

[Transcript] The Realignment / Iraq War 20th Anniversary | Robert Draper on How the Bush Administration Took America Into Iraq

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Realignment.

What I'm describing here, Marshall, is that while September 11th has commonly been referred to as a failure of the imagination, the Iraq war was the opposite.

It was the imagination run amok.

It was people imagining worst-case scenarios that if we don't do this, something awful is going to happen.

And continually what we would hear in the ensuing months, as Bush began to be very explicit about what he believed was the Saddam threat,

explicit to the American public, he would say, you can only imagine, we can only imagine that Saddam would love to be involved in the next attack,

hand over his weapons of mass destruction to al-Qaeda, and walk away without so much as a fingerprint.

Every part of that scenario is made up.

You know, he didn't have weapons, he didn't confederate with al-Qaeda, and he didn't want to do as in.

Hey everyone, I'm on a work vacation for a conference put on by the Hewlett Foundation, one of the sponsors of the Realignment podcast.

So, because this week coincides with the 20th anniversary of the Iraq war, I'm going to repost our July 2021 interview with Robert Draper about his book,

To Start a War, How the Bush Administration Took America into Iraq.

Obviously, it's been a bit of time since that conversation.

There are all sorts of things that would have come up, specifically how the path to war compares and contrasts with Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022.

But it still has really aged well, and I cannot recommend the book and Robert's broader writing enough.

Hope you all enjoy the conversation, and I will note that Saga and I have another Realignment Supercast subscriber exclusive episode coming out on Friday,

so be sure to subscribe at realignment.supercast.com, take that access to the full episode, and of course, to submit any questions you may have.

See you all next time, and a huge thank you to Lincoln Network for supporting the podcast.

Robert Draper, welcome to the Realignment.

Thanks so much for having me, Marshall.

I want to start our conversation on the war in Iraq, focusing on myths that have really propagated around the war.

So let's just start really directly.

George W. Bush, or figures with decision making capacities in the Bush administration, lie, as in knowingly believe that Iraq was not a threat, that Iraq had a dilapidated weapons program.

Did they lie about those facts in order to start a war?

No, they believed those facts. Those facts, in fact, were not facts, and so it's a distinction maybe without a difference in the end that they believe things they had no business believing.

But no, there's no evidence that I find persuasive, at least Marshall, that George W. Bush willfully said to the American public things that he knew were untrue.

He believed that Iraq was a threat. He believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. He believed

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we had no choice in the matter but to go to war in Iraq.

And I actually don't think, I think it's a distinction with quite a difference, because if this is just one man and his administration in 2002 lying,

that doesn't really say, or it could say something about a broader system, but it doesn't have to say anything about a broader system.

But if in fact there was a two decades long process involving think tanks, ideology, inspections, UN resolutions that led folks to believe things that were not true, that led to this cataclysmic event, that's what makes this actually so valuable to study. You can both believe that the Iraq war was the worst foreign policy decision in American history,

but also believe that it was a poor decision made in a fact that was believed by the actors. So I think that's so important to hit right up the start.

I think, look, that's a great point, Marshall, and I guess when I say it's a distinction without a difference, what I mean is it's cold comfort that, well,

you know, President Bush had the best of intentions, but you're right that this was not just a diabolical act of one person, but a policy born out of group things that spanned a couple of decades, spanned the ideological spectrum, you know, the liberals believed that Saddam had weapons, liberals believed that democratization of the Middle East would be a good thing.

And so, so yeah, I think it is, you're right, a very important object lesson to recognize that this was not just simply a case of someone willfully telling you something they knew not to be true.

So then here's the next myth focused question. Did Iraq's oil or a broader critique of the military industrial complex, which also brings in Halliburton, which Dick Cheney obviously had a relationship with,

did those economic factors play into the decision to invade Iraq?

Only in the sense that that is a world and thus, you know, perhaps a vantage point that both George W. Bush, who was from the oil patch of Midland and Cheney, who as you mentioned, worked at Halliburton,

they would proceed from that, but it was not, you know what, let's go to Iraq and enrich all of our oil buddies. There is absolutely no evidence that I found persuasive to that, despite the fact that books on that topic have been written insinuating that it is true that

they wanted to preserve the oil fields of Iraq, but not to pocket the money themselves. They wanted to do it because they believed, erroneously as it turns out, that the Iraq oil production would essentially finance the reconstruction and thus that we, the U.S.

could do an invasion on the cheap. And that's the key fact here because the idea that this was a purely neocolonial expedition to seize oil would suggest that this war, the way it went down, would have occurred without 9-11, without very specific circumstances.

And I just don't think that's true. Maybe there was an unsustainable path between the Clinton policy to the Bush policy and we can be convinced that the airstrikes in the north could have led up to something bigger, but I just can't look at this and conclude that this is neocolonialism.

No.

Because this is at the top of everyone's mind, especially in our listenership, but I just think it has to be dismissed because it distracts from the broader lessons about how truly disastrous this decision was.

I think it's also the case that people have to recognize about George W. Bush, that despite the family

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history, that is to say that in 1993, former president George Herbert Walker Bush was nearly assassinated, or there was an assassination attempt on him when he was visiting Egypt, and that the belief is that it was Saddam's intelligence agency that was behind it. Despite that, it is not like George W. Bush came into office in 2001 wanting to go to war. He wanted to be a domestic president.

He didn't want to spend his time hugging war widows. He wanted to tax tax cuts. He wanted to reform education. He wanted to reform the immigration system.

He very rarely on the campaign trail talked about Saddam, and in fact, once he was elected and members of the New York Times met with Bush and asked him about his Iraq policy, it was evident. It was manifestly evident that he was very suited to the containment policy that was already in place by the Clinton administration. He couldn't stand Saddam.

He wanted somebody to take Saddam out, but he didn't want to waste American lives in the effort to do so until 9-11 happened, and he came to believe that he had no choice in the matter.

Let's start there then because we'll get to the implications of what the war means for the Republican Party, the foreign policy establishment.

But the thing that I always remind folks of who haven't studied this era is that a lot of folks who tend to be more on the realist part of the right,

folks who tend to be more Trumpy in America first, there's a lot that those folks would probably like in the George W. Bush of 2000, in the sense that he's running against why are we engaging in these interventions in the 1990s during the Clinton administration.

The Condoleezza Rice-Penz essay in Foreign Affairs, it's not realist in the sense, but it's definitely non-interventionist away from the Clinton side. In the book you mentioned how there are actually hawkish folks who probably wanted Al Gore to be president over George W. Bush, because he was seen as the figure to be less interventionist in his foreign policy. So can you just speak to the pre-9-11, pre-presidency George W. Bush, because I think that's a really fascinating part of this dynamic,

and actually illustrates the broader point about how a terrible process in world events could lead someone who you'd be the least person to suspect to actually engage in this really terrible decades-long policy.

Sure. What you're referencing when it comes to Bush versus Gore is that in one of their candidate debates, Bush said, as a kind of clapback to Gore cheerleading what the U.S. had done in Kosovo, as, you know, we can't fix the problems of the world. If we're humble, they'll respect us. And there were a lot of people who thought, well, that's not exactly what we wanted to hear. For that matter, Vice President, his running mate, Dick Cheney, had said just weeks before he was nominated by Bush in his oral history.

He said, you know, the truth is, when we went to war to push Saddam out of Kuwait, we had this great coalition going, and our charter was very clear, get them out of Kuwait, not finish off Saddam altogether.

That was the right thing to do. I wish that Saddam's people would have finished the job. They did not. We're going to have to live with a guy.

But so, yeah, that was basically the viewpoint. And it's one of the regrettable aspects of this was that members of the Bush administration not only paid very little attention to the kinds of things that were very approving of the things that Clinton had done in Bosnia and Kosovo,

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but also paid very little attention to what Clinton and his administration were doing vis-a-vis al-Qaeda and Islamic extremists. I think the view among the Bush administration was, you know what, if the Clintons are preoccupied with this, it must not be very important.

They felt like, you know, that, I mean, okay, terrorism is bad, but it's never happened to us, not in our soil. It's the cost of doing business overseas. And, you know, we'll take out terrorists where we can. But how could it possibly be the number one threat? As a result of which, though, as you were suggesting earlier,

in the 1990s, there were all these conservative think tanks and other groups pouring over what to do about Saddam Hussein and what to do about Iraq. There was no similar think tank saying what to do about Afghanistan with the Taliban that's harboring al-Qaeda.

There simply was not a set policy in place in the conservative intelligentsia regarding al-Qaeda, and thus they really were caught flat-footed on September 11th.

I've spoken with a bunch of the folks you cover in the book and the thing that they will always say around this 1990s period. And once again, this is post-op, a decades-long terrible war.

So I'm not meaning to provide mouthpieces for anybody, but what they will emphasize is that the Clinton era policy was not unsustainable.

The U.S. government, the Congress, once again, you write about this, had passed a resolution saying that the official U.S. policy was regime change in Iraq.

Now, it doesn't necessarily mean an invasion, but it just does mean that the U.S. is dedicated to boxing him in with no fly zones, support for Kurds and other anti-Saddam forces, and the crippling sanctions policy.

So to what degree was this hostile pose of the Clinton era that could have moved into a gore presidency, let's say?

To what degree was that just inevitably going to lead to some degree of conflict that was escalating?

I'm so glad that you brought up something that is very rarely talked about, the 1998 resolution that was passed, basically saying that it is the U.S. policy to support regime change, which did not mean us going to war, but where it was put in place so that we would give

\$97 million to Iraqi refugees so that they could figure out how to do it on their own. This was very much the handy work of Ahmad Chalabi and his lobbying forces. And it was passed in 1998 during a time when people might recall the Clinton

administration was somewhat hobbled by the Monica Lewinsky scandal. It was not a good time, in other words, for Clinton to be making some kind of argument about how we should disengage from the world.

But no one, including the Bush administration, it's not like when they came into office on January the 20th, 2001, they said, oh yeah, that resolution was passed.

We better go bomb Saddam. There is, again, zero evidence to suggest that there was any kind of on ramp being built for such an eventuality.

They were continuing, well, it's called smart sanctions. And while a lot of people felt that was unsustainable, they felt that Saddam was finding his way around this. And by the way, ultimately, we have learned that that was not the case because we were presupposing that he was building weapons when he was not. The Iraq hawks were deeply frustrated by the recognition that Bush just didn't care. I mean, he cared, but he didn't want to do anything about it.

He didn't want to waste American blood and treasure on this.

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So last thing before we get into the actual decision making process, I really enjoy the early chapters where you describe 9 11 and the deep impact that had on the principal players that we're focusing on.

So Paul Wolfowitz, George W. Bush, obviously, Donald Rumsfeld, can you both describe the world of September 10th, the world of September 11th, which would then take us into and then describe the day that they were looking at on September 11th, and then which

will then take us into the actual process and the cascading dominoes.

Sure. So it's to kind of deconstruct this. I mean, Bush was intending on September 11 to start pushing an immigration policy that was next on his agenda.

Paul Wolfowitz had always had always been jonesing to go after Saddam Hussein and up to that point had been deeply frustrated by his inability to get any traction on that subject.

And and so when September 11 occurred, again, they were they were all caught flat footed. You could see, you know, the videotape of George W. Bush, you know, slacked on by this, despite the fact that the lesson one month earlier he'd gotten the famous bin Laden determined to strike the US presidential daily brief from CIA analysts and immediately their world was turned upside down and they recognized that America was no longer protected by by its geo position and that there were bad actors out there to do us harm.

For Paul Wolfowitz, he became a merely convinced that Saddam Hussein had been so terrible to his own people who was so hostile towards the Israelis that he had to have something he had to have had something to do with all of this.

And the very evening of September 11, late, late, late that night, he tasked the Defense Intelligence Agency, and by the way, to your listeners, Paul Wolfowitz was the Deputy Secretary of Defense.

He was the second in command to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Wolfowitz test the DIA to immediately come up with a document explaining Saddam Hussein's history of links to Islamic terror groups.

So he already had Saddam on the brain. He then began to talk to Bush about it just within a matter of a couple of days at a famous meeting in Camp David.

Mainly that a terrible thing had happened. He was determined now to make sure they were all convinced everyone in the administration that another attack was imminent while the US was hobbled.

And so now it was looking around to see where it would come from. Furthermore, they were convinced that the next attack would be worse than the first attack.

The first attack was bad enough using box cutters and airplanes, but the next one could perhaps involve bio weapons. And so everything that I've just described to you are sort of natural intuitions, but none of it was fact based.

I mean, there in fact was Saddam Hussein was factually not a threat to the United States had never even voiced being a threat to the United States.

There was no evidence that another attack was imminent, and there was no evidence that if there was another attack, it would be worse than the previous one.

What I'm describing here, Marshall, is that while September 11th has commonly been referred to as a failure of the imagination, the Iraq war was the opposite.

It was the imagination run amuck. It was people imagining worst case scenarios that if we don't do this, something awful is going to happen.

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And continually what we'd hear in the ensuing months, as Bush began to be very explicit about what he believed was the Saddam threat, explicit to the American public, he would say, you can only imagine, we can only imagine that Saddam would love to be involved in the next attack, hand over his weapons of mass destruction to al-Qaeda, and walk away without so much as a fingerprint.

Every part of that scenario is made up. He didn't have weapons, he didn't confederate with al-Qaeda, and he didn't want to do us in other than that, that's an interesting scenario.

Well, and you said something very key, which is that Saddam Hussein did not actually indicate he was a threat to the United States.

That being said, especially, let's say, towards the start of the book, you spend a lot of time describing Saddam himself. I think the chapter is the villain, or something, because once again, he was a villain. That's another key thing to hit here. You also had a good line where he wasn't a 70s-era African dictator who's a pure kleptocrat.

I forget who was a cannibal, but there was a person who was a cannibal. Basically, he's still a villain, and you also describe him as a survivor.

So what I don't understand is why on September 11 or afterwards did he feel the need to actually condemn the United States after 9-11?

Because as you point out, everyone else, effectively, didn't really do anything. Even the Iranian regime offered some form of at least symbolic help when it came to the following Afghan war with the Taliban.

So even the Iranians could perceive that, hey, the best move here is not to antagonize the United States. Why did Saddam feel the need?

And once again, he just made a condemnatory statement. So I'm not claiming that he threatened Hellfire and Brimstone, but he poked the bear. Why would he do that?

Well, it was stupid and it was churlish, but it would not be unfamiliar to followers of American politics. This guy was playing to the street.

He was playing to the Arab street, and this is what, you mentioned earlier, Marshall, this guy was a survivor.

Part of his being a survivor was not just simply to put everybody down by brute force, but also to play to the Islamic right and to make sure that he was on good terms with them.

He famously gave checks to Palestinian, you know, widows of Palestinian bombers. As far as I can tell, by the way, he didn't give nearly as much as some of our allies like Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Jordan, but he always publicized it.

He wanted the world to know this. And so this was his way of being, you know, and what he said was not good. I hope someone does it again.

He said, you know, America deserves this. They reap the thorns of their own policy. And that was, you know, pulling at the heartstrings of extremists, you know, who hated America.

But it was stupid because it definitely contributed to the muscle memory that Bush already had of the guy who tried to kill his father.

And that speech of, or statement of Saddam circulated throughout the West Wing and beyond in the Bush administration.

Everybody knew that Saddam stood alone in his nasty outlook on what had happened to us. And so that made Bush that much more susceptible to the argument by Paul Wolfowitz four days after

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September 11 that this guy's a threat.

This guy's a threat and he needs to be gone.

Because the other key thing that we're not discussing is there were the anthrax attacks. So in this place, and I like your point about the imagination expanding, but the part that made this difficult is that there were these little data points that you could then extrapolate from.

So you did have anthrax attacks that hit Congress that hit random post offices. You then have September 11 obviously. So you have these little moments happen that then everything crescendos off from.

Right, except that, you know, then we learned the wrong thing from those those moments. So the anthrax attacks occur at the end of September.

And we immediately, not entirely foolishly think Saddam us have some involvement in this because after all he used to produce anthrax.

Now we hadn't seen any evidence that he produced any since 1992, but he did back then. So this could perhaps be Iraqi anthrax.

Quickly, we learned that that was not the case. And there's a lesson to learn from that first, that it's not Saddam's but secondly, that there actually are other evil people in the world besides, you know, the dictator of Iraq.

And instead of like reckoning with that, we still began to or so many of the people in the Bush administration remain laser focused on Saddam Hussein, despite the fact that that data point doesn't in any way enculpate him.

I want to get to the other actors part, especially in the context of the axis of evil but right before we get there, I want to address ideas in ideology because I also think this is an area where the public mythmaking is really confused.

For example, folks who refer to Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney as neoconservatives, when they're not neoconservatives, when it's Paul Wolfowitz who's very conservatively a neoconservative. And then you have other ideas such as the Revolution and military affairs, which is Donald Rumsfeld believing that there's this way that you could I don't want to say invade on the cheap because that's not quite what you're doing.

It's this idea that military technological advancements after the Cold War that you really saw during Desert Storm have made it so that you don't need to deploy 500,000 troops to defeat what was once the fourth largest army in the world before Desert

Storm you can use drones you can use precision airstrikes you can use lighter or more mobile forces to do these types of bits. You see a weird combination of the neoconservatism of Paul Wolfowitz from the non ideological RMA theory really combining here to explore the ideology part here. What role.

Once again we're talking around September 12 to basically December 2021 to 2001. What role does neoconservatism play in that period.

Yeah, I think that I mean the key actor in neoconservatism would be Paul Wolfowitz I believe because he had a belief system, not only that encompassed the sort of negative, you know, negative aspect of there being a threat in the world that being Saddam Hussein but also the positive aspect of what the removal of Saddam Hussein could do to the Middle East and then Wolfowitz having been the ambassador to Indonesia saw what a majority Muslim nation with religious tolerance could be

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and he wished that kind of flowering upon the Middle East you're absolutely correct though to say that that conflating Wolfowitz with what Rumsfeld wanted what Cheney wanted and for that matter what the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Doug Feith wanted is really a mistake Rumsfeld was no one's idea of a neoconservatism because he didn't care about democratization and by the way neither did Cheney. I think that Cheney was driven more by as with as was Rumsfeld with the desirability of projecting but that's in Cheney's case that was because he Cheney really believed the world become a dangerous place and all the more so because we wouldn't back up whatever whatever our threats were that essentially we just used a pea shooter you know in an alley fight and and required more than that Rumsfeld you've as you mentioned had the additional incentive of really believing that we needed to transform the military and use something that had a faster and lighter footprint he wasn't a famously frugal person but it wasn't so much to fight on the other side and take the risk that will lose but but really born out of the belief that this was a revolution that could turn the high bound military industrial complex on its ear with Rumsfeld being the guy who showed the way and then Feith the military defense for policy being very driven by Israeli issues and the belief that that Saddam was a major threat to Israel which paradoxically the Israelis themselves did not entirely agree with it they didn't like him but they also found him as to be someone of a check against what they believe was the number one threat the Iranians and there was a great amount of concern among the Israelis that the destabilization of the Middle East that could be wrought as a result of invading Iraq would end up redounding to the advantage of their number one foe Iran which by the way turned out to be the case and I think something you really capture in the book and this tends to happen during these moments for example during the process that led to the Vietnam war there is a fascinating cast of characters that on their merits I think actually are really incredible or horrifically miscast for the moment they hit so for example I personally know Paul Wolfowitz he is in once again this is I'm not going to extrapolate interpersonal interactions to a devastating war that leads to hundreds of thousands of millions of deaths but he interpersonally is a very nice person and when you describe him being incredibly popular with Muslims in Indonesia I can entirely predict I met him when I was an intern at a Christmas party and he was so nice and he was just you see the politician in him that you're describing in the late 90s or sorry late late 80s and the other key thing about him too is that he's he's not conservative and this is something that people don't understand neoconservatism if you actually you talk about how this is the person who passed down from Cornell to watch the I heart you know to I have a dream speech in Washington by MLK this is the person who if anything is a cold war hawkish liberal and that once again really needs to be juxtaposed with Donald Rumsfeld who is he was actually very civil rights Republican when he was a member of Congress but once again no one would confuse that domestic policy with his foreign policy inclinations and funnily enough I started the podcast off by describing the military industrial complex aspect of this Donald Rumsfeld if there had been no war in Iraq probably would have gone down as an excellent post cold war secretary defense he'd been a secretary defense under Gerald Ford he was incredibly young he was cutting major weapon systems he was exactly the type of person who George W. Bush of 2000 would have wanted to have in that position

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so I think it's just it's just so fascinating how these things just compose together well and I'll add to the cast that you mentioned three people who I consider to be sort of tragic figures in this melodrama one of them of course is the secretary of state Colin Powell a towering figure the most popular public figure by a country mile at a time that Bush who had just barely won by 537 votes in Florida tapped to be his secretary of state Bush needed pal and pals popularity and his credibility with the American public much more than the other way around and the belief was that pal would be calling a lot of the shots in foreign policy and tragically that was not born out at all he was the only person in the administration only senior administration figure to warn Bush of unforeseen consequences could take place if Bush invaded Iraq and those were not listened to a person who could have said more of the same or could have brought in his fiduciary obligation I believe was to bring in dissenting points of view as Bush's national security advisor condolence arise I think by all accounts a true genius and not just genius in terms of intellectual skills and creative abilities but also had great people skills and and I can't tell you how many people Marshall from the Bush administration when I'd say you know talk to me about Condi Rice they'd say well you know she was she was a much better secretary of state which is of course what she became but what she became after the old advised invasion had taken place and she was just simply overmatched by these alpha dogs. And Dick Cheney waging these arguments that they'd been having for so long and and really being especially when it comes to Rumsfeld dismissive of rice she was not able to officiate these things and furthermore she did not want Bush her boss to know that she was having trouble officiating them she felt that she was failing in her duties if she couldn't bring some form of consensus opinion to Bush because he Bush was the kind of guy who really didn't want to spend all day listening to debates he'd say get to the point tell me what we should do and so Condi believe they should hammer out something in a room by themselves and unfortunately there was no consensus. There was no way that the meeting of the minds was going to happen between Powell and Rumsfeld on so many things. The final tragic figure I would add is CIA director George Tenet who Bush inherited from the Clinton administration and who was beloved within the intelligence community particularly in the CIA and who I really think did his, his level best to protect the agency, not just for bureaucratic purposes, but also because he believed that they were best equipped to protect Bush post 9 11 amid all this uncertainty and panic, the best information. Unfortunately, doing that, keeping CIA on good footing with the administration meant helping to sell the case for war, and that was a slippery slope that we tried to navigate. But I think ultimately we could see by December 2002 and certainly by February 2003 when Powell gave his UN speech that was based on intelligence supplied by the CIA that turned out to be uniformly false that unfortunately the CIA had become a marketing device for the Bush administration to make a case for war. I'm going to hit two things here before I move on. One, to just put a double click on what you meant by the Connolly's rice getting overwhelmed by the figures she's actually adjudicating with once again I said it already. So it was the youngest secretary of defense ever he literally held the job twice before he was White

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House chief of staff before that. Dick Cheney was also a White House chief of staff. He was also a secretary of defense.

He was a major leader among Republicans in Congress and Connolly's rice did not have anywhere near the experience that they really held it's really. And this is once again why I find this to be such a fascinating story beyond the conspiracy theories this was.

I mean you talk about this but he this is the NSA president the NSA president has recruited a team of executives that this isn't the Trump administration and this is the key this is not the Trump administration this is not the jokester apprentice hour this was separate ideology for a second if you were to say who are we going to technocratically choose to hold these positions at this point of time this is an impressive team and I just think that's I think it's so fascinating how everything goes from there.

Yeah it's I mean that's it's also true I mean there was no slouch in the bunch you could you could argue that these were at least on paper that you know the Republican version of the best and the brightest.

But you alluded to this in your previous question Marshall, which was that they were miscast. Donald Rumsfeld had more paper experience than any secretary of defense because he'd served it before and yet he'd been out of government for a very long time and and just had not been thinking about 21st century challenges most of all Al-Qaeda. Condoleezza Rice was you know a superstar as a think tanker as but she did not possess the bureaucratic wherewithal as you mentioned that say Cheney and Rumsfeld did and Rumsfeld I also have to just say was a truly exasperating person who a real pain in the ass and and did not play well was very very turf conscious and just infuriating to have a discussion with because he would never nail himself down to I mean interestingly you know for people who think that somehow Rumsfeld was the one responsible for the war in Iraq.

When he was asked by Bush should we go to war he wouldn't answer he didn't give an opinion on the subject and he he tended to answer questions with questions well we must also weigh the risks of not going to war you know that kind of thing.

And but but he was far more skilled at picking apart the weaknesses and other people's arguments than being wedded to his own argument and this was crazy making for Powell it was crazy making for Rice who he viewed also as somebody who interposed himself into the proper chain of command that he was the secretary of defense he should report to the commander in chief and what's this broad doing hanging out at my meetings you know my weekly meetings with the commander in chief.

Then often he would try like to cut rice out of meetings saying well actually here we're I know your national security advisor this is not national security we're going to talk about today this is military policy and she would be basically not so fast I'm still a part of this and and so you know there were all of these people who by all rights should have made for an extremely successful foreign policy team and ultimately the blame has got to go with the commander in chief right it's got to go with a guy who in fact did not say you know what everybody here sounds like they agree that we ought to go to war with Iraq, maybe we should just bring in somebody who, you know, who has an alternative point of view, Condi, you know, would you talk about that, or, you know, Colin, Colin seems to have some serious doubts about this

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let's let him talk a little bit longer about this, or, you know, I actually am doubting that there's a real consensus here let's have let's have the argument because American lives in an entire region are on the line, he didn't do any of that, and that is on him.

This is fascinating because this is obviously a book on leadership and decision making and something listeners probably aren't aware of is just the real contrast, especially in 2000 pre 911 2001 between George W Bush's leadership style and the Clintonian

leadership style, which is that Clinton is sloppy meetings are disorganized we're running to 4am there's pizza everywhere people aren't wearing there and what's the I'm just too young to have actually seen this I'm describing things I've read in books such as yours, but it's an important you know vision here, and then bush comes in, we're running organized meetings, I have an MBA, this this this and that. Can you just make an assessment. And I could have drawn in Trump with his private sector experience here but I think that's its own unique thing so let's just separate 2015 on, can you just compare and contrast Clinton leadership Clintonian leadership in management style with the bush style.

Yeah, I mean sure they they all have their, their flaws I mean I'm sorry to sound banal but they, you know, it's bush responded contemptuously to every characteristic you just described about Clinton meetings that would go over long pizza on the floor

people not wearing their coats and ties, and they began to place a premium on those kinds of appearances, and I can tell you as someone who interviewed bush, you know, many times during the course of his presidency, that if I if there was an appointment for me to see bush at 930 in the room, I need to get there at nine, because you might very well actually say, you know, I'm early, let's do this now 910. And if you're not there you're screwed, and bush was almost I mean he had this almost kind of compulsive quality to go chop chop chop through his

and it had this veneer of efficiency, when there really were moments where you would like to someone said slow down, you know, let's let's let's think about all this stuff. I mean, it's, again, it's easy to caricature all these things because now you know what's often said is that the Obama administration over learned the mistakes of the bush administration, and that Obama was professorial and discursive to a fault, and that Obama was cautious about interposing himself into the Middle East to a fault because he had seen what had gone wrong in Iraq.

There's, there's more than a grain of truth to them. But it's what you know what I will say about bush.

He was very good, and still is I'm sure at finding the weakness and somebody's argument at at, you know, cutting to the chase on things when that was required, recognizing when someone was engaging in double speak.

And at the same time, when things did go awry, Bush, unlike the previous office holder, did not go around blaming other people, always accepted responsibility. Everyone knew where they stood with Bush.

Yeah, there were some people he didn't, you know, develop a rapport with he didn't with Colin Powell, for example, but he never pretended that he did. And, and, and for that matter, just because he did favor someone like Condoleezza Rice, for example, I mean, they were like brother and sister didn't

I mean, they didn't have like real, you know, fights. And it was not that he favored her argumentation just because he favored her personally. So there's a lot. And also, you know, this is

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not the be all end all. It's always been meaningful to me.

Because someone say really liked working for that man. I want to, you know, I really loved it. And I mean, it's for all the reasons I just cited that you knew where you stood and that he was he was clear in his in his the marching order see dispense that he wasn't wishy washy, he didn't blame others. And so Bush had a lot of great characteristics. And it's, I suppose you could say if only his war team have stepped up and said, you know, it's he's, it's not his tendency, for example, to want to hear a lot of arguments.

We're just going to have to do it anyway. And he'll thank us later, which by the way, I mean, Bush famously couldn't stand. I mean, Mark McKinnon, his media advisor used to always say that it was like, walking into a propeller, you know, going into tell Bush and from something he didn't know. But he would ultimately be rewarded for that. Bush knew, you know, he'd chide you forward later and call you, hey, sunshine, thanks a lot for that great briefing, you know, it's I really feel happy. But but he and in the short run, you know, that'd be a little tough. But what did that some of the adults in the room had recognized that you know what, that's our obligation that we owe it to him, we owe it to the country, and we'll be thanked for it later.

So let's go to the, because once again, this is a book about the Iraq war, but this is about the process. So we're not going to debate the surge in 2007. I want to then look at the axis of evil as a construct, because once again, as you set up, there were three regimes that David from and another Bush speechwriter really coined together in this really impactful construct. So we're talking about Iraq, Iran and North Korea. And the thing that fascinates me and should fascinate anyone is that regardless of whether or not you think war, military action is the proper course. Those that did and obviously Russia is now a part of Russia and China from a peer hostility perspective. Those are the three regimes that the US in the early 21st century have just had and will have the most hostile relationships with to this day, Iran, with the nuclear deal, North Korea with everything North Korea is always doing these are just the thorns in the side and just looking at these three countries if yours is say look, something is going to happen in the 21st century.

Iraq would just be the least priority of those three. Yes. What was it just but is that is that but isn't that the toxic process that happened because it was the least priority was actually the easiest one to handle. Hypothetically, there's no invasion of Iran with 150,000 people.

There's no soul that will be bombed to smithereens if you do anything. Just, how did that happen? How did we pick the easiest, easiest quarter for the audio listeners using quotation marks was the easiest, but also the least threatening of those three.

Well, because had it been left up to Bush, there would have been only one named and it would have been Iraq that was the one he was setting his sights on after we had succeeded in operation and during freedom in routing the Taliban from Afghanistan didn't succeed unfortunately and getting bin Laden.

But after we had achieved that Bush was telling people, you know, in public, it's now time for the next theater in the war on terror. And, you know, we're not finished yet. We're just getting started. He was kind of, you know, he was full of, you know, full of vinegar arguably of hubris after the quick triumph.

You know, he was seemed of in Afghanistan. And so he set his sights immediately on Iraq. And it was

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Connie Rice who said that, you know, our foreign our foreign allies are going to believe that we're declaring war on Saddam, if we don't add a couple others.

And so they added North Korea and Iran. But you can tell Marshall that their heart wasn't really in it because it was just one sentence of each of those two and then like a pair, you know, two whole paragraphs relating to Iraq.

You knew where the real malice was intended. And, and the belief was that there was perhaps a growing movement of moderates in Iran that North Korea certainly, you know, problems with that regime, but did not seem poised to threaten the US at that moment in time. And Bush by that point was already getting pretty sold on the notion that Saddam had operational contacts with Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. And there was no strong intelligence to indicate that was the case.

But if you started out believing that you could find intelligence here and there that would fortify that point of view.

And this is just the wildest part here. I really, we pull a clip from every episode that we play at the start and I'm going to pull where you described a lack of imagination with September 11 and then too much imagination after September 11.

But the one part where there wasn't that much imagination is what if the action we're taking in Iraq ends up actually empowering those other two parts of the axis in the sense that

Iraq from my perspective, guaranteed that there'd be no appetite for intervention when it came to the North Korean nuclear program completely delegitimized that that as a reality Iran obviously is empowered even more it removes their regional rival, it

raises the Shiites to power in Iraq itself so it turns it in more of an allied country you obviously have the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and its military get a good 10 years of experience fighting US forces is effectively their version of the US intervening

in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s. So it's just wild how the mad the thing that was not imagined is what if the action we take actually makes the global picture worse which is what from my perspective seems exactly to have happened.

Sure, and I mean, I, and I guess the answer to that is, even as the Bush administration, imagine the worst case scenarios if we do not invade Iraq, they also imagine the best case scenarios as to what would happen once we did.

And, and fundamental to that and this is really George W. Bush's contribution, key contribution to this whole fiasco was that Bush had long ever since he first ran for unsuccessfully for Congress back in the

1970s, had believed that that the number one thing people want is freedom. They will coalesce around it as a conservative he also believed that with freedom comes personal responsibility but he believed freedom was the most animating concept.

It was for him as a Texan, and he believed that that was the case for everybody else in the world.

The thought never occurred to him that that for a country that has been invaded and torn to ribbons that matter country that that has been, you know, tyrannized by Saddam Hussein, that

there would be all of these sectarian tensions that would have to be addressed that people would have as their number one issue, safety, not having their family shot at their number two issue, being able to provide for their family,

and that well down the list would be participatory democracy. So, you know, Bush and Wolfowitz,

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both figured that, you know, to every question, freedom is the answer. And so, you know, when, for example, in early January, some Iraqi refugees who had not been inside the country in 30 years were invited to the White House to talk to Bush about all this Bush said well what about you know like the Sunni and Shia tensions that have existed for a while what's going to happen there.

The answer given to him was music to his ears which is that, you know, the Saddam Hussein has been the source of those tensions he's pitted brother against brother, you remove Saddam Hussein, and they will all coalesce joyously around, you know, a democracy.

That only made sense to a guy like George W. Bush and his failure was the failure to put himself in the feet of Iraqis and rather than of people he grew up with an oil patch.

So in our last section here, as anyone can guess spoiler alert, the war is a disaster, the Middle East is the transformation the Middle East happens just not the transformation that Wolfowitz and the more transformative folks in the administration desire.

What, what is the lesson here, because this is where the debate gets interesting so for example the lesson could be hey don't start a land war in Asia, the lesson could be.

I mean, the Smithsonian, aka ambitious democracy promoting ideologically driven foreign policy doesn't work. But I feel like that's missing something because from my perspective. This is a fascinating combination of a specific moment of history, a specific event that was created to generating this type of response. So I think the thing that people who try to explain the action administration get wrong is when they say well, the Clinton policy was breaking down so something was going to have to happen.

I can almost guarantee that that something was not going to be a major transformative war of the scale that we saw. So I think that's what that defense misses so maybe there would have been more air strikes but there's a difference between more air strikes and the invasion we saw.

But what would you just say brings this all together so that people who are thinking about this from the perspective of moving forward, especially in regards to Taiwan and China, or other Russia and Ukraine these other specific decisions that presidents are going to have to make.

How do you think about that.

Well, I think that, I mean, these are two very, very baseline things to say. You'd think they'd be howlingly obvious, but they obviously weren't in 2002 and early 2003. The first is, you know, know before you go. I mean, you know, understand the facts and seek out the facts.

And after all, I mean, younger listeners may not be aware of this but I mean, this is what Bush was saying over and over the Condoleezza rice phrase of, of, we can't wait for the smoking gun to come in a form of a mushroom cloud we can't wait we can't wait for the facts.

And Bush actually said in one speech, you know, they're, does Saddam have nuclear weapons. Well, we don't know. And that's the problem. Well, you know what, solve the problem try to find out instead of bombing a country, you know, and so that's one piece.

And the other pieces is, think hard about all the things that can go wrong because wars are messy. And I mean, the best of wars are messy. The best of wars have unintended consequences.

It's a, you know, the very successful Gulf War had the unintended consequence of Saddam slaughtering his own people. And that wasn't foreseen when when the coalition moved in.

And so I, you know, I do think, having said all that that there is a wide spectrum of possibilities in determining what America's role in the world is between reckless adventurism and America first

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isolationism.

And secondly, that is a debate that the either party has had. I mean, the Democrat Party's views basically war is bad, stay away from it. And the Republican Party's view has been to just kind of change the subject since this was, I mean, this was a Republican policy, entirely because of the liberal intelligency and the media went with it and and but and many Democrats supported him. But we saw in 2015, in the first presidential debates before Trump actually said no this this was a disaster, Rubio and

Bush and Ted Cruz and others saying, well, you know, it was a bit of a problem, but the surge was a great thing and and Bush kept us safe. And so that arguments never really been waged and it's becoming incredibly poignant, incredibly salient.

When we see, for example, it's taking place now in Afghanistan with withdrawal of our troops from there. And former President Bush and others saying, look, this is going to be catastrophic, you know, all these women and children are going to be tortured and killed. And, you know, American allies in Afghanistan, the same will happen to them. And that's, it's something worth arguing about Biden's view, you know, has been, you know, I, all I can say is we've been there 20 years, and with no end in sight.

And, and I'm not going to waste another, you know, I'm not going to risk the loss of another American life over anything in Afghanistan. It's become such a quagmire. But then what do we do if there is another humanitarian crisis?

Rwanda style, what do we do if a another momar Gaddafi threatens to kill tens of thousands of his citizens in, you know, Benghazi, and in Mizrata. Do we sit on our hands, let's have the argument but that argument really has not been had and it's and part of it is we, you know, are now consumed by a pandemic. And I think part of it also is that the Republican Party is so fractured that they even can't, they can't even get to ideology.

But, but America's place in the world is really kind of up for grabs right now. And it's just a discussion that is long overdue for us to be rejoining.

So two last things, I just want to hit the point you made about Republicans changing the subject because you fascinatingly see this in the Afghanistan context. So, as you said, Republicans had a politically unsustainable position in 2015 that Trump despite actually supporting the Iraq war in 2003 despite his claims exploited accidentally in 2015, which is wait Republicans don't actually like this war anymore. I'm just going to call it out and point that out and people will be stuck defending incoherent think tank positions. But that being said, what they but those politicians have done is just shifted the question to while we've been in these wars for 20 years, and have ignored the process that led us into the war itself. So that's why I think this is such an important book. And for an a history for people to learn about, because the history for me isn't the surge, because I think the surge was the right decision. I think President Bush actually to your point when he does have his positive traits. It really was 2006 to 2008. But that isn't the issue. The issue was the process in 2001 to 2003 that was the book in the first place. And that's where the debate should center. So for the final thing here. I think if you critique American foreign policy, it's that we are always focused on the last war. So for example, during the Cold War, everything is Munich, every crisis is appeasement. Every crisis is Berlin in 1961 where Kennedy has to stand up to Khrushchev on and on and on and on. How do we avoid for good or for ill, every foreign policy

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decision, we have moving forward, just becoming debating the Iraq war and the lessons that different ideologies to different sides take from it. Well, I guess we don't avoid it entirely. But because it's worthwhile, more than worthwhile to digest the lessons of the past. And if anything, I lament that a lot of people haven't regarding Iraq, that there hasn't been a sort of fullsome discussion. But so, but I don't think we should let the past inform how we view the future as, you know, as a feta-complee. I mean, there are dynamics that change. There are new allies that emerge. And, you know, now and again, we have, we have tried that. I mean, I, you know, Afghanistan is really frustrating case in point, because clearly Bush was of the view that we can break the mold that Russia and the UK and other countries have suffered with this, you know, this quicksand of a country. And that did not, that did not bear out until very recently. It was just axiomatic that we would say, you know, let's reset and with our relations with Russia. And, and I don't think that the solution is to say, well, you know, Russia's, you know, Afghanistan's unfixable for all time, and that Russia's, you know, Russia, Russia will never be our ally. But we do have to be mindful of history, and, and, you know, and fully ingest that, that there are certain dynamics that have been there on the scene. And it should not be ignored just because a new administration comes in with some bright new ideas and new motivations. And, and I mean, I do think the, you know, the, the failure of, of so many administrations just to say, we're not going to do what the last guys did, what the last guys did was lousy is, is, is not helpful. And it's not helpful on the domestic front, but it's really not helpful when there is in fact this prevailing view of America rightly or wrongly that persists, you know, that spans beyond this or that administration. So it's incumbent upon us to be really mindful of all of these lessons as we come in with a certain humility, but, but to not feel trapped by them. I think that's an excellent place to end. So Robert would love for you to shout out the book, any other writing you have before we go. Yeah, well, thank you. No, I'm actually at work now on another book about the, the current state of the Republican Party, and, and it's, and it's largely informed by the events of January the sixth I was there at the Capitol that day, and, and how the government has reacted to that. It's, it's challenges and trying to disentangle itself from disinformation and conspiratorial thinking is kind of key to all of this. I'm literally starting to write the book day after tomorrow. And, and this is the last, but, but to start a war. It's just now been released in paperback. I'm very excited about it. And I hope that people will find it worth their time. Thanks for joining Robert. Yeah, my pleasure. Hope you guys enjoyed the episode reminder, substack subscription, bookshop book purchases and most importantly, huge thank you to Lincoln Network for supporting our work. We'll see you next time.