Doctrine. Record wisely concludes that the war violated the doctrine’s prudent prescriptions, but that doctrine itself is not an accurate gauge for assessing future cases where the use of force may be necessary.

While one may salute Record’s attempt to get at the root causes, it is also important to pay attention to what the people who made or contributed to these decisions were thinking at the time. For example, in the Pentagon in 2003, we told ourselves that invading Iraq was about the “3 Ts plus WMD:” threats to the region from Iraq, the tyranny of Saddam’s regime, its support to terrorist groups, and of course, Iraq’s stockpile of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and its research and development programs. The WMD issue created the sense of urgency, and its veracity in our eyes had been validated by the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. It is easy to dismiss this thinking today, but the climate of fear in the country and among national decisionmakers in 2002 was sufficiently strong to warp both visions of the future and the decisionmaking process.

Under fear and pressure, smart people can do things that in retrospect appear stupid. While postwar studies can and should create elaborate maps to the rationale that underpins decisions, the actual decisionmaking process is messier and warped by bureaucratic pathologies. There are often as many prime motives as there are senior participants in the process. Learning takes place but often does not insulate an administration from making mistakes. Important warnings that do not fit preconceptions are ignored. Scholars of decisionmaking have to restrain themselves. Things are not always

subject to strict tests of rationality. Without prudent judgment, scholars can impose too much order on the confusion that is modern-day policymaking.

Record makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the underlying rationale behind the invasion, but he would, I am sure, agree that much work remains to be done. Picking up the banner, the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute is working on a series of 10 or more monographs to comprehensively examine the strategic decisions related to the war. The *Operation Iraqi Freedom Key Decisions Monograph Series*, edited by Colonel John R. Martin (Ret.), is off to a great start with two important volumes by Steven Metz, the first on the decision to go to war (*Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: Removing Saddam Hussein by Force*) and the second on the Surge (*Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Strategic Shift of 2007*). The U.S. Naval Institute Press has done its part by publishing John Ballard’s 2010 book, *From Storm to Freedom: America’s Long War with Iraq*, which will help to create a fuller narrative by taking the reader from Operation *Desert Storm* in 1990–1991 to the current war.

The war in Iraq continues, and it remains difficult to draw a final conclusion on our efforts there. Jeffrey Record’s book provides a useful placeholder:

*The experience of the Iraq War almost certainly will diminish America’s appetite for the kind of interventionist military activism that has characterized post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy, especially that during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. . . . Future enemies undoubtedly will attempt to lure the United States into fighting the kind of . . . messy wars into which it stumbled in Vietnam and Iraq. But if such*