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Iraq and the Pathologies of Primacy

The Flawed Logic That Produced the War Is Alive and Well

By [Stephen Wertheim](#)

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A U.S. soldier walks in Baghdad, April 2003

Goran Tomasevic / Reuters

Twenty years ago, the United States invaded Iraq. It spent a decade breaking the country and then trying to put it back together again. It spent another decade trying to forget. “We have met our responsibility,” U.S. President Barack Obama told the nation in 2010 while declaring a short-lived end to the U.S. combat mission in Iraq. “Now, it is time to turn the page.”

For Obama, moving on meant taking the fight to al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan through a surge of U.S. troops. Obama’s critics, for their part, soon found

another reason to tell Americans to “get over Iraq”: the debacle was, in their view, making the president and the public too reticent to use military force, this time to sort out Syria’s civil war, which erupted in 2011. Obama refrained from striking Damascus, but he ended up deploying troops to Iraq and Syria in 2014 to fight the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), which emerged out of the maelstrom of the United States’ original invasion.

By 2021, it was President Joe Biden’s turn to urge the country to move on from post-9/11 debacles. “I stand here today, for the first time in 20 years, with the United States not at war,” he declared in September. Biden had just withdrawn U.S. forces from Afghanistan. The United States nevertheless continued to conduct counterterrorism operations in multiple countries, including Iraq, where 2,500 ground troops remained. “We’ve turned the page,” Biden said.

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Have we? Over two decades, Americans have stubbornly refused to move on from Iraq. That is partly because the U.S. military is still fighting there and many other places besides. More profoundly, the country cannot “turn the page” without reading and comprehending it—without truly reckoning with the causes of the war. It may be painful to revisit what drove American leaders, on a bipartisan basis, to want to invade a country that had not attacked the United States and had no plans to do so, facts widely appreciated at the time. Yet without looking back, the country will not move forward with confidence and unity.

To be sure, Washington has absorbed several hard-earned lessons from the conflict. American policymakers, politicians, and experts now generally reject wars to change

regimes or rebuild nations. In weighing the use of force, they have rediscovered the virtue of prudence. And they now appreciate that democracy is rarely imposed at gunpoint and takes hard work to establish and preserve, even in deep-rooted democracies such as the United States.

These are necessary lessons, but they do not suffice. They reduce the Iraq war to a policy error, which could be corrected while the United States goes on pursuing the hegemonic world role it assigned itself when the Cold War ended. In fact, the decision to invade Iraq stemmed from the pursuit of global primacy. Primacy directs the United States to fund a massive military and scatter it across the globe for an essentially preventive purpose: to dissuade other countries from rising and challenging American dominance. Promising to keep costs low, primacy assumes that U.S. hegemony will not engender resistance—and strikes hard to snuff out any that appears. It sees global dominance almost as an end in itself, disregarding the abundant strategic alternatives that wide oceans, friendly neighbors, and nuclear deterrents afford the United States.

The invasion of Iraq emerged from this logic. After the 9/11 attacks, the architects of the invasion sought to shore up U.S. military preeminence in the Middle East and beyond. By acting boldly, by targeting a galling adversary not involved in 9/11, the United States would demonstrate the futility of resisting American power.

As “shock and awe” gave way to chaos, insurgency, destruction, and death, the war should have discredited the primacist project that spawned it. Instead, the quest for primacy endures. U.S. power is meeting mounting resistance across the globe, and Washington wishes to counter almost all of it, everywhere, still conflating U.S. power projection with American interests, still trying to overmatch rivals and avoid curbing U.S. ambitions. The results were damaging enough during the United States’ unipolar

moment. Against major powers armed with nuclear weapons, they may be much worse.

BULLY ON THE BLOCK

The ideological foundations for the Iraq war took shape well before American tanks rolled into Baghdad in 2003. Just over a decade earlier, three of the men who would become the most influential officials in the George W. Bush administration—Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, and Paul Wolfowitz—were working in the Pentagon to devise a new concept to guide U.S. strategy in the post–Cold War world. Even though the Soviet Union had collapsed, they wanted the United States to keep projecting superior military power across the globe. In 1992, Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put the objective plainly. The United States must possess “sufficient power” to “deter any challenger from ever dreaming of challenging us on the world stage,” he told Congress. “I want to be the bully on the block.”

So did Cheney, serving at the time as President George H. W. Bush’s secretary of defense. He assigned his deputy, Wolfowitz, to supervise the drafting of the Defense Planning Guidance, a comprehensive framework for U.S. security policy written in 1992. In 46 pages, Wolfowitz and his colleagues explained how to sustain U.S. global dominance in the absence of formidable rivals. The key, they reasoned, was to think and act preventively. Lacking challengers to balance against, the United States should keep new ones from emerging. It must work to dissuade “potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.” To this end, the United States would maintain a massive military, sized to dwarf all others and capable of fighting two large wars at once. It would retain alliances and garrison troops in every region of the world that Washington considered to be strategically significant. It would, in short, replace balances of power with an American preponderance of power.

In this vision of American hegemony, the United States would be benevolent. It would internalize the core interests of allies and act to benefit much of the world. In formulating its own foreign policy, the Pentagon planners recommended, the United States should “account sufficiently for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order.” U.S. primacy would thereby suppress the security role of U.S. allies as well as adversaries. Every nation, save one, would have nothing to gain and much to lose by building military power of its own. In this way, the United States could stay on top for good, delivering global security at reasonable cost.



Bush addressing soldiers and their families in Fort Hood, Texas, January 2003

Jeff Mitchell / Reuters

There were two principal problems with this theory, and they surfaced as soon as Wolfowitz’s draft leaked to reporters that March. The first flaw was that the United States’ bid for hegemony might induce others to push back. Rather than submit to

perpetual peace on Washington's terms, other countries could develop capabilities to counter U.S. might. With Russia reeling after the Soviet Union's collapse and China still poor, the United States would not face determined opposition for years to come.

But the more the sole superpower expanded its defense commitments and military reach, the more it might encounter and even stimulate resistance. In time, the United States could find itself overstretched and risking wars detached from U.S. interests, except for those interests circularly created by seeking globe-spanning dominance in the first place. Cheney's Pentagon wanted American primacy to make resistance futile. What if resistance made American primacy futile instead?

It was also unclear whether the American people would be willing to bear the costs of global dominance, especially if those costs were to rise. The Pentagon's document sparked an immediate backlash. Conservative commentator Pat Buchanan, amid his insurgent presidential campaign, denounced the plan as a "formula for endless American intervention." The bald ambition for primacy likewise repelled leading Democrats, who favored a peace dividend for Americans and collective security for the world. Biden, a U.S. senator at the time, scoffed: "The Pentagon vision reverts to an old notion of the United States as the world's policeman—a notion that, not incidentally, will preserve a large defense budget." The Cold War consensus in favor of containing Soviet communism had been forged in response to an existing great-power threat. To police the post-Cold War world, which featured sundry challenges but no major enemy, was a new and untested proposition that more than a few Americans thought dubious.

The rest of the 1990s constituted the heyday of American unipolarity, yet signs of international opposition and domestic apathy abounded. China and Russia worked to resolve their bilateral disputes and began to assemble what became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Together, they touted "the multipolarization of the world."

In a 1997 letter to the UN Security Council, Beijing and Moscow declared, “No country should seek hegemony, engage in power politics, or monopolize international affairs.” Even some American allies voiced similar concerns. Two years later, French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine dubbed the United States a “hyperpower” and called for “real multilateralism against unilateralism, for balanced multipolarism against unipolarism.”

Most nettlesome at the time were the so-called rogue states of Iran, Libya, North Korea, and especially Iraq. After expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991, the U.S. military did not try to depose Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, but U.S. officials hoped Saddam would fall and encouraged popular uprisings by the country’s Shiite majority in the south and its Kurdish minority in the north. When Saddam held on by suppressing these uprisings and killing thousands of Iraqis, the United States did not walk away. For the rest of the decade, it contained Iraq through no-fly zones, routine bombings, weapons inspections, and economic sanctions. For this purpose, among others, the United States indefinitely stationed tens of thousands of troops in the Persian Gulf, including in Saudi Arabia, for the first time in history.

The Iraq War was not just a policy error.

President Bill Clinton embraced his predecessor’s goal of hegemony in the Middle East and pursued the “dual containment” of Iran and Iraq. Yet this was not enough to satisfy right-wing primacists. In 1997, intellectuals William Kristol and Robert Kagan formed the Project for the New American Century, a think tank devoted to a foreign policy of “military strength and moral clarity.” For them, Saddam’s Iraq represented unfinished business. The dictator was “almost certain” to acquire deliverable weapons of mass destruction—WMD—and use them to challenge U.S. forces and partners in the region, according to the group’s 1998 open letter, signed by Donald Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and a handful of other soon-to-be officials in the George W.

Bush administration. The United States, they argued, must seek regime change in Iraq—a goal enshrined as U.S. policy by the Iraq Liberation Act later that year. The resolution passed the House overwhelmingly, 360 to 38, and the Senate unanimously. The rise of this “regime change consensus,” as historian Joseph Stieb writes, did not make a full-scale invasion a serious possibility before 9/11. But it delegitimized the alternative policy of leaving Saddam in power while keeping him contained. Washington had set its desired end: ousting Saddam.

The means were another matter. After winning the Gulf War and helping to reunify Germany within NATO, President George H. W. Bush had been booted from office in 1992. The voters preferred a Vietnam War draft evader promising to “focus like a laser beam on the economy.” Clinton, for his part, had taken pains to minimize U.S. casualties even as he used military force frequently and enlarged American alliances.

The death of 18 U.S. Rangers in Mogadishu in 1993 caused him to withdraw from Somalia completely and brought the term “mission creep” into the American lexicon.

Clinton’s most daring intervention, intended to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, relied on airpower alone. NATO planes flew high enough to remove any risk to pilots, even though doing so made targeting less accurate.

Madeleine Albright, Clinton’s secretary of state, is remembered for proclaiming the United States to be “the indispensable nation.” Often forgotten is that she did so at a televised town hall in 1998 in Columbus, Ohio, during which her defenses of American policy in Iraq were met with hostile questions and occasionally drowned out by hecklers. The first post–Cold War decade showed that such opposition would not swell into a determined political force as long as the United States could exercise global hegemony on the cheap. If the costs went up, however, who could say? How could an “indifferent America,” as Kristol and Kagan lamented in these pages, be

made to “embrace the possibility of national greatness, and restore a sense of the heroic”?

Even inside the Beltway, the depth of support for a muscular U.S. foreign policy was questionable. As the Clinton administration came to a close, Wolfowitz justifiably bragged that the ideas in his Defense Planning Guidance, much maligned on its introduction years earlier, had become conventional wisdom in both political parties.

Writing in *The National Interest* in 2000, he nevertheless admitted: “In reality today’s consensus is facile and complacent.” As Wolfowitz bemoaned, the country displayed a “lack of concern about the possibility of another major war, let alone agreement about how to prevent one.” Most of Washington was now singing from the same hymn book, but in Wolfowitz’s eyes, there were alarmingly few true believers.

DEMONSTRATING DOMINANCE

That started to change on September 11, 2001. The 9/11 attacks supplied a sense of existential threat that gave purpose to American power after a decadelong search. But the attacks could have been interpreted very differently: as a horrific case of blowback and a portent of resistance to U.S. hegemony. In the days and weeks following 9/11, more than a few Americans entertained this possibility as they tried to understand why 19 terrorists would give their lives to kill people halfway across the globe. The writer Susan Sontag suggested the attacks were “undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions.” Osama bin Laden, after all, had declared war on the United States years before, citing three main grievances: the U.S. troop presence in Saudi Arabia, American coercion of Iraq, and U.S. support for Israel. In *The New York Times*, journalist Mark Danner pointed out: “The American troops and warships in the Gulf, the unpopularity of our presence there, the fragility of the

regimes we support—these facts are not secrets but among Americans they are not widely known.”

After 9/11, those facts might have become more widely known, especially if the United States had stayed focused on the specific enemy that attacked it: al Qaeda.

Americans might have concluded that the way to make themselves safe from terrorists in the Middle East was ultimately to stop occupying the region and killing people there. They might have asked, once the United States retaliated for 9/11, whether the quest for global dominance was diminishing their own security.

For President George W. Bush and his foreign policy principals, it was crucial that the country come to a different conclusion: the problem was not too much American power but too little. The attackers, they assured Americans, were motivated by pure evil and not at all by anything the United States might have done. “Americans are asking, why do they hate us?” Bush said in an address to the nation nine days after 9/11. His answer: “They hate our freedoms.”

Just as important, “they” were not only the jihadists of al Qaeda. To focus solely on the group that had attacked New York and Washington would miss the larger stakes, namely the struggle to sustain U.S. global hegemony against all manner of opposition. As Wolfowitz, now deputy secretary of defense, told Congress on October 4, 2001, “Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong Il and other such tyrants all want to see America out of critical regions of the world.” The 9/11 attacks were just an instance of resistance, which had to be confronted as a whole. “That is why our challenge today is greater than winning the war against terrorism,” Wolfowitz continued. “Today’s terrorist threat is a precursor of even greater threats to come.”



A U.S. soldier redirecting people in the aftermath of a bomb explosion, Baghdad,

August 2003

Suhaib Salem / Reuters

Viewed in this light, the 9/11 attacks presented the Bush administration with an opportunity. By mounting a spectacular response, the United States could nip gathering international resistance in the bud. It could dissuade a wide variety of potential adversaries from “even aspiring” to a larger role, as the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance had urged. This time, moreover, the nation’s leaders could galvanize public support. At last, the American people would positively embrace, not just passively accept, the once abstract primacist mission.

For such purposes, not even a “global war on terror” would suffice. The United States must “go massive,” Rumsfeld told an aide four hours after the Twin Towers fell. According to the aide’s notes of the conversation, Rumsfeld said, “Sweep it all up. Things related and not.” That meant hitting “S.H. @ same time—Not only UBL” (referring to Saddam and bin Laden). U.S. intelligence promptly identified al Qaeda

as the perpetrator of the hijackings, yet Rumsfeld, along with Wolfowitz and other officials, began advocating an attack on Iraq. The idea struck the National Security Council's counterterrorism coordinator, Richard Clarke, as nonsensical. "Having been attacked by al Qaeda, for us now to go bombing Iraq in response would be like our invading Mexico after the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor," Clarke later recalled saying on September 12. As the country embarked on an uncertain war in Afghanistan against a shadowy enemy that might well strike again, it was remarkable for senior officials to contemplate invading Iraq, too, let alone to devote 130,000 soldiers to the task within 18 months.

The Bush administration advanced several rationales for attacking Iraq, but at the center were allegations (some but not all of which were backed by U.S. intelligence) that Saddam was stockpiling chemical and biological weapons and seeking to develop nuclear weapons. The United States might not have invaded if officials had known that Saddam's weapons program was a mirage, a bluff intended to bolster the dictator's power and ward off enemies such as Iran. It is nonetheless difficult to know how much explanatory weight to give to the fear that Saddam might one day pass WMD to terrorists, who could then employ them on the U.S. homeland—a nightmare scenario conjured by many advocates of the war. The prospect was always entirely speculative, although policymakers did not want to suffer another "failure of imagination" after failing to anticipate how commercial airliners could be hijacked and turned into missiles.

But whereas Saddam might never use WMD against the United States proper, it was more certain that his presumed weapons would pose an obstacle to American designs in the Middle East. "A likelier problem was that they would affect our willingness to defend U.S. interests," Douglas Feith, who served as undersecretary of defense during the run-up to the war, subsequently wrote. Revealingly, Feith dismissed as "beside

the point” the possibility that Saddam had no intention of attacking the United States. “Saddam might even prefer to leave us alone,” he acknowledged. “The issue was whether Iraq’s WMD capabilities would compel us to leave him alone—free to attack Americans and our friends and interests.” That is, a well-armed Saddam would impede U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. Taking him out would make American dominance more secure, whether or not it was the best way to protect the United States itself.

Sometimes the Iraq war seems to have vanished from collective memory altogether.

Retrospective accounts, including a recent book by historian Melvyn Leffler, fixate too narrowly on the issue of WMD, a far from sufficient cause of the invasion. Even if Bush administration officials had not misrepresented some of the intelligence concerning Iraq’s programs, the desire to disarm Saddam would not account for key aspects of the march to war. Fear of Saddam’s arsenal is an inadequate explanation for why the Bush administration moved so rapidly after 9/11 to attack Iraq, which was not thought to be on the cusp of acquiring a major new type of weapon. Nor can it account for why the Bush administration pulled UN weapons inspectors out of Iraq in March 2003, by which time the UN team had conducted more than 550 inspections without notice, believed it was making progress, and wanted to continue. If disarming Saddam had been the paramount motivation, the Bush administration could have allowed the inspections to continue and potentially avoided war. To the contrary, some advocates of an invasion, such as Cheney, had never wanted to give weapons inspections a chance.

The rush to war is better explained by a desire to shore up U.S. primacy soon after the United States was beset by a devastating attack. “The demonstration effect” was how Cheney’s deputy national security adviser at the time, Aaron Friedberg, later

characterized the thinking. The administration aimed “not just to be a tough guy but to reestablish deterrence,” he told the journalist Barton Gellman. “We have been hit very hard, and we needed to make clear the costs to those who might have been supporting or harboring those who were contemplating the acts.” It was imperative to do something big, to restore a general sense of fear without which U.S. global hegemony could provoke endless antagonism. “If the war does not significantly change the world’s political map, the U.S. will not achieve its aim,” Rumsfeld wrote Bush on September 30. The United States should seek, among other things, “new regimes in Afghanistan and another key State (or two).”

From this standpoint, it scarcely mattered whether Iraq was connected to the 9/11 attacks, what the precise status of its weapons program was, or whether the U.S. government could align on a plan to govern Iraq before dismantling its regime. What mattered was the “order of magnitude of the necessary change,” in Rumsfeld’s phrasing. What mattered, as political scientist Ahsan Butt argues, was that the United States would destroy an adversary and send a message: don’t underestimate our power or our willingness to use it.

The war’s architects doubtless believed they were protecting U.S. national security. Yet what they were directly attempting to achieve was something distinct: fortifying the United States’ preeminent power position through a preventive war. Although they assumed that such preeminence was necessary for American security, the very argument for the Iraq war should have suggested otherwise. Ousting Saddam required the United States to pay upfront costs in lives and treasure in return for highly speculative benefits. (If the costs appeared minimal at the outset, that was only because the war’s cheerleaders discounted the possibility that U.S. forces would be treated as invaders and occupiers. “We will, in fact, be greeted as liberators,” Cheney promised in March 2003.) The potential benefits of removing Saddam would accrue

to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other U.S. security partners in the region. The United States would benefit only insofar as maintaining U.S. hegemony in the Middle East was worthwhile. But could the United States better obtain security for itself by reducing its involvement in the region? The question went unexamined as the pursuit of primacy ironically deflected from its deadly costs by generating new and deadlier missions.

DOMESTIC BLOWBACK

Over the next decade, Americans would hear no shortage of reasons for why the war in Iraq went wrong: the Bush administration failed to plan for postwar reconstruction. It let the Iraqi state collapse into civil war. Democracy is rarely imposed at the point of a gun. Nation building does not work.

Those insights are all true and meaningful. They are also inadequate. A parade of small lessons allowed larger ones to go unlearned—and allowed the war’s supporters to avoid scrutiny of their main misconceptions. A year into the war, Kristol and Kagan conceded that Bush had “not always made the right decisions on how to proceed” in reconstructing Iraq while urging U.S. forces to remain “as long as needed.” In an influential 2005 book on the war, the writer George Packer blasted the Bush team for “criminal negligence.” The problem with the invasion, in his view, lay less in its conception than in its execution. “The Iraq war was always winnable; it still is,” he concluded. “For this very reason, the recklessness of its authors is all the harder to forgive.”

Small wonder that the targets of Packer’s critique adopted a similar stance, the better to redeem the decision for war and salvage the ongoing campaign to fight insurgents and terrorists and establish a viable Iraqi state. In 2006, Bush and Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice admitted to errors in “tactics”—“thousands of them, I’m sure,” Rice added unhelpfully. They nonetheless cast the invasion as strategically sound.

By then, the American public was turning against the war and Washington’s excuses.

Over the next decade, voters delivered three electoral surprises that revealed the depth of their discontent. Invading Iraq was supposed to demonstrate American power and Washington’s will to shape the world, unconstrained by internal doubt or external norms. When political elites proceeded to treat the war as a tactical mistake, born of incorrect intelligence or insufficient planning, they did not eliminate the sense of existential purpose with which they initially invested the invasion. Instead, they tried to paper over the war’s deeper meaning, only to be hit by blowback at home, as well as abroad.



An Iraqi man suspected of having explosives being detained near Baquba, Iraq,

October 2005

Jorge Silva / Reuters

The first surprise came in the congressional election of 2006. Bush's White House expected to wield the war to the Republican Party's advantage, accusing Democrats of "retreat and defeatism," in Cheney's words. By Election Day, it was the GOP that had retreated from the debate. Led by Nancy Pelosi, who decried the invasion as a "grotesque mistake," Democrats won the House of Representatives after 12 years of Republican rule. A majority of voters viewed the Iraq war as the single most important issue of the election and expected Democrats to reduce or terminate U.S. military involvement in the country.

Bush, however, ordered a "surge" of troops into Iraq as a last-ditch effort to stabilize the country. The next election, in 2008, produced an even bigger surprise: the victory of Obama, young, Black, and liberal, over the more senior senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain. Both Clinton and McCain had voted to authorize the Iraq war. Obama stood out for opposing it in October 2002 as "dumb" and "rash." His stance on Iraq constituted perhaps his chief advantage in the primary campaign. "I don't want to just end the war," he declared. "I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place." Obama seemed to offer a clean break not only from the Bush administration but also from a "foreign policy elite that largely boarded the bandwagon for war," as he put it on the campaign trail.

The clean break turned out to be a false one. In office, Obama treated the "mindset" behind the war mostly as a psychological deficiency. Whereas Bush had acted impulsively, Obama would think carefully. He would calculate consequences before opening fire. Obama withdrew U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, but he kept the war in Afghanistan going and ended up sending troops back to Iraq in 2014. Meanwhile, he maintained the security partnerships he inherited and enlarged and routinized a program of terrorist killing by drones and special forces. Obama found himself bogged down in the Middle East, perhaps against his better judgment, for much the

same reason that his predecessor had launched the war in Iraq: the United States sought to remain the dominant power in the region and, as Obama repeated, the “indispensable nation” globally.

In the next presidential election, Washington presumed that George W. Bush’s younger brother Jeb would be the Republican frontrunner. The former Florida governor became a political casualty of his brother’s war. At first, asked if he would have invaded Iraq even “knowing what we know now,” he said yes. Then he attempted to skirt follow-up questions. Finally, he decided he would not have invaded after all. It fell to Donald Trump to capitalize on the public’s untended outrage. The demagogue delivered the third shock to the political establishment when, in 2016, he blasted the war as possibly the “worst decision” in American history. Trump was lying when he claimed to have opposed the invasion all along, but at least he recognized in hindsight that the war was a disaster. It was proof enough for some voters to trust him as commander in chief and ignore the chorus of elites that deemed him unfit to lead.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Today, political leaders once again seek to turn the page. Perhaps the appearance of forbidding adversaries will allow them to succeed where prior efforts failed. In the face of China’s rise and Russia’s aggression, the United States has acquired renewed purpose for its global power. Never mind that balancing behavior by major powers was exactly what U.S. global primacy was supposed to avert: now that its theory of the case has come up short, Washington wants to look forward, not backward. Sometimes the Iraq war seems to have vanished from collective memory altogether.

Biden recently referred to Russia’s war against Ukraine as the only large-scale invasion the world has witnessed in eight decades. “The idea that over 100,000 forces

would invade another country—since World War II, nothing like that has happened,” Biden proclaimed in February. He spoke these words within a month of the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a war that then Senator Biden voted to authorize.

Attempting to forget is the only way to guarantee failing to learn. If the United States applies to peer competitors the same will to dominate that brought it into Iraq, a far weaker country, the consequences will be severe. The “next Iraq” could well take the form of a great-power war. Few Americans would seek such a conflict, but neither did many advocate for a direct invasion of Iraq before 9/11 or anticipate the scale and duration of Operation Iraqi Freedom before it commenced. The pathologies of primacy made war appear necessary and worth the price, and those pathologies continue to put the United States on a collision course with other countries. First, Washington conflates U.S. interests with its far-flung military positions and alliance commitments, almost excluding in advance the possibility that offloading some responsibilities could increase American security and enhance American strategy. Second, Washington systematically discounts how its power threatens others, who then act accordingly. Together, these errors force U.S. foreign policy to fight the tendency of power to balance power, just when an overstretched United States needs to harness that tendency.

Since February 2022, the United States has rightly helped Ukraine defend itself against Russia’s brutal invasion. Yet it has evaded serious consideration of U.S. policy mistakes that set the stage for this conflict and potentially more to come. By enlarging NATO through an open-ended, open-door process, the United States extended its dominance of European security affairs while hoping that Russia would not turn hostile. That hope was naive from the start. The creation of a dividing line within

Europe, creeping ever closer to Moscow, rendered especially vulnerable whichever countries NATO would not admit.

The “next Iraq” could well take the form of a great-power war.

NATO expansion therefore came at the expense of Ukraine—and the United States. By entrenching its dominance of European defense, the United States gave its allies ample reason to outsource their security to Washington. As a result, it now falls principally on the United States to orchestrate international aid for Ukraine and to put its soldiers and cities on the line if Russia were to attack NATO countries in the future. The only escape from this self-imposed trap is to break with the logic of primacy and gradually but decisively turn leadership of European defense over to the Europeans, who can mobilize ample resources to deter Russia and defend their territory.

As it runs greater risks in Europe, Washington is also barreling toward confrontation with Beijing. An emerging bipartisan consensus seeks to get ever tougher on the world’s number two power. Yet what the United States wants its relationship with China to consist of in the coming decades remains ill defined and superficially considered. A hostile direction, without a desired destination, makes for unwise policy. Although passions are less intense and the public less engaged, the environment in Washington increasingly resembles the lead-up to March 2003, when politicians and officials, eager to take on an adversary, neglected to assess the potential trajectories of a post-Saddam Iraq and underestimated the agency of others in determining the outcome.

If the United States and China are serious about avoiding a cold war, or a world-rending shooting war, both sides will have to work to establish terms of coexistence. Yet those terms are getting more elusive by the day. Amid the torrent of objections to

Chinese practices, it often seems that the United States opposes China's rise altogether. After the Trump administration identified China as a threat, Biden has taken potentially fateful measures, eroding the "one China" policy that has allowed Washington and Beijing to agree to disagree over Taiwan and imposing broad restrictions on China's access to technology, including advanced semiconductors. How China will react is not yet known, but its capability to harm the United States is substantial. In defending its preeminent power position—which ought to be a means to an end—the United States is assuming enormous risks without appreciating how intensified rivalry could make Americans poorer and less safe.

Better options are available: the United States should disentangle itself from the Middle East, shift defense burdens to European allies, and seek competitive coexistence with China. If it sometimes sounds as though policymakers are doing just that, the facts say otherwise. For all the talk of strategic discipline, about as many U.S. troops are stationed in the Middle East today, around 50,000, as there were at the end of the Obama administration. Washington is still in thrall to primacy and caught in a doom loop, lurching from self-inflicted problems to even bigger self-inflicted problems, holding up the latter while covering up the former. In this sense, the Iraq war remains unfinished business for the United States.

- STEPHEN WERTHEIM is a Senior Fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Visiting Lecturer at Yale Law School and Catholic University. He is the author of *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*.

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