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ARTICLE



The case for Bush revisionism: Reevaluating the legacy of America's 43rd president

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ABSTRACT

This article reassesses the foreign policy legacy of George W. Bush in light of the emerging historical record of his administration. We conclude that, whereas Bush's foreign policy was in widespread disrepute when he left office in 2009, that reputation is likely to improve – perhaps significantly – in the coming years. We identify six particular arguments that lend credence to an emerging 'Bush revisionism.' To be clear, we do not necessarily argue that the balance sheet on Bush's foreign policy was positive, but the arguments presented here are likely to generate a more sympathetic and favorable historical assessment of Bush's presidency over time.

KEYWORDS George W. Bush; US foreign policy; Iraq; war on terror; Afghanistan

Harry Truman is the patron saint of unpopular presidents. When Truman left office in January 1953, he was widely reviled for his purported failures in foreign policy; decades later, he had come to be widely revered for his role in creating the postwar international order.¹ As his own presidency ended, George W. Bush seemingly had the Truman template in mind. The 43rd president left office with historically low approval ratings and with his foreign policy widely criticized. Bush, however, often invoked Truman as a historical role model of courageous foreign policy leadership and an example of how a president's reputation can improve as time passes and partisan passions fade. 'When he left office in 1953, his approval ratings were in the twenties,' Bush wrote of Truman in 2010. 'Today he is viewed as one of America's great presidents.' The implication, here as in other statements, was that history and hindsight would also eventually vindicate Bush's policies, as well.²

¹The work that best represented this shift in views was David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1992). That biography built on a significant body of scholarly work, often more specialized in nature, on Truman's presidency.

²George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown 2010), 174–75. See also Lou Cannon and Carl Cannon, *Reagan's Disciple: George W. Bush's Troubled Quest for a Presidential Legacy* (New York: Public Affairs 2008), 299–303; George W. Bush, 'Commencement address at the United States military academy in west point, New York', 27 May 2006, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=83>>.

Were this to happen, it would represent an astonishing turnaround in perceptions of Bush's statecraft. Both during and after his presidency, Bush's more polemical critics accused him of deliberating misleading the country into a disastrous war in Iraq, along with a host of other nefarious misdeeds. Even more sober observers were sharply negative in their appraisals. Scholars and journalists alike have charged that the administration neglected the terrorist threat before 9/11, subsequently mismanaged the 'necessary war' in Afghanistan, and pursued needlessly aggressive and counterproductive counter-terrorism (CT) policies. They claim that the invasion of Iraq was an unnecessary and catastrophically mismanaged 'war of choice,' one that distracted the administration from other pressing global challenges and alienated American allies and world opinion in the process. When Bush left office, then, many early assessments held that his foreign policy produced many costly failures and precious few meaningful successes. 'There are bad foreign policy presidents,' wrote one prominent progressive pundit, '...and then there is George W. Bush.'³ Likewise, although there were alternative voices offering more sympathetic readings of Bush's legacy, a 2008 poll indicated that a whopping 98.2 percent of historians classified Bush's presidency as a failure, with 61 percent deeming it the worst in American history.⁴ Even the Republican nominee for president in 2008, Senator John McCain, distanced himself from his Republican predecessor, much as Adlai Stevenson had to do Truman in 1952.⁵

Perspectives can change over time, however, and the policies of American presidents sometimes look better in the light of history. When he left office, Dwight Eisenhower was widely considered to be an ineffectual leader and intellectual lightweight; within 25 years an emerging 'Eisenhower revisionism' depicted a subtle but deft statesman who skillfully steered the country through a dangerous time.⁶ Ronald Reagan was famously maligned, in many quarters, as an 'amiable dunce' during the 1980s; in the past decade, new archival research has depicted him as having a crucial and largely constructive role in ending the Cold War.⁷ So what prospects are there for the emergence of 'Bush revisionism' in the years and decades to come?

³Michael Cohen, 'The best and worst foreign policy presidents of the past century', *The Atlantic*, 30 Jul. 2011, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/07/the-best-and-worst-foreign-policy-presidents-of-the-past-century/242781/>>.

⁴*History News Network*, 'HNN Poll: 61% of historians rate the Bush presidency worst', 6 Nov. 2008, <<http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/48916>>. For an extreme and exaggerated critique, see Jean Edward Smith, *Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2016). For an early proto-revisionist portrayal, see John Lewis Gaddis, 'Ending Tyranny', *The American Interest* 4/1 (Sep/Oct. 2008), 6–15.

⁵See Michael Cooper, 'McCain distances himself from Bush', *New York Times*, 4 Jun. 2008; Steve Holland, 'McCain slowly but surely distancing self from Bush', *Reuters*, 2 May 2008.

⁶The classic work was Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic Books 1982); also Robert Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press 1981).

⁷See, for instance, Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan's and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House 2005); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press 2005); Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2016).

In this essay, we attempt to answer that question by consulting the emerging historical record of Bush's presidency. Recent years have seen the publication of a profusion of sources on Bush-era foreign policy, including participant memoirs, oral histories and other primary sources, and thoughtful accounts by scholars, journalists, and other observers. At the same time, the passage of time allows for a vantage point that is harder to obtain when partisan emotions run strong and criticism can easily turn into caricature – as often happened during the Bush years. We will not, of course, have anything approximating a final judgment on Bush's foreign policy for many years, and maybe not even then. But we are now, perhaps, now in a position to move beyond the initial, contemporaneous judgments of Bush's presidency and to assess his record with greater insight – and less partisan ardor – than before.

To this end, we consider six key arguments that are likely to loom large in any 'Bush revisionism' – those arguments that analysts might plausibly use to rehabilitate Bush's historical reputation. These arguments include: (1) 'the empathy defense,' or the idea that greater sensitivity to constraints, alternatives, and context can lead to a more favorable view of decisions taken in Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11; (2) 'he kept us safe,' or the idea that the Bush administration's policies helped prevent follow-on terrorist attacks on the United States after 9/11; (3) 'he got Iraq right...eventually,' or the idea that Bush administration largely salvaged the situation in that country via the 'surge' of 2007–08; (4) 'a world beyond Iraq,' or the idea that the administration actually enjoyed significant diplomatic success outside that conflict; (5) 'the two George W. Bush presidencies,' or the idea that both policy and process improved significantly from Bush's first term to his second; and (6) 'it's all relative,' or the idea that Bush's foreign policy record looks somewhat better when viewed against the travails of his successor, Barack Obama. These arguments use slightly different measuring sticks for evaluating what makes for a 'good' president, or at least what makes for a 'better than we initially thought' president. Some emphasize that Bush's policies were more effective and enduring than generally believed; others highlight the administration's ability to recover from initial errors; others stress how a fuller appreciation of the dilemmas and difficulties inherent in foreign policy can mitigate existing critiques. All of these arguments enjoy at least some support from the emerging historical record; in the pages that follow, we therefore articulate these arguments and assess their merits in some detail.

Our basic thesis is that Bush's historical reputation should, in fact, improve in the years to come. This does not mean that every argument assessed here is entirely persuasive, or even that, taken cumulatively, they necessarily outweigh the valid criticisms of Bush's foreign policy.⁸ We (the

⁸Indeed, one of us has earlier taken many of these defenses of Bush's record into account and still concluded that the negatives of his foreign policy outweighed the positives. See Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2014) Ch. 4.

two authors) differ somewhat on these issues ourselves, so we recognize that reasonable people can reach a range of judgments. But in view of the emerging historical record, there is enough plausibility in each of these arguments to cause fair-minded observers to temper the most harshly negative views of Bush's diplomacy, and perhaps to more fully grasp the enormous challenges and pressures his administration faced as well as appreciate the accomplishments it did, in some areas, achieve. George W. Bush may never be seen as another Truman, Eisenhower, or Reagan. Yet when one considers the various arguments presented here, it becomes clear that the debate on his historical legacy is far from settled – and that the prospects for some form of Bush revisionism are actually fairly good.

The empathy defense

The first defense of Bush's record might involve stressing the need for greater empathy in assessing the difficult decisions the administration made after 9/11. Yes, Bush revisionists might argue, the president made some choices that turned out badly, or at least entailed significant negative consequences. But those decisions were made amid intense pressures and enormously difficult circumstances, and the alternatives were either infeasible or had powerful disadvantages of their own. What look to critics like 90–10 decisions – obviously right or obviously wrong – were more likely 60–40 decisions, or closer calls than that. In sum, Bush revisionists would not deny that certain administration policies – particularly regarding Afghanistan and Iraq – merit criticism, but they would maintain that a proper understanding of context and alternatives should temper that criticism to a degree.⁹

Consider the administration's light-footprint approach to the initial invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. That approach, which featured a relatively small number of special operations forces (SOF) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives, along with a heavy reliance on airpower and local Afghan allies, has since been roundly criticized for allowing Osama bin Laden to escape after he had been cornered at Tora Bora and for prefiguring the persistent under-resourcing of Afghan security in the years that followed.¹⁰ But as more recent scholarly work has emphasized, these critiques are not entirely fair.¹¹

⁹For recent accounts that stress, either implicitly or explicitly, the need for such empathy, see Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday 2013); and Melvyn Leffler, 'The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy', *Diplomatic History* 37/2 (Apr. 2013), 190–216.

¹⁰Peter Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and al-Qaeda* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2011), 69–85.

¹¹This section builds on arguments first developed in Stephen Biddle and Peter Feaver, 'Assessing Strategic Choices in the War on Terror', in James Burk (ed.), *How 9/11 Changed Our Ways of War* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press 2013), 27–55.

It was, after all, the light-footprint approach that allowed Bush to strike back at al-Qaeda in Afghanistan far more quickly than would have been possible under existing or heavier-footprint Pentagon war plans; that speed, in turn, surprised al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders and allowed Washington to liberate Afghanistan more rapidly – and at far less cost – than virtually anyone had predicted.¹² Moreover, as detailed campaign analysis has indicated, although it might have been possible to insert a US blocking force near Tora Bora in December 2001, doing so would have entailed significant operational and logistical risks, and it is far from assured that the insertion of a few hundred – even a few thousand – troops would have sealed off all escape routes.¹³ Finally, although the light-footprint approach did have pernicious longer-term effects with respect to Afghan security, most US officials – as well as most outside observers – were understandably wary of taking a heavier-footprint approach that might activate the same nationalist antibodies that had caused earlier occupiers such grief; with the lighter footprint, Americans were viewed as liberators than occupiers for years after the invasion.¹⁴ One can still plausibly argue that, taking everything into account, the United States should have followed a different approach in Afghanistan following 9/11. But considering these various issues does remind us that the options were more closely balanced than some retrospective criticism has made it seem.

Or consider a more controversial example: the invasion of Iraq. Much criticism of that decision centers on the claim that Iraq was the quintessential ‘unnecessary war’ – and that the administration’s choice to overthrow Saddam by force can only be explained by ideology, dishonesty, or Oedipal impulses.¹⁵ Yet as work by respected scholars (and Bush critics) such as F. Gregory Gause has established, there is virtually no evidence to support the more conspiracy-minded theories of why the Bush administration invaded Iraq, or the idea that the administration was dead set on using military force against Saddam prior to 9/11.¹⁶ In fact, a dispassionate look at

¹²For more pessimistic contemporary assessments, see R.W. Apple, Jr., ‘A military quagmire remembered: Afghanistan as Vietnam’, *New York Times*, 31 Oct. 2001; also John Mearsheimer, ‘Guns won’t win the Afghan war’, *New York Times*, 4 Nov. 2001.

¹³See Peter John Paul Krause, ‘The Last Good Chance: A Reassessment of U.S. Operations at Tora Bora’, *Security Studies* 17/4 (2008), 644–84.

¹⁴On the fear of replicating the Soviet experience in Afghanistan during the 1980s, see Donald Rumsfeld to Bush, 20 Aug. 2001, Rumsfeld Papers (RP); Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown* (New York: Penguin 2011), 367–68; Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, ‘A war on a small scale, possibly long and risky’, *New York Times*, 29 Sep. 2001. On Afghan favorable views of the US intervention, see Gary Langer, ‘2005 poll: four years after the fall of the Taliban, Afghans optimistic about the future’, *ABCNews.com*, 7 Dec. 2005, <<http://abcnews.go.com/International/PollVault/story?id=1363276>>.

¹⁵On the idea of Iraq as an unnecessary war, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, ‘An Unnecessary War’, *Foreign Policy* (Jan/Feb. 2003), 51–9; also Richard Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2009).

¹⁶See F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2010), Ch. 6.

some key contextual factors surrounding the decision to use force after 9/11 makes it far easier to understand how a group of dedicated, well-intentioned individuals could have made such a choice.

First, contrary to the common retrospective assertion that 'Saddam was contained' by 2003, the longstanding Iraq problem – the challenge of what to do with a weakened but still dangerous Saddam – was widely seen to be getting worse. The United Nations' inspection regime meant to keep Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs in check had collapsed following the expulsion of inspectors in 1998; intelligence agencies and high-ranking officials in the United States and elsewhere almost unanimously assessed that those programs were active and advancing.¹⁷ The UN sanctions regime was also unraveling, due to Russian and French opposition, and as Saddam's regime became increasingly skillful at exploiting loopholes or humanitarian carve-outs. By 2001, UN inspections chief Hans Blix assessed, 'The inspectors were gone. The sanctions were condemned by a broad range of world opinion and in any case they had become less painful, and were eroding.'¹⁸ Moreover, the US military presence needed to hold containment of Saddam in place was stressing American forces, while also requiring a quasi-permanent US troop presence in Saudi Arabia that served as one of al-Qaeda's chief grievances against the United States.¹⁹

In light of these problems, it was hardly unreasonable for the Bush administration to conclude that simply muddling through with a costly and eroding containment policy was an unattractively high-cost option. Indeed, as early as 1998 the US Congress had passed – by overwhelming, bipartisan majorities – and President Clinton had signed a resolution establishing that 'it should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq,' as the only long-term solution to the threat posed by Iraq's WMD ambitions.²⁰ As the political scientist Frank Harvey has pointed out, moreover, Al Gore – Clinton's vice president and Bush's opponent in

¹⁷On US intelligence (and its failures) prior to 2003, see Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2010), Ch. 3. It is important to note here that, although the Bush administration did exaggerate the strength of the intelligence on Saddam's WMD programs, bipartisan investigations have now confirmed that the administration did not exert undue pressure on intelligence analysts, or simply manufacture intelligence about Saddam's regime from whole cloth. Rather, the overestimation of Saddam's WMD programs stemmed largely from longstanding errors in tradecraft and analysis within the intelligence community. See Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, 'Report to the president of the United States', 31 Mar. 2005, <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/wmd/report/wmd_report.pdf>; Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, 'Report on the U.S. intelligence community's prewar intelligence assessments on Iraq', 7 Jul. 2004, <<http://web.mit.edu/simsong/www/iraqreport2-textunder.pdf>>.

¹⁸Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq* (New York: Knopf 2004), 54.

¹⁹As we have noted elsewhere, however, the US presence in Saudi Arabia is not the only rationale for jihadist attacks on the United States. See Hal Brands, *The Limits of Offshore Balancing* (Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute 2015), Esp. 30–2; Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, 'Trump and Terrorism: U.S. Strategy after ISIS', *Foreign Affairs* 96/2 (Mar/Apr. 2017), 28–36.

²⁰'Iraq Liberation Act of 1998', *Public Law 105–338, 105th Congress*, 1998.

the 2000 presidential election – was actually quite hawkish on Iraq in the late 1990s.²¹ One can criticize this bipartisan consensus as misguided – and some critics did so before the Iraq war – but it was nonetheless grounded in the frustrating experience of seeking to contain Saddam Hussein.²²

Second, and related, the alternatives to confronting Saddam with military force did not seem particularly viable. The United States might have opted for a long-term tightening of sanctions and inspections after 9/11 with an eye to making containment more effective – but the experience of the previous decade had shown that international and domestic enthusiasm for such a policy would inevitably fade over time, and even in the best-case scenario this approach would simply return Washington to an extended game of cat-and-mouse. Even prior to 9/11, the editors of the *New York Times* had acknowledged that any policy ‘that depends on Security Council unity is destined to be weak’; after 9/11, it was only the threat of imminent invasion that led Saddam to readmit the inspectors – and even then he refused fully to cooperate.²³ Coercive options short of war – such as seeking to foment a coup or uprising to bring about regime change – also seemed destined to fail. As postwar research in Iraqi records makes clear, Saddam had effectively coup-proofed his regime during the 1990s, and he had crushed previous efforts to challenge his dominance.²⁴ What the administration confronted after 9/11, then, was a problem that clearly seemed to be worsening – and for which solutions short of war and regime change seemed increasingly untenable.

Third, the urgency of the Iraq problem increased dramatically for Bush after 9/11 – as it would have for any administration. As memoirs and other sources make clear, the months and even years after 9/11 were a period of immense stress within the administration, as policymakers grappled with dangers they had hardly imagined before – and worried about potentially devastating consequences if they failed to prevent similar or worse attacks from happening again. As former Department of Defense and Department of Justice official Jack Goldsmith writes, we must recall ‘the unusual psychological pressures on executive branch officials who are personally responsible for preventing hard-to-fathom terrorist attacks that could kill thousands....Inside the federal government counterterrorism officials [were] genuinely fearful, every day, of a devastating homeland attack.’²⁵

²¹Frank Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic, and Evidence* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2012), 47–50, 77–8.

²²John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, ‘Keeping Saddam Hussein in a box’, *New York Times*, 2 Feb. 2003.

²³*New York Times*, ‘No Illusions about Iraq’, 27 Dec. 1988.

²⁴See, for instance, Kevin M. Woods, et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam’s Senior Leadership* (Norfolk VA: United States Joint Forces Command 2006).

²⁵Jack Goldsmith, *The Terror Presidency: Law and Judgment Inside the Bush Administration* (New York: Norton 2007), 12, 186; also Melvyn Leffler, ‘9/11 and American Foreign Policy’, *Diplomatic History* 29/3 (Jun. 2005), 395–413; Leffler, ‘The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration’; Dick Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Threshold 2011), 328–63; Bush, *Decision Points*.

Moreover, there was ample grounding for those fears. In the months following 9/11, the administration had to deal with a successful biological weapons attack within the United States (the anthrax attacks of October 2001), new intelligence from captured documents in Afghanistan about al-Qaeda's WMD ambitions, rumors (ultimately unsubstantiated) that terrorists had gotten ahold of a nuclear device, and government exercises indicating that biological weapons attacks could cause over one million deaths.²⁶ As several historians have written, these considerations significantly shifted the administration's risk calculus – they made previously tolerable threats seem intolerable and made the risks of inaction seem higher than the risks of action.²⁷

In these circumstances, the Iraq problem took on new and more ominous dimensions. Saddam's regime had a record of aggression and a history of animus toward America; it had aggressively pursued WMD in the past (and was almost universally believed to be doing so in 2002–03); and it had a distinguished record of support for terrorist groups that had previously targeted and killed Americans. Indeed, documents captured in the invasion of Iraq substantiated Bush's much-maligned claim that Hussein's regime and al-Qaeda had explored tactical forms of cooperation with each other (although they were never able to forge such an operational alliance prior to Saddam's overthrow).²⁸ Add in the fact that US officials were still smarting from what the 9/11 Commission later called a 'failure of imagination' in terms of anticipating devastating and unconventional attacks, and that the US intelligence community had previously badly *underestimated* the sophistication of Iraqi WMD programs prior to the Persian Gulf War, it is hardly surprising or discrediting that top administration officials took a dire view of the Iraqi threat.²⁹ As Bush later recalled, after 9/11 'Saddam Hussein's capacity to create harm...all his terrible features became much more threatening.'³⁰ Or as British foreign secretary Jack Straw, following discussions with US officials, noted in 2002:

²⁶See Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press 2003), 118–19; Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: HarperCollins 2008), 51, 216–17.

²⁷As Vice-President Dick Cheney famously remarked, if there was even a 'one percent chance' that al-Qaeda might acquire a nuclear weapon, 'We have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.' Quoted in Glenn Kessler, 'U.S. decision on Iraq has puzzling past', *Washington Post*, 12 Jan. 2003; also Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies since 9/11* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2006), 62.

²⁸On these points, see Kevin Woods, *Iraqi Perspectives Project: Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Iraqi Documents* (Alexandria VA: Institute for Defense Analyses 2007); Iraq Survey Group, 'Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD', 30 Sep. 2004, <https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004>.

²⁹National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 'The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Executive Summary', 2004, <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report_Exec.htm>.

³⁰Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2004), 27.

Objectively, the threat from Iraq has not worsened as a result of 11 September. What has however changed is the tolerance of the international community (especially that of the US), the world having witnessed on 11 September just was determined evil people can these days perpetrate.³¹

When one adds these various factors together, the decision to resolve the Iraq problem once and for all by invading becomes more understandable. Indeed, many congressional observers supported that decision. The House and Senate resolutions authorizing Bush to use force against Saddam passed by much wider margins in 2002 than the resolutions authorizing the Persian Gulf War in 1991, and leading Democratic foreign policy experts such as John Kerry, Joseph Biden, and Hillary Clinton all voted in favor of the authorization. 'We have no choice but to eliminate the threat,' Biden commented. 'This is a guy who is an extreme danger to the world.'³² In other words, Bush's 'war of choice' seemed more necessary to most American observers than had his father's 'war of necessity' a decade earlier.³³

Of course, it is perfectly reasonable to acknowledge all of these factors and still criticize the administration's policy toward Iraq – as we each have done, one at some length.³⁴ After all, the administration ended up addressing a terrifying but arguably low probability danger – that Saddam might provide terrorists with WMD – by pursuing a course of action – the forcible overthrow of Saddam's regime – that was fraught with dangerous complications. Similarly, although there has emerged no credible evidence to support the assertion that the Bush administration simply manufactured evidence regarding Saddam's WMD programs, the fact remains that the intelligence assessments on which the administration partially based its decision-making were incorrect, and so in reality – as opposed to perception – the Iraq problem was less severe than it seemed. There were also instances in which administration officials presented the case regarding Saddam's suspected WMD programs more forcefully than the available evidence warranted.³⁵ Moreover, even treating the erroneous intelligence picture compiled in 2002 as an intelligence failure rather than the result of active

³¹ Jack Straw to Tony Blair, Apr. 2002, <http://webarchive.org/web/20100723165758/http://www.michaelsmithwriter.com/memo_six.html>.

³² Quoted in 'Interview with Tim Russert on NBC News' "Meet the Press", 29 Apr. 2007, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=77742>>.

³³ The phrase comes from Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice*. For an even stronger argument to this effect, see Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War*.

³⁴ See Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?*, Ch. 4.

³⁵ The comprehensive Duelfer report rebutted some elements of Bush's pre-war rationale and confirmed other parts. The report confirmed that Saddam Hussein had destroyed much of his existing WMD arsenal and that efforts to build new capabilities were not as far advanced as Bush thought. But the report also showed that, as Bush claimed, Hussein was trying to game the inspection regime and fully intended to ramp up his WMD programs as soon as he could get out from under the sanctions. See Iraq Survey Group, 'Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD with Addendums', *Central Intelligence Agency*, 30 Sep. 2004, <https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004>.

politicization does not insulate the decision for war from criticism: many experts, particularly in NATO allied countries, broadly shared the intelligence judgment of unraveling sanctions and growing WMD programs, and yet concluded that it did not add up to a threat to vital interests that warranted launching a preventive war.³⁶

Finally, one can fairly criticize the myriad failures of execution in carrying out the occupation of Iraq, the deficiencies of planning and process that allowed those failures to happen, the mismatch between the ambitious goal of building a democratic Iraq and the inadequate resources initially committed to the project, and the ham-handed prewar diplomacy and overheated rhetoric that ended up alienating so many observers. Of these, the reliance on overly optimistic planning assumptions of what might happen after the fall of the regime and the failure to engage in adequate preparation and planning for how to adapt if those assumptions proved faulty loom largest; these errors have been extensively documented in reports and other analysis, and they prefigured many of the tragic missteps, unanticipated difficulties, and vastly higher-than-expected costs that the United States encountered in Iraq. 'The evidence suggests that the United States had neither the people nor the plans in place to handle the situation that arose after the fall of Saddam Hussein,' one authoritative report concludes. This deficiency 'enabled the insurgency to take root.'³⁷

One can thus be properly mindful of the pressures, problems, and perceptions that led the administration to invade Iraq, without concluding that the decision was ultimately correct, much less executed in competent fashion. But understanding those issues can, perhaps, enable a more nuanced and balanced assessment of decisions that so many observers have condemned as clearly wrong-headed and essentially inexplicable.

He kept us safe

Another core tenet of Bush revisionism is likely to be the very argument that the president and his defenders often made while he was in office and after – that whatever the travails of the 'global war on terror,' the administration should receive greater credit for preventing major follow-on attacks against the homeland after 9/11. 'After the nightmare of September 11, America went seven and a half years without another successful terrorist attack on our soil,' Bush later wrote. 'If I had to summarize my most meaningful accomplishment as president in one sentence, that would be it.'³⁸

³⁶This is a major theme of Britain's 'Chilcot Report.' See 'The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, "Executive Summary"', 6 Jul. 2016, 40–7, <<http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-report/>>.

³⁷See Nora Bensahel, et al., *After Saddam: Prewar Planning for the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation 2008), xvii.

³⁸Bush, *Decision Points*, 180.

That outcome was, certainly, surprising given how likely such attacks seemed just after 9/11. The intelligence community, like many observers, assessed that the 9/11 attack was the first of a planned series of mass casualty attacks, some perhaps involving WMD.³⁹ 'Between 9/11 and mid-2003,' Bush later wrote, 'The CIA reported to me an average of 400 specific threats each month.'⁴⁰ In October 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld warned that 'it has been a month since the attack on the Pentagon' and that 'more people are going to be killed if we don't produce some results fast.'⁴¹ In Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike shared this sentiment; Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) commented that 'an attack is predictable now whether we retaliate against Afghanistan or not.'⁴² An overwhelming majority of Americans agreed – a poll taken a month after 9/11 showed that 85 percent of respondents thought another attack 'likely to happen in the near future.'⁴³ When Vice-President Dick Cheney commented in early 2002 that 'it's not a matter of if, but when', he was simply conveying the nearly ubiquitous assessment that more, and perhaps the worst, was yet to come.⁴⁴

There is, moreover, some reason to credit the administration's claims that proactive measures taken after 9/11 helped forestall such attacks. As analysts such as Lawrence Wright have noted, US military operations in Afghanistan beginning in late 2001 surprised and devastated al-Qaeda, killing perhaps 80 percent of its Afghanistan-based membership, depriving it of safe haven, and putting its organization and leadership into survival mode.⁴⁵ 'Al Qaeda's freedom to operate fell dramatically in the first six months after September 11,' terrorism expert Daniel Byman noted in 2003, 'and has yet to recover.'⁴⁶ Similarly, US economic and financial sanctions significantly constrained al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations from using the international banking system, as aggressive intelligence and diplomatic cooperation with countries from the United Kingdom to Pakistan

³⁹George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: Harper Collins 2007), 229, 239, 245–47.

⁴⁰Bush, *Decision Points*, 151–53, 157–58.

⁴¹Quoted in Rumsfeld to Myers and Pace, 10 Oct. 2001, Rumsfeld Papers.

⁴²*CNN.com*, 'Source: '100-percent Chance' of Another Attack: Lawmakers Caution There's No Specific Threat', 5 Oct. 2001.

⁴³Goldsmith, *The Terror Presidency*, 187.

⁴⁴John Lehmann, 'New Attacks Coming: Cheney – "It's Not a Matter of If – but When"', *New York Post*, 20 May 2002.

⁴⁵The estimate comes from Lawrence Wright, 'The Rebellion Within: An Al Qaeda Mastermind Questions Terrorism', *New Yorker*, 2 Jun. 2008, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/02/the-rebellion-within>>. This point also stands as an important corrective to the myth that Bin Laden expected and hoped for the kind of US response he actually generated with his attack so as to draw the United States into a quagmire. On the contrary, he expected some sort of mild punitive response and was taken by surprise by the administration's decision to undertake major military operations in Afghanistan. See also Bergen, *Longest War*, 86–94.

⁴⁶Daniel Byman, 'Are We Winning the War on Terrorism?', *Brookings Institution, Middle East Memo*, 23 May 2003, <<https://www.brookings.edu/research/are-we-winning-the-war-on-terrorism/>>.

contributed to the arrest of over 3000 al-Qaeda operatives in the two years after 9/11.⁴⁷

Other post-9/11 measures also seem to have reduced the danger of major follow-on attacks. The US government devoted significantly enhanced resources to CT and created new bureaucratic structures – such as the National Counterterrorism Center and Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) – that fostered greater integration of the intelligence community's CT efforts. 'The intelligence agencies began sharing information more freely and collaborating in new and unprecedented ways,' two veterans of the intelligence community have written. 'Large and sustained increases to intelligence budgets funded an expanded overseas presence, new collection programs, and lethal covert action tools.'⁴⁸ Likewise, the advent of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) helped mitigate the bureaucratic stovepipes that had impeded effective CT policy prior to 9/11. And although the impact and effectiveness of various homeland security programs – from reinforced doors on airplane cockpits, to increased border and port security, to expanded FBI CT programs, to surveillance programs overseen by the National Security Agency (NSA) – is hotly debated, it seems plausible that these measures did generally make the United States a harder target.⁴⁹ Writing in 2009, three analysts summed up the effects of US policy as follows:

Since 2001, the United States has relentlessly hunted terrorists around the world, shut down training facilities, dried up sources of funding, disrupted active plots, and maintained constant pressure on terrorist networks. Al Qaeda operatives and leaders have reportedly been killed, captured, or reduced to preserving their personal safety. Evidence also suggests that U.S. homeland security has improved since September 11. High value targets have been hardened; coordination between military, intelligence and law enforcement agencies has increased; and authorities at every level of government have heightened the scrutiny of suspicious behavior.⁵⁰

Moreover, Bush did all of this while also working strenuously to avoid framing the war against al-Qaeda and other transnational terror networks as a conflict with all of Islam.⁵¹ Those who 'take out their anger' on

⁴⁷ Juan Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: Public Affairs 2013); Daniel Byman, 'Scoring the war on terror', *The National Interest*, Summer 2003, Esp. 78.

⁴⁸ Stephen Slick and Michael Allen, 'The Office of the DNI's Greatest Hits', *Foreign Policy*, 21 Apr. 2015, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/21/dni-september-11-terrorism-clapper/>>.

⁴⁹ As the author of one extensive analysis writes, 'Even the much-mocked Transportation Security Administration...has probably improved security, not because its methods are foolproof but because even a small increase in the risk of detection can make a big difference in a world-be terrorist's mental calculus.' Timothy Noah, 'Why No More 9/11s?' *Slate*, 5 Mar. 2009.

⁵⁰ Dallas Boyd, Lewis A. Dunn, and James Scouras, 'Why Has the United States Not Been Attacked Again?' *The Washington Quarterly* 32/3 (Jul. 2009), 4–5.

⁵¹ Dana Milbank and Emily Wax, 'Bush Visits Mosque to Forestall Hate Crimes', *Washington Post*, 18 Sep. 2001.

innocent Muslims 'don't represent the best of America,' Bush commented while visiting a mosque six days after the 9/11 attacks, 'they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior.'⁵² Although there were too many regrettable incidents of anti-Muslim bias and hostility in the wake of 9/11, Bush largely succeeded in suppressing the worst kinds of domestic hysteria that characterized many earlier American wars.

The 'he kept us safe' thesis is thus not baseless – but neither is it entirely dispositive, for several reasons. First, Bush's success in preventing follow-on 9/11's does not erase the fact that the original 9/11 attack happened on his watch. As the 9/11 Commission later concluded, perhaps the administration could not have done much, during its limited time in power, to disrupt the plot. It is also fair to point out that some of the best chances for disrupting al-Qaeda came during the Clinton years. But it is nonetheless true that Bush and his top aides did not treat terrorism with the urgency that was, in hindsight, warranted prior to 9/11, and that the administration was thus part of a broader US governmental failure to reckon with an approaching – and catastrophic – danger.⁵³

Second, the efficacy of key CT programs remains contested at best, and some may even have been counterproductive. CIA veterans such as Jose Rodriguez argue that the use of enhanced interrogation techniques (EIT) against captured al-Qaeda operatives was vital to disrupting planned attacks.⁵⁴ Yet other CT officials such as Ali Soufan of the FBI, as well as a massive report issued by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, cast significant doubt on these claims.⁵⁵ Conclusively resolving these disputes will remain difficult if not impossible until full declassification occurs, but even now there is a growing body of analysis supporting the judgment that EIT in particular may have been strategically counterproductive. For instance, one extensive survey by the political scientist Robert Pape concludes, 'It is widely accepted that the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo contributed significantly' to the motivations of fighters who

⁵²'Islam is Peace, Says President', 17 Sep. 2001, <<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html>>.

⁵³See National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 'The 9/11 Commission Report', 2004, <<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>>.

⁵⁴See, for instance, Jose Rodriguez and Bill Harlow, *Hard Measures: How Aggressive CIA Actions after 9/11 Saved American Lives* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2012).

⁵⁵See Ali Soufan, *The Black Banners: Inside the Hunt for Al Qaeda* (New York: Penguin Books 2011); Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 'Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program', Apr. 2014, <<https://archive.org/details/ssci-cia-torture-report-executive-summary>>. The conclusiveness of the Senate report, however, remains somewhat contested. The strongest denunciations of effectiveness come in the portion of the report signed only by the Democrats on the committee and were rebutted by the Republicans in their own minority report. For a strong critique of the report (that nevertheless strongly criticizes the CIA), see Robert Jervis, 'The Torture Blame Game: The Botched Senate Report on the CIA's Misdeeds', *Foreign Affairs* 74/3 (May/Jun. 2015), <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/2015-04-20/torture-blame-game>>.

flocked to join al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁵⁶ And, of course, in curtailing the EIT program during his second term, President Bush himself provided at least implicit support for the critique that he went too far during his first term. This outcome does not necessarily mean that Bush's post-9/11 CT efforts were entirely counterproductive, and if EIT actually did – as sometimes claimed – help prevent attacks and lead to the successful targeting of Bin Laden, then the balance sheet is at least mixed. But the evidence of counterproductive results does, at a minimum, undermine Bush administration claims about the wisdom of the program.

Third, even if one accepts that most post-9/11 programs had constructive effects, it remains difficult to parse precisely how much impact those programs – particularly the controversial ones – had in preventing additional attacks. The absence of such attacks may also have resulted in part from a range of additional factors, from the inherent difficulty of the task, to the simple incompetence of many terrorist operatives. That absence also could well have resulted from an al-Qaeda decision to focus on other targets such as Bali, Madrid, Amman, and London – all of which were attacked successfully after 9/11 – or to focus its attacks on US troops in war zones in Afghanistan and, particular, Iraq. As US intelligence officials noted in 2006, 'the Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse' by inflaming anti-Americanism in the Muslim world and bringing a new generation of recruits into the fight.⁵⁷ Iraq offered 'a training ground, a recruitment ground, the opportunity for enhancing technical skills,' commented the CIA's national intelligence officer for transnational threats a year prior.⁵⁸ Similarly, as Ricardo Sanchez, commander of US troops in Iraq in 2003–04, acknowledged, 'This is what I would call a terrorist magnet, where America, being present here in Iraq, creates a target of opportunity, if you will.'⁵⁹

Indeed, it is hardly implausible that the presence of large numbers of US troops in Iraq from 2003 onward may have weakened the allure of homeland attacks for al-Qaeda by presenting that organization with far more accessible American targets. Of course, the Iraq war factor cuts multiple ways because many of the terrorists who flocked to Iraq later died in Iraq, precisely because the United States was in Iraq in sufficient numbers to fight

⁵⁶To be clear, the Bush administration and its defenders subsequently sought to draw bright lines distinguishing (a) the unauthorized abuses at Abu Ghraib, from (b) the controversial but clearly delimited Enhanced Interrogation Program, and from (c) the indefinite detention of terrorists in Guantanamo Bay. But Pape's argument is that jihadis inspired to join al-Qaeda nevertheless saw those lines as blurry or nonexistent and invoked them collectively in a single rallying cry. See Pape's detailed analysis in 'Forum on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) Report and the United States' Post-9/11 Policy on Torture', *International Security Studies Forum*, 16 Feb. 2015, <https://issforum.org/forums/ssci-report-torture#_Toc411763045>.

⁵⁷Mark Mazzetti, 'Spy agencies say Iraq war worsens terrorism threat', *New York Times*, 24 Sep. 2006.

⁵⁸Dana Priest, 'Iraq new terror breeding ground', *Washington Post*, 14 Jan. 2005.

⁵⁹See *CNN.com*, 'Transcript: CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer', 27 Jul. 2003, <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0307/27/le.00.html>>.

them there. But the point remains that issues of causality with respect to the surprising post-9/11 respite are difficult to disentangle. As the authors of one study conclude, 'There is almost certainly no single explanation for why the United States has not been attacked again.'⁶⁰

Fourth and finally, whatever the effects of Bush's CT campaign, the degradation of core al-Qaeda capabilities seemed to be wearing off by late in his presidency. In 2006, Prime Minister Musharraf cut a dubious deal with restive tribes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The result was a substantial lessening of pressure on the terrorist groups operating from that region.⁶¹ By 2007–08, the intelligence community warned that al-Qaeda was regrouping in the tribal regions of Pakistan and that it had 'protected or regenerated key elements of its homeland attack capability.'⁶² In response, according to statistics compiled by the New America Foundation, the Bush administration began escalating drone strikes against al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan.⁶³ But al-Qaeda was nonetheless able to reconstitute enough of its capacity in Pakistan as well as other countries such as Yemen to pose an ongoing, if more circumscribed, threat to the homeland when Bush left office.⁶⁴

For these reasons, the 'he kept us safe' argument is likely to remain contested ground. What one can say, however, is that the Bush administration succeeded in laying down an enduring institutional and policy framework for CT. As Jack Goldsmith, who was both a high-ranking Department of Defense and Department of Justice lawyer during the Bush years and a subsequent critic of some administration's policies, later wrote:

Barack Obama campaigned against the Bush approach to counterterrorism and came to office promising to repudiate it and to restore the rule of law.... But in perhaps the most remarkable surprise of his presidency, Obama continued almost all of his predecessor's counterterrorism policies.⁶⁵

This was no exaggeration. The Obama administration embraced preemptive military action against terrorist groups, significantly escalating the program of drone strikes Bush had initiated. Likewise, it adopted and expanded the use of

⁶⁰Boyd, Dunn, and Scouras, 'Why Has the United States Not Been Attacked Again?' 10.

⁶¹See Samina Ahmed, 'Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Appeasing the Militants', *Crisis Group Asia Report* 125/11 (Dec. 2006), <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/pakistan-s-tribal-areas-appeasing-militants>>.

⁶²National Intelligence Estimate, *The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland* (Washington DC: National Intelligence Council Jul. 2007), <<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb270/18.pdf>>.

⁶³See New America, 'Drone Wars Pakistan: Analysis', <<http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan-analysis.html>>. According to this source, the number of US drone strikes in Pakistan increased ninefold – from 4 to 36 – from 2007 to 2008.

⁶⁴Another potential critique of the 'he kept us safe' argument, not discussed in detail here for reasons of space, is that even if U.S. counter-terrorism programs were narrowly successful in averting follow-on attacks, the expenditures and opportunity costs involved were not worth the benefits reaped. For a version of this argument, see John Mueller and Mark Stewart, 'The Terrorism Delusion: America's Overwrought Response to September 11', *International Security* 37/1 (Summer 2012), 81–110.

⁶⁵Jack Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint: The Accountable Presidency after 9/11* (New York: Norton 2012), x.

SOF to conduct direct action missions against terrorist groups, the most notable example being the raid that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011. It continued practices such as rendition, military detention, and the use of military commissions to try suspected terrorists, and it employed, refined, and expanded Bush-era tools used to attack terrorist finances. With respect to homeland security, the Obama administration extended the Patriot Act and utilized preexisting programs such as NSA surveillance. The administration largely left other Bush-era institutional innovations in place – DHS, the DNI, and NORTHCOM all continued to play key roles in US policy. Perhaps most notably, the administration relied heavily on the legal framework that the Bush administration had constructed. It used both the original Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) resolution passed in September 2001, as well as the more controversial AUMF passed in October 2002 (and initially aimed at Saddam Hussein's Iraq), to wage war against groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL, and aggressively asserted the president's authority to target suspected terrorists – including American citizens – around the globe. Finally, even where the administration did visibly seek to depart from Bush-era practices – such as by closing the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay or by banning the use of EIT – it often simply codified changes that had already been made (as in the case of EIT) or had limited success in implementing these changes (as in the case of Guantanamo).⁶⁶

To be clear, there remained significant debate about the wisdom of all of these policies, just as there had been under Bush. There were also areas in which policy did change meaningfully. The Obama administration was far more aggressive in conducting kinetic strikes within Pakistan than the Bush administration had ever been; from 2011 onward, it was also far more hesitant to conduct prolonged counterinsurgency or stabilization operations in the name of CT.⁶⁷ But broadly speaking, there was no wholesale rejection of the post-9/11 framework; rather, the continuity between the two administrations demonstrated that Bush had established a basic, bipartisan approach to CT. Here, then, there was perhaps a meaningful parallel to Truman. If the 33rd president had instituted the policy and institutional foundations for one generational struggle, the 43rd president could reasonably claim to have done likewise for another.

He got Iraq right...eventually

If the Bush administration was more effective than often recognized in fighting the war on terror, revisionists might argue, it was also more

⁶⁶Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint*, 3–22; also Jack Goldsmith and Matthew Waxman, 'The Legal Legacy of Light-Footprint Warfare', *The Washington Quarterly* 39/2 (Summer 2016), 7–21.

⁶⁷Obama's approach to Pakistan was itself a double-edged sword since the kinetic campaign violated local sensibilities on sovereignty and, arguably, exacerbated tensions with the Pakistani government and its people.

successful than recognized in waging the war in Iraq. To be clear, we are not suggesting that the Bush administration should earn plaudits for its handling of Iraq in the aftermath of the initial invasion in March 2003. As numerous early accounts have emphasized, this period was characterized by serial mistakes of planning and execution with respect to the 'Phase IV' operations that followed Saddam's fall, dogmatically upbeat assessments of a steadily deteriorating security situation, and a persistent reluctance to fundamentally rethink strategy even as evidence that the strategy was failing mounted.⁶⁸ By mid-2006, the war in Iraq was thus on a trajectory toward becoming a strategic disaster for the United States – a mishandled conflict that had destabilized the Middle East, dramatically exacerbated Sunni-Shia cleavages, empowered terrorists as well as US enemies such as Iran, engendered widespread perceptions of American arrogance and incompetence, and siphoned off finite resources and attention from other pressing problems. Future accounts may help rebut some of the more extreme critiques of Bush's early handling of the war, but they are unlikely to significantly vindicate many of the key decisions taken from 2003 to 2006.

What Bush revisionists might nonetheless argue is that despite all this, the administration ultimately put the United States in position to achieve something approximating strategic success in Iraq. By this line of argument, the administration – and particularly the president – courageously resisted demands for de-escalation at the worst moments of the war in 2006, instead choosing to 'surge' an additional 30,000 troops and to emphasize, for the first time, a properly resourced, population-centric counter-insurgency strategy. That strategic shift was vital to turning the tide of the war, inflicting grievous wounds on a previously ascendant al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and bringing the strategic objective of a relatively stable, democratic, and friendly Iraq within sight at the time Bush departed the presidency in early 2009. Put another way, even if Bush should be criticized for his early handling of the war, he should be credited for not heeding those who demanded in 2006 that he rapidly withdraw from Iraq, a blunder which would have compounded the mistake many-fold. Instead, Bush pursued a very different course of action, and this controversial move was vindicated by the subsequent change in Iraq's security trajectory.⁶⁹

The key elements of this argument do find support in the emerging historical record. It is increasingly clear, for instance, that the 2007–08 surge of US troops – and associated changes in US military strategy – were

⁶⁸A good early account is Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra Two: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon 2006). For a particularly scathing account, see Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin 2006).

⁶⁹See, for instance, Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2013); also Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books 2008); and many memoirs by Bush administration veterans.

necessary if not sufficient to breaking the escalating cycle of violence and dramatically improving the security environment. As a detailed analysis by Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro demonstrates, the surge was not, by itself, a silver bullet. Yet it did significantly improve security in key geographic areas – particularly in and around Baghdad, and in parts of Anbar province – and it interacted synergistically with other favorable developments, namely the ‘awakening’ of Sunni tribes that rose against AQI. As a result, ‘monthly civilian fatalities fell from more than 1700 in May 2007 to around 500 by December; from June 2008 to June 2011, these averaged around 200, or about one-tenth of the rate for the last half of 2006.’ Crucially, this analysis demonstrates that the surge and the awakening were mutually indispensable – the surge would not have succeeded had Anbar Sunnis not risen against AQI, but the awakening would not have achieved such breadth or success had it not been supported by an expanded and adapted US troop presence.⁷⁰

As this and other sources indicate, the same combination of trends – along with the growing effectiveness of US CT operations in Iraq – also allowed US forces and their Iraqi allies to turn Iraq from a training ground for terrorist fighters to a burial ground for many operatives who had flocked to that country between 2003 and 2006 and were then killed or captured in large numbers between 2006 and 2009. Finally, and not least, the surge elicited improved political and military performance from the Iraqi government. It did so by providing Washington with increased leverage to discourage overtly sectarian policies and by empowering Nuri al-Maliki – then widely viewed as a weak, ineffectual leader – to more assertively confront challenges from radical Shiite militias and other spoilers.⁷¹ When Bush revisionists argue that US policy was one indispensable factor in reversing the downward trajectory of the war, then, they are on defensible ground.

Bush revisionists can also find increasing support for the assertion that Bush himself played a decisive role in the surge. By the time of the surge decision in December 2006–January 2007, Democratic support for US involvement in Iraq had long since collapsed, and Republican support was starting to crack. Even within the administration, key confidants such as Condoleezza Rice opposed any deepening of US involvement in Iraq, and the uniformed military was ambivalent at best toward the idea of a surge. As

⁷⁰See Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro, ‘Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?’ *International Security* 37/1 (Summer 2012), 7–40. Bush administration officials saw these two elements as collectively part of the surge. See Stephen Hadley, Meghan O’Sullivan, and Peter Feaver, ‘How the Surge Came to Be’, in Hal Brands, Jeffrey Engel, William Inboden, and Timothy Sayle (eds.), *The Last Card in the Deck: Inside George W. Bush’s 2007 Iraq Surge Decision* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press forthcoming).

⁷¹On the effectiveness of the surge and the evisceration of AQI, see Mansour, *Surge*; also Bergen, *The Longest War*, 266–96.

has become clear from memoirs, journalistic accounts, and newly available primary sources, the president's role was thus crucial.

These sources show, for instance, that Bush refused to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq prior to the November 2006 elections despite the fact that Congressional Republicans were feeling increasing pressure to break with the administration's policies. They also reveal how the president brought the reluctant Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) along with the proposed five-brigade surge, by providing 'sweeteners' such as expanding the overall size of the army and marines corps while also politely but firmly rejecting concerns that the surge might 'break the force.' 'Let me tell you what's going to break the army,' he said at a climactic Pentagon meeting in December 2006. 'What's going to break the army is a defeat like we had in Vietnam that broke the army for a generation.'⁷² And once the surge decision was made, Bush publicly took personal responsibility for all errors made in the administration's Iraq strategy to date, while also steadfastly defending the surge from critics who tried to discredit it politically and defund it in Congress. As one recent analysis concludes, although advocacy for the surge came from many sources, ultimately 'the single most important player throughout the process was President Bush.'⁷³

Finally, one can quite plausibly – if perhaps not definitively – argue that the subsequent collapse of stability in Iraq, culminating in the Islamic State's (IS) seizure of one-third of the country in 2013–14, should not be laid at Bush's feet, because that outcome was less the inevitable consequence of the 2003 invasion than the avoidable consequence of policies pursued after Bush left office.⁷⁴ As numerous analysts (including several former Obama administration officials) have argued, there was reasonable cause to think that the positive trajectory of Iraqi security and politics might continue after 2008–09, given sustained US engagement. But the transition from Bush to Barack Obama resulted in the replacement of a leader with a deep, personal investment in Iraq by one who was deeply ambivalent toward that project. The resulting US diffidence – symbolized by the Obama administration's effectively disengaging from the Iraqi political process in 2010, and its subsequent military disengagement following an unsuccessful and somewhat desultory effort to extend the U.S. presence – helped replace positive trends with negative ones. These decisions removed the US 'shock absorber'

⁷²Baker, *Days of Fire*, 520; also the essays and transcripts in Brands, Engel, Inboden, and Sayle (eds.), *Last Card in the Deck*.

⁷³Colin Dueck, 'The President as Policy Entrepreneur: George W. Bush and the 2006 Iraq Strategy Review', in Hal Brands, Engel Inboden, and Timothy Sayle (eds.), *Last Card in the Deck* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press forthcoming); also Colin Dueck, 'The Role of the National Security Advisor and the 2006 Iraq Strategy Review', *Orbis* 58/1 (Winter 2014), 15–38; Stephen Dyson, 'George W. Bush, the Surge, and Presidential Leadership', *Political Science Quarterly* 125/4 (Winter 2010), 557–85.

⁷⁴We make this case in much greater detail in Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, 'Was the Rise of ISIS Inevitable?' *Survival* 59/3 (Jun-Jul. 2017), 7–54.

between competing Iraqi factions, robbed Washington of leverage to restrain Maliki's increasingly sectarian and authoritarian instincts, weakened the Iraqi security forces, and deprived US officials of crucial intelligence on the threat posed by IS.⁷⁵ To be sure, it may not be possible to fully adjudicate these claims – and the Obama administration's counter-claims – for some time. But based on presently available information, it is not implausible to assert that the crumbling of Iraqi security between 2011 and 2014 was less a consequence of Bush's decisions than of Obama's.

At the very least, then, this line of Bush revisionism does bear analytical weight. At the same time, however, there are also important caveats to consider.

First, although proponents of Bush revisionism can adduce growing historical evidence to support their position, they still must address various counterarguments. Bush's critics have argued, for instance, that it was the awakening rather than the surge that deserves primary credit for reducing violence in Iraq, and that implementation of a counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq predated the surge and was more of a bottom-up than a top-down initiative.⁷⁶ For the reasons noted previously, we find these critiques unpersuasive, but they nonetheless have some currency among certain analysts of the Iraq War. More plausibly, and as discussed subsequently, there also remain heated debates about just how stable Iraq really was when Bush left office in 2009, and how to apportion blame for the subsequent unraveling of the country.

Second, any success Bush enjoyed in Iraq has to be balanced against the indisputable fact that it took more than three years after the invasion to identify an effective strategy, and that this painfully slow process – combined with the initial invasion of Iraq – unleashed precisely the instability, sectarian carnage, and profoundly counterproductive strategic effects that the surge later had to correct. Some of those effects – the empowerment of Iran, for instance, or the exacerbation of sectarian rivalry and violence across the Middle East – were so far-reaching that not even the success of the surge could put them 'back in the box.' Indeed, given the significance of the economic, geopolitical, and humanitarian consequences of initial US management of the Iraq war, it is still possible to assert that the foremost legacy of the war was not the wisdom that Bush showed in pushing the surge, but

⁷⁵See Kenneth Pollack, 'Reading Machiavelli in Iraq', *The National Interest*, Nov/Dec. 2012, pp. 8–19; Dexter Filkins, 'What We Left Behind', *The New Yorker*, 28 Apr. 2014, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/what-we-left-behind>>; Rick Brennan, 'Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit', *Foreign Affairs* 93/6 (2014), 25–34; Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs 2015), 330–59.

⁷⁶See, for instance, Hagan, John, et al., 'Correspondence: Assessing the Synergy Thesis in Iraq', *International Security* 37/4 (Spring 2013), 173–98; see also Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Free Press 2013), 85–112; Joshua Rovner, 'The Heroes of COIN', *Orbis* (Spring 2012), 215–32.

rather the questionable decisions that put the country in such a deep hole to begin with.⁷⁷

Third, this line of Bush revisionism must be tempered by sobriety in assessing what the surge really accomplished. It may well be that the surge enabled significant security gains in Iraq, and it is certainly plausible that this progress might not have been reversed – or reversed so dramatically – given different and better decisions by Bush's successor. But it is also possible to argue, as Obama's defenders do, that the fissiparous and destabilizing forces unleashed by the invasion and subsequent disorder were so powerful that the surge could provide only temporary relief, and that those forces were likely to resurge at some future point even had Washington left 5000, 10,000, or even 20,000 troops in Iraq after 2011.⁷⁸ We rebut that counterargument elsewhere and argue instead that the United States would at least have been in a *better* position to address the rise of IS had it not withdrawn from Iraq in 2011.⁷⁹ Yet we acknowledge that precisely how useful and effective such a presence would have been remains conjectural. Moreover, any candid assessment of the surge requires acknowledging that some of the associated initiatives – such as empowering Maliki – may actually have facilitated some of the more authoritarian tendencies that leader displayed as time went on.⁸⁰

In summary, assessing Bush's record requires accepting that his administration ultimately got something of a handle on a conflict that had earlier looked so disastrous, and that it handed off to Obama an Iraq that was more stable and secure than at any time since March 2003. Moreover, it requires acknowledging that Bush turned the situation around in Iraq in 2007–08 not by heeding the sharpest critics of the war, but by doing almost the opposite of what they recommended. Yet it also requires understanding that this achievement did not necessarily negate the costs incurred along the way, and that the question of how enduring the progress made during the surge truly was remains difficult to answer. On balance, the Iraq experience provides enough cause to demand humility from both Bush revisionists and Bush critics.

⁷⁷This is the argument made, for instance, in Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* Ch. 4.

⁷⁸Colin Kahl, 'No, Obama Didn't Lose Iraq', *Politico*, 15 Jun. 2014, <<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/no-obama-didnt-lose-iraq-107874>>.

⁷⁹Brands and Feaver, 'Was the Rise of ISIS Inevitable?'

⁸⁰One counter-revisionist argument that does not stand up to careful scrutiny is the idea that since Bush signed the original Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Maliki in 2008, he should be blamed for the eventual withdrawal of US forces at the end of 2011. It was widely understood that the Bush administration intended the SOFA to be amended to permit a post-2011 US presence, an interpretation confirmed by the fact that Obama administration officials indeed sought to amend that agreement – and predicted, prior to the breakdown of negotiations in 2011, that they would be successful in doing so. These dynamics are covered in Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon 2012), 523–59, 651–71.

A world beyond Iraq

The first three types of Bush revisionism discussed here all involve confronting the highest profile – and costliest – aspects of Bush’s statecraft: the global war on terror and, particularly, the invasion of Iraq. A fourth type of Bush revisionism, however, might argue that focusing too intently on these issues risks obscuring the degree to which US policy on a range of issues beyond Iraq was actually quite successful. Just as several Cold War historians have promoted a more favorable assessment of Lyndon Johnson by shifting the focus from Vietnam to issues such as US–NATO relations, non-proliferation, and arms control, Bush revisionists can argue that the broader the perspective one takes on U.S. foreign relations during the Bush years, the better the view becomes.⁸¹

Consider the following accomplishments, all of which are now well documented in accounts by administration insiders, well-respected journalists, and scholars alike. Despite Russian objections to Bush’s decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, the administration successfully negotiated the Moscow Treaty, which codified mutually agreed upon deep cuts in the strategic arsenals. With respect to India, determined and creative engagement fostered a diplomatic breakthrough that brought New Delhi out of the ‘nuclear ghetto’ and fostered increased strategic cooperation with one of the world’s most important rising powers.⁸² Regarding China, the Bush administration succeeded – despite jeers from Republican hardliners – in defusing an early crisis over a US surveillance plane that had crash-landed on Hainan Island. The EP-3 incident, as it came to be known, had the potential to poison Sino-American affairs; as it was, the administration’s careful handling of the crisis presaged its effectiveness in maintaining generally stable relations with a rising Beijing over the course of Bush’s presidency. To a degree that was not fully appreciated at the time, in fact, the administration navigated some treacherous cross-Taiwan Strait relations, consistently opposing forcible reunification while also restraining a Taiwanese government that seemed dangerously close to declaring independence or otherwise crossing Beijing’s red-lines.⁸³ The administration also maintained positive ties with Japan, continuing the post-Cold War process of encouraging that country to broaden its defense

⁸¹See Thomas Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003); H.W. Brands, *The Wages of Globalism: Lyndon Johnson and the Limits of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press 1995); Hal Brands, ‘Progress Unseen: U.S. Arms Control Policy and the Origins of Détente, 1963–1968’, *Diplomatic History* 30/2 (2006), 253–85; Hal Brands, ‘Rethinking Nonproliferation: LBJ, the Gilpatric Committee, and U.S. National Security Policy’, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8/2 (2006), 83–113.

⁸²Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown 2012), 436–42; also Ashley Tellis, ‘The Merits of Dehyphenation: Explaining U.S. Success in Engaging India and Pakistan’, *The Washington Quarterly* 31/4 (2008), 21–42.

⁸³Thomas Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: Norton 2015), Esp. Ch. 7.

and strategic horizons. And across the Asia-Pacific, the Bush administration continued to modernize US alliances and partnerships, and it began quietly – and non-provocatively – to strengthen and disperse the US regional military posture to better address the challenge from an increasingly powerful China. As scholars have begun to note, key initiatives that later figured prominently in the Obama-era rebalance to the Asia-Pacific had their roots during the Bush years.⁸⁴

Looking beyond the Asia-Pacific, the administration also established fairly productive relations with a rising Brazil in Latin America – despite the obvious ideological differences between Bush, a conservative Republican, and the left-of-center Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – and subtly cultivated Brasília as a moderate regional counterweight to Hugo Chavez's Venezuela.⁸⁵ Also in Latin America, the administration continued and expanded Plan Colombia, an aggressive counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency assistance plan that helped – in conjunction with several other factors – to reverse the trajectory of the Colombian civil war and make Bogota a key strategic partner in the region.⁸⁶ In the realm of non-proliferation, the administration created an innovative multilateral institution – the Proliferation Security Initiative – which quickly proved its worth in countering the spread of WMD components and technologies.⁸⁷ It also used a combination of diplomatic engagement (which dated back to the Clinton years) and coercive threats to bring to closure a process that largely disarmed Libya of its WMD programs and stockpiles and turned Muammar Qaddafi from a long-time enemy to a generally cooperative CT partner.⁸⁸

In Africa, the administration's record was perhaps most transformative of all. In 2003, Bush launched the path-breaking President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which over the next decade provided \$52 billion to support antiretroviral treatment of 7.7 million people (in addition to other anti-AIDS interventions) and is widely assessed to have saved over a million lives. As even one of Bush's foremost critics – President Barack Obama – later said, 'President Bush deserves enormous credit for that. It is really

⁸⁴See Michael Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press 2017), 482–517; Michael Green, 'The Iraq War and Asia: Assessing the Legacy', *The Washington Quarterly* 31/2 (2008), 181–200; Nina Silove, 'The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia', *International Security* 40/4 (2016), 45–88.

⁸⁵See, for instance, Cristina Soreanu Pecequillo, 'A New Strategic Dialogue: Brazil-U.S. Relations in Lula's Presidency (2003–2010)', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 53 (Dec. 2010), 132–50; also Rothkopf, *National Insecurity*, Esp. 99–107.

⁸⁶For a balanced assessment, see Russell Crandall, 'Colombia's Catastrophic Success', *The American Interest* 9/3 (Jan/Feb. 2014), 58–65.

⁸⁷See, for instance, Andrew Winner, 'The Proliferation Security Initiative: The New Face of Interdiction', *The Washington Quarterly* 28/2 (Spring 2005), 129–43.

⁸⁸See, for instance, Bruce Jentleson and Christopher Whytock, 'Who "Won" Libya? The Force-Diplomacy Debate and Its Implications for Theory and Policy', *International Security* 30/3 (Winter 2005/06), 47–86.

important.⁸⁹ Indeed, to put the matter baldly, estimates of lives saved by PEPFAR dramatically outstrip even the most aggressive estimates of lives lost as a result of the Iraq war.⁹⁰ More generally, Bush dramatically increased both the quantity and quality of foreign aid, doubling the aid budget and pushing forward important new reforms with the Millennium Challenge Corporation.⁹¹

Finally, while a full accounting of Bush's domestic policy is beyond the scope of this essay, one important episode had profound significance for America's global standing. In the waning months of Bush's presidency, the administration played a key role in averting a financial meltdown that might have severely damaged the economic base of US power. It did so by pushing through necessary but unpopular interventions – such as the Troubled Asset Relief Program – at home, while also promoting greater multilateral cooperation to stabilize the international economy.⁹² In fairness, the administration also bore some responsibility for the emergence of that crisis: the Treasury Department and other government actors failed to appreciate the scale or urgency of the accumulating financial problems until mid-2008, and the Bush administration was part of a long line of American administrations that worked aggressively to promote greater homeownership. But, to be sure, the blame can be spread well beyond President Bush and his top advisors; the Clinton administration, the independent Federal Reserve governors, successive generations of Congressional leaders from both parties, and, of course, leaders of the financial institutions themselves all contributed to the problem. And when matters turned truly critical in the fall of 2008, Bush provided the political leadership necessary to put vital damage-limitation measures in place.⁹³

⁸⁹ See 'The United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief: Funding and Results', <http://www.pepfar.gov/funding/>; 'Press Gaggle by President Obama aboard Air Force One', 28 Jun. 2013, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/28/press-gaggle-president-obama-aboard-air-force-one>>; Rochelle Walensky and Daniel Kuritzkes, 'The Impact of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) beyond HIV and Why It Remains Essential', *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 50/2 (2012), 272–75.

⁹⁰ As of Jun. 2017, the Iraq Body Count estimated that there had been a total of 268,000 violent deaths as a result of the Iraq war. See <<https://www.iraqbodycount.org/>>.

⁹¹ On Millennium Challenge, see Stephen Hook, 'Ideas and Change in U.S. Foreign Aid: Inventing the Millennium Challenge Corporation', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 4/2 (Apr. 2008), 147–67. One could also argue that Bush was perceptive on a number of foreign policy points, even where his administration failed to deliver significant results. He rightly saw the need for reform of Palestinian governing structures as an essential precursor to lasting peace with Israel, for instance – although as Elliott Abrams acknowledges, the administration perhaps did not carry this insight far enough. See Elliott Abrams, *Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2013).

⁹² On this episode, see Henry Paulson, Jr., *On the Brink: Inside the Race to Stop the Collapse of the Global Financial System* (New York: Grand Central Publishing 2011); Baker, *Days of Fire*, 607–17, 621–28.

⁹³ On the origins and course of the crisis, see Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, *Financial Crisis Inquiry Report* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office 2011).

Taken together, these accomplishments belie the notion of Bush as a singularly ineffective foreign policy leader. What they suggest, rather, is that the leader who was responsible for the Iraq war was also capable of subtle, sophisticated, and constructive statecraft, and of orchestrating a number of policies that improved America's international position. In fact, on a number of key issues – from the opening to India to the origins of the Asia-Pacific rebalance – the Bush administration could reasonably claim to have laid the foundations for key initiatives undertaken by its successor. These accomplishments should gradually loom larger in assessments of Bush's presidency, as the passions stirred by Iraq and CT policies continue to fade.

The 'world beyond Iraq' thesis thus has real promise for Bush revisionists. Yet like all of the arguments discussed here, it also has real limitations. First, even setting Iraq aside, Bush-era foreign policy was characterized by notable and costly failures as well as meaningful achievements. After an initially successful invasion of Afghanistan, for instance, the administration was unable to consolidate the gains in a sustainable way, in part due to persistent Pakistani support for the Taliban, and in part due to the under-resourcing of the US mission in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ By 2008, Bush was handing over to his successor an Afghan conflict that, as Rice's aides candidly reported to her, 'was nearing catastrophic failure.'⁹⁵ Just as seriously, the administration continually struggled to define a coherent – let alone effective – policy toward a rapidly nuclearizing North Korea, and so the president who had pledged not to let 'the world's most dangerous regimes threaten us with the world's most dangerous weapons' ended up unable to prevent Pyongyang from doing precisely that.⁹⁶

Nor were these the only challenges Bush was unable to overcome. With respect to Iran and its nuclear program, critics charge that the administration missed an opportunity to exploit the coercive leverage its initial success in Iraq afforded in 2003, though how much Iran was willing to negotiate remains hotly contested by experts inside and outside the administration.⁹⁷ The Intelligence Community assessed that Iran suspended its weaponization efforts in the wake of the initial Iraq invasion; Iranian fears of US military action also may have contributed to the conclusion of the 2004 Paris Agreement, which laid out the terms for

⁹⁴The two authors disagree somewhat on how to weight these factors, but we agree that both were involved to a meaningful degree.

⁹⁵See, for instance, Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: Norton 2010); quote from Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 636.

⁹⁶A good source is Mike Chinoy, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press 2008).

⁹⁷Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2007), 240–44, 253; Glenn Kessler, 'Rice denies seeing Iranian proposal in '03', *Washington Post*, 8 Feb. 2007.

multilateral negotiations supported by the United States.⁹⁸ But these negotiations faltered as the war in Iraq bogged down and the pressure on Iran dissipated, and collapsed altogether when the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took power in Tehran in 2005. Thereafter, even though the Bush administration did gradually forge a coherent multitrack approach combining sanctions and other pressures with multilateral negotiations, and even though that approach did gradually lead to greater diplomatic isolation and economic pressure on Iran, that approach did not culminate in success and Bush's tenure ended with the Iranian nuclear program advancing at a dangerous pace.⁹⁹

There were difficulties elsewhere, as well. In Latin America, critics charge that the administration erred in appearing to lend tacit support to an ultimately unsuccessful coup against Hugo Chavez, an episode that – rightly or wrongly – provoked condemnation from intervention-sensitive observers around the region.¹⁰⁰ Finally, relations with Russia were increasingly problematic as Bush's presidency progressed and were characterized by two controversial and problematic actions in 2008 alone. The administration first pushed NATO to announce that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members of the alliance without adequately preparing for the likely Russian response or resolving the question of whether NATO could actually defend those countries in a crisis. When Russia then reacted by invading Georgia, the administration did send naval vessels into the Black Sea and airlifted Georgian troops serving in Iraq back to Georgia, in an effort to deter further advances. Yet it stopped well short of more coercive steps to punish Moscow for breaking the post-Cold War taboo on military aggression and forcible boundary changes in Europe, such as sending military supplies to Georgia or imposing meaningful economic sanctions.¹⁰¹ Widening the scope beyond Iraq, in other words, requires grappling with a diplomatic record that was neither singularly effective nor singularly catastrophic, but that was, instead, mixed.

Second, looking beyond Iraq also requires acknowledging that many of these frustrations and failures were influenced by the pernicious strategic spillover from that conflict. As Seth Jones and other scholars have noted, the

⁹⁸See the declassified National Intelligence Estimate, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities* (National Intelligence Council Nov. 2007), <https://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/international/20071203_release.pdf>.

⁹⁹The evolution of U.S. strategy is discussed in Jordan Chandler Hirsh, 'How America bamboozled itself about Iran', *Commentary*, Mar. 2015, <<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/how-america-bamboozled-itself-about-iran-1/>>; also Flynt Leverett, *Dealing with Tehran: Assessing U.S. Diplomatic Options toward Iran* (New York: Century Foundation 2006); Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iraq: Power and Paradox in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books 2006), 127–29.

¹⁰⁰In fairness to the Bush administration, some of the more vociferous critiques of U.S. policy – to the extent that the United States had materially supported the coup or incited the Venezuelan opposition to overthrow Chavez – were vastly exaggerated. For a defense of U.S. policy, see Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 255–56.

¹⁰¹On the Georgia conflict, see Ronald Asmus, *The Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010).

under-resourcing of the Afghan War was partially a result of the administration's increasing preoccupation with Iraq from 2002 onward.¹⁰² Similarly, the rapid loss of strategic leverage that resulted from the administration's struggles in Iraq made it far more difficult to exert sufficient coercive leverage on rogue states such as Iran and North Korea. Despite imposing a multilateral sanctions regime on Pyongyang, for instance, the administration was unable to halt North Korea's nuclear program, and even insiders blamed the way that Iraq constrained the US ability to generate decisive pressure. As Robert Joseph, undersecretary of state for arms control under Bush and a leading North Korea hawk, later acknowledged, 'If you are looking for the place where Iraq really distracted them, where we really paid the price, it was North Korea.'¹⁰³ More broadly, of course, the Iraq War undercut US diplomatic prestige, soft power, and relationships in a way that made a variety of international issues more difficult to address. And even where the record of US policy under Bush was quite constructive, as in the Asia-Pacific, the Iraq war still diverted resources and attention and made it more difficult to reinforce positive trends.¹⁰⁴ One cannot simply segregate Iraq from the remainder of Bush's record, then, for the negative consequences of that action flowed far and wide.

Third, and finally, even if one acknowledges the administration's various diplomatic accomplishments, there remains room for debate on how to weigh their relative importance. Bush revisionists might reasonably argue that over-emphasizing Iraq vis-à-vis these other issues risks replicating the same strategic myopia of which the administration was often accused, and that coming to grips with Bush's record requires recognizing that Iraq was only one part of much broader tableau in which the president arguably succeeded at least as often as he failed. Critics, by contrast, might reasonably point to the disproportionately high costs of Iraq war – over 4000 US service members killed, many times that number maimed and wounded, somewhere between roughly \$1 and \$3 trillion in direct and indirect costs, the profound and often counter-productive spillover effects in the Middle East and beyond – in arguing that the war overshadows other diplomatic achievements.¹⁰⁵ To return to an earlier analogy, recent work on LBJ and Europe, or on LBJ and arms control, has certainly given historians a better-rounded view of that president's statecraft.

¹⁰²See Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 127–29; David Rohde and David Sanger, 'How a "Good War" in Afghanistan went bad', *New York Times*, 12 Aug. 2007; Steven Simon, 'The Iraq War and the War on Terror: The Global Jihad after Iraq', in John S. Duffield and Peter Dombrowski (eds.), *Balance Sheet: The Iraq War and U.S. National Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009), 35.

¹⁰³Sanger, *The Inheritance*, 283; Green, 'Iraq War and Asia', 192; see also Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* 183–85.

¹⁰⁴Green, 'Iraq War and Asia.'

¹⁰⁵The costs are discussed in Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* Ch. 4; also Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (New York: Norton 2008).

It has not, however, overturned the consensus judgment that the disaster in Vietnam outweighs all other aspects of his diplomacy.¹⁰⁶

In view of these issues, taking a more global view of US policy under Bush will only carry that president's historical rehabilitation so far. What it will do, however, is remind fair-minded observers that the balance sheet on Bush's diplomacy was less one-sided than a single-minded focus on Iraq might make it seem, and that his administration left many positive legacies in foreign policy – to go along with the negative ones.

The two presidencies of George W. Bush

This line of argument is related to a fifth type of likely Bush revisionism – the idea that there were, in policy terms, not one but two George W. Bush presidencies. In the first term, the most prominent foreign policy decisions fit a pattern most critics considered to be 'unilateralist': leaving the ABM treaty, withdrawing from the Kyoto Accord on climate change, and other controversial moves. Moreover, in the first term, the administration committed costly errors, in part because of a policymaking process that even those officials charged with overseeing the process – namely, Condoleezza Rice and her deputy and successor as national security adviser, Stephen Hadley – admitted was fundamentally deficient. Rice later lamented a 'cycle of distrust and dysfunction' that made competently deciding and implementing policy all too difficult; Hadley gave the administration a 'D-minus' for policy execution during the first term.¹⁰⁷ By the end of the second term, in contrast, the administration had compiled a record of innovative multi-lateral approaches and forged cooperative relations with both traditional allies and new partners. More broadly, it moved into a more constructive phase of policymaking, in no small part because both the president and process that supported him became more adept at managing difficult challenges. As one prominent observer of US diplomatic decision-making writes, for example, Bush was a 'very different president' – with a vastly improved foreign policy – during his second term than during his first.¹⁰⁸

Indeed, there would seem to be little question that the overall quality of Bush's policies increased with time. Policy toward Iraq improved dramatically during the second term; as noted, it was in 2006–07 that the administration finally came to grips with the failure of its extant strategy, and shifted to the approach would significantly alter the trajectory of the conflict by 2009.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶This is not to argue that the costs of Iraq exceeded or were less than the costs of Vietnam – an issue that informed observers could argue either way – but simply to note that in both cases, a frustrating and costly conflict loomed over other foreign policy issues and achievements.

¹⁰⁷Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 22; Hadley in Ivo Daalder and I.M. Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served – From JFK to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2009), 293.

¹⁰⁸Rothkopf, *National Insecurity*, 45.

The opening to India also reached full flower in the second term, driven forward by improved cooperation between the National Security Council (NSC) and the State Department.¹¹⁰ During the second term, the administration also undertook intensive efforts to repair the damage to transatlantic relations caused by the Iraq war, through a combination of personal diplomacy and increased cooperation on Afghanistan and other issues.¹¹¹

The arc of administration policy was broadly positive in other areas, as well. In the second term, Bush walked back many of the more controversial war on terror policies, most notably the enhanced interrogation program, which he shut down in 2007. Regarding Iran, the administration – at Bush's own insistence – shifted its approach to avoid the twin extremes of preventive war and accepting an Iranian nuclear capability. It did so by moving away from an unproductive diplomatic process led by key European powers, and toward a multi-track approach emphasized multilateral diplomacy with the United States in the lead – in tandem with various pressures, including new financial sanctions and other measures designed to limit Iran's options. This same multilateral approach, when continued and expanded upon by the Obama administration, would ultimately produce the Iran nuclear deal of 2015.¹¹² In Latin America, the administration shifted from its frequently counterproductive policy of rhetorical and diplomatic confrontation with Hugo Chavez and his radical populist allies, adopting a lower diplomatic profile in the region while also cultivating more moderate counterweights such as Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil.¹¹³ More broadly, the president made greater effort to avoid unnecessarily provocative rhetoric during the second term, and the administration paid increased attention to multilateral structures – whether alliances such as NATO or organizations such as the United Nations – as part of a deliberate effort to mitigate the perceptions of arrogant unilateralism that had marred the first. (Those efforts were aided by the replacement of comparatively difficult European leaders, such as Jacques Chirac of France and Gerhard Schroeder in Germany, with more congenial partners, such as Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel.) 'He wanted to engage in diplomacy,' one senior NSC official later recalled of Bush; he understood the need to stop 'breaking china.'¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰See, for instance, Glenn Kessler, *The Confidante: Condoleezza Rice and the Creation of the Bush Legacy* (New York: Macmillan 2007) Ch. 2.

¹¹¹Mark Webber, 'NATO: The United States, Transformation, and the War in Afghanistan', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 11/1 (2009), 46–63; also Philip Gordon, 'The End of the Bush Revolution', *Foreign Affairs* 85/4 (Jul/Aug. 2006), 75–86.

¹¹²Hirsh, 'How America Bamboozled Itself about Iran.'

¹¹³Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 564–72; also Hal Brands, *Dealing with Political Ferment in Latin America: The Populist Revival, the Emergence of the Center, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute 2009); Clare Ribando Seelke and June Beittel, *Merida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service 2009).

¹¹⁴Rothkopf, *National Insecurity*, 48.

As this comment indicates, these improvements were often driven by changes in the policymaking process. The departure of Colin Powell in early 2005, and eventual firing of Donald Rumsfeld in late 2006, removed the two officials whose bureaucratic rivalry had so impeded effective decision-making and implementation throughout Bush's early years in office. The removal of Rumsfeld, and his replacement by Robert Gates, was particularly crucial to the Iraq surge, as Rumsfeld had reflexively resisted and blocked any advocacy for increased US troop levels. At the same time, Rice moved from the NSC – where she had sometimes struggled as manager of the policy process (particularly with respect to Rumsfeld and Powell in the debates surrounding Iraq) – to State, where she was more naturally suited for her role as the nation's chief diplomat. That move, in turn, permitted Hadley's elevation to national security adviser; he gradually brought greater efficacy to the decision-making by cultivating a more collegial atmosphere among principals, by creating more formal mechanisms for strategic planning and policy implementation, and by improvising new processes – for instance, the strategy review that led to the surge and the creation of the so-called Iraq war 'czar' – that successfully overcame problems that bedeviled the administration in the first term. Together, these changes improved both the quality of the advice that Bush received and the system's ability to translate those inputs into competently executed policies.¹¹⁵

Moreover, as both primary and secondary sources now indicate, the administration benefitted from adjustments in Bush's own leadership style. As Bush matured as a diplomat and statesman, he became less prone to the overheated and moralistic rhetoric of the first term on issues from Iraq to North Korea, and more focused on the need to rebuild trust and reassurance with traditional American partners. As the president gained experience and learned from his own earlier missteps, he became more willing to demand greater discipline and accountability within the administration and to remove or increasingly sideline officials – such as Rumsfeld and even Cheney – who were impacting the policy process in adverse ways. Indeed, as Peter Baker has chronicled, the influence of the vice-president and his staff diminished significantly over time.¹¹⁶ Finally, as the president became more comfortable in his role as commander-in-chief, he also became more assertive in asking his military commanders the hard questions necessary to shift US strategy in Iraq – while still persuading the Joint Chiefs to support a

¹¹⁵Daalder and Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office*, 292–97; Rothkopf, *National Insecurity*, 47–52; Peter Feaver and William Inboden, 'What Was the Point of SPIR? Strategic Planning in National Security at the White House', in Daniel Drezner (ed.), *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Brookings Press 2009), 98–111.

¹¹⁶See, particularly, Baker, *Days of Fire*; for a portrayal of Cheney at the height of his influence, see Barton Gellman, *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency* (New York: Penguin Press 2008).

surge policy that many of them initially opposed. Indeed, a soon-to-be-released collection of oral histories on the decision-making leading to the Iraq surge amply confirms the critical role of Bush's evolution in bringing that shift about.¹¹⁷

To be clear, there were limits to this evolution, and there were areas in which US policy remained – or became – depressively ineffective during the second half of Bush's presidency. Virtually throughout the second term, the administration remained badly divided on the question of whether and how seriously to pursue nuclear negotiations with North Korea, resulting in a policy that was halting, contested, and without lasting positive effects. (North Korea, it will be recalled, tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006.)¹¹⁸ US relations with Russia actually deteriorated significantly during the second term, and the Bush administration – like its successor – never found the formula to manage Vladimir Putin effectively. The trajectory of the war in Afghanistan also tended sharply downward during Bush's second term; in fact, the resource constraints and lack of top-level attention that had always complicated that enterprise arguably became worse amid the intense focus on the Iraq surge. 'It is a matter of resources, of capacity,' JCS Chairman Michael Mullen noted in 2007. 'In Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must.'¹¹⁹ Moreover, the sweeping language of the second inaugural address – for instance, pledging America to the goal of 'ending tyranny in our time' – shows that even in the second term Bush's rhetoric sometimes provoked as much as it persuaded.¹²⁰ Finally, and more broadly, the 'two presidencies' thesis has to be kept in perspective – improvement of both process and policy was possible during the second term in no small part because the administration struggled so significantly on a number of crucial issues during the first.

These issues remind historians of the need for caution and moderation in pushing this particular thesis. But to the extent that the emerging historical record indicates that the administration – and the president – showed meaningful learning, adaptation, and improvement over time, it should qualify some of the harsher extant judgments of Bush as a foreign policy leader. All presidents, even the most accomplished ones, make mistakes and

¹¹⁷On these issues, see the oral histories reproduced in Brands, Engel, Inboden, and Sayle (eds.), *Last Card in the Deck*.

¹¹⁸See Chinoy, *Meltdown*.

¹¹⁹Julian Barnes, 'U.S. calls Iraq the priority', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Dec. 2007.

¹²⁰President Bush's Second Inaugural Address', 20 Jan. 2005, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4460172>>. The administration took pains to caveat and explain the poetry of the Second Inaugural with the prose of the 2006 National Security Strategy, which received a more sympathetic reception from critics. See Ivo H. Daalder, 'Statement on the 2006 National Security Strategy', *Brookings Institution*, 16 Mar. 2006, <<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/statement-on-the-2006-national-security-strategy/>> .

run into trouble; how well they recover is thus an important factor in assessing any presidency.

It's all relative

One final line of argument can be advanced to support the revisionist take on Bush. Every other case of presidential revisionism was catalyzed by applying the lens of comparison. Truman and Eisenhower's 'mistakes' looked different when compared to those of Kennedy and Johnson; Nixon benefitted from the contrast to the decidedly mixed record of Jimmy Carter. Perhaps Bush, too, should profit from comparisons with his successor.

There are two particular dynamics worth noting here. First, as discussed previously, the fact that Obama subsequently adopted so many of Bush's policies – particularly in the CT realm, but also with respect to issues ranging from Iran to India to Africa – indicates that some of the more heated contemporary assessments of Bush's record, including some of those issues by candidate Obama himself, were overstated. Second, the fact that President Obama himself compiled a mixed record in global affairs serves both to remind us of how hard it can be to get foreign policy right, and perhaps to cast Bush's own statecraft in a somewhat more flattering light.¹²¹

Any full assessment of Obama's record would require far more space than is available here. What can fairly be said, however, is that Obama made a number of controversial decisions that can legitimately be criticized in retrospect – the decision, for instance, to downgrade presidential relations with Maliki in 2009–10 and then to take a hands-off approach to the ultimately unsuccessful effort to negotiate a stay-behind presence in Iraq; the decision to conduct a major military 'surge' in Afghanistan while simultaneously announcing a pre-set withdrawal schedule that arguably undercut the military and psychological benefits of US escalation; the decision to declare that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must go and then fail to exert sufficient effort to bring about his removal; the decision to announce a 'red line' concerning Syrian chemical weapons use, and then to not defend that red line when Assad flagrantly violated it; the decision to intervene for humanitarian purposes in Libya while refusing to invest in post-conflict security; the decision not to pair the 'reset' with Russia with the necessary reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank; and others.

What can also be said is that Obama's record of success and failure was decidedly mixed. What many consider to be notable achievements included the Iran nuclear deal, the opening to Cuba, bilateral and multilateral

¹²¹Early assessments of Obama's presidency include Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs 2016); Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama doctrine', *The Atlantic*, Apr. 2016; Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press 2015); Mark Moyar, *Strategic Failure: How President Obama's Drone Warfare, Defense Cuts, and Military Amateurism Have Imperiled America* (New York: Threshold 2015).

agreements on combatting climate change, some important measures to strengthen the US posture in the Asia-Pacific, and others.¹²² Failures, disappointments, or unresolved challenges included the rise of the IS, the spread of jihadist groups throughout the Middle East and North Africa, the growth of Chinese coercion and assertiveness in East Asia, the resurgence of Putinism and the associated Russian threats to European peace and stability, the humanitarian catastrophe and geopolitical destabilization resulting from the Syrian civil war, and so on. Admittedly, not all of these failures and frustrations can be laid entirely at Obama's feet – just as certain difficulties of the Bush years owed more to unpropitious circumstances than bad strategy. But they do demonstrate that the Obama administration encountered its own share of problems in foreign policy. Finally, it can fairly be said that some of Obama's missteps seem to have come from overlearning the apparent lessons of the Bush years. Candidate Obama repeatedly criticized the Bush administration for getting into the war in Iraq too precipitously; it is hard to avoid the conclusion that President Obama made the opposite mistake of trying to end US involvement in that war too precipitously.

To be clear, the point of all this is not to argue that Bush's foreign policy was better than Obama's (or vice versa). The point, rather, is that this comparative perspective reminds us that foreign policy is always hard, that failures and missteps were not the peculiar province of the Bush administration, and that honestly assessing any president's foreign policy requires holding that president to the same standard – no harder, no easier – than those who came before or after. Knowing and understanding the record of Barack Obama may not cause future historians to dramatically revise their assessments of Bush, but it should at least provide context that can conduce to more textured and nuanced analyses of Bush's presidency. And as the records of both presidents are compared to the struggles of their successor, President Trump, this could create a reputational boost for both. Perhaps this is already happening among the general public, for in a June 2017 Gallup poll Bush enjoyed a 59% approval rating, up from 34% when he left office, and Obama enjoyed a 63% rating, up from 59% when he left office.¹²³

¹²²Though even here fair-minded critics have offered thoughtful critiques of each of these – the Iran deal was too generous, the Cuba deal failed to address legitimate human rights concerns, the pivot to Asia was overstated and under-resourced, and so on. As with Bush's mixed record, there is ample room to debate both the alleged successes and failures, and to disagree on what it means on balance for each President's legacy. We have recorded our own divergent perspectives on this debate, and on many of the issues discussed in this section, in Hal Brands, 'Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy', *The Washington Quarterly* 39/4 (Winter 2017), 101–25; and Peter Feaver, review of 'Obama's World: Judging His Foreign Policy Record', in H-Diplo-International Security Studies Forum, 3 Jun. 2016, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/127456/issf-forum-14-%E2%80%99Cobama%E2%80%99s-world-judging-his-foreign-policy-record%E2%80%9D#_Toc452291517>.

¹²³Gallup, 'George W. Bush and Barack Obama Both Popular in Retirement', 19 Jun. 2017, <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/212633/george-bush-barack-obama-popular-retirement.aspx>>.

Conclusion

Revisionism is an inherently dynamic process. Judgments that seem firm in one period give way to reassessments in the light of new evidence, contrary arguments, and the fresh perspective that historical distance and comparisons permit. Given how severe many contemporaneous critique of Bush's foreign policy record were, any change would seemingly have to be in a positive direction. Some degree of Bush revisionism is thus quite likely to emerge in the years to come.

In our view, six lines of argument should nudge the assessment of Bush's foreign policy legacy in a more positive direction. First, a fairer assessment of the constraints under which Bush was operating – and the imperfect alternatives he had to consider – should produce greater empathy for his decisions, even those decisions that occasioned negative results. Second, Bush can rightly claim that there were no further mass casualty terrorist attacks on US soil after 9/11 and that this result can partly be credited to policies he adopted. Third, although the decision to invade Iraq still appears to be a mistake in hindsight, his later decision to implement the surge in defiance of great pressure from critics within and outside government appears quite wise. Fourth, beyond the war on terror, Bush had many foreign policy successes, along with some notable failures, that collectively make the record more mixed than his harshest critics have allowed. Fifth, there was a marked improvement in the trajectory of foreign policy over Bush's two terms. And finally, the mixed record of the Obama administration in foreign policy casts a somewhat favorable and sympathetic light on Bush's own record.

None of these lines of revisionist thinking is so decisive as to end all argument about where Bush belongs in the pantheon of foreign policy presidents. Reasonable people, ourselves included, disagree on where the weight of evidence ultimately comes down. It is premature to declare that Bush revisionism should or will match Truman revisionism, as ardent supporters have posited. But it is also premature to declare that Bush's foreign policy record should never be viewed more favorably than his ardent critics have depicted. Collectively, the six lines of argument presented here seem to present a credible case for revising upward history's judgment. How far remains open to debate – perhaps only modestly, perhaps more substantially. Yet we remain confident in asserting that Bush's foreign policy legacy will – or at least should – gradually come to look better as time passes and more dispassionate accounts emerge.

Disclosure statement

Brands served as a political appointee in the Defense Department in Obama's second term and Feaver served as a political appointee in the White House in Bush's second term.

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