



PROJECT MUSE®

## Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience

Charles A. Duelfer, Stephen Benedict Dyson

International Security, Volume 36, Number 1, Summer 2011, pp. 73-100 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/443890>

# Chronic Misperception and International Conflict

The U.S.-Iraq Experience

Charles A. Duelfer  
and  
Stephen Benedict  
Dyson

**W**hy did the United States and Iraq find themselves in full-scale conflict with each other in 1990–91 and 2003, and in almost constant low-level hostilities during the years in-between? We suggest that the situation was neither inevitable nor one that either side, in full possession of all the relevant information about the other, would have purposely engineered: in short, a classic instance of chronic misperception. Combining the psychological literature on perception and its pathologies with the almost unique firsthand access of one of the authors—Charles Duelfer—to the decisionmakers on both sides, we isolate the perceptions that the United States and Iraq held of each other, as well as the biases, mistakes, and intelligence failures of which these images were, at different points in time, both cause and effect.

First, we consider the basic concept of misperception, and explain why core features of international politics combined with the limited cognitive resources of decisionmakers inevitably produce some degree of error. This informs the central task of the article: isolating and explaining the images and beliefs that the United States and Iraq held about themselves and about each other.

On the Iraqi side, we find evidence that President Saddam Hussein underestimated U.S. hostility prior to the wars of 1990–91 and 2003. He failed to appreciate the increased U.S. freedom of action after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the earlier war, and the decreased U.S. tolerance for the set of problems he represented after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Moreover, Saddam suffered from a general overestimation of the shared interests between Iraq and the United States, seeing the two countries as natural allies and himself as a useful bulwark against Iranian expansionism and radical Islamism more generally. Further, Saddam saw U.S. intelligence as close to omniscient, leading him to interpret apparent U.S. disinterest in his initial moves toward Kuwait during 1990 as lack of concern rather than lack of understanding, and leading him, in the 2003 conflict, to believe that the United

---

*Charles A. Duelfer is former Deputy Executive Chairman of the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq and former Special Advisor to the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency on Iraq Weapons of Mass Destruction. Stephen Benedict Dyson is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut.*

---

The authors wish to acknowledge the helpful comments of Robert Jervis and the journal's anonymous reviewers.

---

*International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2011), pp. 73–100  
© 2011 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

States knew he possessed no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and so was engaged in some kind of elaborate bluff or ruse.

Although Saddam cannily perceived some dynamics of the United Nations inspection process, and the likely consequences in the Security Council of his stance toward it, he misperceived at the crucial moment the ability of “friendly” states—especially China, France, and Russia—to restrain the United States from launching an attack. Finally, Saddam sought to understand his position by measuring how the United States acted toward its other enemies. He drew analogies between his own situation and that of Libyan leader Col. Muammar al-Qaddhafi, reasoning that the United States punished Qaddhafi to some degree but never took actions that threatened his regime. He was mistaken in assuming that he would receive similar treatment.

The United States succumbed to a comparable volume of misperceptions, casting doubt on commonplace assertions about the battle of ideas in an open democracy being less likely to produce false images of the world than the internal dynamics of a dictator’s thoughts.<sup>1</sup> Despite a long period of intense focus on Saddam, U.S. decisionmakers failed to grasp key aspects of his worldview. Far from being a kind of cartoonishly evil villain, Saddam saw himself as playing the role of a modern-day Nebuchadnezzar, Hammurabi, or Saladin, giving him a very long view on questions of victory, defeat, and Iraqi interests. He saw the 1990–91 Persian Gulf conflict not as a crushing defeat but, by virtue of his survival in power, as a historic victory. His focus was on endurance and the honor of struggle, rather than on a sensible and pragmatic consideration of what prudence might dictate when one has incurred the displeasure of the world’s only superpower.

U.S. decisionmakers misread Saddam’s perceptions of threat. They found it difficult to understand that Saddam paid only intermittent attention to their policy toward him, and that he was concerned to a much greater degree with what he saw as the linked threat from Iran and Iraq’s own Shiite majority. Many of his actions and signals on questions such as weapons of mass destruction, interpreted in the United States as evidence of dangerous malignity, were in fact directed at the Iranian/Iraqi Shiite threat and not intended for consumption by an American audience.

Further, the United States largely failed to understand Saddam’s grievances toward the world around him, tending to take his actions as evidence of uncalibrated hostility and aggression. Saddam, though, believed his annexation of Kuwait in 1990 to be an entirely justified response to the ingratitude of

---

1. See also Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 5–48.

the Arab states for his country's sacrifices—and expenses—in retarding the Iranian threat by way of the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War. When these states, which had advanced loans to Iraq to fuel the war effort, began to call in the debt, Saddam saw economic aggression designed to keep Iraq weak and sought the annexation of oil-rich Kuwait as a ready fix. This went largely unnoticed in the United States, which took the Kuwaiti incursion as the baseline for forming an image of Saddam as an enemy—one that cast him as malign, devious, aggressive, and beyond redemption. This image, established in 1990, went largely unchallenged in the mind-sets of U.S. decisionmakers until Saddam was deposed in 2003.

Although the elaboration of these misperceptions is of value in and of itself, we seek to at least partly explain them by reference, first of all, to a more basic question: Why do people misperceive, and how do the circumstances of decisionmaking in international politics interact with processes of perception and misperception?

### *A Primer on Misperception*

Misperception can be defined as the gap between the world as it actually exists and the world as it exists in the mind of the perceiver. This definition rests on a basic assumption: that there is both a single objective reality and multiple subjective realities.<sup>2</sup> The difference between the former and the latter is accounted for by perceptual processes and the errors they introduce.<sup>3</sup> Misperception is not a synonym for policy failure and, in some cases, does not affect policy choice.<sup>4</sup> If the perceiver has what game theorists term a dominant strategy—one that provides the best outcome regardless of what the other state does—they will follow that strategy irrespective of the perception of the other's response, because the other's response is irrelevant to the perceiver's payoff.<sup>5</sup>

Misperception does matter to policy choice in the more common circumstance that states have a range of policy options, and the selection of a policy depends on the perceived responses, intentions, and capabilities of others. A misperception can be said to have had a causal effect on a policy choice when the policy would not have been selected in circumstances of more accurate or

---

2. Yaacov Y.I. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 35, 37.

3. Jack S. Levy, "Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems," *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (October 1983), p. 79.

4. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds*, p. 8.

5. Arthur A. Stein, "When Misperception Matters," *World Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (July 1982), pp. 508–509.

complete understanding, or the choice was made according to procedures and pressures that decisionmakers would not accept as appropriate were they conscious of them.<sup>6</sup>

Misperception has both situational and individual causes. It is more likely in situations with inherent ambiguity, involving complex causal interactions among actors and where many interactions are occurring simultaneously. This is a description that fits international politics well: states interact in numerous ways with often murky motives, operate in a context that switches between zero-sum and positive-sum depending on the issues and actors involved, and frequently have opaque internal decisionmaking processes. The nature of international politics, as Robert Jervis states, is "multilateral and interactive. That is, we are not dealing with one state that is perceiving a passive environment, but with many states that are perceiving and reacting to one another."<sup>7</sup>

Communication in this complex environment takes place through the sending and receiving of signals.<sup>8</sup> States send each other signals as to their thinking and likely behavior both intentionally and unwittingly. At the same time, they are receiving signals and attempting to make sense of them. While this is going on in a single dyad, each side of the interaction is sending signals to and receiving signals from many other states in multiple simultaneous interactions. The consequence is that international politics is characterized by incomplete, often contradictory, information concerning interaction with multiple international actors where the payoffs for each side are constantly shifting. It is, in short, overwhelmingly difficult for decisionmakers to evaluate in real time.

These features of international interactions mean that decisionmakers cannot simply observe and then choose a course of action, because their observations are meaningless and choice impossible without first interpreting the mass of information they are receiving. Perception, then, is not a passive process of receiving information but an active process of constructing reality.<sup>9</sup> As Roberta Wohlstetter puts it, "Data are not given, they are taken" and to be able "to discriminate significant sounds against this background of noise, one has to be listening for something or for one of several things. In short, one needs

---

6. Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (April 1968), pp. 458; and Levy, "Misperception and the Causes of War," p. 94.

7. Robert Jervis, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat," in Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, eds., *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 33.

8. Robert Jervis, "Signaling and Perception: Drawing Inferences and Projecting Images," in Kristen Renwick Monroe, ed., *Political Psychology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), pp. 293–314.

9. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds*, p. 9.

not only an ear, but a variety of hypotheses that guide observation.”<sup>10</sup> Here, then, we move from situational to individual causes of misperception.

Humans are not, in fact, physiologically incapable of being perfectly unbiased and solely inductive information processors. They recognize and categorize information based on existing beliefs and hypotheses concerning the nature of the world and the characteristics of actors within it. Therefore, human perception and choice is theory based. People carry around with them guiding principles about the world and specific domains (i.e., international politics) within the world. These guiding principles range from the very general—the fundamental nature of the world—to the very specific—knowledge concerning a particular actor within the world or a particular past event.<sup>11</sup> They are cued through a matching process that recalls the guiding principles from the cavernous stores of long-term memory and puts them to work in evaluating the here and now. Research on the physiology of the brain indicates that this process, long thought to be driven by cold cognitive reasoning brain regions, begins with the activation of the emotional processing system.<sup>12</sup>

These mind-sets and cognitive constructs fulfill several roles. First, and most fundamentally, they strongly influence what people notice. Individual perceptual systems have differentiated threshold levels for noticing stimuli from the environment. Information that accords with an existing theory has to cross a lower threshold to attract attention than information that is dissonant. This leads to the most basic cause of misperception: decisionmakers tend to see what they expect to see and can miss—or ignore—signals that do not fit their internal worldview or mind-set.

Second, perceptual theories help to conserve cognitive resources by providing ready-made maps as to the nature of a situation and action-scripts on the proper response. The perceptual system will first recognize feature A of a situation or actor; indeed feature A may be perceived in part because it fits preexisting knowledge. The situation or actor will then be tagged as being an instance of X, where X also contains features B, C, and D. The perceiver is then disposed to search the situation or actor for signs of B, C, and D, and is likely to find those features present. These ready-made maps or schema encourage the perceiver to go beyond the information given and fill in the gaps of miss-

---

10. Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 56, 70.

11. Alexander L. George, “The ‘Operational Code’: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-making,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1969), pp. 190–222.

12. Stephen Peter Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 27–55; and Jonathan Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” *International Organization*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 1–31

ing knowledge. Moreover, having filled in the blanks of the new situation or actor through matching with an existing schema, the decisionmaker is likely to follow the path of action suggested by the success or failure of dealing with the similar past situation.<sup>13</sup>

Third, the cognitive system defends existing theories from disconfirmation. Because decisionmakers see what they expect to see, and use the matching of features to fill in the blanks, they tend to be biased toward confirming that their existing system of knowledge is an accurate guide to the new people or situations they encounter—or the new data from old people and situations with which they are already familiar—and thus needs at most minor tweaking around the edges. Dissonant information is not noticed, or is noticed yet denied validity, or is noticed and accorded validity, but is seen as not requiring theory change; that is, the information is the exception that proves the rule, in the illogical yet psychologically accurate saying.<sup>14</sup>

The theory-based system for processing information is necessary for comprehension of a complex world, and it is inherent in the human neurological make-up. But it can carry significant costs. When considering another state, a decisionmaker forms a theory of that state's nature, goals, and capabilities that can be usefully called an "image." These images, once formed, become the perceptual filter through which all subsequent information concerning that state must pass, and the scaffold of knowledge from which information about that actor must hang. The image allows decisionmakers to go beyond the information readily available and fill in the blanks about the state.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as Richard Herrmann argues, "The perceiver is likely to lose track of which pieces of information about the other actor emanate from empirical evidence and which are schematic fill-ins."<sup>16</sup>

The United States and Iraq developed images of each other through the privileged weighting of what were seen as especially dispositive pieces of information; subsequent information was interpreted in light of preexisting images; and the dynamic became such that images—and errors—become more rather than less entrenched over time. Our discussion of perceptual processes above gives a basis for explaining how this could occur.

---

13. Deborah Welch Larson, "The Role of Belief Systems and Schemas in Foreign Policy Decision-Making," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (March 1994), pp. 17–33.

14. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 291–296.

15. Deborah Welch Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 50–57.

16. Richard K. Herrmann, "Image Theory and Strategic Interaction in International Relations," in David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 290.



### *Sources of Data for Understanding U.S. and Iraqi Perceptions*

Several recent developments make this study possible and worthwhile. In particular, some primary sources on Iraqi perceptions have recently become available, ameliorating the chronic problem of understanding decisionmaking processes in closed regimes.

First, the United States Joint Forces Command's Iraqi Perspectives Project has exploited regime documents captured during the operation to overthrow Saddam. These documents, covering internal regime communications and records of meetings among the senior Iraq leadership, have formed the basis for a series of invaluable analyses of the regime's policies and perceptions.<sup>17</sup> Efforts continue to exploit and make available these documents.<sup>18</sup>

Although these documents are invaluable, they cannot be the final word. As Jervis puts it, "Even if all documents are preserved and opened for public inspection, we should not expect too much from them. There is little reason to think that they fully and accurately reveal the motives, calculations, beliefs, and goals of the actors. Many decisions were made under great pressure, and in few countries will the foreign policy organizational procedures have required a full explication of the positions and considerations. The job of decisionmakers, after all, is to make decisions, not to lay out a record for future scholars."<sup>19</sup>

This concern can be partially addressed by a second new source on the Iraqi regime: transcripts of the debriefings of Saddam Hussein by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2004, made available by George Washington University's National Security Archive project.<sup>20</sup> After his capture in

---

17. Kevin M. Woods, with Michael R. Pease, Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam's Senior Leadership*, (Norfolk, Va.: Joint Center for Operational Analysis, 2006); Kevin M. Woods, James Lacey, and Williamson Murray, "Saddam's Delusions: The View from the Inside," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (May/June 2006), pp. 2–26; Kevin M. Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008); Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, with Mounir Elkamri, "Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War," McNair Paper, No. 70 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2009); Kevin M. Woods and Mark E. Stout, "Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions: The Case of 'Desert Storm,'" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (February 2010), pp. 5–41; and Kevin M. Woods and Mark E. Stout, "New Sources for the Study of Iraqi Intelligence during the Saddam Era," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (August 2010), pp. 47–87.

18. See Woods and Stout, "New Sources for the Study of Iraqi Intelligence during the Saddam Era," p. 548.

19. Robert Jervis, "Images and the Gulf War," in Stanley A. Renshon, ed., *The Political Psychology of the Gulf War: Leaders, Publics, and the Process of Conflict* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 173.

20. Joyce Battle, ed., "Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI," *National Security Archive Electronic*



December 2003, Saddam was debriefed in two phases. The first debriefings, conducted by a team led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), remain classified. A second phase of debriefings was conducted under the auspices of the Iraq Survey Group, established by President George W. Bush to investigate the regime's relationship to weapons of mass destruction. For these debriefs, an FBI agent took the lead. More than twenty debriefings of Saddam were conducted and later declassified, during which he talked widely on his rise to power in Iraq, the operations of his regime, and his policies in war and peace. These interviews and conversations offer a remarkable insight into Saddam's worldview.

We add to these important primary sources the unique personal experiences of one of the authors, who participated in this interaction at the highest levels for fifteen years. Charles Duelfer was deputy chairman of the UN weapons inspection organization in Iraq—the United Nations Special Commission or UNSCOM—for several years and subsequently, as head of the Iraq Survey Group, he was in charge of investigating the history and final disposition of the Iraqi regime's WMD activities after the 2003 invasion. Duelfer's direct contact with Saddam's ruling elite as a senior UN official and his postinvasion role in debriefing Saddam and his key lieutenants gave him a unique view of the Iraqi perspective. At the same time, Duelfer had direct dialogue with top decisionmakers in Washington. He was the lead author of the *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the Director of Central Intelligence on Iraq WMD* (popularly known as the *Duelfer Report*), which was submitted to Congress and the president in 2004.<sup>21</sup> This report recorded the relationship of the Iraqi regime with WMD over time and in so doing investigated the decisionmaking process, and underlying assumptions, of the regime. Key to the investigation was lengthy interviewing of all top officials including Saddam, examination of regime documents, and investigations of various sites in Iraq.

In what follows, we utilize these sources of information to delineate the key principles that underlay Iraqi and U.S. decisionmaking. In both cases, we consider perceptions and misperceptions that developed in the 1980s, hardened in the 1990s with the 1990–91 Gulf conflict as a crucial inflection point, and culminated in the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The core of the analysis is the focus on the depth and breadth of misunderstanding on both sides.

---

Briefing Book, No. 279 (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, George Washington University, 2009), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB279/index.html>.

21. Charles Duelfer, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, September 30, 2004), [https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq\\_wmd\\_2004/index.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/index.html).

### *The Iraqi Perspective*

Saddam suffered from several misperceptions: he twice underestimated U.S. reactions leading to the decisive military defeat of Iraq on both occasions; he overlooked or miscalculated the implications for Iraq of two world historical events—the end of the Cold War and the September 11 terrorist attacks; he perceived a congruence of key interests between the United States and Iraq that was not reciprocated; he overestimated the omniscience of U.S. intelligence capabilities and the influence friendly states on the UN Security Council were able to exert over U.S. policy; and he sought to understand his situation through a faulty comparison between his regime and that of Muammar al-Gaddafi.

#### UNDERESTIMATING U.S. HOSTILITY IN 1990–91 AND 2003

Given the disparity in military capability between the two states, an Iraqi leader with perfect information and complete understanding would be unlikely to choose a set of actions that he knew would lead to war with a country as powerful as the United States. The two instances of failing to appreciate the danger of—and acting in ways that actively courted—fully committed U.S. military attacks in 1990–91 and 2003 constitute the master misperception from the Iraqi side. A cumulative series of smaller misperceptions led to these mistakes.

#### THE END OF THE COLD WAR AND THE SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACKS

The two miscalculations as to the will of the United States to employ decisive military force were predated by Saddam's misreadings of major events in international politics. The first was the end of the Cold War. Baghdad found it difficult to grasp the local implications of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The NATO/Warsaw Pact military balance suddenly did not dominate U.S. force planning. U.S. forces were no longer tied down in Europe seeking to contain the Soviet threat. Saddam, however, read the end of the Cold War not as a re-orientation of great power politics but in more immediate, self-interested terms: Did the revolutions in Eastern Europe show the vulnerability of authoritarian systems to overthrow by a dissatisfied populace?<sup>22</sup>

Duelfer was told by Iraqi Ambassador to the United Nations Nizar Hamdoon and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz that Saddam did not appre-

---

22. Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 208; and F. Gregory Gause III, "Iraq's Decisions to Go to War, 1980 and 1990," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Winter 2002), p. 56.

ciate the extent to which the end of U.S.-Soviet competition would affect Iraq both in freeing up the U.S. military from its deployment in Europe and in removing the Cold War constraints on superpower intervention in the Middle East. This misperception was a major reason that Saddam underestimated the virulence of the U.S. response to his invasion of Kuwait.<sup>23</sup>

In retrospect, senior Iraqis could not understand why the United States did not work harder to disabuse Saddam of his misperception. One theory held by the regime leadership was that Washington wanted Saddam to go into Kuwait, thus creating a pretext for crushing Iraq's forces. Iraqi leaders repeatedly raised the following question in conversations with Duelfer: If Washington did not want Iraq to go into Kuwait, why did it not inform Saddam that the United States would deploy 500,000 troops, several carrier battle groups, and hundreds of fighter aircraft? The Iraqi leadership discounted the possibility that Washington did not know what it would do in response to an invasion until one actually occurred. In postwar discussions, Saddam indicated that had he understood that the United States would react with this level of force, he would not have gone into Kuwait. In a world of perfect information and comprehension, Saddam would have been deterred.

As with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the September 11 terrorist attacks changed U.S. perceptions of risks and possibilities in ways that the Iraqi regime was slow to appreciate, a mistake that would prove fatal for Saddam this time.<sup>24</sup> Foreign Minister Naji Sabri told Duelfer that Saddam's initial reaction to the attack on the United States was that it could only be good for Iraq. In the past Saddam had, through back channels, offered to assist Washington in countering Islamic fundamentalism. This was, from Baghdad's perspective, a logical extension of the common Iraqi and U.S. interest in countering the Islamic revolutionary government in Tehran. Saddam interpreted the September 11 attacks in this light. The United States had been attacked successfully by a renegade group, and he calculated that this would cause the United States to recognize that it was not all-powerful and to become more receptive to Saddam's offer for help with Islamic extremists.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, neither Saddam nor even the outwardly urbane Tariq Aziz had a particularly nuanced understanding of the internal dynamics of U.S. decision-making. Saddam operated with a crude view of U.S. foreign policy as being

---

23. Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, conversations with Charles Duelfer at the Iraqi Mission to the United Nations in New York, November 22, 1993, and March 17, 1994; and Ambassador Nizar Hamdoon, conversation with Charles Duelfer, June 2, 1995.

24. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, p. 16.

25. Former Foreign Minister Naji Sabri al-Hadithi, conversation with Charles Duelfer, February 11, 2004.

heavily influenced by Israelis or a Jewish lobby.<sup>26</sup> As noted, he perceived a logical congruence of interests between the United States and Iraq, and so he explained away hostile U.S. actions as the result of policy being captured by Zionists. This led him to subscribe to a bizarre conspiracy theory view of U.S. actions, rereading, at the time of his FBI debriefings, his invasion of Kuwait as a preemptive strike against “an American plan” to attack Iraq. According to Saddam, “The United States was planning to destroy Iraq, an intention pushed by Zionism and the effect of Zionism on elections in the United States.” He told his interviewer that he “believed this very much.”<sup>27</sup>

One senior Iraqi who did have a good understanding of the U.S. system was Ambassador Hamdoon, but he had been eased out of a position of influence in the summer of 2000, when Saddam brought Naji Sabri in to lead the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hamdoon was not consulted by Saddam during the crucial period leading to the 2003 invasion. In fact, Hamdoon’s knowledge of the United States had made him vulnerable to suspicions cast on him by competitors within Saddam’s circle of aides. He was seen in Baghdad as being “tainted” by his Washington experience, or even of being a possible collaborator. This suspicion of one of the few figures who could have provided Saddam with an accurate account of thinking in the Bush administration was to prove costly.

#### OVERESTIMATING SHARED INTERESTS

Saddam persisted in the belief that Iraq was more of a natural ally than an enemy of the United States. Iraq, to Saddam, was strong, secular, and westward leaning; had vast resources; and served as the major regional balancer to the radical Islamist government in Iran. To Saddam, an objective analysis indicated that the United States and Iraq had many common views and interests.<sup>28</sup>

Until 1990, Saddam judged his experience with the United States to have been positive.<sup>29</sup> He viewed Iraq and the United States as having a shared antipathy to revolutionary Iran and a desire to keep oil flowing to international markets through the Gulf. Saddam saw the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a very real threat, one that could (and did) inspire Iraqi Shiite actions against his own regime.

---

26. Woods, *The Mother of All Battles*, p. 291.

27. Battle, “Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI,” Interview No. 4, pp. 5–6.

28. Multiple conversations between Duelfer and Ambassadors Nizar Hamdoon (especially a lunch conversation on June 3, 1996) and Saed Hasan al-Musawi between 1993 and 1998; and Duelfer conversations with presidential secretary to Saddam, Abed Hamid Mahmud, on March 21 and 24, 2004.

29. Battle, “Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI,” casual conversation, May 13, 2004, p. 2.

Moreover, Saddam viewed the battle between Iranian revolutionaries and Washington over U.S. hostages in 1979–80 as clear evidence of the congruence of Washington's and Baghdad's interests, and as reducing to zero the chances of U.S. intervention on the Iranian side during the coming Iran-Iraq War.<sup>30</sup> He saw this analysis substantiated in the 1980s as formal diplomatic relations evolved and senior officials of the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations called on him in Baghdad. Indeed, Washington had concluded that it could not afford to have Iraq lose its war with Iran. The United States provided nonmilitary assistance and intelligence to Saddam and assisted in keeping the Persian Gulf open for Iraqi oil exports. Saddam's judgment up to the late 1980s, then, was not without foundation.<sup>31</sup>

During its war with Iran, Iraq expended 101,000 chemical munitions in countering Iranian human wave attacks, often utilizing U.S.-provided intelligence to target Iranian troop concentrations. The occasional protestations by some in the U.S. government about the use of chemical weapons were heavily discounted by Saddam, who believed that public pronouncements were often bad indicators of true intent. Saddam believed that actions speak louder than words, and the U.S. intelligence kept coming.<sup>32</sup>

Other Western countries, notably France and Russia, provided weapons and direct military assistance, financed largely on credit against future oil sales. Arab Gulf states also provided credit to Saddam to help finance his war effort. Saddam perceived Iraq's role as leading the "Arab nation" against a Persian revolutionary threat—a role that logically would make Baghdad Washington's best ally in the region. This perception led to two key miscalculations: prior to his invasion of Kuwait, Saddam believed that at worst he would be able to secure U.S. neutrality, and at best tacit support, for his actions.<sup>33</sup> Later, in the lead-up to the 2003 war, Saddam believed that the United States would accept that Iraq had complied with UN disarmament resolutions and lift the sanctions against Baghdad. Then he would have sought a security agreement with the United States to protect Iraq against Iran—a manifestly unrealistic objective given his image in Washington.<sup>34</sup>

Saddam also did not perceive an irresolvable incompatibility between the twin objectives of pursuing weapons of mass destruction and achieving a good relationship with the United States. He had only to observe Israel, and

---

30. Gause, "Iraq's Decisions to Go to War," p. 69.

31. Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982–1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994); and Barry Rubin, "The United States and Iraq: From Appeasement to War," in Amatzia Baram and Barry Rubin, eds., *Iraq's Road to War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), pp. 256–257.

32. Rubin, "The United States and Iraq," p. 263.

33. Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 214.

34. Battle, "Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI," casual conversation, June 11, 2004, p. 3.

later Pakistan and India, for proof that this was possible. Saddam did not perceive his pursuit of WMD as the action of a rogue regime, but instead as part of the normal process of modernization. Given that Saddam felt he could play a role in promoting Washington's interests in the region, it was logical to him that some accommodation over time should be achievable with the United States whereby it would drop its opposition to, and may in time acquiesce in, Iraqi possession of WMD.<sup>35</sup>

Saddam had thus formed an image of Iraq's importance under his leadership and its role in the international system that was at odds with how others saw it. This dynamic is a common source of misperception in international politics.<sup>36</sup> Decisionmakers have strong motivational drives to maintain a positive image of themselves and their state.<sup>37</sup> Rare indeed is the leader of the state who believes that he or she is following illegitimate and unjustified policies.

Saddam, then, viewed Iraq as having an important role to play in the region and in history, one that was in accordance with Washington's fundamental interests. Iraqi-U.S. relations in the 1970s and 1980s were the basis for the formation of this image, and subsequent data suggesting that it had changed were undervalued or dismissed. When Iraq was treated in ways that were at odds with Saddam's image of his state and with the treatment of other states pursuing similar actions, Saddam believed that this was deeply unjustified and further evidence for his conspiracy theory view of U.S. decisionmaking.<sup>38</sup>

#### OVERESTIMATING THE OMNISCIENCE OF U.S. INTELLIGENCE

After Saddam was deposed, discussions with former senior Iraqi leaders revealed the assumption that the United States, the last superpower and the home of the vaunted CIA and other intelligence capabilities, possessed an almost omniscient and infallible intelligence apparatus. This erroneous assumption underlay some very significant misperceptions throughout the period in question.

In the lead-up to the invasion of Kuwait, while units of Saddam's army were streaming south, the Iraqi leadership assumed that Washington both saw this and understood what it presaged. At the infamous July 25, 1990, meeting between Saddam and U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie, the Iraqis took the absence of a vigorous statement of U.S. opposition to an invasion of Kuwait as an ex-

---

35. Abed Hamid Mahmud, conversation with Duelfer, March 21 and 24, 2004; and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, conversation with Duelfer, June 18, 2004.

36. Kalevi J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (September 1970), pp. 233–309.

37. Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 107.

38. Battle, "Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI," Interview No. 4, p. 3.

pression of the limits of U.S. interests rather than of ignorance or indecision.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, Glaspie had been given instructions that Washington considered clear and firm. As President George H.W. Bush later wrote, "No one, especially Saddam Hussein, could doubt that the U.S. had strong interests in the Gulf and did not condone aggression."<sup>40</sup> In fact, Saddam doubted that very thing.

When asked by a debriefer on January 17, 2004, what he recalled about his meeting with Glaspie, Saddam said he remembered little about it but that it concerned what was fundamentally a dispute between Iraq and Kuwait and that the United States would not interfere in a dispute between two Arab countries. After the meeting, he was "relieved that America was not going to get involved." Curiously, the written records of the meeting from the Iraqi and U.S. sides are similar. This similarity emphasizes again that what is said can be very different from what is heard. When Glaspie was asked by a reporter why her attempt at deterring Saddam had been unsuccessful, she responded that "we foolishly did not realize that he was stupid, that he did not believe our clear and repeated warnings that we would support our vital interests."<sup>41</sup>

This assumption of an all-knowing United States was also evident in the period following the September 11 attacks. Saddam knew that Baghdad had no connection with the al-Qaida attacks and assumed that the United States would also know this. It did not occur to the leadership in Iraq until much later that Washington might blame Iraq or equate it with al-Qaida, especially as Saddam had made known his aversion to radical fundamentalism and had offered to help the United States in fighting it. Similarly with the issue of weapons of mass destruction, Baghdad thought Washington must know that the evidence it presented concerning Iraqi WMD was incorrect. Duelfer discussed this with former Oil Minister (and key WMD technocrat) Amer Rasheed, Presidential Advisor Amer al-Saadi, and Deputy Prime Minister Aziz. The belief in Baghdad was that the United States must know that Iraq had disarmed by 1998 and that Washington was raising doubts about Iraqi compliance simply to keep UN sanctions in place.<sup>42</sup>

#### MISREADING THE UNITED NATIONS

As deputy head of the UNSCOM inspections from 1993 to 2000, and again as the chief investigator into Saddam's WMD programs after the 2003 invasion,

---

39. Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 216.

40. George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p. 311.

41. Quoted in Woods, *The Mother of All Battles*, p. 49.

42. Charles Duelfer, *Hide and Seek: The Search for Truth in Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), pp. 154–155.



Duelfer had a unique opportunity to develop an understanding of how the Iraqis viewed UN weapons inspections and resolutions. During one of the first inspections, while Iraq was still surrounded by the massive forces used to expel it from Kuwait, UNSCOM staff was blocked and various materials were secreted away.<sup>43</sup> This blatant obstruction of the UN inspectors was reported to the Security Council and, after debate among its fifteen members, the council dispatched the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Hans Blix, and the head of the UNSCOM inspection team, Rolf Ekeus, to Baghdad to resolve this dispute over access afforded under the UN cease-fire resolution.

This response—the dispatch of two Swedish diplomats—was seen by Saddam as indicating a weakness of will in the Security Council. He had violated the terms of the cease-fire resolution, and the response was neither regime threatening nor even punitive in nature. The weak response communicated a lesson that shaped Saddam's attitude toward the UN process. The Security Council would not recommence the war to enforce compliance with disarmament requirements, in spite of whatever some members may have said at the time. Saddam came to regard the UN process not as one wherein he would be obligated to comply categorically, but as one of testing and bargaining. He would give up what he had to give up to convince the Security Council to lift its sanctions, but no more.

With this perspective on the process, Baghdad made incremental revelations of the extent of Iraqi WMD programs and undertook only incremental steps to provide inspectors the broad access inscribed in the UN resolutions. UN inspectors, Saddam decided, would not be afforded full and free access to the most sensitive sites and records of his regime.<sup>44</sup>

Over time, Saddam and senior Iraqis came to find the broader UN process vexing and confusing. The collective Security Council position as codified in its resolutions seemed straightforward: sanctions would remain in place until Iraq satisfied weapons inspectors that all of Iraq's WMD capabilities had been eliminated and monitoring systems were put in place to detect any attempts to reconstitute them in the future. Very different messages were sent from individual council members, however. During the Bill Clinton administration, public comments by the president and by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated that Washington's policy was containment of Saddam with an eventual goal of regime change. Albright, in a speech at Georgetown University in March 1997, responded to a question on lifting sanctions by not-

---

43. "Report of the Executive Chairman of UNSCOM to the United Nations Security Council," UN doc. S/23165, October 25, 1991, especially pars. 17–19, 32, and appendix 3, pars. B, C.

44. Duelfer, *Hide and Seek*, pp. 137–161.

ing not that Saddam could have them lifted if he complied with UN resolutions, but that “a dialogue” would be possible with a “successor regime.”<sup>45</sup>

To the Iraqis, Albright’s statement seemed to contradict Security Council resolutions. Containment depended on a permanent retention of sanctions, but the resolutions contained the provision that if and when Iraq satisfied weapons inspectors, then sanctions would be lifted. Saddam and senior Iraqis therefore questioned whether Washington would ever agree to lift sanctions, even if Iraq could satisfy the inspectors. They put this paradox to senior UNSCOM staff as well as to officials of Security Council member nations such as France, Great Britain, and Russia, and received assorted and contradictory opinions in return.<sup>46</sup>

Deputy Prime Minister Aziz raised the issue in October 1993 when he asked Ekeus whether Iraqi compliance with monitoring as specified by UNSCR 715 would yield the benefit of a lifting of the embargo by the Security Council.<sup>47</sup> Likewise there were discussions between Ekeus and Clinton National Security Advisor Tony Lake concerning the necessity for Iraq to have a “light at the end of the tunnel.”<sup>48</sup> This question was also raised regularly in discussions between Duelfer and Ambassadors Nizar Hamdoun and Sayed Hasan al-Musawi in New York in 1994–98.

Washington transmitted a message that was ambiguous. Discussing this issue after the 2003 war, senior Iraqis reported that there was a feeling that, with the passage of time, the United States’ harsh attitude toward Iraq would soften, especially if Baghdad could offer some combination of cooperation in areas of utility to Washington such as the Middle East peace process, oil deals, and countering Islamic extremism. The relatively close relations between Baghdad and Washington of the 1980s remained a strong memory among the Iraqi leadership, and Baghdad strove to return to those days.<sup>49</sup>

Also in the Iraqi frame of reference was the recent experience of Yasser Arafat, whom President Clinton had invited to the White House with Yitzhak Rabin. The famous image of Rabin shaking hands with Arafat and President Clinton on the South Lawn of the White House on September 13, 1993, was taken by the Iraqi leadership to indicate that the United States was capable of

---

45. Madeleine Albright, “SecState Albright Policy Speech on Iraq,” Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., March 26, 1997, <http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/1997/03/bmd970327b.html>.

46. Abed Hamid Mahmud, conversations with Duelfer; and Nizar Hamdoun, conversations with Duelfer.

47. Contemporaneous UNSCOM minutes of meeting.

48. Rolf Ekeus meeting with Anthony Lake on October 11, 1994 between 5:05 P.M. and 5:35 P.M.; and UNSCOM minutes of meeting.

49. Abed Hamid Mahmud, conversations with Duelfer; and Nizar Hamdoun, conversations with Duelfer.

reassessing its interests and reevaluating its enemies based on altered circumstances. Arafat, the Palestine Liberation Organization thug of the 1970s and 1980s, was now a guest at the White House. Saddam did not understand that in Washington his own image had become synonymous with maniacal evil as a result of the Gulf War. A rehabilitation, even a partial and temporary one as with Arafat, was not possible in his case.

At the same time, Baghdad was receiving signals from Moscow that Russia would work to advance Iraq's case in the Security Council. For example, at a meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov and UNSCOM Chairman Ekeus in Moscow on February 7, 1997, Primakov raised Saddam's worry that as Iraq demonstrated its compliance with the disarmament requirements of UN resolutions, the goalposts would simply be shifted. Primakov said the Russian government had advised Saddam to cooperate, but Saddam had asked Russia to ensure that new obstacles to lifting the embargo and sanctions would not be created. Ekeus, knowing that Primakov was referring to potential U.S. actions, said that once UNSCOM reported that weapons had been accounted for, then it would be difficult for anyone, including the United States, to veto the lifting of the oil embargo.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, France was situating itself somewhere between the positions of Russia and the United States.<sup>51</sup> The French listened sympathetically to Iraqi claims that Iraq had complied with UN demands and that UNSCOM was dominated by Americans.

Questioned in 2004 by the FBI, Saddam said he had come to view the UN process, and in particular the resolution demanding WMD disarmament, as driven by the United States, with a growing reluctance among other Security Council members to support the U.S. position. The unanimity of the resolution authorizing the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait had been replaced, in Saddam's judgment, by a dissensus over disarmament resolutions: "The United States started the cause and others followed. UNR [*sic*] 661 [imposing sanctions on Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait] was agreed to by all the parties while UNR 687 [setting the terms by which Iraq must abide after losing the 1990–91 war] was not."<sup>52</sup>

As this dynamic developed into the later 1990s, Saddam drew together his experiences with the disarmament regime. UN resolutions, he now believed, would not be enforced militarily, and Washington would never allow the sanctions regime to be lifted.<sup>53</sup> Saddam reasoned, then, that he could

---

50. UNSCOM meeting minutes.

51. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, pp. 90–91.

52. Battle, "Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI," Interview No. 3, p. 3.

53. Tariq Aziz, conversation with Duelfer, Baghdad, June 18, 2004. These views were also expressed by Aziz during final meetings with UNSCOM leadership in Baghdad, August 3, 1998.

have sanctions with weapons inspections or sanctions without weapons inspections.

He preferred the latter, and during the course of 1998 (when Baghdad saw the Clinton administration as weakened by the Monica Lewinsky scandal), Iraq hardened its limits to cooperating with inspections to the point where the United States, supported only by the United Kingdom, conducted a circumscribed bombing campaign during four days in December. This action was not agreed to by the Security Council, and in the aftermath, the council was sharply divided on the Iraq question. The UNSCOM inspection mission was evacuated, and Iraq never permitted it to return. From 1998 to 2001, Iraq pursued a policy of eroding the sanctions regime with substantial success. This strategy reflected, at that point in time, an accurate assessment by Saddam of the strength of will of the Security Council.

Only during 2002 did Saddam begin to detect a new danger. At a meeting of his Revolutionary Command Council in February 2002, he agreed with a recommendation by Deputy Prime Minister Aziz to accept the return of UN weapons inspectors to diffuse the U.S. threat.<sup>54</sup> The lessons of the 1990s remained foremost in Saddam's mind, however, and so he conditioned their return on receiving some concrete assurance that tangible actions to lift sanctions would follow. Saddam did not realize how dangerous this new round of bargaining and obstructionism was to his regime until it was too late. Until the eve of the invasion, Saddam harbored the hope that the United Nations would restrain the United States from an attack.<sup>55</sup>

#### USING BAD ANALOGIES

Saddam sought to gain clues about U.S. intentions by looking at how the United States dealt with other countries. Indeed, analogical reasoning is often used by decisionmakers facing a confusing situation. Analogies—comparing a current international event to a past international event—function as schema, allowing a decisionmaker to match events based on an initial similarity and then fill in the blanks about the new event by interposing features of the old. Although this can be a useful process, the dangers of misperception arising from this method of matching are significant. Decisionmakers are not perfect unbiased users of a store of historical analogies, and so they may select an ill-fitting analogical match.<sup>56</sup>

---

54. Duelfer, *Hide and Seek*, pp. 200–201.

55. Woods, Lacey, and Murray, "Saddam's Delusions."

56. Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); and David Patrick Houghton, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

In deciding on an analogy as a guide to a current circumstance, decision-makers rely on heuristics and shortcuts. In particular, events that were personally experienced, figure prominently in recent history, or have superficial similarity to current circumstances are cognitively available and therefore more likely to be selected.<sup>57</sup>

Considering his own situation in relation to the United States, Saddam found the analogy of Muammar al-Qaddhafi's regime in Libya to be instructive. Both Iraq and Libya were secular Arab regimes, and Qaddhafi took actions that paralleled those of Saddam to an almost uncanny degree. Qaddhafi invaded his neighbor to the south, Chad. He supported terrorism against the United States—to a far greater degree, in fact, than had Saddam (Saddam had deliberately avoided attacking Americans except during the 1991 war and when U.S. aircraft patrolled over Iraqi territory; Qaddhafi was less restrained). Finally, Libya also had oil wealth. With these parallels in mind, Saddam judged his situation to be similar to that of Qaddhafi. The United States, for all its threatening talk against Libya, had done little that would threaten Qaddhafi's rule. He drew the conclusion that he would be treated in a similar manner.<sup>58</sup>

At the same time, Saddam saw Iraq's situation as fundamentally different from the predicament of rogue states such as North Korea. The power of theory-driven information processing, in this case hearing what you want to hear, was vividly demonstrated in Saddam's response to President Bush's 2002 commencement address at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. This speech was both intended and universally interpreted in the United States as a direct warning, stopping only slightly short of a declaration of war, to Saddam's regime. It contained fulsome talk of unbalanced dictators who could not be allowed to possess the world's most destructive weapons.

Incredibly, however, Saddam did not grasp that Bush's words were primarily targeted at him. He did not consider himself an unbalanced dictator and assumed that the warnings were intended for North Korea. The West Point speech stressed the unique danger posed by the combination of radicalism and technology: Saddam agreed that this was a dangerous mix, and he believed that his war on Iran had been motivated by the same concerns. When Bush spoke of "tyrants who solemnly sign nonproliferation treaties and then systematically break them," Saddam heard a denunciation of the leadership of Iran and North Korea, both of which had signed the Nonproliferation Treaty yet continued to produce WMD. Finally, when Bush lauded "leaders like John

---

57. Khong, *Analogies at War*.

58. Duelfer, *Hide and Seek*, pp. 52–53.

F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan” for their staunch policies against the “brutality of tyrants,” Saddam became really confused. For him, U.S.-Iraqi relations had been excellent while Reagan was president, and he later commented in captivity that the situation only started deteriorating under the Bushes.<sup>59</sup> Lauding Reagan’s policies would make Saddam believe that a return to a happier relationship was imminent.

Writing years after the fact, President George W. Bush could not comprehend how Saddam missed these warnings: “How much clearer could I have been?”<sup>60</sup> Given Saddam’s style of leadership, it was also the case that none of those (few) around him who did understand Washington felt able to inform him that the Bush administration considered him unbalanced. This absence of realistic feedback to Saddam was clear both in the debriefings of Saddam and in conversations with his top aides, who pointed to the risks involved in delivering bad news.<sup>61</sup>

### *The U.S. Perspective*

The United States also succumbed to significant misperceptions. U.S. decision-makers failed to understand Saddam’s notion of history and his place in it, his preoccupation with the Iranian threat and relative lack of concern with U.S. policies, and his regional grievances. Instead of an accurate understanding of Saddam’s worldview, U.S. observers of Iraq operated with a blunt enemy image of Saddam that became the sole hypothesis for explaining his actions.

#### FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND SADDAM’S NOTION OF HISTORY

Saddam saw himself as the latest in a long line of great Iraqi leaders that included Nebuchadnezzar, Hammurabi, and Saladin.<sup>62</sup> He was narcissistic, and he had a very long time horizon. As he told an FBI debriefer, it was important to consider what people would think of him “500 or 1,000 years from now.”<sup>63</sup> His perspective was not dominated by the short-term demands of election cycles, budget cycles, or news cycles.

Consequently, Saddam did not discount the future in the manner common

---

59. This point arose, in particular, in a discussion between Duelfer and Ambassador Hamdoun in New York City on March 7, 2003, and also less directly in a conversation with former Foreign Minister Naji Sabri in Qatar on February 11, 2004.

60. George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 269.

61. Duelfer, *Hide and Seek*, p. 202; and Woods et al., “Saddam’s War,” p. 6.

62. Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 152; and Johanna McCreary, “Inside Saddam’s World,” in Turi Munthe, ed., *The Saddam Hussein Reader: Selections from Leading Writers on Iraq* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2002), p. 484.

63. Battle, “Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI,” Interview No. 1.

in the West. King Hussein of Jordan, who had substantial interactions with Saddam going back to the 1970s, told Duelfer in 1995 that Saddam did not think like Westerners. The king gave two examples. First, he pointed to the absence of Iraq's ability to export oil following the Gulf War. King Hussein said that in the West we would be very conscious of the unrealized oil revenues. He noted that to Saddam this was not all lost. He still had the oil. It was in the ground much like savings in a bank account. Second, Hussein emphasized Saddam's very long time horizons. Saddam thought in terms of decades and about his reputation hundreds of years hence. Near-term costs, and people's lives, were much less significant according to that scale.<sup>64</sup>

Saddam's notion of success was also very different from that in Washington. Saddam valued the character of the struggle and endurance, even if it resulted in something others might term defeat. He saw himself as a great Arab leader who was continuing, among other things, the historic struggle against the Persians. This was an inherited obligation of a sort unappreciated or unrecognized in Washington. In this light, Saddam declared that Iraq had defeated Iran in the enormously costly war he launched from 1980 to 1988.<sup>65</sup> By most international standards, the war achieved almost nothing—certainly nothing worth the horrendous costs. But to Saddam, continuing the historic struggle was victory enough.

Saddam's view of the Gulf War was also discordant with the West's perception of massive defeat. In 1992, Saddam told his top military commanders that the United States "did not achieve its ends regardless of our withdrawal from Kuwait," and the Americans "might wonder how much force they would need to deploy [next] time in order to achieve what they failed to do this time."<sup>66</sup> Merely remaining in power in the face of an onslaught that Saddam saw as historically unprecedented constituted, to his calculation, a stunning victory. Kevin Woods, drawing on captured regime documents, came across an order from Saddam to senior officials to read and "correct" the military histories of the Gulf War written by Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf and British Gen. Sir Peter de la Billière: "[E]ach one of you should try his best to recall the incidents and re-write them. Whenever you come across a lie or distorted facts, point them out, criticize them and state the authenticated and correct information. . . . Their writings [are] full of propaganda and unfounded allegations."<sup>67</sup>

---

64. This point, in particular, was raised in a discussion with Ambassador Hamdoun on March 7, 2003, in New York City, and again less directly in a conversation with former Foreign Minister Naji Sabri on February 11, 2004, in Qatar.

65. Gause, "Iraq's Decisions to Go to War," p. 47.

66. Quoted in Woods and Stout, "Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions," p. 12.

67. Quoted in Woods, *The Mother of all Battles*, p. 267.



#### SADDAM'S IRANIAN PREOCCUPATION

The fundamental motivating factor in Saddam's foreign and security policy was his preoccupation with the threat from Iran.<sup>68</sup> Although Saddam was often represented in Washington as being motivated by a desire to attack the United States, he did not see the United States as an existential military threat until the long buildup of U.S. forces in Kuwait was well under way in 2002. As the 2004 Comprehensive Report noted, "Saddam failed to understand the United States, its internal or foreign drivers, or what it saw as its interests in the Gulf region. Little short of the prospect of military action would get Saddam to focus on U.S. policies."<sup>69</sup> Moreover, his rhetoric concerning Israel, taken in the United States as further evidence of his implacable hostility, was largely tokenistic and ritualistic.<sup>70</sup> The threat from Iran, not the United States and not Israel, was foremost in Saddam's mind.<sup>71</sup>

The pursuit of weapons of mass destruction in the 1980s was to Saddam primarily a defensive guarantor of Iraqi safety from Iranian aggression. Indeed, the need to maintain the outward appearance of possessing a WMD capability to deter Iran was at the core of Saddam's ambiguous signals about a commitment to complete WMD disarmament.<sup>72</sup> As the 2004 Comprehensive Report concluded, "This led to a difficult balancing act between the need to disarm to achieve sanctions relief while at the same time retaining a strategic deterrent. The regime never resolved the contradiction inherent in this approach."<sup>73</sup> In his memoir, President George W. Bush expressed his bafflement: "If Saddam didn't have WMD, why wouldn't he just prove it to the inspectors? Every psychological profile I had read told me Saddam was a survivor. If he cared so much about staying in power, why would he gamble his regime by pretending to have WMD?"<sup>74</sup> As Jervis notes, Saddam's actions "made it almost certain that the United States would overthrow him, and his behavior therefore was figuratively and even literally suicidal."<sup>75</sup>

Studies of signaling and perception in international politics indicate that this situation, wherein actor A (Iraq) is sending a signal intended for actor B (Iran), but which is also received and interpreted by actor C (the United States), is not at all uncommon.<sup>76</sup>

---

68. Battle, "Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI," casual conversation, June 11, 2004, p. 1.

69. Duelfer, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD*, pt. 1, p. 32.

70. Efraim Karsh and Lawrence Freedman, "Saddam Hussein and the Gulf War," in Munthe, *The Saddam Hussein Reader*, p. 214.

71. Woods and Stout, "Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions," p. 32.

72. Battle, "Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI," casual conversation, June 11, 2004, p. 2.

73. Duelfer, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD*, pt. 1, p. 441.

74. Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 269.

75. Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 129.

76. Jervis, "Signaling and Perception," pp. 293–314.

FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND SADDAM'S GRIEVANCES

The United States also failed to understand Saddam's perspective on recent regional history and his justifications for pursuing policies viewed as beyond the pale in the West. Saddam's image as an aggressor became set in the United States with his invasion of Kuwait. Saddam, however, believed that the invasion was an entirely justified response to what he saw as Kuwaiti and regional aggression against Iraq. After the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam believed that Iraq suffered from continued economic oppression from the other Arab Gulf states, which he felt he had helped to defend.<sup>77</sup> Absent Iraq, Saddam told the FBI, Iran would have occupied "all of the Arab world."<sup>78</sup>

Subsequently, in Saddam's eyes, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were intentionally perpetuating and promoting Baghdad's financial weakness by sustaining low oil prices in OPEC and not relieving the debt that Baghdad had accumulated during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>79</sup> Saddam told his FBI debriefer that money to support the war given Iraq by other Arab Gulf states was "aid, not loans." After the war, however, these countries "changed their minds" and started demanding repayment.<sup>80</sup> Saddam claimed that he had tried to send an emissary to Kuwait to deal with the issue diplomatically, and his Kuwaiti interlocutor said, "We'll make the economy in Iraq so bad that one will be able to sleep with an Iraqi woman for ten dinars."<sup>81</sup>

This was at the forefront of Saddam's mind when he addressed the Arab summit in Baghdad on May 28, 1990. Saddam, speaking as the leader of the most powerful defender of the "Arab nation" (as he saw it), demanded that Iraq be forgiven its debts and that the wealthy Gulf states contribute to restoring Iraq to its economic situation as of 1980. Saddam's logic was that Iraq had paid a vast cost in lives and treasure that had benefited the rest of the Gulf by defeating the Persian threat. Regional states should therefore compensate Iraq for its sacrifice. An irony that arose a few months later, appreciated in Baghdad but not Washington, was that the United States made exactly this case when securing financial contributions to offset the expense incurred by the United States in deploying the massive forces associated with Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Washington did not appreciate that, for Baghdad, the accumulated economic and financial actions were seen as aggression with the equivalence of a physical attack and a national affront justifying a military response. As Paul Davis and John Arquilla report, "The *painfulness* of the economic troubles to

---

77. Woods, *The Mother of All Battles*, p. 54.

78. Battle, "Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI," Interview No. 9, p. 1.

79. Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 158.

80. Battle, "Saddam Hussein Talks to the FBI," Interview No. 2, p. 5.

81. Ibid., Interview No. 9, p. 2.

Saddam was not fully appreciated even by regional specialists before the invasion.”<sup>82</sup> In custody after the war, former Deputy Prime Minister Aziz stated this perspective with vigor.<sup>83</sup> To the United States, however, the initial act of aggression was Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, and it was from that moment on that Saddam was seen as implacably aggressive.

#### THE FORMATION OF AN ENEMY IMAGE

The interpretation of Iraqi actions by U.S. decisionmakers was driven by a particularly vivid type of theory-driven information processing: the formation of an enemy image of Iraq, organized around an inherent bad-faith interpretation of Iraqi actions. These images quickly become resistant to disconfirmation. Image-consistent information has to cross a much lower perceptual threshold to be noticed by the decisionmaker, and information that could support several interpretations is processed as if it supported only the extant enemy image. The consequence is that decisionmakers, having perhaps formed the enemy image through a schema-driven fill-in-the-blanks process, believe they are receiving many independent pieces of evidence confirming the validity of the image. The image becomes more and more ingrained, and the responses associated with it more and more automatic.

The core of an enemy image is the assumption of malign intent.<sup>84</sup> All behavior is seen as evidence of malign intent—with even cooperative-seeming behavior perceived as hostile—a function of either intent to deceive, a temporary weakness, or a retreat in the face of firmness from the perceiving state.<sup>85</sup> This interaction process can easily lead to a conflict spiral: each state perceives the other as hostile yet responsive to firmness from the other side, and what is intended by one side as a defensive action is perceived by the other as offensive, leading to a feedback loop of escalatory behavior.<sup>86</sup> Each escalation of the spiral is perceived as independent confirmatory evidence of the validity of the enemy image—hostile actions are perceived as hostile, and cooperative actions are perceived as deceptive and therefore also hostile. Enemy images are essentially nonfalsifiable, because virtually any behavior is consistent with the image.

This dynamic influenced not just U.S. decisionmakers, but also the intelli-

---

82. Paul K. Davis and John Arquilla, *Deterring or Coercing Opponents in Crisis: Lessons from the War with Saddam Hussein* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1991), p. 7 (emphasis in original).

83. Tariq Aziz discussions with Duelfer in the 1990s, including April 8, 1995, in New York and November 18, 1994, in New York, both at the residence of Iraq Permanent Representative to the UN; and June 18, 2004, in Baghdad.

84. Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy.”

85. Herrmann, “Image Theory,” p. 291.

86. Robert Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Winter 1982/83), pp. 3–30.

gence community, which with respect to its assessments of Iraqi WMD, failed as a matter of rigorous analytic tradecraft to maintain multiple hypotheses against which to collect data. In essence, they assumed Saddam would be re-constituting WMD, and this assumption became the only active hypothesis—producing a remarkable failure in intelligence assessment.

Indeed, U.S. perceptions of Saddam's regime are an almost paradigmatic example of the enemy image in operation. The core of this image was established in American minds by the Gulf War, and the individual who perhaps subscribed most fully to the image was President George H.W. Bush. As Bush's national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, told political scientist Steve Yetiv, "I think he in his own mind demonized Saddam Hussein. . . . It took on a good versus evil kind of quality to it."<sup>87</sup> President Bush's joint memoir with Scowcroft describes, often in the first person, the evolution in thinking of the president from a relatively strong supporter of relations with Iraq during the Reagan years to a vigorous opponent of Saddam as an individual. As Bush wrote to his children on December 31, 1990, "Principle must be adhered to—Saddam cannot profit in any way at all from his aggression and from his brutalizing the people of Kuwait."<sup>88</sup>

The U.S. assumption of Iraqi bad faith was strengthened by the regime's maddening and deceptive attitude toward the UN inspection processes in the 1990s. By the time UNSCOM operations ceased in 1998, the pattern of confrontations between inspectors pressing for access denied by Iraq and the successive revelations of additional aspects of Iraqi WMD efforts (following assurances from Baghdad that all had been revealed) had left a rigid mind-set that Iraq would never be forthcoming, and that if it was blocking access to the UN, then it must have something to hide.<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, there were aspects of Iraq's declarations on the disposition of its WMD that were demonstrably wrong, but that was not a demonstration that WMD remained. Long-term inspectors experienced a pattern of minimal revelations by Iraq and some rather absurd explanations of WMD disposition. Iraqi claims of disarmament turned out, of course, to be closer to the truth than U.S. assertions of nondisarmament. As Presidential Advisor Amer al-Saadi said to Duelfer, "There is an Arabic saying which means 'you overlook many truths from a liar.'"<sup>90</sup> It was an apt summation of the U.S. approach to Iraq's WMD declarations prior to the Iraq War.

When Saddam finally permitted UN inspectors to return in November 2002,

---

87. Steve A. Yetiv, "Groupthink and the Gulf Crisis," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (July 2003), p. 429.

88. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 435.

89. UNSCOM staff, discussions with Charles Duelfer, late 1995.

90. Amer al-Saadi, conversation with Duelfer, May 15, 2004.

Washington continued to view all of Iraq's actions through the lens of this inherent bad-faith model. Washington was convinced that any ambiguity concerning Iraqi WMD was evidence of their existence and Saddam's commitment to conceal capabilities. The inability of inspectors to find actual weapons was taken as additional evidence of Saddam's duplicity and cunning—he was managing to conceal them—not as evidence that they did not exist. When Iraq submitted partial or inconsistent inventories of known precursor materials for WMD, and how it had disposed of them, this was seen as further evidence of concealment. As Jervis puts it, deception was treated as “a given rather than a hypothesis to be tested, and [the United States] never asked what information might indicate that activities were absent rather than being hidden.”<sup>91</sup>

The long gap during which no inspectors were present from December 1998, when UNSCOM departed, to the entry of the new inspection team in November 2002 exacerbated this problem: intelligence from inside Iraq was scant during those years, and Iraqi efforts to convince the new inspection team of its compliance were not easy to believe. It was natural then that many in Washington would seek to make sense of the situation by using the assumptions of the enemy image to fill in the blanks.<sup>92</sup>

Iraq's inability to provide consistent and full documentation as to the disposition of its WMD programs and materials—taken by Washington as evidence of concealment—also had at least in part a slightly absurd explanation: Iraq told so many different stories over so many years to UN inspection teams that it became impossible for them to reconstruct an entirely consistent narrative; they simply could not keep the lies straight. Viewed by analysts in Washington operating under the assumption of inherent Iraqi bad faith, this all looked very sinister, indeed, especially when distilled into a comprehensive account as in Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 2003 presentation to the UN Security Council. As Duelfer wrote in his memoir, however, “UNSCOM had received reports similar to what Powell was describing, often from the CIA, and we had investigated them. Invariably, we would find some very weird and entirely unpredictable Iraqi reason why the evidence observed by U.S. intelligence was not WMD-related. With American logic, analysts staring at computer screens in Washington would connect the dots in a way that made sense to them. Often, the reality on the ground was quite different. The problem was exacerbated by the lack of dots to connect.”<sup>93</sup>

Also contributing to the enemy image were the reports provided by the Iraqi

---

91. Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, p. 139.

92. Duelfer recollections of numerous discussions with both policy analysts at the White House, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense and especially with CIA intelligence analysts charged with assessing Iraqi WMD programs.

93. Duelfer, *Hide and Seek*, p. 253.

National Congress, a group of Iraqi expatriates who were promoting an effort to remove Saddam. They provided a series of defectors who spun largely invented stories about ongoing weapons programs in Iraq. These data were often viewed less critically at political levels in Washington because they fit well with the dominant assumptions concerning Saddam's Iraq.<sup>94</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Misperceptions accumulated over the course of interactions between the United States and Iraq during the period of study, and they contributed heavily to the occurrence of two major military conflicts. Iraq failed to understand the influence of the end of the Cold War and, later, the September 11 attacks on Washington's view of the world and tolerance of perceived risk. Saddam perceived a shared interest between Baghdad and Washington that was not reciprocated. He used the misleading analogy of Qaddhafi's Libya as a guide to how Washington was likely to approach Baghdad, and he overestimated the knowledge and competence of the U.S. intelligence apparatus.

For their part, many Washington policymakers never really understood how Saddam saw Iraq and its role in the region and in history; they failed to recognize that Saddam was much more interested in the threat from Iran than the threat from the United States, and they formed a nonfalsifiable enemy image of Iraq that became the sole explanatory construct for everything Iraq said and did.

Under rationalistic theories of learning, repeated interactions are expected to reveal consistent preferences and additional information that advances both parties toward mutually agreeable outcomes, or at least toward a more accurate understanding of where precisely they differ. The discrepancies between the U.S. and Iraqi views of reality, however, grew more, not less, divergent over time. Misperception compounded misperception.

What lessons can be learned from these experiences? Most important, it is of fundamental importance that policymakers and those in the intelligence community do not become fixated on a single model for understanding the behavior of others—what a RAND study of U.S. decisionmaking in the Gulf War called “the tyranny of the best estimate.”<sup>95</sup> Rather, policymakers and intelligence analysts must maintain a variety of hypotheses against which to judge new information. This, of course, is more easily said than done. It seems that

---

94. Ibid., p. 101; and Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, pp. 140–142.

95. Davis and Arquilla, *Deterring or Coercing Opponents in Crisis*; and Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, p. 127.

the most effective course of action is to continue to point out the dynamics and the dangers of theory-based information processing, and to identify specific instances where fixation on a single hypothesis has led to undesirable outcomes.

Of course, the classic study in this regard is Roberta Wohlstetter's account of the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>96</sup> The book is useful reading for those who collect and make use of intelligence. This is not enough, however. Reportedly, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld passed around copies of the Wohlstetter study and frequently quoted its core injunction to remain open-minded. However well-thumbed the secretary's copy of Wohlstetter's book, Rumsfeld himself was part of a policymaking team that misperceived the state of Iraq's WMD programs.

Thus, there is still a need to regularly infuse national security practitioners with the critical thinking and tradecraft methodologies that address the problem of compensating for the natural psychological underpinnings of mistaken perceptions and analysis. Systematic training in the dynamics of the human information processing system could help to ameliorate the classic tendencies toward error described herein. This is one area where the work done in universities can be of significant direct benefit to the work done in Washington. A thorough grounding, and periodic reminder, of the perils of theory-based information processing could substantially improve the interpretation and use of intelligence.

How differently would the U.S.-Iraq dyad have evolved if policymakers on both sides possessed a perfect understanding of each other? This is of course the realm of counterfactual speculation, but it does seem reasonable to ask, with Saddam deposed and dead, and in light of a U.S. involvement in Iraq that has been incredibly costly in both lives and treasure, whether either side would have chosen the same courses of action had it possessed a more accurate understanding of the other.

---

96. Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*.