Executive Scorn

The George W. Bush Administration, News Media, and the Influence of Groupthink in the Iraq War, 2003-2007

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From the outset of the American military intervention in Vietnam, the United States news media has had the capacity to report military engagements from around the world in real time.[1] Instantaneous and pervasive news coverage has helped to inform the American public and politicians of ongoing military operations, which has led to obvious questions about the possible influence of news on military strategy.[2] This assumption has only gained popularity following studies of news media influence in Vietnam, which has prompted further investigation of the possible links between US military strategy and the media.[3] The proponents of this termed "CNN effect," which hypothesizes a causal link between media reporting and politico-military decisions, include Steven Livingston of George Washington University who proposes that the viewing of images on television "undeniably influences the evolution of events."[4]

However, proponents of the CNN effect have frequently failed to take into account the important role of strategic decision-making in setting the course of international conflicts.[5] This failing may be particularly evident in the case of the 2003 Iraq War. Indeed, despite extensive negative media coverage of US military strategy since the onset of hostilities, negative media pressure seemingly has had little effect on US military strategy.

This paper, therefore, examines the following questions: how, and to what extent, does the degree of strategic certainty present among the core strategic decision-makers in the executive branch of the US government condition their receptiveness to outside criticism and alternative points of view on their preferred strategy? Moreover, to what extent has news media reporting of the Iraq War influenced the course of American military strategy during the conflict? In response, I hypothesize that, despite extensive negative reporting on American military strategy in Iraq, the high degree of strategic certainty among the US executive over the proper direction of US military strategy in the conflict has largely precluded the media from influencing the course of US strategy. Therefore, I hypothesize that while the news media can influence the course of military strategy in conflicts where a general consensus does not exist among the US executive over the proper course of military strategy but that its influence will be severely curtailed when strategic decision-makers are in general agreement over their preferred strategy.

Strategy

A term often used in conflict analysis, strategy refers to the design and implementation of a plan for the coordination of the state's resources in the pursuit of

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[1] Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect: Strategic Enabler or Operational Risk?* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 2001), 1.

[2] Ingrid A. Lehmann, "Exploring the Transatlantic Media Divide over Iraq: How and Why U.S. And German Media Differed in Reporting on U.N. Weapons Inspections in Iraq: 2002-2003," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 10, no. 1 (2005): 3.

[3] Eytan Gilboa, "The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations," *Political Communication* 22, no. 1 (January-March 2005).

[4] Steven Livingston, *Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention* (Cambridge, MA: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, 1997), 14.

[5] Piers Robinson, *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention.* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 30.

achieving a set of objectives.[6] This study will use Sir Basil Liddell Hart's definition of "military strategy," hereafter referred to as strategy, which he defines as "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy."[7] Put simply, this study will define strategy as a guidance plan to achieve particular ends. Conceived this way, strategy can be defined as being created by a complex decision-making process of ideas, expectations, and goals, which result in a plan for achieving stated goals through military action. Therefore, this definition should be appropriate for determining if critical media reports can influence the US executive branch's employment of strategy and their choices to change strategy at certain points during a conflict.

Theoretical Approach

Media-Strategy Interaction Model

This paper expands upon the policy media interaction model developed by Piers Robinson. Robinson suggests that, in situations of "policy certainty" among US officials, the news media has little influence on foreign policy, regardless of the level of media attention devoted to the crisis.[8] The central tenet of this model is that, once a consensus has been reached among policy actors on a policy or course of action, the resolve to carry out objectives constitutes "policy certainty," wherein decision-makers are extremely resistant to contrary outside influences.[9] Conversely, a situation where no direct consensus exists among the US executive over the direction of policy constitutes "policy uncertainty."[10] The Media-Strategy Interaction Model proposed here focuses on the direction of military strategy set by the executive branch of the US government. Robinson's core concept of policy certainty is supplanted in this modified model by the concept of "strategic certainty;" however, the basic logic of the original concept remains.

Groupthink

Groupthink refers to a set of decision-making problems that can afflict policy-makers during periods of crisis, which collectively deteriorate critical thinking, mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment.[11] Groupthink, an extremely rigid consensus, results when a group of decision-makers seek complete conformity and agreement on a policy solution, thereby avoiding alternative points of view that are

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[6] Franklin D. Margiotta, *Brassey's Encyclopedia of Land Forces and Warfare* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's Inc., 2000), 1003-1004.

[7] Dan Reiter and Curtis Meek, "Determinants of Military Strategy, 1903-1994: A Quantitative Empirical Test," *International Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1999): 364.

[8] Robinson, 30.

[9] Piers Robinson, "Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics: Models of Media Influence on Foreign Policy," *European Journal of Communication* 16, no. 4 (December 2001): 534.

[10] Ibid.: 535.

[11] Greg Cashman, *What Causes War? An Introduction to Theories of International Conflict* (New York, NY: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993), 112.

critical of the consensus position.[12] As a result, in situations where groupthink is present, majority consensus limits the potential influence that external actors, such as the news media, can impart on the core decision-making group.

The core logic of groupthink is that cohesiveness will occur in groups where members put agreement ahead of rational decision-making. However, high group cohesiveness is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for groupthink to occur.[13] Rather, four structural conditions also play an important role in determining the presence of groupthink. First, the group should lack norms for requiring methodological procedures, a condition that occurs when a group refrains from searching for complete and reliable information.[14] Second, groups should exhibit signs of insulation from outside sources of information and opinion that could challenge group beliefs. Third, the group should lack the tradition of impartial leadership, wherein a group leader uses their influence to control the group's agenda and restricts searches for alternate solutions. Finally, groups that show signs of groupthink often share similar backgrounds and ideology.[15] Taken together, these conditions predispose members to ignore other potential solutions in favour of supporting the group.

This is not to suggest that by simply avoiding these conditions that poor decisions can be averted. Groupthink simply suggests that poor decision outcomes are more likely when its symptoms are present. As a result, model cannot predict every variable which could influence a bad decision. Indeed, many factors can affect an outcome including a lack of necessary information, inadequate time for decision-making, poor judgment, pure luck, and unexpected actions by adversaries. With this in mind, some major failures of foreign policy decision-making cannot be explained by groupthink. The real value of the theory is that it is a concise and simply stated theory for explaining one factor that could lower the possibility of a successful outcome.

Moreover, the groupthink model can be further refined to a series of symptoms one would expect to find in a highly cohesive group. These symptoms reflect the group's avoidance of alternative opinions that may affect its consensus. For the purposes of this study the eight common symptoms will be refined into the three major types identified by Janis: illusion of invulnerability (type 1), closed-mindedness (type 2), and pressures toward uniformity (type 3).

US Strategy in Iraq

In order to determine the impact of the news media on US strategy during the conflict, we must briefly outline the military strategy employed. From the outset of military operations in Iraq, the strategy for rebuilding post-Saddam Iraq was based on two primary goals. First, the US military was tasked with defeating the insurgency and

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[12] Irving Lester Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 1; Mark Schafer and Scott Crichlow, "Antecedents of Groupthink: A Quantitative Study," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 3 (September 1996): 417-419.

[13] Hensley and Griffin: 508, Janis, 249.

[14] Thomas R. Hensley and Glen W. Griffin, "Victims of Groupthink: The Kent State University Board of Trustees and the 1977 Gymnasium Controversy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30, no. 3 (1986): 509.

[15] Ibid.: 508-510.

terrorist threats against US and Iraqi forces.[16] Second, the US would train and build the Iraqi forces for eventual turnover of security to those forces.[17] The US strategy for the stabilization and then rebuilding of Iraq has been reported since 2003, and has been repeated frequently by senior US officials to support the course of operations there. Perhaps the best example of the reinforcement of this strategy has come from recent statements by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who describes the strategy in Iraq using simple key words, "clear, hold, and build."[18] Similar wording and phrases have appeared throughout the Iraqi operation to describe the US strategy, which constitutes strategic certainty in this case.[19] Moreover, despite critical reporting of the results of the US strategy to defeat the insurgency, the strategy has remained in place and been reinforced through briefings, statements, and speeches by senior US officials.

Applying the groupthink hypothesis

Group Cohesiveness

The Iraq War case provides a particularly good example of the structure of a cohesive group. The majority of Bush's cabinet was made up of either close-friends from the previous George H.W. Bush administration, or people who had been promoting an engagement in Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein during the Clinton administration. Indeed, Dick Cheney acted as Bush Sr's Secretary of Defense, and Colin Powell was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Persian Gulf War making them both keenly aware of issues relating to Iraq. Moreover, in the 1990s, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz formed a group to push the Clinton administration to promote regime change in Iraq, a policy they promoted strongly in a direct letter to the president in February 1998 that Iraq was "ripe for a broad-based insurrection," and that "We must exploit this opportunity."[20] Furthermore, in the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, officials close to the president assert that he was determined to make Iraq the next target in the war on terror and requested that Rumsfeld re-evaluate plans for intervention in Iraq.[21] This process continued unabated over the next two years. The group was so closely knit that a formal review of plans for Iraq, such as searching for additional intelligence to support the war aims, were ignored by the war-focused

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[16] George W. Bush, President Bush Discusses Early Transfer of Iraqi Sovereignty: Remarks by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair on Transfer of Iraqi Sovereignty, Hilton Istanbul, Istanbul, Turkey.; (Available from http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/print/20040628-9.html), 2.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Condoleezza Rice, "Iraq and U.S. Policy: Secretary Condoleezza Rice, Opening Remarks before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," (United States Department of State, October 19 2005), 1.

[19] Bush, President Addresses the Nation, 2.

[20] Michael J. Mazarr, "The Iraq War and Agenda Setting," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3, no. 1 (2007): 4.

[21] Glenn Kessler, "U.S. Decision on Iraq Has Puzzling Past," *The Washington Post*, January 12 2003, 1; Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 1-3.

cabinet.[22] Therefore, when the Iraq war began in 2003, it was the product of research, experience, and a mutual goal to promote the end of Saddam Hussein's regime.[23]

Structural Faults of Groupthink

Lack of Norms Requiring Methodical Procedures

The Iraq War has lacked important procedures for evaluating alternatives prior to, and during, the war. Indeed, regime change in Iraq appeared as the only viable option to members of the Bush administration. According to one administration official, "there was absolutely no debate in the normal sense," on the merits and evidence against Iraq.[24] Indeed, in an interview conducted with Bob Woodward for his book, *Plan of Attack*, Bush admits that he had never asked either Powell or Rumsfeld if they felt attacking Iraq was the right thing to do, as both members knew of Bush's support for the plan and this only enhanced their confidence.[25]

Powell was often critical of the limited amount of debate in the Bush administration, which gave Condoleezza Rice, Rumsfeld, and especially Cheney more access to the president because of their preference for discussing their true feelings in private.[26] Powell argues that "the president must be satisfied with the way the NSC (National Security Advisor) and the White House were operating," because the president has never used his authority to change the way information was given to him, or as plans progressed he did not seek out additional information to support his case for war.[27] Furthermore, members of the American bureaucracy were often excluded from the decision-making process. For example, the State Department's "Future of Iraq" project, a group made up of experts on Iraq which had produced thirteen volumes of reports and recommendations since 2001 had sent their findings to Rumsfeld to advise him on post-war planning. Despite their collective experience, Rumsfeld was convinced that US forces would be met openly in Iraq and promptly rejected any outside advice.[28] According to Michael Mazarr's analysis of the prewar period, "It is striking how little outside advice Bush sought, how few tough questions were asked of knowledgeable observers."[29] Likewise, Bob Woodward who, in a series of interviews on Iraq, was told directly by Bush that: "I have no outside advice. Anybody who says they're an outside adviser of this administration on this particular matter is not telling the truth."[30] Thus, the

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[22] Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2006), 92-93; Woodward, 25.

[23] Mazarr: 11.

[24] James Fallows, "Bush's Lost Year," *Atlantic Monthly* 294, no. 3 (October 2004): 79.

[25] Woodward, 251, 272, 416.

[26] Andrew Cockburn, *Rumsfeld: His Rise, Fall, and Catastrophic Legacy*, 1st Scribner hardcover ed. (New York, NY: Scribner, 2007), 96-97.

[27] Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 478.

[28] Patrick J. Haney, "Foreign-Policy Advising: Models and Mysteries from the Bush Administration," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 2005): 296.

[29] Mazarr: 19.

[30] Haney: 296.

flow of information in the White House deliberately limited debate both inside and outside of the administration.

Group Insulation

The Bush administration was, to a large extent, isolated from the broader foreign policy community. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Rice, and Powell would often discuss issues related to Iraq in closed door meetings, and when communicating with administration appointed officials outside the government, such as L. Paul Bremer, the Director of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance for post-war Iraq, meetings were rarely face-to-face and critical messages on US policy were often ignored.[31] For example, when reviewing a draft RAND report criticizing US troop levels, Bremer summarized the study with his comments and sent it to Rumsfeld with the note: "I think you should consider this," however, he did not receive a response to this, or any of his requests for additional troops during his time in Iraq.[32] Moreover, Richard Clarke, a US government official, argues that Bush "doesn't reach out, typically, for a lot of experts. He has a very narrow, regulated, highly regimented set of channels to get advice."[33] Consequently, the system appears to have been responding to the collective push from Bush - and through the history of many of those around him - to engage Iraq at the earliest opportunity and that outside influences were shut out of the decision-making process as a result.

Impartial Leadership

Although Bush would often rely heavily on the experience of his advisers, he has been consistent on strategy in both phases of this war, and he would never refrain from making his views clear to his advisers. Indeed, as discussed above, Bush was a long-time supporter of regime change in Iraq which can be traced back to statements made in 2000 during his presidential campaign in which he argued that: "If I found in any way, shape or form that he was developing weapons of mass destruction" that "I'd take 'em out."[34] Similar statements were repeated by members of his staff in meetings on Iraq and in public speeches in the run up to, and during, the war. Powell notes that this norm appeared to be solidified by 2003 arguing that Bush disliked "anything… that suggests any weakness in the [administration's] position," which often left Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage out of important policy meetings.[35] Consequently, during his term as Secretary of State, Powell would often refrain from openly criticizing the president or his advisers and eventually accepted his outsider status in the administration, a factor which is wholly consistent with this structural condition of groupthink.

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[31] L. Paul Bremer and Malcolm McConnell, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 10; DeYoung, 479.
[32] Bremer and McConnell, 10; DeYoung, 479.
[33] Nicholas Lemann, "Remember the Alamo: How George W. Bush Reinvented Himself," *The New Yorker*, October 18 2004, 148.
[34] John Lancaster, "In Saddam's Future, a Harder U.S. Line," *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2000, 1.
[35] DeYoung, 490.

Homogeneity of Members' Social Background and Ideology

The insulation of the Bush administration has only been enhanced by their common ideological views. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Rice were able to work closely in large part because of their common view of Saddam Hussein as a major threat to international security. The War on Terror strongly affected Bush who viewed an invasion of Iraq as a moral choice to, in his words, "rid the world of evil."[36] At the same time, Cheney expressed strong support for the use of military force in Iraq as a method for reshaping the Middle East, a view strongly supported by Bush and political elites at the Pentagon.[37] Moreover, Wolfowitz saw regime change in Iraq as an extension of Bush's emphasis on defeating regimes that support terrorism, a point he made very clear to the cabinet on 13 September 2001.[38] Less vocal members of the administration, such as Rice, expressed similar views arguing in late 2002 that: "There wasn't a flash moment. There's no decision meeting. But Iraq had been on the radar screen that it was a danger and that it was something you were going to have to deal with eventually."[39] Therefore, Bush has been able to work very closely with the majority of his staff and this only proved to reinforce US strategy in Iraq.

Symptoms of Groupthink

Overestimation and the Illusion of Invulnerability

While some differences in views existed, ample evidence exists that the members responsible for planning and execution of the conflict including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Cheney, and Bush believed that the war plan would not fail. Indeed, as the initial invasion date approached the US plan which originally called for as many as 500,000 troops was recast six times, wherein the final version called for just 78,000.[40] The two men believed the plan would rapidly defeat Iraq's army, and that a small force could maintain the peace before turning over security to a new Iraqi army.[41] Sending large numbers of troops at any phase of the war, in Michael Isikoff's and David Corns' words would be, "an admission of error and miscalculation. And acknowledging mistakes wasn't part of the president's campaign."[42] As a result, the Bush administration has clearly shown signs of the illusion of invulnerability.

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[36] Alexander Moens, *The Foreign Policy of George W. Bush: Values, Strategy and Vision* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 135.

[37] Spender Ackerman and Franklin Foer, "The Radical: What Dick Cheney Really Believes," *The New Republic*, December 1 and 8, 2003, 20.

[38] Moens, 137.

[39] Mazarr: 6.

[40] Woodward, 287.

[41] Cockburn, 169-170.

[42] Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2006), 358.

Closed-Mindedness

Following years of difficulty conducting weapons inspections in Iraq and Hussein's expulsion of UN weapon inspectors, the Bush administration did not consider negotiation as a possible resolution to the conflict. In addition, as there was no doubt within the group that Saddam possessed illegal weapons, the group shared a view that Hussein was evil and could not be dealt with peacefully.[43] Indeed, early drafts of the 2002 State of the Union address originally included only Iraq as a major threat to national security. Although this was later changed to include Iran and North Korea to prevent the appearance of a declaration of war, the decision to intervene had clearly been made in the previous few months.[44] This collective view continued as violence from the insurgency began to increase. Referring to the intelligence he was provided on the insurgency, Rumsfeld complained in one meeting that it was "failing to confirm what *he knew* to be true," asserting that the insurgency did not exist and hostile acts against US forces were the result of small groups of Saddam loyalists.[45] Rumsfeld's statement reflected the general policy of the Bush administration to reject claims of an insurgency, which continued for months, prior to the beginning of major counter-insurgency operations in 2004.[46] Taking this into account, the members of the Bush administration appeared to stereotype outside groups and had collective rationalizations, both of which have strongly influenced US strategy in Iraq.

Pressures towards uniformity

Although many of the groups' members continue to be supportive of US efforts in Iraq, following the initial invasion and US difficulties in battles with the insurgency some members began to criticize US strategy and evidence suggests they were marginalized as a result. For example, Powell was a major supporter of the war prior to the invasion, however, to counter rising difficulties in Iraq following the invasion he recommended using Mideast experts from the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. However, all of his recommendations were rejected by Cheney and Rumsfeld, and officials favoured by DoD were given these positions without consultation with Powell.[47] Powell's criticism of the functioning of the advisory system in the White House made his term in the Bush administration difficult.[48] Indeed, as meetings often occurred between small groups and the president, Bush was often influenced the most by "the last person to whisper in his ear," and that "that person was usually Cheney."[49] As a result, Cheney was often used to prevent changes in US strategy from occurring as he remains the most

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[43] DeYoung, 448-449; Jim Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York, NY: Viking, 2004), 348.

[44] John P. Burke, "The Contemporary Presidency: Condoleezza Rice as Nsc Advisor: A Case Study of the Honest Broker Role," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2005): 561.

[45] Cockburn, 193.

[46] Alice Hills, "Fear and Loathing in Falluja," *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 4 (July 2006): 631.

[47] DeYoung, 462.

[48] George Gedda, "Colin Powell: Four Tumultuous Years," *Foreign Service Journal* 82, no. 2 (February 2005): 32.

[49] DeYoung, 478.

adamant supporter of US strategy in the Iraq. In contrast, as a former military commander Powell was far more sensitive to the military situation on the ground.[50] Consequently, after Bush was re-elected in 2004, Powell promptly left the administration feeling that many members refusal to admit to previous mistakes had led to serious miscalculations in Iraq that were going unchecked by the administration. Therefore, direct pressure from members of the administration seriously affected the decision-making environment and the influence some members could have on US strategy.

The News Media in Iraq

Major Combat Operations in Iraq, 2003

Although coverage of the war was initially positive or neutral, reporting on US military strategy turned negative after only a week of fighting. The process of embedding reporters with infantry and armoured units gave reporters the unique ability to develop stories from the perspective of the US military. It also presented the media with an unprecedented opportunity to report negatively on the implementation of US military strategy on the front lines, which largely began to appear during the second week of military operations. For example, several stories referring to "two week jitters" appeared across major US media outlets when a major sandstorm slowed the advance of US forces toward Baghdad.[51] Some of the resulting headlines included "Questions Raised About Invasion Force: Some Ex-Gulf War Commanders Say U.S. Needs More Troops, Another Armored Division," "Allies' Pre-War Assumptions Fall Short As Iraqi Resistance Stiffens," and "Sandstorm Brings Forces to Grinding Halt."[52] Embedded reporters expressed to domestic audiences that US forces had been completely stopped by the bad weather, a result of poor planning in a desert environment. However, media reports of major difficulties proved to be unfounded as US forces continued to move on Iraqi roads towards Karbala and the outskirts of Baghdad.[53] According to an assessment of the progress by a senior Marine commander, "its regiments needed and expected no pause."[54] Indeed, as the force was designed to operate lightly and to keep pressing the enemy it was able to continue its operations despite distancing itself from the slow

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[50] Ibid., 516.

[51] Douglas Kellner, "Media Propaganda and Spectacle in the War on Iraq: A Critique of U.S. Broadcasting Networks," *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 4, no. 3 (August 2004): 332.

[52] These and other headlines included: Ronald Brownstein, "Iraq Forcing Longer, Conventional War," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 26 2003; Richard T. Cooper and Paul Richter, "Former Commanders Question U.S. Strategy," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 26 2003; Ellen Knickmeyer, "Sandstorm Brings Forces to Grinding Halt," *Washington Times*, March 25 2003; Vernon Loeb and Thomas E. Ricks, "Questions Raised About Invasion Force: Some Ex-Gulf War Commanders Say U.S. Needs More Troops, Another Armored Division," *Washington Post*, March 25 2003; Thomas E. Ricks, "War Could Last Months, Officers Say," *The Washington Post*, March 27 2003; Barbara Slavin and Vivienne Walt, "'Allies' Pre-War Assumptions Fall Short as Iraqi Resistance Stiffens," *USA Today*, March 25 2003.

[53] John Keegan, *The Iraq War* (London, UK: Hutchinson, 2004), 155.

[54] Francis J. West and Ray L. Smith, *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2003), 83.

moving logistics vehicles.[55] Thus, some units were preparing to assault cities along the Tigris river before ordered to pause by commanders of the 3rd Infantry Division.[56] Moreover, many units had progressed so quickly in the sandstorm they were forced to backtrack 23 miles to meet the rest of the division.[57] As a result, many embedded units received little or no coverage because operations were progressing far more quickly than could have been anticipated.

In addition, embedded press during this period expressed concern that US planning was inadequate, particularly with respect to troop and equipment levels, and commented that US strategy was overly ambitious and unworkable.[58] Early press reports reflected commentary by former US military officers including Wesley Clark and Desert Storm division commander Thomas Rhame. Both made frequent appearances on television during this period to criticize US force levels and equipment leading to speculation that the war could last for months.[59] Despite the collective experience of these commanders, their criticism in the media did not appear to have an observable effect on strategy. Indeed, as the sandstorm lifted, US forces resumed their original strategy of bypassing major cities in southern Iraq to hit Baghdad directly.[60] Statements by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld emphasized the progress made by US ground forces during the opening weeks of the campaign and pointed out that, at the time of heightened media criticism over alleged slow progress and despite the weather, US forces were within 50 miles of Baghdad.[61] Taking these examples into account, these events not only demonstrate that a tangible phenomena, the sand storm, could and did have a temporary effect on the speed of prosecution of US strategy, but also that media coverage of the problems created by this phenomenon had no discernable effect on the course of US strategy.

The news media was further isolated from senior officials during this conflict by the level of certainty demonstrated by US officials, even to criticism from senior military advisers. Prior to the invasion, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended 250,000 to 300,000 troops be used to secure Iraq, but these numbers were later revised by Rumsfeld and his staff in the weeks before the war to 140,000.[62] The force plan developed by the Joint Chiefs was designed to be used as a guide for the number of troops that would be needed in the occupation phase of the war. However, Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz had a dramatically different view of US troop levels, arguing that he did not see, "why it would take more troops to occupy the country than to take down the

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[55] Michael DeLong and Noah Lukeman, *Inside Centcom: The Unvarnished Truth About the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), 101-103.

[56] Nicholas E. Reynolds, *Basrah, Baghdad, and Beyond: The U.S. Marine Corps in the Second Iraq War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 90.

[57] Keegan, 156.

[58] Christopher Paul and James J. Kim, *Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 55-56.

[59] West and Smith, 82.

[60] Romesh Ratnesar, Sticking to His Guns; (Available from http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/03/31/timep.guns.tm/index.html), 1.

[61] Donald Rumsfeld and General Frank Myers, "Dod News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), March 28 2003), 1.

[62] Woodward, , 287.

regime."[63] Any increase in troop requests had to be approved after careful scrutiny by Rumsfeld and his deputy, resulting in many conservative estimates for occupation force levels being significantly reduced.[64] This further contributed to strain among Pentagon staff and CENTCOM commanders in Iraq as numbers had to be reviewed frequently before approval severely increasing opportunity costs of the mission.[65] Consequently, this is particularly important because the level of resolve of the US executive to reject troop recommendations from senior military advisers demonstrates the limited influence the news media could have despite the frequency and accuracy of their reports.

The Joint Chiefs displayed similar problems influencing decision-making in the months leading up the conflict. In early 2003, former Joint Chiefs Chairman General Hugh Shelton stated publicly at a Pentagon meeting that he felt troops levels were insufficient to conduct the full scale invasion requested by DoD.[66] His concerns were echoed by other senior members of the US Army including General Eric Shinseki, who reporting his concerns directly to Congress and, consequently, he was later dismissed by DoD.[67] Senior military commanders were especially critical of plans to remove two heavy tank divisions from the invasion force, a measure reportedly to increase efficiency by using rapidly mobile forces rather than slower-moving heavy units. In addition, requests to have the force numbers reviewed were rejected many times by senior DoD officials, straining relations between the two sides.[68] Despite the apparent need for additional troops, Rumsfeld's earlier commitment in 2000 to reform and shrink the US military by using small mobile forces and technology overrode, to him, the collective experience of senior military staff. According to a senior general close to the process, "the running argument was eroding relations with Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz and so needed to be brought to an end."[69]

Although orders to deploy the 1st Armored Division were eventually accepted, it was the result of months of immense pressure and internal criticism from the Joint Chiefs that one of the two units needed to be put into service to accomplish the goals of the US administration.[70] In this way, by presenting the use of heavy armor as being essential to accomplishing US strategic goals in Iraq, which required crippling Iraqi forces and occupying territory, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz reluctantly accepted.[71] Many of the generals opposing the US administrations plan, including Shinseki, were later forced into retirement following this and other battles over troop support levels. Moreover, where Rumsfeld did agree with the US Army staff, including Richard Myers, Peter Pace, and Tommy Franks, who collaborated with the Bush administration on the invasion and

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[63] Ricks, 123.

[64] Ibid., 124.

[65] Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), , 251-253 ; Gregory Hooker, *Shaping the Plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Role of Military Intelligence Assessments* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005), , 22 ; Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, 122.

[66] Burke: 568.

[67] James Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," *Atlantic Monthly* 293, no. 1 (2004): 64-65, 73; Michael R. Gordon, "The Strategy to Secure Iraq Did Not Foresee a 2nd War," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2004.

[68] Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, 119.

[69] Ibid., 121.

[70] Ibid., 120.

[71]Ibid., 120, 127.

occupation strategy in 2002, were selected because of their reluctance to be critical of their superiors and their ability to "play politics."[72] Thus, while some senior personnel were critical of the invasion plan, these men were often forced to retire and those willing to work with the Bush administration on the invasion and restructuring plan were promoted into senior military positions.

The Iraq Insurgency

<u>The First Major Battle, Fallujah 2004</u>

The Iraqi insurgency, which has been active since 2003, has seriously delayed the efforts of US forces to establish peaceful conditions in Iraq. Compounding this difficulty, reporting on the effectiveness of the US counterinsurgency strategy has been largely negative. For example, an article that appeared in *The Los Angeles Times* during the US operations in Fallujah in November, 2004, the largest single operation in the counter-insurgency campaign, commented that, "Iraqi insurgents based in Fallujah presented U.S. military forces with two choices, one bad and the other worse. Marines opted for the bad one Monday, assaulting the city with the understanding that civilians as well as fighters would be killed and Arab passions would be inflamed far outside Fallujah and Iraq."[73] The coverage of the application of American military strategy in Fallujah was symptomatic of a general trend in coverage of the US counterinsurgency operation in Iraq, wherein the news media emphasized US casualties, successful insurgent attacks on Iraqi civilians, and has largely downplayed the success of the strategy in stabilizing most of the country. During Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, US and Iraqi forces managed to strike against major insurgent bases in Fallujah, clearing house to house of enemy combatants.[74] The combined ground and air operation is credited with eliminating thousands of insurgents in the city during the month of November. Moreover, the ISF fought and secured the neighbourhood of Jolan, and on November 11, 2004, was given responsibility for its security.[75] The ISF displayed the ability to protect these areas and maintain security with limited US oversight. These operations are consistent with the strategy set out by the US executive during 2003, wherein US forces would secure territories for eventual transfer to the ISF.[76]

Furthermore, critical media reports on the battle for Fallujah did not appear to concern administration officials. For example, on November 12, 2004, Powell supported increasing US troop levels in response to his belief that US, British, and Iraqi troop levels were too low to provide security and capture and hold terrain.[77] Moreover, he recommended replacing Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense due to his miscalculation of

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[72] Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra Ii: The inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2006).

[73] David Walsh, Us Media Applauds Destruction of Fallujah; (Available from http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/nov2004/fall-n17.shtml), 1.

[74] Christopher M. Ford, "Speak No Evil: Targeting a Population's Neutrality to Defeat an Insurgency," *Parameters*, no. 35 (Summer 2005): 60.

[75] John Pike, Operation Al-Fajr. (Dawn) Operation Phantom Fury; (Available from http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oif-phantom-fury-fallujah.htm), 1.

[76] Pamela Hess, "Iraqi Security Forces Developing – Slowly," *The Washington Times*, August 5 2004, 1.

[77] Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, 407.

the insurgency and reluctance to change US strategy.[78] However, this strong opposition to US strategy resulted in the resignation of Powell and the appointment of Rice who, like Bush, strongly opposed disrupting the war effort and the overall momentum achieved in these battles.[79] Therefore, even internal government pressure could not influence US strategy because of opposition within the administration to any changes that would be perceived as admitting past mistakes, and thus the news media could not be influential in this political environment.

Najaf

The United States received similarly negative reporting during its counterinsurgency operation in Najaf. During the month of August 2004, attempts by US Marines and the ISF to attack the forces of Muqtata al Sadr were met with critical reporting of damages to holy buildings in the city.[80] According to Kenneth Payne's analysis of the media reports of this operation, "media reporting of hardships in the town and of considerable damage to urban environments… [led to] political pressure to limit the assault quickly."[81] However, as Donald Rumsfeld countered, the military had the capacity to defeat Sadr's militia, but decided instead to make a negotiated settlement to end the operation.[82] As al Sadr's militia's base of operations was in the city's major mosque, the US did not want to inflict further damage on a building of religious significance to the population. Instead, the negotiated settlement represented another method for achieving the same end for the operation and ensured that the city could be secured for rebuilding, and be transferred to the ISF. Rumsfeld went on to argue that coalition forces "would have successfully retaken the city. It turned out they didn't have to. The fact that it was clear to Sadr and his crowd, the militia, that they did have the ability to do that is what without question led Sadr to encourage his militia to get out of town."[83] Moreover, the United States began transferring authority for provincial security of Najaf to the ISF in November, 2004, which allowed Iraqi forces to conduct their own planning and operations outside of the authority of the US Marines.[84] This is, once again, consistent with the US strategy in Iraq to transition responsibility for Iraqi security to the ISF. This transition was completed in Najaf by September, 2005.[85]

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[78] Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 361.

[79] Hills: 631; Woodward, *State of Denial*, 361.

[80] Patrick J. McDonnell, "Iraqi City Lies in Ruins," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 14 2004, 1; Kirk Vick, "Iraqi Holy City Left Broken by Urban Warfare," *The Washington Post* August 27 2004, 1.

[81] Kenneth Payne, "The Media as an Instrument of War," *Parameters*, no. 35 (Spring 2005): 88-89.

[82] Donald Rumsfeld, "Secretary Rumsfeld's Speech at the National Press Club," (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), September 7 2004), 1.

[83] Ibid.

[84] American Forces Press Service, Iraqi Army Takes Control of Najaf; U.S. Soldier Killed by Ied; (Available from http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Sep2005/20050907_2632.html), 1; American Forces Press Service, Iraqi Security Forces Take Control of Najaf Province, The Associated Press; (Available from http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Nov2004/n11302004_2004113003.html), 1.

[85] American Forces Press Service, Iraqi Army Takes Control of Najaf; U.S. Soldier Killed by Ied; American Forces Press Service, Iraqi Security Forces Take Control of Najaf Province.

The generally negative tone of media reporting, coming from the majority of the American print and televised media, has brought into question the US strategy to remain in post-Saddam Iraq. A study commissioned by Pew Research concluded that the steady stream of largely negative reporting is "significantly undermining support for U.S. military operations there."[86] Despite this, US political and military decision-makers did not change the direction of military strategy to counter rising criticism. Instead, the US administration demonstrated resolve in maintaining the Iraq strategy outlined above, such as in statements made in 2004 and in the 2005 State of the Union Address, President Bush maintained that, despite the increased violence against American forces, troops would remain to defeat the insurgency.[87] In addition, in his public radio address on March 2006, Bush once again reiterated his belief in the success of the strategy, noting that "in the past three years, Iraqis have gone from living under a brutal tyrant to liberation, sovereignty, free elections, a constitutional referendum, and last December, elections of a fully constitutional government."[88] Furthermore, in statements made to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in October, 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argued clearly that, "our strategy – the key – is to clear, hold, and build: clear areas from insurgent control, hold them securely, and build durable, national Iraqi institutions."[89]

Similar resolve has been reported in private conversations between administration officials. For example, Cheney reiterated to Rice in 2005 that the US would do whatever is necessary to win in Iraq and, once again, refused renewed calls to replace Rumsfeld from former top army generals and staff.[90] Even calls from former Bush Sr. administration official Brent Scowcroft who wanted the president to consider replacing Rumsfeld were met with scorn from Bush who argued forcefully that, "I'm sick and tired of getting papers from Brent Scowcroft telling me what to do, and I never want to see another one again."[91] Therefore, the resolve of the US administration to resist growing calls to change their strategy and the face of declining public opinion demonstrates the strength of groupthink in this case.

The 2006 Congressional Election and "The New Way Forward"

Despite the post-congressional election dismissal of Rumsfeld and the appointment of Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense, the news media does not appear to have influenced US strategy or the strategic certainty of the Bush administration. For example, the "New Way Forward Strategy" announced on January 10, 2007, touted as a change to US strategic operations in Iraq merely renamed the central goals of the "clear,

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[86] Andrew Kohut and Jodie Allen, *Guantanamo Prisoner Mistreatment Seen as Isolated Incidents, Iraq News Increases Calls for Troop Withdrawal* (The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press), 2.
[87] George W. and Iyal Allawi Bush, Bush, Allawi Affirm Commitment to Overcome Insurgency; (Available from http://japan.usembassy.gov/e/p/tp-20040927-38.html), 1.
[88] George W. Bush, *President's Radio Address* (Washington, DC: March 18 2006).
[89] Rice, 1.
[90] Woodward, *State of Denial*, 456.
[91] Cockburn, 219.

hold, and build" security strategy conceived in 2003. For example, in Bush's statements unveiling the newly titled US strategy in January 2007, he maintains that "our troops have a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis *clear* and *secure* neighbourhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of provided the security that Baghdad needs."[92] Bush's resolve to continue essentially the same strategy, which has only changed the word "hold" to "secure" and given a more tangible goal of building security and Iraqi forces in major populated areas, suggests that the news media has not influenced the Bush administration despite the firing of Rumsfeld as a result of the congressional election. Furthermore, in the summary report of the strategy released by the White House, the security portion keeps Iraqi forces in the lead to isolate extremists and protect the population, and emphasizing, above all, that the US should "accelerate transition to Iraqi responsibility and increase Iraqi ownership."[93]

In addition, the report *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, released in June 2007, continues to emphasize the transfer of provincial authority to the Iraqi government, a goal consistent with the November 2005 *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* and subsequent reports. [94] This is further supported by the July 2007 assessment of progress in Iraq, which argues that "our overarching strategy continues to emphasize a transition to the Iraqi Government and its security forces," and that the New Way Forward Strategy was only a response to an upsurge in violence by insurgents in the summer and fall of 2006.[95] Moreover, as four of eighteen provinces have been fully transferred to Iraqi control, three more will transition within the next few months, and all provinces are scheduled to transfer to Iraqi authority by March 2008, US decision-makers have only reinforced their cohesive view of US strategy as successful in the face of mounting media criticism.[96] As these points make clear, the US executive remains deeply committed to its existing strategy and have resisted all external pressure to change course, including those generated by the American news media.

Conclusion

This analysis of decision-making in the Iraq War has shown that the groupthink tendency of the Bush administration prevented any outside information from influencing the US executive. The Bush cabinet has shown significant rivalry among some of its key members, in particular Powell against like-minded members Rumsfeld and Cheney. The

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[92] Lorry M. Fenner, *Stand up and Be Counted: The Continuing Challenge of Building the Iraqi Security Forces* (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations, 2007), 23.

[93] George W. Bush, *Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, January 2007), 1.

[94] Ibid; George W. Bush, *Initial Benchmark Assessment Report* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, June 12 2007), 1; George W. Bush, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, August 2006), 1; George W. Bush, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, June 2007), 1; George W. Bush, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, November 2005), 1.

[95] Bush, *Initial Benchmark Assessment Report*, 2.

[96] United States, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," (Department of Defense, June 2007), 29.

inability of Powell to change US strategy, due in large part to his limited access to the President, is wholly consistent with the central tenets of the groupthink theory. In addition, the minor changes to the "clear, hold, and build" strategy in 2007 cannot be attributed directly to media pressure or to the 2006 election.[97] The US cabinet, moreover, has displayed strategic certainty in the main objectives of their strategy, which has made media influence in this case very difficult to determine. Ultimately, while the news media is an important and influential group in some conflicts, in cases where decision-makers demonstrate groupthink, and are strategically certain of their goals, the news media cannot be influential despite the frequency and intensity of coverage.

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[97] Woodward, *State of Denial*, 480, David McKeeby, "Baghdad Security Plan Progressing, Says Coalition Spokesman: Iraqis securing capital, assuming military command, pursuing reconciliation," (US Department of State, August 28 2006).

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