Introduction

Bad ideas caused Britain’s war in Iraq, ideas that were dogmatically held. Many remember Iraq as a misadventure of bad faith and botched management, of “dodgy dossiers” and deceit. These are evergreen subjects. But they are not the paramount issue. Mischiefs and falsehoods can facilitate war. They were not its driving force. From its inception as a proposal as the shadows lengthened in 2001 to the invasion fifteen months later, Britain’s Iraq venture was a war of ideas, real concepts about the pursuit of security in a dangerous world. Those ideas were occasioned by conditions, a sense of both power and vulnerability. Visions of world order and democracy, and corollary fears of rogue states with deadly arsenals, were not retrospective face-saving fictions. They drove the push for action from the outset. Prime Minister Tony Blair was the chief protagonist and embodiment of those ideas. He and his counsellors, congregating in his Downing Street “den”, regarded Iraq as the central front in an epochal struggle against a new, apocalyptic barbarism. Britain’s “deciders” are remembered as deft propagandists, but were idealists at the core. Their endeavour was underpinned by powerful and doubt-proofed assumptions, as sincerely assumed as they were rarely examined.

The decision to settle accounts with Iraq after a long standoff, to topple its regime in Baghdad, was a genuine effort to forestall a hypothetical but terrifying danger, the coming together of dictatorship, terrorism and weapons technology, to reorder the world with the antidote of liberal democracy. It was also a British effort to play tutor to the United States. British officials were frightened of the superpower that was wounded and inflamed by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They aimed to prevent America becoming a runaway train. Blair ran grave political risks to turn his Atlantic ambition into policy. A journalist who tailed the prime minister affirmed the intensity of his beliefs and the strain of the hour. The once-cherubic premier of Cool Britannia was thinner faced and darker eyed, enduring “sleepless nights and anxious days.”

As the parliamentary vote loomed, without a legitimising mandate from the United Nations Security Council, Blair asked his Cabinet Secretary to ready his resignation papers. Joining Washington’s war was not an act of geopolitical cynicism. It was more dangerous, a real ideological crusade, rooted in ideas widely shared. As Blair said privately and publicly, “It’s worse than you think. I actually believe in doing this.”

I argue that three bad ideas drove the war. These ideas I refer to as “warlike idealism”, as they blended a pessimistic account of the international security environment, one that demanded

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bold and decisive action, with an optimistic account of what well-intentioned force could achieve. All three ideas warrant interrogation. The first is “regime change”, a doctrine as much as a practice, that states have little choice but to pursue security by breaking and remaking states, possibly in preventive wars, by fixing the political interior of those states with the expansion of democratic and capitalist institutions, by reordering whole regions, and by exterminating rather than containing threats. In launching this bid to reorder the world, policymakers had internalised revolutionary ambitions that were more radical than they realised. They lost sight of the possibility that their cure was worse than the disease. Behaving as insurgents, breaking states and creating new power imbalances, they believed themselves to be guardians bringing order into chaos. Second, there is the doctrine of ‘rogue states’, the assumption that defiant ‘outrider’ states are undeterrible, suicidally-aggressive actors that we cannot live with, whose neutralisation and removal is so vital that it warrants risky preventive action, and who make any strategies of restraint an invitation to aggression. Third, there is the ‘blood price’ fallacy, that Britain can secure exceptional influence in Washington by committing significant up-front costs, and with ground forces in America’s ‘9/11 wars.’

As I argue, the explanation that Britain’s Iraq war came from bad ideas that were widely held better fits the evidence than alternative explanations. These alternative explanations argue that Britain got into the war by accident as a result of a diplomatic process that locked it in, or that it was a war of opportunism masked by rhetoric of democratic liberation, or that it was a good idea that was poorly executed, that it was the result of American pressure, or that it was simply “Blair’s war” and that the British people were his victims. These alternative histories do not survive interrogation. From the many things written about Iraq, we can now assemble a range of competing explanations, explicit and implicit, and weigh them.

This book is a work of “international history”, or the historical study of international politics. It explains an historical event and its significance for the future. It focuses on the decision for war, and that decision’s consequences. It does so methodologically with the inspiration of two minds, the philosopher Karl Popper and the historian Marc Trachtenberg. Trachtenberg argues that the historian must also be a theorist. If “theory” is a set of assumptions that map the world, the historian should examine evidence consciously with a prior set of questions in mind, and then attempt to adjust both until they align and reconcile.3 Why did Britain join the war, when it had discretion not to, and was already committed to another one? Why did it believe such a relatively weak adversary posed such a security problem? Why, given the latitude of choice, did decision-makers think the matter was

obvious and that there was little real choice in the matter? Why did the decision-makers expect such decisive and benign results, or alternatively, why did they think the risks were worth the trouble? Why were they able to succeed in carrying opinion? These questions arise from assumptions that I will defend. In answering these questions, I borrow from Popper. Like Trachtenberg, Popper assumes that theory guides observation, and that observation presupposes theory. In that tradition, we approach an issue like the causes of Britain’s war in Iraq as a contest between competing hypotheses. If ever a conflict attracted divergent explanations about motive, influence and causation, it was this one. Important here is Popper’s social-scientific principle of falsification. We cannot hope for a complete, to-scale explanation that is positively “provable.” We can, though, get closer to a partial rendering or approximation by identifying and dismissing “disprovable” hypotheses, weighing competing explanations and by eliminating inadequate accounts, identify the explanation that comes closest to the evidence we have, in terms of plausibility and consistency. To test my explanation, I pit against it several competing hypotheses, to demonstrate how my argument better fits, and predicts, the rationales, behaviour and chronology of the time. As one of the first histories written “post Chilcot”, this is only a first foothold, to prepare the ground for histories to come.

Deploying the large number of primary documents and retrospective testimonies of participants, I reconstruct the assumptions underlying decisions, the policy ‘world’ that participants inhabited 2001-2003, a world that later disappointments have made harder to imagine. I present an account of how governance over the issue ‘worked.’ As this was a war conceived primarily in Washington, and Britain’s preparations grew from interactions with its senior ally, this is also unavoidably a transatlantic story.

Britain’s Iraq war has already attracted a large literature. Ever since the withdrawal of international troops, civilian and military officials as well as the commentariat have re-fought the Iraq war a second time in memory. It has drawn in journalistic, academic and ‘grey’ literature. Much of it is partisan and polemical. There is also more dispassionate analysis to be found. Most of that literature predates the release of the Iraq Inquiry’s report in July 2016. Valuable studies of Iraq were produced before the Inquiry’s findings were released, but they examine the campaign as a whole and devote much effort to other questions.


In particular, fixations on dishonesty and illegality overshadow the debate. The literature already explores how, and how far, Iraq was a war of false pretences, feints, omissions and exaggerations, and what it means for international law. The Inquiry itself was an honourable undertaking. This book would be impossible without it. But its critique largely focussed on other related questions: the process of decision-making, intelligence, truth, legality, whether war was a “last resort”, and how Britain handled the aftermath and subsequent disorder.

Unlike so much of the public discussion, this history of the war is not centrally about the question of “lies” or legality. The Iraq Inquiry rebuked Blair’s circle, if not exactly for lying or fabrication. Rather, it found the government guilty of decision-based and faith-based evidence-making, casting about for evidence to confirm a prior decision. “Selling” the threat compromised the process of assessing it, as did the effort to harmonise plans with Washington, leading to misplaced certainty and undue weight being placed on ambiguous evidence. The state prepared policies in private, to force regime change, that diverged from those publicly articulated, to secure peaceful disarmament. Its plans was locked and loaded well before weapons inspectors could complete their job. Can lying in wartime be justified? This is an important question, but a separate one. Certainly, most of the wars Britain and the United States remember as honourable were also attended by dishonesty and dissembling. Wartime leaders most revered in the Anglosphere – Churchill, Lincoln, Roosevelt – were dissemblers all, suggesting the issue is less obvious than we may assume. This issue has attracted a sophisticated literature. The question of deceit may help explain how states generate consent. It tells us little about the recourse to war. Charges of falsehood tell us little about what drove policymakers to war in the first place. This book is concerned less with

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7 The *Report of the Iraq Inquiry (Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors) Executive Summary* (HC 264), p.115: ‘The statements prepared for, and used by the UK Government in public from late 2001 onwards conveyed more certainty than the JIC Assessments about Iraq’s proscribed activities and the potential they posed’; p.117: ‘intelligence and assessments made by the JIC about Iraq’s capabilities and intent continued to be used to prepare briefing material to support Government statements in a way which conveyed certainty without acknowledging the limitations of the intelligence.’ Sir John has reiterated these findings since: ‘The judgements about Iraq’s capabilities in that statement, and in the dossier published the same day, were presented with a certainty that was not justified’ in ‘Sir John’s Public Statement’ 6 July 2016 at http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-inquiry/sir-john-chilcot-s-public-statement/; see also ‘Iraq Inquiry: Full Transcript of Sir John Chilcot’s BBC Interview’ *BBC News* 6 July 2017.

deception than self-deception, the tragic process by which rulers are gripped by assumptions they fail to scrutinise.

Above all, I focus on the ideological roots of the decision to intervene. I explore three interlocking doctrines that formed the war’s intellectual foundations: “regime change,” “breaking states”, and the “blood price” of the Anglo-American relationship. Iraq, like other wars of this century, was an intellectual war, “a war made by intellectuals, and cheered on by intellectuals.” Bush and Blair erected their beliefs on specific theoretical foundations about the world, and they sought intellectual opinion to buttress their doctrines, if not question them. The doctrines warmakers drew upon had a rich intellectual pedigree, such as the “democratic peace”, ideas that were widely accepted at the time, even if many intellectuals distanced themselves once the war ran aground. This book puts ideas, habitually sustained, collectively shared and often uncritically accepted, back at the centre of the story. These are enduring habits of mind that led Britain into disaster, and might again.

**Explaining Iraq: Interpretations So Far**

As we refight the war in memory, the most important historical question is the simplest one. Why did Britain take part in the first place? There is already a medium-sized academic literature addressing the question, offering competing explanations. Many appeared before the Iraq Inquiry generated its documentation. They are often speculative, and replete with half-truths. Five versions can be identified: the “poodle” explanation, attributing Britain’s participation to its servile client status and alliance pressure; inadvertent escalation, identifying an accidental momentum created by a disarmament process that was supposed to avoid a final conflict; “Blair’s war”, attributing Britain’s entry predominantly to the will and agency of the Prime Minister; and “virtue/vice”, arguing that Britain went to war either for secret and diabolical reasons, or simply in good faith, for the reasons publicly articulated by the government. Each of these captures elements of the truth, but each also distorts the record.

The “poodle” charge is a common interpretation. It is often vulgarly formulated as a product of Blair’s power-worshipping tendencies, or the eagerness of British security elites to please Washington, as a servile client state, a critique famously played out in the ‘romcom’ film Love Actually. According to this theory, Blair invaded Iraq out of alliance pressure, real or anticipated. Those who draw this interpretation charge Downing Street with being seduced and strongarmed by

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its senior ally, with Blair capitulating to the superpower. Rosemary Hollis presents the decision in these terms, approvingly quoting the memoir of former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook: “the real reason he [Blair] went to war was that he found it easier to resist the public opinion of Britain than the request of the US President.” Hollis and Cook charge that Blair was “programmed to respect power not rebel against it.” Sir Christopher Meyer’s memoir speculates that Blair was seduced by the awe of Washington DC. Geoffreyy Wheatcroft’s polemic takes the allegation to fever pitch, accusing Blair of behaving in the manner of a “puppet or satellite”, denouncing his ‘servility’ to Washington, going to Bush’s retreat in Crawford, West Texas because he was “summoned.” Like many anti-Blair philippics, the portrait is incoherent, painting Blair as a warmongering egotist with ‘great power’ fantasies about Britain’s stature, yet also a slavish vassal willingly subordinating Britain to a foreign potentates’ will.

The ‘poodle’ interpretation of a craven Blair, doing as he is told, is an odd account of the figure who confronted trade union leaders and traditionalists within his own party over its constitution and voting system, a figure who had argued publicly for a decisive confrontation with Saddam Hussein years before Bush became president, and whose persistent pressure on President Bill Clinton during the Kosovo crisis led Clinton to rebuke him for ‘grandstanding.’ It is also an interpretation at odds with the observable dynamics of the Anglo-American relationship after 9/11. Blair was not “summoned” to Bush’s ranch, he was invited with flattering overtures, with signals communicated through Condoleezza Rice that the president wanted Blair’s advice, not his compliance, advice on assembling a coalition that Blair delivered and Bush heeded. David Manning, his foreign policy advisor, privately advised Blair that it was a chance to exert “real influence” on the United States, “to push Bush on the Middle East.” This is not the language of poodles. As we will see in Chapter Three, British Atlanticists desired from their solidarity with Washington not subordination and approval but influence, out of a flawed expectation of a grand strategic payoff, and a belief that Britain could vicariously reclaim global leadership via its closeness to the U.S. The ‘poodle’ charge also misrepresents the dynamics between Blair and the U.S. It was not a case of the dog owner instructing its pet to come to heel. Bush’s administration was not naturally multi-lateralist

12 Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *Yo, Blair!* (London: Politico, 2007), pp.7, 8,
in its orientation, and did not feel the need to invest capital in pressuring allies to join the fray. Bush’s administration held a growing confidence that while allied support and international mandates were desirable “extras”, it could confidently act alone. Indeed, the causal relationship is the reverse. Blair took more of the initiative to reach out to the Bush’s administration in the aftermath of 9/11 and impose himself on events. There is also a significant recorded detail. In a phone call on the eve of Britain’s parliamentary vote, a vote that could be fatal to his premiership, Bush repeatedly and emphatically assured Blair that Washington would sympathise if he dropped out of the warfighting coalition. Bush offered Britain an alternative supporting role through a second wave of peacekeeping. Blair gratefully declined the offer, advising the President “I absolutely believe in this too…I’m there to the very end.”

America was not making a forceful request for British participation, and stated a preference for the survival of an allied government over its risky participation in Iraq. Rather, Britain’s government insisted on taking part. Alliance-related pressure would constrain the UK in other ways, but only later in the causal pathway, through the accelerating dynamics of mobilisation, weather and timetables. The “poodle charge” flows from a disbelief that the Prime Minister actually believed in the cause. It relies on a poorly-supported demonology about Blair. It fails to distinguish between allied support and allied servility. And it falls back on a crude account of the Anglo-American relationship.

A second and flawed explanation is inadvertent escalation. According to this theory, Britain stumbled into war. The invasion was the product of an accidental momentum created by a disarmament process that was supposed to avoid a final conflict. The UK allegedly ‘went to war in a comedy of errors, locked into a sequence of events that its government had worked so hard to avoid,’ falling prey to a ‘policy momentum, largely driven from Washington, which became impossible to slow down, still less reverse. The systemic failure to get off the rails that a prime minister, obsessed with leading from the front, had laid down is the real Chilcot story behind Tony Blair’s own.’ Some versions of this interpretation then stretch to account for what happened next, charging that with the initial ‘WMD’ and counterproliferation rationale discredited, the occupiers went on conveniently to the justifications of democracy promotion and nation-building. This draws partly on a typical ‘bureaucratic politics’ explanation, where governments reach decisions for


functional reasons and then formulate rationales after the fact. This explanation is tied also to assumptions about how the Anglo-American relationship functioned, assumes that Blair’s circle overconfidently invested their hopes in a UN mandate and process that would force Saddam to yield without a shooting war. As we will see, Britain’s multi-level strategy was staked on a strong early assumption of regime change, probably involving participation in a war to forcibly overthrow Saddam, preferably through an attempt to gain UN approval, while publicly legitimising this endgame as a disarmament process intended for a peaceful resolution. There was nothing accidental about Britain’s war in Iraq. As Coates and Krieger argue, denied a mandate but facing a defiant Saddam and under American pressure, Britain with its unique-world-role ‘arrogance’ and imperialist pretentions had no face-saving way out. This interpretation need not detain us long. To attribute empire-nostalgia to the Europhile, multiculturalist architects of New Labour is an odd gambit. And like the ‘poodle’ explanation, it is self-contradictory, positing a Britain that is both vassal-state and great power fantasist. It is also directly contradicted by the historical record.

A third, flawed explanation is the ‘One Man’s War’ account. This narrative recalls the project as overwhelmingly Blair’s creation, where a messianic leader dragged his reluctant country to war. One strand of explanation puts weight on Blair’s authoritarian ‘personality type’, stretching insights about the agency of leaders to the point where Iraq becomes a product of Blair’s individual foibles or obsessions, his autocratic tendencies and gifts of persuasion. A silver-tongued charismatic leader, or a glib falsifier in some versions, almost single-handedly sold Britain the undertaking. The reduction of Iraq to Blair’s persona has obvious political appeal. For those who doubt Iraq’s legitimacy, the claim that it was conducted against strong domestic opposition is a major theme, while for those who regret their support, Blair is a tempting target of blame-shifting. But if the Blair-focused approach is to be consequential to understanding Britain’s decision-making, it implicitly must mount a counterfactual claim, that a different type of leader would not have taken Britain to war. “His faith in his own star convinced him he was right about Iraq’s supposed weapons of mass destruction. He then charmed parliament and voters into war. Nobody forgives being seduced and then deceived, which is why most Britons now despise Blair.” This begs questions. Why were people so easily ‘charmed’, including Blair’s most committed and bitter opponents outside and inside his own party, who were not in the habit of being seduced? If Blair did possess such powers, why

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did he fail when keenly advocated other causes, such as Britain joining the Euro currency? Blair, it is true, was prone to dogmatic thinking and assumed a great capacity to control events. His dogmas, and their appeal, were hammered out in an ideological matrix whose roots lay well beyond his character. Neither is it obvious that without Blair, Britain would have kept its distance. Gordon Brown, Blair’s Chancellor and who was the recognised future leader in the wings, admitted even when Iraq was imploding that he would have made the same decision, and later reaffirmed that the invasion was ‘the right decision’ for ‘the right reasons’ before Chilcot.20 We can’t know definitively what Brown would have done in Blair’s position, but the refusal of Blair’s greatest rival to repudiate the decision in hindsight, and even despite the political payoffs, is significant. To carry the will of parliament and assemble a wide domestic coalition, Blair needed more than self-belief and charm. His case for war needed the active help of other agents who might withhold support. And it had to resonate with a wider pool of assumptions.

This was Britain’s war too, not just Blair’s.21 In public discussion, the ex-prime minister has since become the tribe’s scapegoat, onto whom collective sins are loaded before being driven out of the village. This is not to exculpate Blair or the weight of his decisions. To Blair’s credit, he asks for understanding not exculpation. This book will criticise his judgements in detail. Instead, it is to resist the attempt to isolate the issue to one figure, and the attempt to avoid painful engagement with the war through the blood-sport of Blair-obsession. Blair fulfils a similar exonerating function in Britain to ‘neoconism’ in the US, where a once-broad coalition of minds who supported the war claims in hindsight that a narrow cabal of ideologues made America do it.22 That Blair’s inner circle prepared their case in ways that precluded internal scrutiny is the beginning of the story, not the end. Blair could drive and discipline his cabinet but did not, and could not, foist the venture on his other compatriots in the dead of night. He could not have undertaken it had the ground been infertile. Paradoxically, Britain’s Iraq decision was both covert and democratic. The inner circle conceived regime change as their goal and kept that ambition close to their chest. Yet when the conditions were fitting, they took it to the country. Iraq became one of the most democratically contested wars in British history, initiated only after a protracted public debate and vote in the House of Commons.

Even Blair, armed with a well-honed propaganda machine, could only lead Britain to war because many were already receptive to the doctrines on which it rested. Powerful institutions rallied to the cause with impressive ease, from press barons to security service chiefs to parliament, as did the military service chiefs whose forewarnings were low-volume and gentle. Public figures, including Iraqis in exile, independently joined the coalition of pro-war opinion. Central to the argument was the press magnate Rupert Murdoch and his 175 newspapers worldwide, all of whom supported the invasion. Often depicted as a mere cut-throat businessmen, Murdoch is also an intellectual figure who came to the Iraq question through long-held ideological commitments. He was, in his own words, ‘a man of ideas.’ Murdoch held and promoted the neoconservative vision of US heroic greatness, that marries democratic idealism with military assertiveness, using its hegemonic might to transform nations.

Long before Blair took office, Murdoch sponsored the *Weekly Standard*, America’s foremost neoconservative publication whose signature project was the liberation of Iraq, and maintained it at a loss, and his media embraced the ‘Bush Doctrine’ that realised these ideas. ‘With our newspapers we have indeed supported Bush’s foreign policy’, he said, ‘And we remain committed that way.’ Britain’s ‘Sun King’, like other pro-war newspapers from the *Observer* to the *Financial Times*, were not subject to the government’s whip. Of his own volition, Murdoch agitated for Blair to strike. In the week before the Commons war vote, he phoned Blair to urge against delay. The Iraq war attracted major figures from the British intelligentsia across the spectrum, from Paul Johnson, Melanie Phillips, Anne Leslie, Michael Gove and Max Hastings to David Aaronovitch, John Lloyd and Nick Cohen. Among these names were ex-leftist radicals, who embraced American military power as the last instrument of revolution. Blair’s vision was nourished by collective assumptions that had built up before the 9/11 terrorist attacks that defined the period, assumptions about the nature of security, about what war was for, and what statecraft could achieve.

Those MPs who voted for war in Iraq, at times, have since scrambled for alibis, as have their supporters. They claim they lent their support only because they believed false intelligence, because they trusted the government, or that the blame lies with others for bad planning. Matthew Parris pleaded, ‘we believed what we were told.’

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that he and his colleagues were “misled” into supporting the war, and that had he known of one critical intelligence report of September 2002 that was withheld by the U.S. until 2011, he would have doubted the case.28 The report admitted that there was only a thin evidential base for the Iraqi WMD programme, and that most analysis was based on analytical assumptions rather than evidence.

But this hand-washing is bogus. Journalists and politicians are supposed to scrutinise authority. If they were persuaded by the official intelligence dossier, they were easily persuaded. In Brown’s case, why should we accept that he would have weighed the withheld report more heavily than the other seemingly authoritative estimates he was given by the head of the Secret Intelligence Service, Richard Dearlove and his officials, or the seemingly compelling new evidence produced in September from the Iraqi defector, that he also mentions, about alleged mobile biological weapons production facilities? Even if the secret report had surfaced in time, why should we assume Brown would have believed it and rejected the others? No-one was in a position to ‘know’ that the secret, skeptical US report represented indisputable truth, or that it should outweigh the multiple other reports. The report itself still judged that Iraq “is making significant progress in WMD programs”, and that more precise knowledge was being obstructed by Iraqi Camouflage, Concealment and Decoys.29 There was also in existence, in public, alternative credible sources to suggest doubts over the state of the Iraqi WMD Programme. Serious and informed doubts were raised before the invasion, in public, by the head of UN weapons inspections Hans Blix reports of the chief UN weapons inspector, Dr Hans Blix, and Dr Mohamed El Baradei of the International Atomic Energy Agency, to the Security Council on 14 February, 2003, that "so far, UNMOVIC has not found any such weapons [of mass destruction], only a small number of empty chemical munitions."30 If Brown was truly prepared to revise the issue on the basis of a weak intelligence base, he did not need access to a secret U.S. report, especially one that still estimated that a progressing and covert WMD program existed. Recall that one argument of the Blair and Bush governments was that the likely reason for any lack of final proof was Saddam’s concealment, and that in a post-9/11 world, given incomplete knowledge, in post 9/11 world, responsible states couldn't take the risk. Brown’s own memoir supplies further evidence that early access to the document would probably not have changed his mind. Brown indicates he was predisposed to accept that Saddam with his serial breaches of UN resolutions and his WMD programme was a ‘threat to regional and global order.’ He recalls that he had strong domestic political reasons not to dissent over the war. At the time, he was already on a

30 14 February 2003, Blix claimed that “so far, UNMOVIC has not found any such weapons [of mass destruction], only a small number of empty chemical munitions.”
‘head-on collision’ with Blair over the euro, NHS and tuition fees, and so was “anxious to avoid a fourth area of dispute, particularly one that was not my departmental responsibility.” Brown’s alibi is implausible, that one critical missing document would have overturned a whole set of well-entrenched assumptions about power, order and security. What mattered was the predispositions of those who, like Brown, consumed intelligence products.

Outside the government, politicians an journalists cannot plausibly reduce the issue to one of betrayed trust. In other policy areas, the tabloids and opposition MPs who supported the war regularly accused the prime minister of mendacity. They accepted the state’s verdict because, ideologically, they were predisposed to. And they were not only evaluating the government’s threat assessment, but were exercising a wider strategic judgement, that invading was a prudent choice and had a strong chance of succeeding. They chose to support the argument that war would work. This, too, drew on assumptions that warrant scrutiny.

Part of the “Blair’s War” alibi is an undue emphasis on administrative incompetence, a shifting of blame to “bad planning” and administrative bungling, and the assumption that Iraq’s “lesson” is that military force must be aligned to and optimised around the “reconstruction” of countries after overthrow.31 The “incompetence dodge” is a face-saving exercise that glibly suggests the profound political problems inherent to post-Saddam Iraq could have been administered or engineered away. “Managerialist” accounts of Iraq sidestep questions of “whether” to fight such wars, and to reduce Iraq’s memory to a guide in “how” to conduct such wars in future. Managerialists infer that the failure of Iraq is attributable to bad planning, rather than the idea of regime change itself. They draw from the campaign insights into nation-building and how to govern states once their own states have seized their capital. Ultimately, their concern is about failure to intervene, not intervention failure, and are determined to keep the flame of interventionism intact. They caution that we must not ‘over-learn’ from Iraq, lest it erodes our spirit of warlike idealism. They work to limit Iraq’s salience as a precedent. Versions of this storyline, of invasion being spoilt by maladministration, and the need to remain predisposed to frequent intervention, are offered by other participants and observers, including grandees of British security policy like former Secretary of State Lord William Hague and former UK ambassador to the UN, Sir Jeremy Greenstock. ‘Yet action to support global order cannot be totally abandoned because particular campaigns ended badly’, as Greenstock’s straw-man reductionism has it.32 Yet the geopolitical storms created by those

campaigns suggest that we should maintain global order differently. In finally admitting that the war in Iraq was a ‘mistake’, Lord Hague presents the error as a problem of proof (‘We relied too much on evidence that turned out to be flimsy’) and stresses that there will need to be more intervention in the next quarter-century even than the last, and returns to his most emphatic theme, based on a misrepresentation of recent history, that the gravest danger is western passivity: ‘We have seen in recent years that when the West pulls back, other actors come in.’ By the time Hague finishes qualifying the cautionary lessons of Iraq, the campaign shrinks into an unfortunate ‘one-off’ with the underlying agenda of liberal war undisturbed. We can identify other defects of managerialism that Chapter Two will address in more depth: managerialists underestimate the profound problems of breaking and remaking states and governing foreign populations. Their arguments tend to treat host populations not primarily as active political agents with visions and agendas of their own, but as passive recipients who must be better administered into stable market democracy. In that sense, managerialists carry colonial attitudes to those they wish to assist. They wrongly interpret post-Iraq cases, from Libya to Syria, as instances of western ‘retreat’ or ‘non-intervention.’ In their fixation with staging military operations in order to impress third parties of the West’s ‘resolve’, they treat international life as a narcissistic drama about western political will, and overstate the prospects of waging peripheral wars in order to impress other major powers into submission. And in their vision of permanent armed revolution, they betray the same attitude as another idealistic and relentless warmaker, Philip II, of whom it was said that “No experience of the failure of his policy could shake his belief in its essential excellence.” Those who embraced the cause of “regime change” would hardly deny themselves a share of the credit for the consequences if it had been a cheap and rapid success. They must accept co-responsibility for their ‘judgement call.’

A narrow focus on Blair arises also from what we might call the legalist tradition about the Iraq war. Questions of legitimacy and legality often attend the debate. Decision-makers too devoted much energy and time to building their case and legitimising it at home and abroad. Legalists approach the Iraq war primarily as a crime, rather than a blunder. They emphasise above all the war’s criminal unlawfulness. They range from polemicists such as Tom Bowyer and Owen Jones, to scholars such as Glen Rangwala, to former intelligence and weapons experts such as Brian Jones, to

33 William Hague, ‘I admit it, Iraq was a mistake: but that shouldn’t stop us intervening in Syria’ The Telegraph 24 November 2015.
34 Reported comment at the RUSI Land Warfare Conference, 2017, Tweet 27 June 2017, 1:26am.
jurist Phillipe Sands. They suggest that successful diplomacy relies upon the legitimacy that only the United Nations can bestow. Rangwala, Dan Plesch, Rabinder Singh QC and Professor Conor Gearty’s *A Case to Answer* typifies this prosecutorial tradition, arguing that Blair specifically must answer a charge of high crimes and suffer impeachment. But in 2003, war-makers also considered themselves internationalists. They too believed that they were enforcing international principles, to the extent that they were willing to flout the global community’s formal rules in order to strengthen its writ. The U.S. and British governments successfully persuaded others to support the invasion, illegal or otherwise. A number of liberal democracies supported Washington’s claim that the best way to uphold world order was to overthrow Saddam Hussein after his serial affronts to it, and argued that an insistence on unanimity had paralysed the international community in the past. It was not a case of virtuous internationalists versus malign rule-breakers. It was a conflict between competing visions of global order, as one side stressed the unity of the United Nations, the other its credibility. In 1999, NATO countries and their supporters argued that their unauthorised bombing of Serbia to oppose genocide and war crimes was illegal but legitimate. So too did advocates of the Iraq war in 2003. As the hawkish intellectual Robert Kagan noted, “In 2003 France and Germany and other European nations were demanding that the United States adhere to an international legal standard that they themselves had ignored, for sound moral and humanitarian reasons, a mere four years earlier.”

Iraq stands for a wider question, about competing visions for what it means to uphold international order. A war’s legality—or otherwise—can only be determined by a properly constituted court. Ultimately, the difficulty with legalism is pragmatic. In the absence of an international system whereby powerful states will actually be tried, or rulers prosecuted, and in a world where states from time to time believe they must infringe rules to uphold order, these are questions of judgement that cannot be resolved in courts.

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38 This distinction was outlined by Sir George Young, MP, in the debate on 18 March 2003: ‘…the debate concerns the credibility of the United Nations on the one hand, and its unity on the other. The Prime Minister’s view is that unless firm action is taken now, the UN’s credibility will be fatally undermined. The alternative view is that moving too fast will shatter the unity of the UN, thus fatally undermining it.’


40 Neither is there a clear link between legal authorisation and strategic success. Most of the violence that occurred in post-Saddam Iraq took place after the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1546 in June 2004, unanimously authorising the continuing presence of a multinational force.
Finally, there is the ‘virtue/vice’ school of interpretation. This approach treats the matter as a morality play, from opposing angles, whereby the British government acted out of simple good faith or bad. One version, centred on ‘vice’, speculates that Britain’s participation was driven by unspeakable ulterior motives covered by deception. Peter Oborne, for instance, insinuates an anti-Islamic motivation on Blair’s part, referring to his ‘habit of attacking Muslim countries.’ The suggestion that Britain attacked those countries because they were Islamic would intrigue the Muslim majority populations of Sierra Leone and Kosovo, on whose behalf the UK intervened before Iraq. It also sits oddly with Blair’s well-documented admiration for all Abrahamic faiths, his government’s oversight of a mass immigration programme that included millions of Muslims, and his daily reading of the Q’uran.

Hostile accounts of Britain’s war in Iraq often share one overriding quality, an assumption there can be no idealism in a war that was allegedly dishonest or illegal. Iraq was such a low gambit, they assume, that it must have been bereft of idealism and dominated by narrow and material Realpolitik. As Piers Robinson charges, “to what extent might have western populations been manipulated into support for a war on terrorism that was as much about geo-strategic opportunism and aggressive wars, as it was about tackling Islamic fundamentalist terrorism?” Notice the structure of Robinson’s question, dividing the ‘geo-strategic’ from the armed struggle against Islamism. The document he builds this case on, ‘The War Against Terrorism: The Second Phase’, shows Blair clearly linking the broader Islamist threat to seven countries. The idealists who took Britain to Iraq believed that if a geostrategic opportunity presented itself, it was a chance to attack Islamism’s foundations, for militant Islamism they believed was one biproduct and symptom of a dysfunctional regional order. Because opponents of the war so often cannot bring themselves to imagine that the war-makers also held high ideals, they struggle to explain it.

A more widespread version of the “bad faith” tradition alleges that it was mainly a project to secure Western oil interests, whether by unlocking a rich source of petroleum for the international market, or by seizing a geostrategic foothold to secure access, with other stated rationales working as high-minded ‘cover.’ This draws too on the demonology about Blair. More subtle observers,

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41 Oborne, Not the Chilcot Report, p.166.
44 Memo, Blair to Bush, 4 December 2001.
45 Nafeez Ahmed, ‘Iraq invasion was about oil: Maximising Persian Gulf oil flows to avert a potential global energy crisis motivated Iraq War planners - not WMD or democracy’ Guardian 20 March 2014.
like Paul Rogers, frame the issue more gingerly, inferring intention from likely effect: ‘A cynical analyst might conclude that one function of the war, at least in the short term and from a US perspective, was to break OPEC, damage the economies of countries such as Iran and Venezuela and ensure price cuts at gas stations in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election. We may doubt whether the US Democrats who voted to authorise the president’s use of force were eager to maximise Bush’s chances of re-election, and the oil market plays a strikingly marginal role in the records of US deliberations that we do have. But it is hard ultimately to falsify such theories. The totality of motivations are irrecoverable and hidden motives by definition are hard to reconstruct. In Britain’s case, if there were secret alternative rationalisations, they must have been very secret. As we will see, along with a process of alleged deception, we can also identify expressions of intense and consistent beliefs in private communications and in the testimonies of Blair’s opponents within Cabinet, where oil was mostly marginal, second order or unmentioned, all of which suggests authenticity and genuinely held core convictions.

The “oil” hypothesis is often formulated simplistically, presenting the Iraq adventure as a war of plunder. Oil, to be sure, had to form part of the calculus. Had Iraq not been a potentially wealthy oil-rich state located in a region regarded by London and Washington as strategically sensitive and adjacent to other sources of threat, policymakers may not have ranked it so highly on their hierarchy of interests, and there was a general aspiration that a liberated Iraq would return to a fully-functioning part of the international energy market. Oil mattered less as a ‘spoil’ of war but more indirectly and generally. Petro-dollars were a strategically potent resource that policymakers feared a hostile state like Saddam’s could use to generate threatening capability, such as nuclear weapons. If, on the other hand, profitable access to Iraq’s energy resources was the overriding motive, as opposed to a second-order one, Western powers had cheaper means short of invading the country. To get Iraqi oil flowing in greater volumes, and to increase their access, they could have lifted economic sanctions. For twelve years by enforcing sanctions, they had conducted a policy despite, not because of, an interest in maximising Iraq’s oil output. If a prime concern for the US had been to ‘lock in’ privileges for their own oil companies, overthrowing the regime was not the easiest way to do it. They could have privately bargained with the regime in Baghdad, as did the anti-war statesman, French president Jacques Chirac. Oil is a fungible commodity on the global

46 Paul Rogers, A War Too Far, p.50.
market, its price is effected by overall supply and demand, and does not require seizure of a country to secure access to it.

The picture that emerges from the documentary sources is different. Oil interests in British decision-making circles, while not overlooked, were an afterthought. Blair’s circle and the parliament predominantly willed the removal of Saddam Hussein for other ambitious, security-related reasons. Only later did they calculate that in the event of his removal, they should ensure their companies a share of the spoils. There was, from 31 October 2002, lobbying by British companies BP, Shell and BG to the Department of Trade and Industry for a slice of the contracts in post-Saddam Iraq. This date that came after, not before, Blair’s circle had privately settled on its decision to participate in military action, so the causal sequence was the reverse of the ‘plunder’ thesis. Liz Symons, Minister of State for Trade, noted ‘we have been making the case publicly that this conflict is about WMD not oil (as many have unfairly claimed).’ If anything, British firms expressed concern to her that the state was not being ruthless enough in pursuing commercial interests in a post-bellum Iraq, and that with momentum for war building, Britain was losing out to American and French firms in an emerging market. In the words of Colin Adams, of the trade association British Consultants and Construction Bureau, as relayed by Symons to Straw, ‘insufficient action appears to be happening at the political level to safeguard UK interests when the situation in Iraq is finally normalised.’ British envoys were in the awkward position of emphasising that security interests were paramount, but that the state would still lend support in Washington to British oil companies. Britain pushed the US to ensure more rigorous international oversight over the management of Iraqi oil revenues. The British embassy advised UK oil companies that ‘US motivation as regards Iraq parallels our own: this is a matter of national security, not oil,’ while also urging Downing Street to take up the matter with the White House. Britain’s main decision-makers did not think, even in private, that a grab for Iraq’s oil was the main purpose. A paper from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office set down as a principle aim of a stable Iraq selling oil on world markets, but described securing reconstruction contracts for British companies as a ‘second order objective.’ With the campaign underway, Blair urged Bush to outline a vision of Iraq’s political and economic future ‘to dispel the myth that we were out to grab Iraq’s oil.’ British policy settings were not optimised around exploiting opportunities for its oil companies. US rules enabled

48 Minute Christopher Segar to PS/Baroness Symons, 31 October 2002, ‘Iraq Oil’.
50 Christopher Meyer to David Manning, 15 November 2002, ‘Iraqi Oil.’
52 Nicholas Cannon to Simon McDonald, 31 March 2003, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Conversation with Bush, 31 March.’
Washington to favour American companies in disbursing reconstruction contracts, whereas Britain’s rules from April 2001 denied preferential treatment to British firms. There evidently was concern within government to ensure a payoff once war was underway. But an anxiety to receive incidental material benefits once a decision is taken is not the same as core prior motive. Nor does it falsify the other aims that Blair’s circle repeatedly and fulsomely asserted.

The other side of the ‘virtue/vice’ approach is the ‘good faith’ version. This account of Britain’s participation is a sympathetic one, and arises partly out of discontent with the sometimes hysterical allegations of anti-war critics. Britain’s war, it argues, was waged in good faith and, without the luxury of hindsight, in circumstances that were compelling. As well as accepting the basic honesty of the government’s case, it also accepts Blair’s calculation about the problem. It supports, or at least sympathises with, the premise that failing to strike Iraq would amount to an imprudent failure to act. Britain in March 2003 had no ‘good’ choices, and given the risks implied in restraint, was on balance wise to take the difficult path of conflict. A later chapter tackles these apologetic arguments, and the dubious counterfactual claims on which they rest.

Elements of the above interpretations contain some truths. As we will see, there was an Anglo-American relationship consideration, though not a ‘poodle’ version; oil was indirectly relevant, not an overriding driver; Blair was a driving force who needed other conditions in place to succeed; and perceptions and presentation of threat mattered in implementing a genuine calculation about security. The best question is how these elements ranked and interlocked, and what inferior interpretations leave out.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter One, ‘Warpath’, I argue that Britain’s war in Iraq was enabled and driven by an interaction of power and ideas, a particular blend of fear and confidence. A set of ideas about how best to pursue security, ideas enabled by the capabilities of the US, created the warpath, and those ideas were insulated and taken-for-granted. Like Bush, Blair’s circle decided on war because it hardly occurred not to, or to entertain alternatives. Dogmatic ideas were not merely the property of the decision-making elite: they could thrive, even in the glare of parliamentary debate. Decision-makers were

ideologically predisposed to war, and thus neglected the most important question of whether to strike. A set of basic assumptions, flowing from a pre-existing and widely held ideology, and the logic of preventive and coalition war, went unexamined, and proved decisive. Blair and his inner circle assumed war was inevitable - the only prudent choice was to force the issue now, on their terms, rather than later, on Saddam’s. They worried predominantly about how to create conditions that would legitimise a British military campaign, that would generate enough support, and that would predispose the country against further postponement of the final reckoning. By taking this wandering course, however, they were moving towards a fixed end. They imposed on their compatriots the tightening pressures of mobilisation, the impatience of their senior ally, and the mounting fear of the reputational costs of standing down. Even when the degraded quality of Iraq’s arsenal and its relative weakness was declared by inspectors on the eve of war, they calculated that only a complete capitulation by the regime would do. They reckoned they could no longer live with the ambiguities and frustrations of the status quo. The ghosts of Suez taught them that they could only influence the superpower by aligning with it. Ultimately, Britain followed America to war because recent experience and embedded ideas taught them a simple truth, that war worked.

Chapter Two forms the core of my argument. In this chapter, I trace the ideological roots of ‘regime change’, identifying regime change as an underlying form of security-seeking. Though it took the structural fact of American power and the contingent event of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to make the assault on Saddam possible, it was also conditioned by the rise in the previous decade of a set of ideas about liberalism and security. Those ideas bred a ‘common sense’ that presented disputable ideas as obvious: that 9/11 was a harbinger, not an aberration, warranting high-risk and radical measures; that designated ‘rogue’ actors are undeterrable aggressors who we cannot live with; and that given the obvious ‘arc’ of history towards democracy and capitalism, western power can be applied to transform whole regions if only westerners have the will. I then refute an alternative argument, made by two liberal-internationalist scholars John Ikenberry and Dan Deudney, that the intellectual foundations of the Iraq war were primarily realist, and that the ideological tradition of liberalism had little to do with it. As I demonstrate, liberals and liberalism were deeply implicated. The forceful reassertion of American primacy was not an amoral exercise in power-maximisation. It was infused with an idealism that has deep historical roots. Moreover, liberalism and the pursuit of hegemony are not antithetical, as the authors imply. Liberalism married with the capabilities of a superpower gives America a proclivity for reckless military adventures. So long as liberalism, untampered by prudential balance-of-power realism, remains a central engine of American grand strategy, the US will be prone to further such tragedies.
Chapter Three turns to the Anglo-American relationship, and the ambition that by aligning with the United States and paying the ‘blood price’, Britain can win great influence over its strategic direction. Rather than subordinating itself to receive material benefits, British decision-makers believed that by aligning with the US in the War on Terror, they were generating the ability to steer a superpower that otherwise might run amok and jettison itself from the international community. The belief that Britain could have this leverage was encouraged by apparent success in steering the Bush administration towards the United Nations and its authority as the framework through which to confront Saddam. However, the experience of preparing and waging war as junior partner revealed the contradictions within the ‘special relationship’ mindset. Influence, so the theory goes, must derive from acquiescence, and continued acquiescence to the outlines of US policy is necessary to retain influence.\textsuperscript{54} This renders any influence highly circumscribed. Having pledged support for a policy, that support must continue and Britain can only influence its execution (and the course of the campaign revealed the limits on Britain’s ability even to shape that). Otherwise, the ability to influence policy will be withdrawn and estrangement or even punishment will follow. Past solidarity creates a path-dependent pressure to tow the line, in order to obtain an influence that Britain in the most critical hour dare not exercise or test. Ultimately, the ‘special relationship’ ambition misconceives the complexity of policymaking in Washington, confusing historical sentiment for geopolitical leverage.

In Chapter Four, I weigh the arguments, and construct the strongest possible case in favour of ‘regime change’ both with hindsight, and without. Hawks pose serious ‘what if’ questions: what were the alternatives to war? What risks and costs would US-led allies have borne if they had refrained from invading? I demonstrate that the defences of the war rest on counterfactual historical claims that are implausible and, in any case, less grave that what actually happened, even on ‘worst case’ calculations. The strongest retrospective case for war still involves fragile gains made at costs so heavy, with such serious unintended consequences, that decision-makers would have judged them prohibitive, had they known them in advance. As I will argue, not invading was a lesser evil than invading. Saddam’s Iraq was a diminished and wretched force that posed little serious threat, the US-led coalition had successfully shackled the regime by 2003, weakened its ability to threaten the region and had established effective deterrence. But there is no avoiding the implications of restraint: restraint would have constituted effective toleration for continued B’aath party’s predatory rule, with

\textsuperscript{54} For a similar critique, see Alex Danchev, ‘Greeks and Romans: Anglo-American Relations After 9/11’ \textit{The RUSI Journal} 148:2 (2003), pp.16-19, 18.
all the consequences. The West, I argue, could have co-existed with and contained a weakened Iraq even in a situation where sanctions were breaking down. There was already evidence, before March 2003, that Saddam’s regime could be deterred and restrained by clear Western signalling, there are strong reasons to assume that a ‘rogue state-terrorism nexus’ had not and would not form in Iraq, and that there was time and capacity to disrupt any rearmament or threatening behaviour. Between ‘regime change’ and ‘doing nothing’ there was a prudent middle way of vigilant ‘overwatch’ available to US-led forces.

In Chapter Five, I argue that a return to realism of a prudent and sceptical kind can help temper the pathologies that led to the Iraq war, on several fronts. It can counsel governments against excess certainty. In particular, it cautions against the ‘Gordian Knot’ temptation, the impatient urge to eliminate sources of insecurity and impose decisive solutions on problems, in particular the perennial demand for the downfall of adversary regimes. Realism can inform policymakers what war can affordably achieve. As well as placing princes on their guard against predation, it encourages prudent war-avoidance. Mindful that states cannot avoid living with insecurity, uncertainty and risk, we can draw upon realist insight to restore deterrence and consequential diplomacy as the central foundations of security. And with realism, we can guard against the temptation to view international life as a morality play requiring ideological crusades, recognising it instead as a tragedy where good intentions can be deadly, as a conflicted world where not all good things go together, and where major powers can be their own worst enemies.

In the Epilogue, I offer two speeches to leave the matter for readers to judge. First, there is the televised address Blair gave on the eve of war. And there is an alternative address he had given, setting out an alternative logic of restraint. It draws on arguments and warnings made and neglected at the time.