Invading Iraq: A case study on the role of evidence and accountability in U.S. policy and foreign intervention.

Perspective of a reformer of science and technology policy

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The 2003 invasion of Iraq is contemporarily considered one of the largest foreign policy intelligence failures. The consensus even bridges long-withstanding partisan divides, which have invariably afflicted domestic foreign policy. However, what is not unanimous, is the exact contour of the intelligence failure. The following thesis investigates three mutually reinforcing knowledge assessment verticals which are believed to have failed in the lead up to 2003. First is the intelligence agencies' failure to acquire accurate and precise information. Second is their inadequate assessment of potential institutional biases, and subsequent mischaracterization of uncertainty around their eventual inferences. Third is the imbalanced power dynamics that dictate who is given access to the information, and how - *or what* - information is being publicly disseminated. The following report aims to use the 2003 invasion of Iraq as motivation for a broader analysis on the existing institutional design and coordination flaws presently governing U.S. foreign policy.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. had a revived sense of urgency and readiness to go to war on "terrorists and on those who harbor [or support] them" [1]. Almost immediately after the attacks the Bush administration began naming the Iraqi government (i.e. Saddam Hussein) as a likely conspirator with Al Qaeda, the transnational militant Islamist organization responsible for 9/11 [1-2]. The witch-hunt that soon ensued against Saddam Hussein, had already been accumulating momentum since the spring of 2001 [1, 3]. Early into 2001, claims that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling nuclear, chemical and biological weapons were growing, mostly fueled by the aluminum tubes that Iraq was surreptitiously importing [3]. The aluminum tubes showed that Iraq could have been reconstituting its nuclear program. While we now know they were intended for artillery rockets, most of the intelligence debates between the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and DOE (Department of Energy) during 2001 to 2003, centered around the tubes' potential use for nuclear enrichment. In the end, the DOE, unlike the CIA, dissented from this judgement but agreed that Iraq was rebuilding its nuclear program. Doing so, elevated the perceived risk posed by Iraq without clear, specified evidence. Fears for homeland security were equally heightened by Iraq's concurrent procurement of software for its Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), which included maps of the United States [3].

During this time, the U.S. was leveraging their inferences to make broad range criticisms of Iraq at the United Nations Security Council, drawing upon instances of human rights violations, support for terrorist organizations, and the stockpiling of biological and chemical weapons [4]. The council accordingly adopted Resolution 1441 which provided Saddam Hussein "a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations"; obligations which had already been laid out in predating resolutions. Though Iraq immediately complied with the Resolution [6], their lack of overall transparency and poor accounting of once proudly advertised biological weapons laboratories, provided the U.S. and U.K. much needed ammunition to disregard reassurances from the UN Monitoring and Verification Commission, that there

were no traces of weapons of mass destruction (or WMDs) [1][3][7]. By their accounts, both governments had enough leverage to go to war.

On March 19, 2003 the U.S. invaded Iraq under the justification that their leader, Saddam Hussein, was illegally possessing WMDs. The war was considered a preemptive measure to prevent further attacks or threat to the United States [3, 8-9]. The administration argued that by overthrowing "tyrant" Saddam, they could "Liberate Iraq", which would not only produce democracy there, but encourage democracy in the rest of the Middle East [8, 9]. The intended effects of this 'preemptive war' aligned nicely with the Bush Doctrine, and the effort to democratize the rest of the world [9]. By embodying the 'liberator' in Iraq, the U.S. believed it could amass further geopolitical power and influence in the region. What the administration failed to consider, is the fundamental discordance between war and peace. Seventeen years later democracy has failed to take hold in Iraq, or most of the Middle East. Instead the war has ensued to a reinvigoration of radical Islamic militant groups in the region (e.g. ISIL), a set-back in Iraqi women's rights, a displacement of millions of Iraqis, and has cost the lives of hundred-thousands of civilians, and thousands of U.S. soldiers [10-12]. Further discussions of the "Bush Doctrine" [9], and the implicit reduction of democracy to an intuitive and immaculate system of government that is impeded only by artificial obstacles (e.g. a tyrant, Saddam Hussein), exist beyond the scope of this paper. What should be conceded from the Doctrine, however, is the clear evidence of an underlying U.S. agenda. Agendas necessarily manifest into institutional biases, which motivate the question: was and *are* the institutions of knowledge acquisition, assessment, and attribution in U.S. foreign policy, designed to account for potential biases and politicization of information during decision making?

The basis for this inquiry exists across public and private domains; intelligence failures are not unique to foreign policy. However, the small margin for error in foreign policy decision-making dictates a need for increased attention to latent systematic failures. Foreign policy intelligence is strictly classified, as are its sources (e.g. intercepted phone calls, satellite imagery, or defected personnel). Consequently, information is collected and assessed in silos, delimiting an intelligence agencies' ability to holistically characterize a threat, or validate its accuracy [1][3][7]. The irony is that though their job may be to 'connect the dots', it is unlikely agencies can ever know every dot, *and* know it absolutely. This fundamental design flaw is underscored by the power ascribed to asymmetrical information, especially in international relations. Saddam Hussein may have never had the biological warfare facilities he boasted about; regardless the effect is the same. The threat of WMDs maintained his power, and in the short-term, provided insurance against enemies in the region [3]. Hence gatekeeping, as opposed to information-sharing, is assumed to be the better strategy between *and throughout* government agencies [1]. However, if left unchecked, flagrant politicized intelligence failures can result in catastrophic domestic and international outcomes; the exemplification of this being the invasion of Iraq.

Notwithstanding the above, intelligence agencies do remain responsible for the misjudgment of Iraq's programs of WMDs. First, as a knowledge acquisition failure and second, as an inadequate knowledge assessment. Here, knowledge acquisition refers to the collection and aggregation of evidence; and knowledge assessment is the interpretation and translation of evidence to actionable inferences. So far, the canonical benchmark for knowledge acquisition failures is to measure the mismatch between observation and expectation. Except in the context of preemptive politics, if the justification of an anticipatory and likely adversarial foreign action is later found to be untrue or incomplete, innocent lives

may have been lost and enemies prematurely created. A political actor's compliance or support of this canonical benchmark makes them culpable for the aftermath of erroneously acquired intelligence, as it was for the Bush Administration in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq. All to say that because tasked intelligence committees do not formulate testable hypotheses or adequately consider counterfactuals, they default to beliefs that cannot be falsified; leaving crucial assumptions unexplicated and unexamined [3]. They ignore the diagnostic value of absent evidence, and instead rely on a mosaic of information from independent ambiguous sources, which are singularly incongruent but together provide convincing, and potentially misleading evidence.

For instance, let us reconsider the debate around the purpose of the aluminum tubes in the context of knowledge acquisition and assessment. One begins by noting that deliberations only questioned whether tubes "could be used for nuclear enrichment?" and not "if the Iraqi government had procured them for this purpose?". One can surmise that the former question was emphasized because it better fit the priori belief that Iraq's use of fronts and surreptitious means to obtain the materials, suggests harboring of illegal weaponry [1]. However, what intelligence committees neglected to link to their prior, is their knowledge that Iraq historically used front companies to evade UN sanctions for import of purely legitimate goods [1]. Also, at that time, the Security Council resolutions prohibited Iraq from importing such materials for conventional military uses [3]. In both scenarios, Iraq's actions were contextually rational, and it was the intelligence committee's adversarial and priori assumptions that lead to false deductions.

If the emphasis of knowledge acquisition alternatively involved characterizing the extent of what is and is not known, intelligence committees could estimate and assign respective likelihoods (i.e. probabilities) to each plausible hypothesis. Knowledge acquisition would require answering questions such as: what evidence should be present if the hypothesis is correct? or Are there alternative interpretations that better align with the foreign government's social and political interests? [3] Once answered, upward dissemination of information to superiors would transition from "likely" to "probable" inferences. Whereby a *likely* hypothesis is when the chance of occurrence exceeds that of alternative outcomes, and a *probable* hypothesis is when the chance of occurrence is at least above 0. The proposed, more disciplined approach, recognizes the limitations to technology and uses it as a measure of how meaningful results are, and is better at delineating between both certain and uncertain gathered intelligence. Generally increasing the accuracy of knowledge acquisition protocols. Likewise, by encouraging the assessment of alternative hypotheses, intelligence committees are less able to dictate final decisions in accordance with their or their superior's existing biases. This is especially important in the context of the Iraq war. Early villainizations of Saddam Hussein translated to analysts and intelligence managers illegitimately skewing their findings against him, because they knew any suggestion that his capabilities were limited would immediately draw fire from their superiors [1, 8].

So far in the analysis, the presumption has been that *the Bush Administration would not have invaded Iraq had they known there were no WMDs.* Except we now know this is untrue. According to the

Senate Committee on Intelligence Findings[1], on-the-ground UN weapon inspectors returned to Iraq in November, and could not find evidence of either active weapon programs or prohibited chemical, biological, or nuclear facilities. The inspectors also reported dismantling all ballistic missiles found to exceed UN-mandated range limits, which suggested that inspectors were actively intervening in Iraq [7][14]. A few discrepancies in Iraq's declaration of its previous programs and stockpiles were reported, however Chief Inspector Hans Blix warned in February 2003, not to equate unaccounted for stockpiles to proof of existing weapons [7][14]. Still President Bush, as well as senior government officials, ignored this evidence and in March told the American people "Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised" [14]. It was also known, as early as October 2002, that the document claiming Iraq had acquired uranium from Africa was completely forged [14]. It should be reiterated here, that intelligence agencies, committees, and departments are intended to inform governments in their decision making. They cannot be invoked or discarded selectively, for example only invoked when in alignment with a government's personal agenda or politics. The unjustified claims made by the Bush Administration on Iraq's illicit weapons completely disavows the executive branch of government's responsibility to the American people, and severely damages the credibility of the government and its "intelligence gathered". More importantly, their blatant disregard for evidence suggests that prescriptions on how to improve knowledge acquisition and assessment are futile if government accountability to knowledge is left unaddressed.

To further elucidate the accountability failure, let us invoke a model of how we now know evidence, inference, and decision making connects in U.S foreign policy. Once a directive is given to gather intelligence on subject matter X, intelligence agencies independently utilize information sources and available technologies to gather data. The information is laterally transferred intra-agency to interpreters, who utilize their prior knowledge to assess the information and develop a formal inference on the threat, or risk posed. These inferences are then longitudinally communicated to the primary foreign policy actors; e.g. Secretary of Defense or Vice President. The design flaw belongs to this unilateral transfer of information, whereby the inferiority of the gatherers and interpreters makes them susceptible to intimidation by the superiority of the decision makers. The intimidation makes them more likely to be influenced by their perceptions of their superiors' biases, and may skew their subjective knowledge assessments of evidence or uncertainty accordingly. Without a neutral, non-partisan, third-party arbitrator, information can be falsely labelled and manipulated in favor of the actors' agenda; since *only they* are privy to the complete 'picture'. Once again, foreign policy is a specifically-extreme case of intelligence failure because of how highly controlled information attribution is. The influence needed to permit access to information is mandated by an individual's power. Hence, without our ambivalent arbitrator, powerful give powerful the *right* to know, while the people most effected by the decisions are forced to learn the information from a heavily guarded chain of memos and media reports. Democracy disintegrates, data is capitalized and citizens vote based on a curated reality made to 'coincidentally' keep the powerful, *tyrannical?*

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[1] The Senate Committee on Intelligence (SCI) was created in 1976 to study the intelligence activities and programs of the U.S. Government and report to the Senate. The Committee is also responsible for proposing legislation and providing legislative oversight to ensure Intelligence activities are in conformity with the U.S. Constitution. [13]

Although, if we attributed the information asymmetry to just an institutional design flaw, then is it President Bush's fault or is it the fault of the model? Do the joint actions of the Legislative and Executive Branch to invade Iraq fall under the default U.S. propensity to amass global power and influence? If so, then should the system not control for these assumed and erroneous proclivities? If we agree that it should, then how do we intervene?

The main concern is that the lack of transparency and accuracy in information gathering, has weaponized 'intel' into a tool to maintain the status-quo and thus inhibit the democratic processes from holding public officials accountable. Some might argue that journalism is the fairest facilitator of truth; journalism is constitutionally afforded the right to uncover politicians with hegemonized leanings. However, retrospective analyses of media coverage during the invasion of Iraq showed the rationale for invasion developed mostly as a "public conspiracy" over a decade by members of Project for a New Century[2] (PNAC) [8]. The repeated messaging that a "war on terrorism" was *necessary* and patriotic*,* proliferated media outlets [2, 8]. The messages were emboldened even more by the villain-caricatures made of Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. "The meaning of terrorism expanded from a tactic to also mean an idea, a lifestyle, and ultimately a condition of the world" [8]. The fear-evoking narrative fostered a national desire for retribution and responsibility [8]. Supporting the Iraq war, became interchangeable to an altruistic fight against an "axis of evil" that was to protect the sovereignty and safety of the United States [8]. Furthermore, at the time, journalists capitulated to the government for information (as is always the case during wartime) [1-2, 8]. Consequently, organizations, like the PNAC, took advantage and steered messaging in favor of the Bush Doctrine [2]. Meanwhile, the Bush administration took advantage to propagate numerous fraudulent claims about Saddam Hussein. Fear, especially in response to 9/11, inhibited critical analysis around the credibility of information by journalists *and citizens* [2]. The use of propaganda to assuage political criticism and direct public opinion is not new to US Domestic or Foreign Policy; similar efforts succeeded during the Reagan-era and the Vietnam war [16]. We even see it today with the onslaught of fake news dictating presidential elections or public health knowledge.

The scope of propaganda and media extends far beyond the Iraq war and the discussion above does not capture its nuance or ubiquity. Nonetheless, it should motivate us to rethink how we define intelligence failures. The still-felt catastrophe of the Iraq invasion was not the result of some false satellite image or forged document; it was the exemplification of a flawed system, one that could benefit from transparent and ongoing discourse.

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[2] PNAC, is a neoconservative think tank that focused on United States foreign policy. Dissolved in 2006. Known for their Principles: *"We need to accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles. Such a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity may not be fashionable today. But it is necessary if the United States is to build on the successes of this past century and to ensure our security and our greatness in the next"* [15]

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