The Coalition of the Willing and Post-hoc Justifications for Intervention in Iraq

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More than five years since the inception of the Iraq War on 20 March 2003, the reasons for intervention remain contested and controversial. Some have counted up to twenty-seven separate rationales given by the Bush Administration[1] and a cursory glance at media reports since intervention illustrates shifting arguments as conditions on the ground in Iraq changed. Whilst particularly relevant for the justifications given by the US, this is also applicable to other members of the Coalition of the Willing, and comparing their rationales for intervention in Iraq provides a useful basis for examining the way controversial political decisions are justified.

"The battle for Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September 11th of 2001 – and still goes on" – George W. Bush, 1 May 2003

INTRODUCTION

This project examines the justifications for intervention in Iraq propounded by George Bush of the United States, Tony Blair of the United Kingdom and John Howard of Australia in the twelve months following intervention.

METHOD

The justifications were examined using discourse analysis, since language plays a key role in framing security and threat issues as well as forming and articulating identities to which such perceived threats are directed. Discourses thus constructed the social reality that elevated intervention as a rational, moral and just course of action and which marginalised alternatives as dubious, reckless and immoral.

Speeches and statements from the three leaders with a substantial reference to Iraq, accessed via the respective government databases, were coded according to the discourse of threat, security and just war theory, national and western identity narratives, historical narratives, and attempts at marginalising critiques of the decision to intervene.

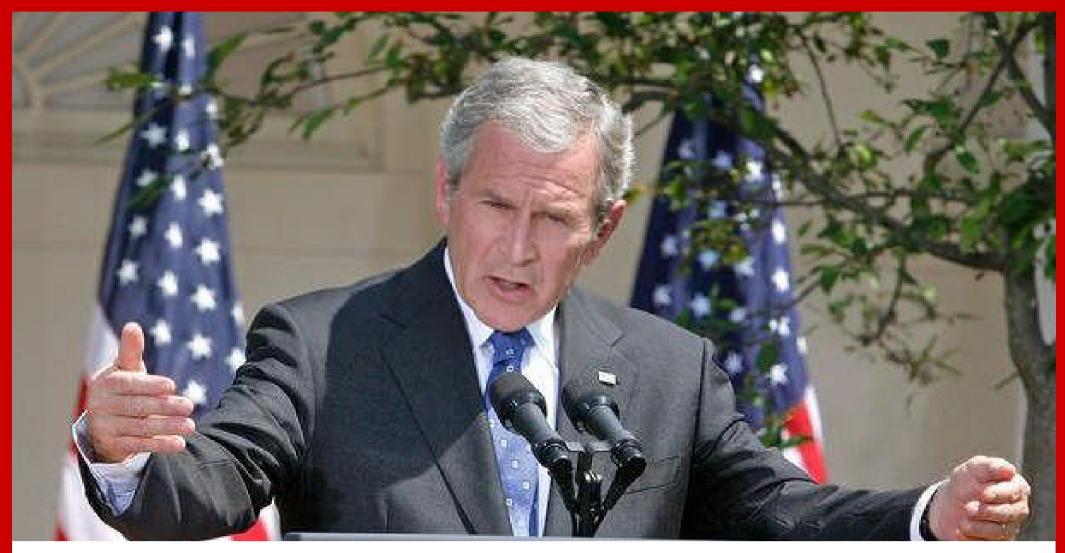## FINDINGS: George Bush (America)

Dominant Justifications:

•War on Terror: 'outlaw regimes', WMD, and international terrorism

•9/11: a qualitatively new threat that warrants pre-emption

•Domestic security

Shifting Justifications:

•WMD: shift from 'weapons' to 'weapons-related program activities'

•Send a 'clear message': stronger after Libya's capitulation over WMD

•Seeking Justice: stronger around death of Uday and Qusay Hussein and also capture of Saddam

Dominant Identity Narratives: the 'light on the hill'

•Liberal identity and role in upholding liberty: historical references (Philadelphia as the birthplace of American liberty, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, America's role in World War II and the Cold War)

•American exceptionalism: Bush promotes Manifest Destiny with religious overtones and portrays liberty as God's gift to mankind

•Military: key agent in the Manichean struggle between good and evil

•Western identity: dichotomous struggle between a civilised liberal democratic west[2] and a barbarous 'other'

FINDINGS: Tony Blair (Britain)

Dominant Justifications:

•Disarming Iraq of WMD with Regime Change following as a corollary

•Evidential claims: intelligence assessments

•Legal case: enforcing UNSC Resolutions

•Moral case: humanitarian intervention

Shifting Justifications:

•Evidential claims: increasing reliance on prior intelligence assessments as criticism over WMD mounted

•Sending a 'clear message': a 'climb-down' would hearten the enemy

Dominant Identity Narratives: the 'benign empire'

•Gladstonian liberal humanitarian interventionism: reference to Kosovo

•International community[3] in terms of intervention and international law and institutions, particularly the UN

•The UK-US special relationship: historical references to World War II

•Western identity: liberal democracy, 'way of life', and a clash between civilisation and barbarism

FINDINGS: John Howard (Australia)

Dominant Justifications:

•Disarming Iraq of WMD with Regime Change following 'axiomatically'

•War on Terror: reference to Bali bombings

•Moral case: references to Australia's role in East Timor

Shifting Justifications:

•WMD: from 'weapons' to [chemical and biological] 'WMD capacity' and 'nuclear aspirations'

•Increasing emphasis on humanitarian imperative, whilst branding opponents as insensitive to the Iraqis' plight

Dominant Identity Narratives: the 'loyal ally'

•Anglophone ally: reference to ANZAC identity and ANZUS Treaty

•Western identity: western civilisation, values and way of life posited against a barbarous enemy

CONCLUSION:

Despite many similarities across the cases, arguments of pre-emption and seeking justice were almost exclusive to America and protecting domestic security received particular emphasis by Bush. Legalistic arguments based on UN resolutions and intelligence and attempts to link the Iraq War to the Middle East peace process were stronger in Australia and Britain than America. Moral arguments of humanitarian intervention received particular focus by Blair compared to others and a western identity was especially vigorous and explicit in Howard's language.

This analysis of the construction of the cases for war and, further, the shifting justifications and the analysis of the tactics of marginalising opposition highlights how the decision came to be justified and it also allows room for critique of the decision for war, suggesting that there may have been a dissonance between the leadership's stated rationales and those that fundamentally drove the political decision for war.

References:

[1] Largio, D. (2004) 'Uncovering the Rationales for the War on Iraq'

[2] Bowden, B. (2007) 'Civilisation and Savagery in the Crucible of War', Global Change, Peace and Security, 19:1, 3-16

[3] Ralph, J. (2005) 'Tony Blair's 'new doctrine of international community' and the UK decision to invade Iraq', POLIS Working Paper No. 20

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