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Why Democracies and Autocracies Go to War: Comparing the Cases of Iraq and Ukraine

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Abstract

History shows that both democratic and nondemocratic countries wage wars to advance their strategic interests. This study has comparatively analyzed two conflicts – the 2003-2011 U.S. invasion of Iraq and Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine – to identify the trends that motivate both democratic and autocratic leaders to behave similarly by launching an invasion. The interpretive research of various memoirs, books, interviews, academic articles, news reports, and speeches, has uncovered that personal biases, particularly confirmation biases, play a significant role in motivating leaders to start a war. Leaders' confirmation biases are often shaped by three prominent factors – historical memory, their ambitions and political vision, and unwaveringly supportive staff. In the pre-war period, both democratic and autocratic leaders first turn to history to identify their enemies and determine the prospects of their success in war. They form their opinions based on historical memory without further confirming past observations with evidence. History also sets a leadership standard and inspires presidents to pursue ambitious political strategies, which sometimes turn into 'obsessions' and motivate leaders to 'fish' for data that confirm their strategic beliefs. Such confirming information often comes from the administration staff, who share presidents' beliefs or unwaveringly support their decisions. The lack of reliance on tangible evidence in this process biases leaders in favor of perpetrating a war that does not necessarily produce anticipated results. The paper provides more details about how leaders form their biases in two different systems and reach the same outcome – war.

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Ketevan Chincharadze

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Chapter 1: Introduction

History shows that both democratic and nondemocratic powers are capable of perpetrating wars if they perceive it to be in their strategic interests. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003-2011 are two examples of the post-Cold War military incursions with far-reaching international consequences that were launched by the widely-recognized autocratic Russian Federation and the democratic United States. This practice has motivated my research to uncover what makes autocracies and democracies similar in this regard; in other words, why powerful countries, regardless of their governance types, choose wars against other peaceful policy alternatives to advance their geopolitical aspirations.

This curious observation goes against the wide-spread premise that democracies are drastically different from autocracies with their peaceful, liberal nature. After the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union or USSR), there was almost a consensus that democracies were less, if at all, likely to engage in a military dispute with each other. The theory of democratic peace that originated in the Enlightenment era with Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace*,[1] regained its momentum after Michael Doyle confirmed Kant's three

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[1] (Kant 1932 [1795])

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Definitive Articles for perpetual peace and suggested that liberal democracies do not wage war against one another.[2] He further designated liberal democracies as a "zone of peace."[3] Influential research by Bruce Russett[4] and the subsequent work by Russett and Oneal augmented the credibility of the theory by suggesting that: "the chance that any two countries will get into a serious military dispute can be estimated if one knows what kinds of governments they have, how economically interdependent they are, and how well connected they are by a web of international organizations."[5] After these studies, a wave or research added different caveats to the theory.[6] Mansfield and Snyder, for example, found that 'mature' democracies are more peaceful than 'transitional' democracies;[7] Lektzian and Souva deemed open flows of information crucial for restraining militarism;[8] Leeson and Dean uncovered a 'democratic domino effect' among neighboring countries.[9] This prominent body of literature set the expectation that democratic institutional checks and balances, demands on transparency, the sense of accountability to the public, and the desire to succeed in future elections make democratic leaders more dovish in their interactions with other democracies, preferring peaceful

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[2] (Doyle 1883a, 1983b)

[3] (Bass 2006, n.p.)

[4] (Russett 1990, 1993)

[5] (Russett and Oneal 2001, 9)

[6] (see Starr 1997; Chan 1997; Ray 1996; Levy 1994; Owen 1994; and Dixon 1993)

[7] (Mansfield and Synder 1995)

[8] (Lektzian and Souva 2009)

[9] (Leeson and Dean 2009)

resolutions to disputes.[10] However, this outlook, also known as the democratic peace theory, has been widely scrutinized within the last several decades.[11]

The democratic peace theory falls short of explaining why democratic states wage wars outside of the "zone of peace."[12] The theory tries to designate democracies like the United States as exclusively peaceful and shift the responsibility of war to autocracies, but as many critics have pointed out, history suggests otherwise. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine is in line with the argument, it cannot account for the U.S.'s little hesitation to invade autocratic Iraq. When it comes to geopolitical interests, such as Russia's desire to exercise its sphere of influence in Ukraine and the U.S. aspiration to demonstrate power over terrorists, autocracy and democracy both respond similarly, with war. This study aims at exploring why.

Many experts and government officials have attempted to shed light on why large powers engage in war and explain the rationale behind Russian and the U.S. invasions of Ukraine and Iraq respectively. Two mainstream explanations that have permeated western thinking are Mearsheimer's offensive realism that blames NATO for the war in Ukraine and the Bush administration's justification of the war in Iraq to eradicate weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

John Mearsheimer argues that it is the anarchic nature of the international system that pushes states to escalate wars. According to him, *great powers* naturally fear each

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[10](Reiter 2012)

[11] (Hook 2010)

[12] (Bass 2006, n.p.)

other and act aggressively, sometimes even risking war, to thwart their rivals from advancing geopolitical positions. *Great powers* also constantly seek to become regional hegemons to maximize their security through military power. The absence of a superior authority that can hold states accountable, he suggests, creates apt conditions for military incursions between self-interested, security-maximizing states.

The term *great power* that Mearsheimer, among many others, use so casually implies the existence of a hierarchy of states in which *great* ones "sit atop the hierarchy, with small and notably less white powers organized below them."[13] Because of the problematic nature of the term that scholars have identified, I avoid referring to the U.S. and Russia as *great powers;* I instead call them *large powers*, implying that some states are only larger than others, not necessarily greater.[14]

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, John Mearsheimer used his theory to explain how the international security structure, particularly NATO, contributed to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. As a key trigger of the conflict, he blamed NATO's open-door policy and the 2008 Bucharest Summit's decision that Georgia and Ukraine would, one day, join the alliance. For him, NATO expansion was the West's strategic blunder that triggered Russian aggression to halt Georgia and Ukraine from turning into the Western strongholds on its border. After Russian President Putin launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, his criticism of

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[13] (Zvobgo and Loken 2020, 12)

[14] (Epstein, 2023 (forthcoming))

NATO expansion has grown stronger as he took the war as an affirmation of his long-standing claims.

The Bush administration also put forward a structural argument to justify the invasion of Iraq. According to the administration, the war in Iraq was launched because of concerns over weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that allegedly Saddam Hussein had owned and could pass on to al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.[15] President Bush himself said before the United Nations General Assembly in September 2002:

> The history, the logic, and the facts lead to one conclusion: Saddam Hussein's regime is a grave and gathering danger. [...] The first time we may be completely certain he has nuclear weapons is when, God forbid, he uses one. We owe it to all our citizens to do everything in our power to prevent that day from coming.[16]

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441 of November 2002 further affirmed that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles in Iraq posed a grave threat to international peace and security. This argument ascribed global importance to Iraq's possession of WMD and implied that the U.S. had a structural responsibility to defend the world.

In this thesis, along with democratic peace theory, I challenge these conventional explanations and offer a different outlook on why large powers, democratic or non-democratic, decide to go to war. I hypothesize that military interventions often happen because of leaders' biases that overshadow their critical reasoning and ability to see beyond war. Biases, in this case, refer to leaders' imagined successful scenarios that are

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[15] (Barma and Goldgeier 2022)

[16] ("George W Bush Address to the United Nations, 9/12/2002" 2017, n.p.)

much more optimistic than the actual outcomes of war. I draw a distinction between President Bush and Putin's wishful projection of victory and the de facto development of events in Iraq and Ukraine to showcase how conjectural optimism or bias influences leaders' decision-making.

I particularly believe that confirmation bias plays the biggest role in deciding to go to war, which is "the tendency to gather evidence that confirms preexisting expectations, typically by emphasizing or pursuing supporting evidence while dismissing or failing to seek contradictory evidence."[17] I further identify three factors in decision-making – historical memory, leaders' ambitions and political vision, and unwaveringly supportive staff – that altogether shape leaders' confirmation biases and deroute them from evidence-based thinking, often leading to a calamitous war.

I suggest that during challenging times, leaders refer to the past to find the culprit among historical rivals, justify a military intervention, or predict the success of an upcoming one. They directly draw conclusions on previous experiences without further verification of evidence – the tendency known as an *availability heuristic* or *availability bias,* which the American Psychological Association defines as "making judgments about likelihood of occurrence in which the individual bases such judgments on the salience of the information held in his or her memory about the particular type of event."[18]

History, preserving information on predecessors' successful and unsuccessful practices, to a large extent, also sets a leadership standard and forms the head of state's political ambition to meet or even exceed the standard. Heads of state, often motivated to

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[17] ("Psychology", n.d.)

[18] ("Psychology", n.d., n.p.)

leave a noticeable footprint on history, develop and obsessively commit to a vision to meet their ambitions, even if they involve war. Supportive staff who purposefully supply leaders with the information they want to hear or sign onto carrying out their agenda without question, feeds into leaders' confirmation biases and validates their intentions to wage war. Finally, I contend that leaders' biases, shaped by interplay of these factors, make wars possible both for democracies and autocracies, as democratic checks and balances do not efficiently prevent leaders from biased decision-making.

To test my hypothesis, I conduct a comparative study of the two wars from recent history, one perpetrated by a democratic large power, the United States, and the other by autocratic Russia—the 2003-2011 U.S.-Iraq war and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. I conduct an inductive, interpretive study of existing scholarship, media interviews, journal and newspaper articles on the two wars. I use Mill's most different systems design to explore how independent variables, a system of governance and leaders' personal biases, relate to the common dependent variable –war.

In doing so, I detail, in respective chapters, the mechanism through which George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin came to believe in the plausibility of launching invasions in Iraq and Ukraine. First, I explain how the historical context and political incentives served as availability heuristics and motivated the two presidents to go to war. Second, I explore the role of historical context in shaping the presidents' geopolitical ambitions and vision to go to war. Third, I showcase how the presidents' staff by deviating from data-driven evidence aggravated the presidents' biased thinking and validated their decision to go to war. I then provide a comparative analysis of these three factors and identify similarities and differences between the U.S. and Russian practices. In the end, I relate

my findings to the U.S.-China competition and explain how they can be useful in preventing the conflict escalation.

Chapter 2: The U.S. Intervention in Iraq: Why War?

Twenty years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the debates about why the U.S. went to war in Iraq are still prevalent. Many argue that it was the "greatest strategic blunder in American history" that led to the deaths of more than 4,400 U.S. military personnel and about 28,000 Iraqi civilians, further destabilizing the Middle East and giving gave rise to sectarian violence, the emergence of ISIS, and the biggest refugee crisis since World War II, among many other calamities.[19] The Bush administration and its supporters, however, maintain that neutralizing Saddam Hussein and waging war on terror was "worth the investment."[20] As then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice told the Washington Post, the world and the Middle East is "better off without Saddam Hussein" and "Iraq is a fragile, but increasingly stable friend of the United States."[21]

In this section, I do not question whether the decision to go to war in Iraq was right or wrong. Rather, I explore the factors that motivated President Bush to invade Iraq. I argue that the decision was largely motivated by President Bush's biases as opposed to data-driven, evidence-based thinking. His biases were shaped by the U.S. historical memory of al Qaeda's previous terrorist attacks and the Gulf War, which left Iraq's

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[19] (Draper and Kaplan 2021, n.p.)

[20] (*NBC News* 2006, n.p.)

[21] ("Condoleezza Rice says Iraq — and the world — is better off without Saddam Hussein" 2022; 1:00-1:40)

dictator Saddam Hussein, perceived threat to the U.S. and a patron of al Qaeda, in power; President Bush's ambitions to portray himself as a strong leader and respond proportionally to the terrorists after the September 11 terrorist attacks; and his staff, who further encouraged him to attack Iraq, fed the president with confirmation biases, and helped me construct the plausible case for the invasion. This chapter explores these three factors in Bush's biased thinking respectively.

2.1. Historical Context: Logical Reasoning or Availability Bias?

The September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the U.S. President George W. Bush's approach to finding the perpetrators demonstrate how the leader can fall for availability biases that history supplies. 9/11 was arguably what put the war in Iraq on President George W. Bush's to-do list. However, as Roger Pilke argues, some Bush administration officials, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Vice President Dick Cheney, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and Chief of Staff to the Vice President Lewis Libby, openly talked about their desire to oust dictator Saddam Hussein before 9/11, implying that the decision to go to war in Iraq had been considered long before the attacks.[22] Despite the disparities between these two opinions, most people agree that 9/11 played a pivotal role in shaping the Bush administration's foreign policy to wage war on terror. Whether the

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[22] (Pielke, Jr 2007)

administration was already thinking about attacking Iraq or not, the terrorist act certainly

accelerated the plan to invade Iraq. As this section argues, 9/11 encouraged the Bush

administration to identify suspects – al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein – based on U.S.

recent history. He believed in their culpability because of their past records, regardless of

limited supporting evidence. This availability bias in the Bush administration's approach,

I suggest, was one of the factors that prepared the ground for conflict escalation.

On September 11, 2001, 19 militants allegedly associated with the Islamic

extremist group al Qaeda hijacked four airplanes to carry out suicide attacks against

targets in the U.S..[23] Two planes plowed into the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center

in New York City; another plane was flown into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia.; the

fourth one, arguably flying towards the White House or the U.S. Capitol, was heroically

diverted by passengers and ended up crashing in an empty field in Pennsylvania.[24] It was

the most devastating event for the country since the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, killing

2,977 innocent people, and shocking the entire world, especially the U.S. government,

which felt immediate pressure to uncover the perpetrator and respond adequately.[25] Such

a calamity demanded action from the government's side. The Bush administration

immediately started brainstorming possible perpetrators, and the first logical place to look

was history.

Indeed, Condoleezza Rice's recollection of the events, implies that the Bush

administration, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, before the U.S. intelligence

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[23] ("USDOJ: Ten Years Later: The Justice Department after 9/11", n.d.)

[24] Ibid

[25] (Huiskes, n.d.)

community (IC) presented verified evidence, was looking back into history to identify the perpetrator. To find and punish the guilty, she recalled, President Bush had daily meetings with his advisors on the matter, during which discussions frequently circulated around the al Qaeda terrorist network, its connection with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and their collective culpability.[26] This was because the al Qaeda terrorist network, as Rice wrote, posed a threat to the U.S. long before 9/11.[27] During the eight years of the Clinton administration and the first eight months of George W.H. Bush's presidency, the U.S. government tried to eliminate al Qaeda.[28] The term "war on terror", which so deftly implies the need for a war-like fast-paced response to terrorism, also has roots in the Reagan administration.[29] President Reagan was the first to declare that terrorists were waging a war and advocate *offensive* strategies as opposed to defensive ones in response to terrorist threats.[30] He codified these views in 1985 in the National Security Decision Directive 179.[31] For the Bush administration, these events all pointed to one thing – because the terrorist threat had come from al Qaeda before, then 9/11 should also have been perpetrated by the same group.

The threat coming from al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein had been so prominent in the past that it was also palpable after the 9/11 attacks. Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in

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[26] (Rice 2004)

[27] (Rice 2004)

[28] (Rice 2004)

[29] (Lewis and Reese 2009)

[30] ("Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association | The American Presidency Project" 1985)

[31] ("NSDD-179: Task Force on Combatting Terrorism" 1985)

Iraq emerged as a threat to the United States during the Persian Gulf War when he tried to invade Iraq's small oil-rich neighbor Kuwait in 1990.[32] As a response to this first full-scale post-Cold War crisis, President George W.H. Bush immediately mobilized the American-led coalition and formed the largest military alliance against Iraq since World War II.[33] As the alliance was trying to liberate Kuwait, President Bush repeatedly compared Saddam Hussein with Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler,[34] after which many were flabbergasted when he did not order to capture Hussein in Baghdad and overthrow his government. Arguably, ousting Saddam seemed extremely costly back then; American troops were anticipated to be subjected to guerrilla attacks from Baghdad, forcing the U.S. into a bloody counterinsurgency war, and resulting in many casualties.[35] After 9/11, however, when people were looking for the guilty, the presence of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime immediately revealed itself as an unresolved issue that contributed to the terrorist attacks. In September 2001, Jonathan Rauch wrote in *The Atlantic* that "President Bush [Sr.] blew it when he called off the war on Saddam. America should have finished the job in 1991 and removed Saddam from power."[36] Bush and his team shared the same sentiments. The fact that Saddam Hussein had previously posed a significant threat and he was still ruling Iraq was an availability heuristic — Saddam was

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[32] ("The First Gulf War", n.d.)

[33] (Peters and Deshong 1995)

[34] (Friedman 1990)

[35] (Zunes 2001)

[36] (Rauch 2001, n.p.)

an 'unfinished business' of the past that needed to be taken care of, regardless of what evidence suggested.

Al Qaeda was another enemy, whose prominent historical presence made it an immediate, unquestionable suspect. During Clinton's presidency, the United States experienced several international terrorist attacks, some of which were attributed to al Qaeda: the bombing of the World Trade Organization in 1993, the bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania in 1998.[37] In February 1998, Usama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, and his close associate, Ayman al Zawahiri, published a fatwa in the newspaper, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, that stated that "Muslims should kill Americans – including civilians – anywhere in the world where they can be found."[38] The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has been developing plans to capture Usama bin Laden since then.[39] The Clinton administration, for example, launched Operation Infinite Reach Airstrikes in 1998 to target the Al Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Sudan, which was allegedly supplying bin Laden to manufacture chemical weapons.[40] Al Qaeda was on the CIA's radar for a long time, and after another shocking terrorist attack, it immediately became one of the primary suspects before further investigation.

Throughout Clinton's presidency, however, there were other international terrorist attacks, such as the CIA Headquarters shooting in 1993 by Mir Amal Kansi and Khobar

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[37] ("Terrorism · Clinton Digital Library", n.d.)

[38] ("12/20/00:Fact sheet: Charges against Usama Bin Laden" 2001, n.p.)

[39] ("National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States" 2004)

[40] ("Terrorism · Clinton Digital Library", n.d.)

Towers bombing in 1996 by individuals affiliated with Hezbollah Al-Hejaz. This should have complicated pinpointing the perpetrator of the 9/11 attacks after the CIA did not have definitive evidence on the suspects, but there is little information, if any, that the Bush administration considered the culpability of other terrorist groups except al Qaeda. A possible explanation is that the IC considered Saddam Hussein as Iraq's secular dictator, bin Laden's trusted person who protected his network.[41] This belief logically connected the two suspects that the Bush administration considered guilty, and it obviated the need to take discussions any further. This practice further demonstrates that the Bush administration relied on convenient explanations that confirmed the president's beliefs.

The recent history of the United States certainly contained details that led the Bush administration into thinking that Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda were at fault. However, relying on history is only logical if suspicions are supported by intelligence; without evidence, historical facts turn into availability biases – as it became the case in Bush's decision-making. President Bush was not relying on intelligence to draw conclusions, but the other way around. The president, who already seemed convinced that Iraq was behind the terrorist attacks, tasked the intelligence community to confirm his hypothesis.[42] By September 17, however, the IC had concluded that there was "no evidence that Iraq was responsible for September 11,"[43] and it would be hard to get the American public and the international community on board to support the military

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[41] Ibid

[42] (Draper 2020)

[43] (Rice 2004, n.p.)

operations.[44] But the president kept pushing his claims and tried different ways to obtain supporting information, pointing to his confirmation biases.

For example, on September 14, 2001, President Bush spoke with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on the phone during which Bush immediately told him he was planning to "hit" Iraq soon.[45] Blair pressed him for evidence of Iraq's connection to al Qaeda and 9/11, as British intelligence had no such information. Bush wanted international support for his possible attack on Iraq, but he was already getting a pushback. Three days later, he told his National Security Council: "I believe Iraq was involved, but I'm not going to strike them now. I don't have evidence at this point."[46] The president's words implied that he trusted his beliefs more than the evidence; regardless of refuting intelligence and international skepticism, he was still motivated to attack Iraq; and he wanted to keep searching for reasons to do so.

These components altogether point to his confirmation bias that was sparked by the availability heuristics stemming from history. However, historical memory was not the only factor that motivated him. It may have helped the president point to the guilty, but his determination to fish for supporting evidence of his views evoke an important question that I will address in the next sections: if the U.S. intelligence could not find any

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[44] (Rice 2004)

[45] (Riedel 2021)

[46] (Woodward 2002, 99)

connection between al Qaeda, Sadam Hussein, and their purported possession of WMDs, why was he "obsessed"[47] with the intervention in Iraq as opposed to looking for other suspects?

2.2. The Bush Doctrine and the War on Terror

A reason why the Bush administration sought support for going to war in Iraq is that his administration developed an ambitious new vision for the U.S. foreign policy, reflective of America's and Bush's global leadership, which involved attacking Iraq. This vision, which later became known as the Bush Doctrine, implied the preventive use of force against states and terrorist groups armed with WMD; it emphasized American exceptionalism – "the long-standing belief of successive American governments that it is a carrier of universal values;"[48] and it assumed America's historic responsibility to bring democracy to the Middle East to establish peace in the region.[49] This process involved regime-change in Iraq, ousting Saddam Hussein from power as well as fighting al Qaeda with guns.

While it is natural for leaders to have a particular political orientation, the Bush administration's vision was based more on his beliefs and desires rather than on data-driven reasoning, which makes it a biased one. There were pre-existing predispositions to intervene in the Middle East within the administration, which motivated the president to

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[47] (Riedel 2021)

[48] (Wheeler 2003, 183)

[49] (Kaplan 2021)

invade Iraq in response to 9/11. President Bush's public announcement of his new strategy in 2002 at the graduation speech at West Point[50] meant that he had already made up his mind about Iraq, and he would only continue finding support for his plans. Bruce Reidel, who was on the staff of the National Security Council in September 2001, even called Bush"obsessed" with Iraq.[51]

The Bush doctrine was channeled by the scale of 9/11 and the president's ambition to, above all, respond proportionally to terrorism. The attacks had not only domestic but global impact as the whole world was watching two of the tallest buildings demolishing with hundreds of people inside them. It was a grandiose event with a grandiose impact that demanded a grandiose response from a large power. This was a guiding paradigm for President Bush and his administration. They sought an adequate response to punish the perpetrators, and war seemed the most proportional measure against 9/11. Besides, the president, under significant pressure, felt the direct responsibility to act, which demanded him to demonstrate strong leadership. The context evoked his ambition to demonstrate the power and further motivated him to legitimize his goal to invade Iraq, regardless of what the IC suggested. Thus, his goals were guided by his ambitions and beliefs, as opposed to intelligence, pointing to his confirmation bias.

Indeed, President Bush wanted to offer jihadists "equivalently spectacular" vengeance for 9/11,[52] and attacking Iraq seemed an ample response.[53] He did not want to

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[50] ("President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point" 2002)

[51] (Riedel 2021, n.p.)

[52] (Woodward 2002, 95)

[53] Ibid

be invisible. His National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice wrote for the Washington Post:

> The president wanted more than a laundry list of ideas simply to contain al Qaeda or "roll back" the threat. The president wanted more than occasional, retaliatory cruise missile strikes. He told me he was "tired of swatting flies."[54]

Rice's words show that the president was strongly motivated to attack, and it did not matter much if there was "no credible evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States."[55] So, he tasked his administration to work on plans for military action in Iraq. The president just decided that Saddam was "a bad guy," and they needed to "take him down."[56] He did not follow any process, "at any stage of the war."[57] "Start now. [...] It's very important to move fast. This is a new way," Bush said.[58]

He had already made up his mind, and his biased thinking was aggravated by his desire to align himself with some of the world's greatest leaders.[59] Draper builds a lucid image of President Bush with a group of Asian journalists in the Oval Office, pointing to the portraits of Churchill, Lincoln, and Washington, listing himself among their ranks as "a leader who knew who he was and who knew what was right."[60] If he knew one thing,

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[54] (Rice 2004, n.p.)

[55] ("Schakowsky: Bush Administration Misstatement of the Day Saddam Hussein al Qaeda Link" 2004)

[56] (Draper 2020, 113)

[57] (Kaplan 2021, n.p.)

[58] (Woodward 2002, 99)

[59] (Draper 2020)

[60] (Ibid, 47)

as he said, "the time had now come to confront Saddam Hussein."[61] For Bush, invading Iraq was the opportunity to invoke his new geopolitical strategy of preemption and to align himself with those great leaders.[62]

The war in Iraq was also an opportunity for the president to remedy his image of a weak president.[63] As Kaplan points out, in the weeks after 9/11, "many of Bush's underlyings were startled to witness this affable but aimless president."[64] Bush was uncertain of himself and doubtful of his legitimacy after losing popularity and "eking out a thin Electoral College edge thanks to a 5-4 Supreme Court ruling."[65] He spent half of his time on his ranch in Texas, away from Washington DC. After 9/11, he was struck with "a piercing clarity of purpose"[66] and an "unchecked self-confidence."[67] He saw the war on terror as his chance to leave his footprint on history.

The Bush doctrine that the Bush administration came up with in the aftermath of 9/11 reflected the president's ambitions to show terrorists proportional response and portray himself as a powerful leader. His decision to go to war in Iraq stemmed from his obsession and, as the previous section demonstrated, historical knowledge that pointed to the culpability of al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein in the attacks. The decision, to a large

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[61] (Ibid, 47)

[62] (Pielke, Jr 2007)

[63] (Draper 2020)

[64] (Kaplan 2021, n.p.)

[65] (Kaplan 2021, n.p.)

[66] (Draper 2020, 27)

[67] (Draper 2020, 174)

extent, was guided by availability heuristics that history supplied and personal motivation as opposed to evidence, pointing to the president's biased approach towards decision-making.

In a democracy like the United States, however, the president's staff also has a considerable role when it comes to deciding on national security matters, such as invading Iraq. Arguably, the president's biases could have been eased by the opposition from his administration, and thus, it is important to examine whether this was (or not) the case in deciding to attack Iraq. The next section will assess the role the administration played in biasing the president into invading Iraq.

2.3. Going to War: Bush's Staff and Their Vision of War

In the previous sections, I argued that President Bush's decision to go to war was influenced by availability biases channeled by history and his personal ambitions to emerge as a powerful leader, which motivated him to look for supporting evidence for attacking Iraq. In this section, I suggest that along with these two factors, the president's staff also played a significant role in designing the preemptive strategy to expand the 'zone of democracy' and encouraging the president to make a case for invading Iraq. The Bush administration was overly optimistic about the plausibility of regime change in Iraq and democratic peace.

The Bush administration was almost certain that Iraqis would immediately welcome Americans as liberators and the U.S. would face limited strategic difficulties with occupying and reconstructing Iraq. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, for

example, told Congress in February 2003: "I am reasonably certain that [Iraqis] will greet us as liberators, and that will help us to keep [post-war] requirements down."[68] He was also hopeful that other western countries like France would have "strong interest in assisting Iraq's reconstruction."[69] He thought "that occupying Iraq would be more difficult than defeating it,"[70] which became clear after he said:

> It's hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam's security forces and his army. Hard to imagine.[71]

Wolfowitz had a hard time imagining what now is considered "the failed reconstruction of Iraq."[72] He even directly rebuked Eric Shinseki, then a four-star general serving as Army Chief of Staff, who had previously suggested that around 100 thousand troops would be needed to stabilize Iraq.[73] Wolfowitz said in front of Congress that "some of the higher-end predictions that we have been hearing recently, such as the notion that it will take several hundred thousand U.S. troops to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq, are wildly off the mark."[74] This practice shows that Wolfowitz was not taking into consideration important military perspectives that could have been helpful in drawing a more realistic picture of required efforts to reconstruct post-Saddam Iraq.

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[68] (Wing 2013, n.p.)

[69] (Fallows 2008, n.p.)

[70] (Fallows 2008, n.p.)

[71] (Ibid, n.p.)

[72] (Smith 2013, n.p.)

[73] (Ibid)

[74] (*Department of Defense Budget Priorities for Fiscal Year 2004: Hearing Before the Committee on the Budget, House of Representatives, One Hundred Eighth Congress, First Session, Hearing Held in Washington, DC, February 27, 2003*, 2003, n.p.)

James Fallows, a prominent American journalist, wrote in his *Atlantic Council* article in 2004 that "the U.S. occupation of Iraq is a debacle not because the government did no planning but because a vast amount of expert planning was willfully ignored by the people in charge. The inside story of a historic failure."[75] Borrowing David Halrberstam's words from *The Best and the Brightest,* he called the staffers at the Office of the Secretary of Defense "brilliant," but "fools."[76] In this thesis, I call them biased. High officials in the Bush administration, especially Wolfowitz, were servants of their beliefs, and they disregarded the information that worked against them.

Arguably, some officials in the Bush administration also had preexisting Bush doctrine-like attitudes towards the way politics should have worked, and their advice influenced the president's approach towards the response to 9/11. As Draper suggests, mid-level officials of the Reagan administration founded the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), a nonprofit that advocated U.S. "preeminence" "to secure and expand the 'zones of democratic peace'."[77] Two high-ranking officials in the administration of Bush Jr. —Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Chief of Staff to Vice President Dick Cheney Lewis Libby—had been prominent at the PNAC, and once they were back in power, they pushed for preemption again.[78]

In 2002, the President Bush administration articulated his new strategy of preemption in the National Security Strategy. The administration broadened the meaning

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[75] (Fallows 2004, n.p.)

[76] (Fallows 2008, n.p.)

[77] (Kaplan 2021, n.p.)

[78] (Draper 2020)

of the concept, previously defined as "the anticipatory use of force in the face of an imminent attack,"[79] to also encompass preventive measures, in which "force may be used even without evidence of an imminent attack to ensure that a serious threat to the United States does not "gather" or grow over time."[80] This process also included the removal of hostile dictators such as Saddam Hussein.[81] The idea of 'regime change' in Iraq had been advocated by some neoconservatives for a long time, especially after President George H.W. Bush chose not to send U.S. troops to Baghdad following the ousting of Saddam's army from Kuwait in 1991.[82] President Bush Jr. was surrounded by people who had preexisting disapproval of Hussein's regime because of their 'preemptive' ideology that the president not only embraced but brought to the next level.[83] This dynamic suggests that President Bush was welcoming advice from Wolfowitz and Cheney, whose ideas were also shared by others in the administration.

Bush's vulnerability for the advice coming from his staff was aggravated by his limited background in foreign policy. Before he came to the White House, Bush was a governor of Texas with limited experience, arguably interest, in international affairs,[84] and largely relied on his staff in this regard. Other than Wolfowitz and Cheney, his national security advisor during his first term of presidency and secretary of state during

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[79] (Pillar 2002, n.p.)

[80] (Pillar 2002, n.p.)

[81] (Draper 2020), (Kaplan 2021)

[82] (Kaplan 2021, n.p.)

[83] (Ibid)

[84] (Ibid)

the second, Condoleezza Rice, was a firm adherent to realpolitik. She wrote in *Foreign Policy* in 2000 that the best way to counter regimes with nuclear ambitions, such as North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, was through "a clear and classical statement of deterrence—if they do acquire WMD, their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration."[85] Vice President Richard Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld were more interested in projecting American power. As Draper argues, Rumsfeld was "entranced by the new generation of ultra-accurate "smart bombs" and saw Iraq's desert as a battlefield laboratory for testing the theory that they "transformed" modern warfare."[86] In this environment, it is logical to presume that most of Bush's staff zealously advocated the invasion of Iraq, which, in a way, shaped the president's decision-making. Some opposition including from then-Secretary of State Colin Powell was not enough to abandon the idea of going to war. As Draper puts it, "They had the case for war, and they were sticking to it."[87]

Bush did not only have a limited number of critics in his close circle, but he mostly had supporters and encouragers of his decision to go to war, which eventually supplied the president with confirmation biases and helped him legitimize the war. To build a plausible case for the invasion of Iraq after 9/11, the Bush administration actively started working on establishing the linkage between Iraq, Saddam Hussein, and al Qaeda. This link should have been strong enough to be worthy of military intervention, not just containment. Bush's two speechwriters, David Frum and Michael Gerson, invented the

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[85] (Rice 2004, 61)

[86] (Draper and Kaplan 2021, n.p.)

[87] (Draper 2020, 199)

term "axis of evil," which Bush used during his first State of the Union speech.[88] The "axis" implied that al Qaeda and Iraq were related, while "evil" conveyed that Iraq and al Qaeda were irrational malicious actors posing a threat. Such wording also signaled that containment would not work to deter unpredictable actors.[89] Bridging the themes together, Bush said:

> The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade.[...] Their terrorist allies [North Korea and Iran] constitute an *axis of evil,* arming to threaten the peace of the world.[90]

Despite criticism, the speech triggered immediate reactions and a flurry of news coverage on Iraq and Saddam Hussein's zealous efforts to develop WMD. Influential members of Congress, Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman, among many others, endorsed Bush's position and warned that the threat from Saddam was exacerbating and "time was not on our [U.S.] side."[91] President Bush's motives finally received public and Congressional support.

As Bush's popular approval continued, it gave him widespread credibility to launch the military operation in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which according to his administration, represented the biggest threat to the United States. Regardless of the absence of supporting intelligence, in less than a year, the administration received around 75% support from both the House and the Senate for the resolution to authorize President

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[88] (Western 2005, 117)

[89] ibid

[90] ("State Of The Union Address 2002" 2017; "President Delivers State of the Union Address" 2002)

[91] (Western 2005, 118)

Bush to use force to oust Saddam Hussein.[92] On March 19, 2003, President Bush

announced launching the war in Iraq in a televised address: "At this hour, American and

coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its

people and to defend the world from grave danger."[93] This war was part of what came to

be known as the War on Terror, a collective name for the Bush administration's domestic

security policies and international military interventions. The war launched a day after

the UN inspectors found "no evidence of prohibited weapons programmes" in Iraq.[94]

This prominent evidence should have encouraged the president to rethink its invasion, but

it did not. In his mind, he had long been at war with Iraq and no evidence could reverse

his biases.

To sum up, Bush had mostly surrounded himself with people who not only

supported his vision, but also contributed to its formation and carried it out with

confidence, regardless of overwhelming evidence suggesting that the IC could not verify

the linkage between Saddam Hussein, al Qaeda, and WMD. His staff's endorsement of

the president's vision further validated his intentions and supplied him with confirmation

biases, which complemented his preexisting availability biases.

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[92] (Western 2005)

[93] ("President Bush Addresses the Nation" 2003)

[94] ("UN Inspectors Found No Evidence of Prohibited Weapons Programmes As of 18 March Withdrawal,
Hans Blix Tells Security Council | UN Press" 2003, n.p.)

2.4. Summary

The 9/11 terrorist attacks were the primary enabler of the war in Iraq. The mass despair that permeated American society and put pressure on the government to punish the guilty immediately motivated President Bush to invade Iraq even though there was little intelligence to support this motive. As opposed to evidence, his decision was based on his beliefs, his desire to demonstrate strong leadership, and his obsession of adequate response to terrorism. Instead of relying on facts observed by the IC, he tasked his government to construct a compelling narrative linking al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, and WMD, which eventually legitimized the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent war on terror.

His beliefs that outweighed critical thinking stemmed from three factors that biased his approach to responding to 9/11. First, by looking back to the previous history of al Qaeda-perpetrated attacks in the United States and Saddam Hussein's presence in power as a 'leftover' from the Gulf War, he immediately designated the two as guilty. Before the IC presented any evidence, the president was already convinced that they were at fault, which demonstrates the presence of availability biases in his thinking. Second, his personal motives to showcase himself as a powerful global leader further incentivized him to invade Iraq. And finally, the majority of his senior staff who believed in preemption provided the president with confirmation biases and helped him create a convincing case to go to war, which eventually resulted in both domestic and international support for invading Iraq.

Chapter 3: Russia's War in Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the biggest military incursion in Europe since World War II, has sparked unprecedented attention around the world, especially in the West. While the Western community tried to make sense of this calamitous war, varying arguments permeated media and academic circles, among which John Mearsheimer's account has become the most popular one. After the annexation of Crimea, he accused NATO and its open door policy— particularly the 2008 Bucharest Summit decision that Georgia and Ukraine would one day join the alliance—of provoking Russia's military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014.[95] "The West is leading Ukraine down the primrose path," Mearsheimer said in 2015, "and the end result is that Ukraine is going to get wrecked."[96] In 2022, Mearsheimer took Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as another proof of his argument, and he emerged as a clairvoyant who had been warning of this war all along. The sequence of the wars paired with his earlier publications created the perception that Mearsheimer was *right* and he knew the *real* reasons for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. His argument is also simple, straightforward, and easy to understand, which convinced many that NATO was the one to blame for the disorder.

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[95] (Mearsheimer 2014)

[96] (Douthat 2022, n.p.)

However, complex events are rarely, if ever, as easy to explain as Mearsheimer suggests. His arguments ignore three significant aspects that are fundamental for understanding Putin's motivation to invade Ukraine. First, he ignores a complex historical background and overlooks the fact that Ukraine's struggle to free itself from Russian oppression dates further back than the Bucharest Summit. He only looks at the events of the 21st century and establishes causation between chronologically correlated events – Budapest Memorandum and the subsequent wars in Georgia's Tskhinvali region (often called South Ossetia), Crimea, and whole Ukraine. Second, he fails to recognize Russia's imperialist foreign policy aspirations that have shaped Putin's ambitions as a leader to restore Russia's greatness. Third, he omits Putin's hubris and confirmation biases of Russia's omnipotence nourished by his staff who do not dare to hold a critical or even different opinion from Putin. I argue that the combination of these three factors plays a much more important role in blundering Putin into Ukraine than NATO's expansion. In the subsequent sections, I explore these three factors and further demonstrate that limiting the explanations to NATO's culpability is too shallow to understand Putin's behavior.

3.1. Legitimizing War: History vs. Putin's History

Historical context, just like in any war, is crucial for understanding Moscow's incentives to invade Ukraine. However, when analyzing the war in Ukraine, many only look at the recent developments, such as the Orange Revolution, Bucharest Summit, or the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – three landmark events in Ukraine's post-Soviet

history that has defined its pro-Western domestic and foreign policy, including its aspiration to join NATO. The 2004 Orange Revolution of 2004 brought pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko into power, which replaced Viktor Yanukovych's allegedly pro-Russian, corrupt regime;[97] the 2008 Bucharest Summit resulted in NATO's declarative promise, though without any timeline, that Ukraine along with Georgia would join NATO;[98] and the war in Crimea resulted in Russia's reemergence as a long-standing oppressor of Ukraine.

These developments are often discussed through the lens of Western interests or the so-called *great power* competition that treats Ukraine as a token that the West and Russia get to play with. For example, Mearsheimer among many others considers Ukraine's ambition to join NATO as the Western plan to drive Kyiv away from Moscow and lure it into the Western orbit. These geopolitical circumstances are often assumed as given, stripping the context from the important historical background and alienating Ukrainians from their free political will.

History of Russo-Ukrainian relations, however, is far more complicated. The Russo-Ukrainian animosity is not just a byproduct of either of the three events, rather it has deep historical roots that this section tries to uncover. After Moscow launched the full-scale invasion, for Ukrainians, Russia reemerged as their perpetual historical enemy[99] – the trend that has arguably encouraged the Ukrainian leadership to seek partnership with NATO after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a prominent British journalist,

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[97] (Harasymiw 2020)

[98] ("NATO news" 2008)

[99] (Hawaleshka 2023)

who has been reporting on the war from the ground,[100] put it "Part of the reason that Ukraine has never had stable statehood is because of Russia."[101] For Russia, on the other hand, Ukraine is its kin state, which, as Putin said, never had "real statehood" and was an integral part of Russia's "own history, culture, spiritual space."[102] Ukrainians and Russians have different recollections of the past, and the clash of their narratives also points to the complexity of the historical context.

Moscow's oppression of Kyiv dates further back than NATO and the Bucharest Summit, to the late 18th century, when Ukraine became part of the Russian Empire as a result of a series of military conquests.[103] After the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, the Ukrainians fought for their independence, which they soon lost as a result of the Soviet invasion.[104] The Ukrainian independentist forces lost the five-year war (1917 - 1921) against the Bolsheviks, after which the country was also forced into the Soviet Union.[105] The seven decades of Soviet rule were characterized by economic exploitation, political and cultural repression to suppress the nations' individual identities and languages. The Holodomor, the famine in Ukraine widely recognized as a genocide, is a quintessence of the Soviet treatment.[106] Putin's claims *On the Historical Unity of Russians and*

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[100] (Tavberidze 2022)

[101] Perrigo 2022, n.p.)

[102] (Perrigo 2022, n.p.)

[103] (*History* 2009)

[104] (Markus and Shulhyn 2004)

[105] (Zhukovsky 1993)

[106] (Gavrilyuk 2018)

Ukrainians[107] stem from this shared past which was oppressive to Ukrainians and expansive for Russians. However, Putin's version of history portrays Russia as completely altruistic and dovish to Ukrainians.

Putin deftly propagates that Ukrainians and Russians (and Belarusians) are "one people," calling Ukraine "entirely the product of the Soviet era" during which, he contends, "Russia was robbed" from its land.[108] As he argues, the Bolsheviks were "generous in drawing borders and bestowing territorial gifts," and "it is enough to look at the boundaries of the lands reunited with the Russian state in the 17th century and the territory of the Ukrainian SSR when it left the Soviet Union."[109] He stated that modern Ukraine is a creation of Vladimir Lenin; Joseph Stalin, after World War II, supplemented Ukrainian lands with other Eastern European lands; and his successor Nikita Khrushchev "took Crimea away from Russia for some reason and gave it to Ukraine"[110] in 1954. Putin called those decisions "worse than a mistake,"[111] and went on to criticize Ukraine for "mindlessly emulating foreign models which have no relation to history or Ukrainian realities"[112] after it gained independence in 1991. In other words, Putin says that "Ukraine is not a legitimate state. Ukraine is Russia. It should never have existed as

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[107] (Putin 2021, n.p.)

[108] (Putin 2021, n.p.)

[109] (Ibid)

[110] ("Address by the President of the Russian Federation" 2022, n.p.)

[111] (Ibid, n.p.)

[112] (Ibid, n.p.)

anything else."[113] Putin's version, however, is hardly convincing anyone outside of his authoritarian circle.

While the two countries have intertwined history, Ukrainians point out that Kyiv was founded hundreds of years before Moscow, and Ukraine has its own distinct language and customs.[114] The Bolsheviks were also hardly generous to Ukrainians. The Soviet authorities tried to erase the genetic code of national memory in the East of Ukraine. According to the census of the Russian Empire in 1897, more than 58% of people were Ukrainian speakers in the Bakhmut district, while this number was 46% in the Mariupol district of the Donetsk region.[115] Russian speakers at that time constituted only 31% in the Bakhmut district and 14% in the Mariupol district. But Soviet Russification policy gradually eliminated the Ukrainian language from official use and to its entrenchment as an inferior, secondary language.

Stalin's regime used hunger as a weapon to eradicate Ukrainian culture. Holodomor, otherwise known as the Great Famine, killed around eight million Ukrainians during 1932-1933.[116] It was the response to the biggest anti-Soviet peasant uprising in the 1930s in Ukraine composed of over one million peasants who felt Stalin's pressure to meet an unrealistically high state-imposed quota of production.[117] The Donetsk region was among the ten regions most affected by the Great Famine and the

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[113] (Perrigo 2022, n.p.)

[114] (Perrigo 2022)

[115] (Суспільне Донбас 2021)

[116] (Rybalko 2022)

[117] Ibid

repressions of the Great Terror – the period of extreme oppression, purges, and killings of everyone who showed a sign of anticommunism.[118] 230,000 people in the Donetsk region and 31,560 people in the Luhansk region were killed in the 1930s.[119] After the famine, the Soviet authorities allocated over 15 million Rubles to settle Russian families into the areas previously populated by Ukrainian peasants.[120] According to KGB archives and the Holodomor National Museum, during 1933-1934, the Donetsk, Lugansk, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kharkiv regions were then repopulated by 21 thousand families of Russian farmers who were provided with significant benefits.[121] The starvation to death and the resettlement of Ukrainian regions with Russians became part of Bolshevik's purposeful and consistent policy of Russianization, which bred paranoia and fear among Ukrainians. The Soviet terror was palpable in Ukraine and beyond until the second half of the 1980's, as the Soviets actively eroded Ukrainian identity in the East.[122] However, Putin does not mention any of these events in his famous televised justification of the invasion[123] or his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.[124]* The omission to the second side of the story points to his propagandist approach towards history.

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[118] (Hill 2013)

[119] (Белоус 2017)

[120] (*BBC* 2020)

[121] (Zanuda and Dorosh 2015)

[122] (Matviiv, n.d.)

[123] ("Address by the President of the Russian Federation" 2022)

[124] (Putin 2021)

Putin's regime, to an extent, is a continuation of the Soviet pattern. The attempt to obliviate Ukrainian culture from the Lugansk and Donetsk regions peaked in 2013-2014 when Putin's regime reinforced the idea that most people in these regions supported self-determination and the idea of joining Russia.[125] This was Putin's another revision of history. As the 2014 surveys showed that only 33% of the residents of the Donetsk region and 24% of the Lugansk population were in favor of joining Russia.[126] Putin's propaganda was a build up to the military intrusion in sovereign Ukraine and occupying parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014,[127] which further allowed Russia to weaponize the education system, ban learning Ukrainian in the regions,[128] and task the teachers to raise pro-Russian patriots.[129] Putin planned ahead for his full-scale invasion in 2022.

The Russo-Ukrainian relations, however, have not always been highly belligerent. The tensions between the two stabilized after the dissolution of the Soviet Union despite a number of difficulties with the fate of Ukraine's nuclear weapons, division of the Black Sea Fleet, resolution of energy and and debts, and the issue of Crimea, which had become part of Ukraine only a four decades before the collapse of the USSR and was predominantly Russian.[130] The Budapest Memorandum between the U.S., U.K., Russia,

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[125] (Matviiv 2022)

[126] ("Прес-релізи та звіти - Динаміка ставлення населення України до Росії та населення Росії до України, яких відносин з Росією хотіли б українці" 2014)

[127] (*Укрінформ* 2017)

[128] (Belokobylskyi 2021)

[129] (*Заборона* 2021)

[130] (Pifer 2017)

and Ukraine resolved the nuclear problem.[131] They together guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity in exchange for Ukraine's nuclear disarmament – the agreement that Russia violated in 2014 by annexing Crimea and in 2022 by attempting to invade the whole country. Kyiv and Moscow separately agreed on debts, dividing the fleet, and Ukraine allowed Russia to use ports of Crimea for Russian warships until 2047.[132] While they had occasional spats over energy, especially natural gas contracts, the countries usually found a solution.[133] The Russian government generally respected Crimea as a part of Ukraine, as it was decided that the states would be recognized within their Soviet socialist Republic (SSR) borders after the collapse of the USSR,[134] despite the fact that Ukraine had already joined NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991 and the Partnership for Peace programme in 1994.[135]

NATO membership, however, was not as popular and desirable for Ukrainians back then as it has become after the annexation of Crimea, and even more so after the 2022 invasion. By 2009, only around 20% of Ukrainians supported NATO membership,[136] it grew twice by 2014,[137] and reached 83% in 2022.[138] While Ukrainians

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[131] ("UNTC", n.d.)

[132] (Pifer 2017)

[133] (Ibid)

[134] (Ibid)

[135] ("Topic: Relations with Ukraine" 2023)

[136] ("How would you vote if the referendum on Ukraine`s NATO accession was held the following Sunday? (recurrent, 2002-2009)" 2009)

[137] ("Less than half of Ukrainians support NATO membership" 2016)

[138] (Hunder, Balmforth, and Baum 2022)

never forgot Russian oppression, the turbulent transition from communism to democracy, did not result in the post-Soviet Ukrainians' immediate desire to align with the West. The lack of initial support to NATO can be explained with the lack of democratic rule in Ukraine and unfamiliarity with Western structures, not necessarily by their unwillingness to align with the West and breakaway from Russia.

Just like other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine emerged as a highly pluralistic but unstable democracy after the collapse of the USSR. In the 1990s, the country's political system was a combination of a liberal democratic facade with post-Soviet oligarch-controlled power distribution.[139] As Mikhail Minakov and Matthew Rojansky wrote in the Kennan Cable, during Ukraine's revolutions "a period of popularly supported democratic reforms was soon displaced by simulated democracy, driven essentially by oligarchic competition and then, later, by authoritarian consolidation, resulting in civic protests and eventual regime change, resetting the cycle."[140] Since independence, Ukrainians have elected presidents with different political values, including pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovitch,[141] and experienced two revolutions, pointing to political discontinuities in Ukrainian democracy and further need for democratic consolidation. Ukrainians, however, forced Viktor Yanukovych to flee from Ukraine as a result of the Maidan Revolution. [142] Their public outrage and revolution amid the Yanukovych

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[139] (Minakov and Rojansky 2018)

[140] (Minakov and Rojansky 2018, 1-2)

[141] (Ibid)

[142] (*The Economist* 2022)

administration's decision to suspend plans to sign an association agreement with the European Union, point to Ukrainians' desire to ally with the West as opposed to Russia.

The two-decade long relative peace between Ukraine and Russia is not enough to numb the four-century long Russian oppression of Ukrainians. Moscow has established a pattern of disruptive tactics against Kyiv to the point that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the next Russian invasion seemed to be just a matter of *when.* The fall of the oppressive communist regime represented another opportunity for Ukraine to breakaway from Russia and seek protection under the western umbrella. NATO, which has declared its desire to expand, represented an opportunity for Ukraine to distance itself from the historical oppressor and build a democratic state with the West's help. John Mearsheimer, however, disregards historical trends that incentivized the Ukrainian leadership after the collapse of the Soviet Union to seek an international partner outside of Russian orbit. According to him, the idea of NATO membership was imposed on the country by the West.

Putin has leveraged his version of history to build the case of self-determination and justify his invasion of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Ukrainians, on the other hand, use the history of Russian oppression as an incentive to break away from Russia and align with the West. These two conflicting views of the shared past of Russians and Ukrainians point to the significance of historical memory in political thinking. The animosity between the two countries is far more complicated than Mearsheimer portrays, and it extends beyond the developments in the 21st century. This section looked further back in history to contribute to the understanding of the rationale of the war in Ukraine both from Ukrainian and Russian perspectives.

3.2. Putin: Identity and Vision

Putin's personality and his vision of Russia's role in global politics constitute another significant factor in his predispositions to perpetrate wars. Russian imperial expansionism in the past has largely influenced President Putin's ambitious and disruptive foreign policy, which took a calamitous form in Ukraine and earlier in Georgia in 2008. Putin shares lots of similarities with Stalin. He has called the collapse of the Soviet Union "a major geopolitical disaster of the century," in 2005 – the sentiment that was reverberated on the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union.[143] Putin, a zealous admirer of the past glory of Russia and the Soviet Union, considers himself akin to great Tsars and Soviet leaders like Peter I[144] and Stalin,[145] which feeds into his confidence and ambition to put Russia on the global map as a major power. In other words, Putin shares Soviet imperial nationalism and "great power chauvinism."[146]

As Andrei Kolesnikov put it, "like Stalin, Putin thinks of the world as divided into spheres of influence and assumes he can mark the territories he thinks belong to him with sweeping strokes on a map."[147] Stalin's rule has become a model for the Kremlin, and Putin himself increasingly resembles him. And in his embrace of imperial and national

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[143] (Юркова 2022, n.p.)

[144] (Roth 2022)

[145] (Kolesnikov 2022)

[146] (Kolesnikov 2022, n.p.)

[147] (Kolesnikov 2022, n.p.)

ideology, he has turned Russia into a personal autocracy both domestically and internationally.

Like Stalin, Putin has been in power for more than twenty years and amended the constitution to reset the clock of his presidential term. Just like Stalin, Putin believes that Russia can flourish in political isolation. He has cut off relations with the West and launched an acute propaganda to portray everything Western as incompatible with Russian ideology; Stalin went the same way in the early Cold War era.[148] Stalin called some people "rootless cosmopolitans," who were hounded from their jobs and persecuted;[149] Putin's adopted the so-called foreign agents law in 2022, which expanded the definition of foreign agent "to a point at which almost any person or entity, regardless of nationality or location, who engages in civic activism or even expresses opinions about Russian policies or officials' conduct could be designated a foreign agent, so long as the authorities claim they are under "foreign influence.""[150] Just like the Soviets, Putin has indoctrinated the Russian population with his version of history, including the idea that Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians are all descendants of the ancient Rus who lived between the Black and Baltic Seas.[151] By early 2022, Putin already had ready popular support for his attack on Ukraine.

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[148] Ibid

[149] (Kolesnikov 2022, n.p.)

[150] (*Human Rights Watch* 2022, n.p.)

[151] (Putin 2021)

Putin also borrowed from Stalin the tactic to perpetrate wars "to shape the future to look like his version of the past."[152] In the Winter War of 1939, just before World War II started, Stalin launched an invasion of Finland to gain the territory he thought would be strategically important as a buffer zone and an obstacle to a potential German invasion of the Soviet Union;[153] Putin tried to achieve the same with his "special military operation" in Ukraine.[154] Stalin simulated a provocation on the border to legitimize launching a war; Putin, similarly, to build a pretext of the war, framed his invasion of the East of Ukraine as Russia's support to the two self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk[155] and Donetsk.[156] This was a replication of his strategy in Georgia in 2008, when he recognized the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia[157] and South Ossetia[158] shortly after the war. His administration did not even change the texts from document to document, pointing to Putin's pattern to provoke separatist movements, recognize separatist states as independent, and portray Russia's intervention as a way to defend those in the separatist regions.

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[152] (Hill, Stent, and Daniels 2022, n.p.)

[153] (Blumberg 2021)

[154] ("Russian Federation Announces 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine as Security Council Meets in Eleventh-Hour Effort to Avoid Full-Scale Conflict | UN Press" 2022)

[155] ("Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 21.02.2022 № 72 · Официальное опубликование правовых актов · Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации" 2022)

[156] ("Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 21.02.2022 № 71 · Официальное опубликование правовых актов · Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации" 2022)

[157] ("International recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia", n.d.)

[158] ("International recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia", n.d.)

Putin follows well-practiced Soviet disruptive methods and takes examples from his predecessors who he admires. NATO, in this case, has a limited role in Putin's behavior, which is largely imperialist, aimed at restoring Russia's glorious past. His ambitious personality and the desire to align with the great leaders like Stalin are helpful in understanding his 'obsession' to wage war in the post-Soviet zone.

3.3. The Putin Administration As a Source of the President's Biases

Putin's admiration of Russia's glorious past and the leaders who left a noticeable footprint on history feeds into his confirmation biases. As he views himself as an invincible Russian leader with a firm vision to turn Russia into not only a large but superpower, motivates him to look for evidence that will support his ambitious aspirations like invading Ukraine. For such a consequential decision, leaders do not only prepare grounds to justify an invasion, but also weigh their military, financial, and human resources to anticipate the outcome of war. Putin should have followed this traditional approach, even though many argue that he is the primary decision-maker within his administration.

The events in Ukraine, however, show that Russians significantly miscalculated their prospects for success in the East of Ukraine. Putin's army did not turn out to be as invincible as widely believed not only among the Russians but also abroad. He intended the war to be as quick as the one in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014, but it has

already been protracted for over one year. His miscalculations are largely because of the projection of his confirmation biases as opposed to evidence-driven decision-making. This is because his autocracy has created a circle around him only for those who agree with Putin and his policy, leaving no room for critical opinion. His staff is only incentivized to provide the information that he wants to hear, and those who show even a slight disagreement are publicly humiliated. This approach points to one thing – Putin already has vision and ideas, and he only chooses to hear information that will confirm his thoughts. Thus, his decision-making is driven by his confirmation biases.

A former Russian diplomat, Boris Bondarev, emphasized the severity of confirmation biases within Putin's administration.[159] He particularly explains the dynamic of decision-making for the war in Ukraine, which he felt was "the beginning of the end."[160] Bondarev recalls that since 2002, "Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was deeply flawed. Even then, it discouraged critical thinking, and over the course of my tenure, it became increasingly belligerent."[161] He further suggested that:

> For years, Russian diplomats were made to confront Washington and defend the country's meddling abroad with lies and non sequiturs. We were taught to embrace bombastic rhetoric and to uncritically parrot to other states what the Kremlin said to us. But eventually, the target audience for this propaganda was not just foreign countries; it was our own leadership. In cables and statements, we were made to tell the Kremlin that we had sold the world on Russian greatness and demolished the West's arguments. We had to withhold any criticism about the president's dangerous plans. This performance took place even at the ministry's highest levels. [162]

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[159] (Bondarev 2022)

[160] (Bondarev 2022, n.p.)

[161] (Bondarev 2022, n.p.)

[162] (Bondarev 2022, n.p.)

He recalls how the Russians fatally poisoned former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the United Kingdom in 2018. Despite the UK intelligence services confirming Russia's culpability, Russian diplomats denied allegations. Russia's innocence, however, was only believed by Algeria, Azerbaijan, China, Iran, and Sudan.[163] Despite the Russian resolution being voted down in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons that was involved in the investigation of the attack, Russian diplomats reported how they defeated the anti-Russian moves by the West. Bondarev recalled:

> At first, I simply rolled my eyes at these reports. But soon, I noticed that they were taken seriously at the ministry's highest levels. Diplomats who wrote such fiction received applause from their bosses and saw their career fortunes rise. Moscow wanted to be told what it hoped to be true—not what was actually happening. Ambassadors everywhere got the message, and they competed to send the most over-the-top cables.[164] It is no surprise that such attitudes within the Putin administration blurred the distinction between truths and fabrications also when it came to the war in Ukraine and Russia's military power.

In April 2023, Vladimir Milov, a former official at the Russian ministry of economy who now lives in exile in Vilnius, said in his interview: "I think it's pretty clear that we are simply dealing with a murderer, with a person who thinks that it is OK to kill people. And he's been doing it all his life."[165] He pointed out that Boris Nemtsov, Putins' outspoken critic, was murdered near the Kremlin in 2015. Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was almost fatally poisoned in 2020 and is imprisoned for 11-and-a-half

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[163] (Ibid)

[164] (Bondarev 2022, n.p.)

[165] (Wilson 2023, n.p.)

years. In 2015 and 2017, Vladimir Kara-Murza, a political activist and journalist,

survived two poisoning attempts, who now faces up to 25 years in jail.[166] "That was him.

That was Putin. And if you really trace back all his way it was always murders, murders,

murders," he said.[167] Putin's alleged murders and repressions send a clear message –

there are consequences for those who oppose his regime.

Milov, who was Navalni's economic advisor and lived in Moscow until 2021,

said: "This is why I decided to leave the country, because otherwise you'd now be

filming documentaries about the need to release myself (from prison) as well."[168] Abbas

Gallyamov, another former government official in exile who was Putin's speechwriter,

noticed that the Putin administration was "tightening the screws with regard to those who

were publicly criticizing them previously" more acutely after the annexation of

Crimea.[169] "They were treating you with more respect [before], but now they started

demanding more loyalty from you. They were saying, "You will get no contracts [unless]

you speak like this," he told the journalist.[170] He further recalled:

> I had one quarrel with them [administration staff], then a second quarrel with
> them, a third one,… [then] they sent another person to deal with me. And again,
> new quarrels, and little by little, they said, "You'll just starve, you'll have no
> money to feed your family." They didn't threaten me with prison at the time.
> That's true; I wouldn't lie about this. They were threatening that I would lose all
> the contracts and I would be unable to work as a political consultant in Russia. So,
> at that time, I made up my mind and moved my family to Israel.…. And the last
> breaking point was the beginning of this war [Ukraine 2022]. As soon as the war

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[166] (Ibid)

[167] (Ibid, n.p.)

[168] (Ibid, n.p.)

[169] (Tavberidze 2023, n.p.)

[170] (Tavberidze 2023, n.p.)

started, and I started criticizing it, all my [Russian] contracts [ended] immediately.[171]

As Abbas Gallyamov himself put it, "the Russian opposition is either in prison or abroad."[172] Putin purposefully suffocates the diversity of opinions to breed conformity both within his government and population. His "intimidation strategy," as Gallyamov calls it in another interview, leaves room only for those who agree with him, making him highly susceptible to confirmation biases.[173] Bondarev's interview helps elucidate this practice on the example of the 2022 Ukraine war.

As Bondarev recalled, Putin has been "obsessed" with Ukraine since the Orange Revolution, far before the NATO Bucharest Summit, and was preparing the ground for its full-scale invasion since the annexation of Crimea and provocation of separatist movements in the East of Ukraine. In 2016, Putin declared that the Russian military was "stronger than any potential aggressor."[174] However, the Russian armed forces were not as mighty as the Russians themselves perceived and as the West feared. In part, the economic sanctions of 2014 that were imposed on Russia in response to its seizure of Crimea, also hit the Russian military, though there was little awareness of acknowledgement of this. The Russian military industry was dependent on the Western-made technological products, critical for building satellites, drones, and other critical equipment. For example, Russian manufacturers cooperated with French companies for

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[171] (Tavberidze 2023, n.p.)

[172] (Tavberidze 2023, n.p.)

[173] (*AP News* 2023, n.p.)

[174] ("Vladimir Putin Says Russia's Military Is Stronger Than Anyone's | TIME" 2016)

the sensors needed for Russian airplanes, and the sanctions cut off access to those

products, which left the military weaker than it was understood. Bondarev wrote:

> But although it was clear to my team how these losses undermined Russia's
> strength, the foreign ministry's propaganda helped keep the Kremlin from finding
> out. The consequences of this ignorance are now on full display in Ukraine: the
> sanctions are one reason Russia has had so much trouble with its invasion.[175]

Putin created the system in which his administration members were content to

embrace lies that pleased Putin. For some, this was a way to evade the responsibility for

Russia's actions and hide behind the I-was-only-doing-my-duty lines. They are "pure

opportunists," as Milov said.[176] He added:

> There is no ideology. There are no ayatollahs or Marxist priests. These people
> have flip-flopped on their political positions throughout their careers. The only
> thing they really value is a portrait of Benjamin Franklin on a green bank note.[177]

Others took pride in Russia's increasingly belligerent actions. Bondarev wrote:

> Several times, when I cautioned colleagues that their actions were too abrasive to
> help Russia, they gestured at our nuclear force. "We are a great power," one
> person said to me. Other countries, he continued, "must do what we say."[178]

Ukraine's invasion did not change these attitudes within the administration. "At

last!" "Now we will show the Americans! Now they know who the boss is" – commented

many.[179]

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[175] (Bondarev 2022, n.p.)

[176] (Wilson 2023, n.p.)

[177] (Ibid, n.p.)

[178] (Bondarev 2022, n.p.)

[179] (Bondarev 2022, n.p.)

Bondarev, Milov, and Gallymov have openly disclosed what the world already knew all along. The war in Ukraine is a stark demonstration of Putin bundling up in his imperialist vision. For over two decades, he has been creating the expectation and tendency for his staff to feed him with the information that aligns with his narratives, which biases his decision-making.

3.4. Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that Putin's invasion of Ukraine was largely motivated by his desire to restore Russia's 'greatness,' akin to its Soviet times. He propagated his version of history to legitimize his war in Ukraine and feed Russian and international society with a purportedly convincing story about unifying the ancient Rus nations that included Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. His ambition to emerge as yet another powerful Russian leader of global importance guided his decision-making, which was full of biases as opposed to evidence.

First, his previous experience in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 made him think that invading the East of Ukraine and advancing towards Kyiv would be easy and quick. 15 months after the war, it has become clear that Putin miscalculated the timeline and misjudged the efforts it would take to invade Ukraine. This trend shows the presence of an availability bias in Putin's thinking. Second, his personality and vision of Russia's prominent global role did not even let him consider the possibility of failing the war. Third, he has created a government in which nobody is allowed to challenge Putin's decisions, and what is even worse, many Russian officials believe in his compelling

fiction to the point that Putin's imperialist policies make them proud. Thus, Putin's staff was only confirming his biases about the invincibility of the Russian army and the West's inability to show proportional response to the Russian invasion. It is the interplay of these factors that made the invasion of Ukraine happen – not only NATO.

NATO may have given the Putin regime an extra stimulus to attack Ukraine, but it did not have nearly as big of a role as Mearsheimer insists. The historical context shows that the problem of Russian oppression has existed for centuries for Ukrainians, and aligning with NATO was a solution to avoiding another possible attack as opposed to a cause. The short period of relative peace between Kyiv and Moscow was not enough to stop Ukrainian authorities from seeking partnership with the West. It is crucial to look beyond the sequence of the events after the Bucharest Summit and avoid establishing causation between the correlated events.

Chapter 4: Comparing the Cases of Iraq and Ukraine

At a glance, the wars in Iraq and Ukraine are drastically different cases in their purpose, context, and execution. However, in this section, I demonstrate that they too have a lot in common, particularly when it comes to the process of deciding to go to war. This research has uncovered that both democratic and autocratic leaders, in this case Presidents Bush and Putin, are prone to biases, which often guide their thinking. While in the desired situation the leaders should be making decisions based on tangible evidence, the wars in Iraq and Ukraine are examples of the leaders' wishful thinking that breed confirmation biases and convince their administrations of the plausibility of going to war. In both cases, the leaders' biases stemmed from three different factors: (1) historical memory, which supplied them with previous examples of the U.S.-Iraqi tensions and the shared history of Russians and Ukrainians; (2) President Bush's obsession to respond to 9/11 proportionally and employ his new preemptive doctrine as well as President Putin's eagerness to restore Russia's "greatness" under his rule; (3) and the two drastically different administrations – one democratic and the other autocratic –which demonstrated full readiness to execute the presidents' vision and fed into their biases. In this chapter, I compare the two cases vis-a-vis these three factors that I found present in the presidents' decision-making.

4.1. How History Can Bias Leaders

History is an important part of political thinking. It preserves information regarding past practices, which can serve as examples for current leaders or even inspire their strategy to improve the shortcomings or revive the glorious past. One similarity that I found between the cases of Russia and Iraq is the significant role of historical memory in the presidents' thinking.

For both presidents history provided availability heuristics. In President Bush's case, his administration started looking for the guilty in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and before the IC suggested any evidence, the administration was already looking into the past to identify the perpetrators. It did not take long to point to Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. Saddam's dictatorial regime in Iraq had already posed problems during the Gulf Wars, and his presence in power seemed like an 'unfinished business' of the past that needed to be addressed immediately. Al Qaeda already had a history of perpetrating terrorist attacks in the United States and its leader, Usama bin Laden, had long been on the CIA's capture list. The two suspects immediately emerged on the surface just by taking a glimpse at history. The IC, however, did not succeed in discovering a link between the two suspects, even though their connection seemed obvious-enough to start the war. This practice reveals the presence of availability biases in the Bush administration's approach, shaped by historical memory.

For President Putin, history also provided availability heuristics, but in a different way. Putin was not looking for the enemy to attack, rather he was motivated to merely demonstrate Russia's invincibility and restore its reputation as a major power by invading

Ukraine. History made him believe that taking over Ukraine would be much quicker and effortless than it turned out to be. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow had already occupied Georgia's Tskhinvali region in 2008 and annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. The war in Georgia lasted only for five days and was followed from limited to no sanctions on Moscow. The weak international response to the war then "greenlighted" Russia's subsequent military assault on Crimea,[180] which lasted for a month and resulted in the seizure of the peninsula.[181] The war was followed by raft international sanctions that triggered the Russian Ruble crisis in 2015,[182] but the country managed to bounce back soon.[183] The effects of the sanctions were not severe-enough to disincentivize Putin from attacking Ukraine again. Given the past record of relatively fast success of the Russian army in Georgia and Ukraine followed by western sanctions that the country managed to withstand, President Putin thought that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine would also be equally less challenging. However, the war has been protracted for over a year and the Russian army has had difficulty defeating Ukrainians.[184] Putin assumed that a trend of Russia's military success would continue, but the reality points to miscalculations stemming from Putin's biased thinking.[185]

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[180] (Dickinson 2022, n.p.)

[181] (Kofman et al. 2017)

[182] (Walker and Nardelli 2015)

[183] (Foy 2020)

[184] (Moses 2022)

[185] (Moses 2022)

Putin also used historical arguments to 'legitimize' the war in Ukraine. Unlike Bush, who merely referred to the facts from previous administrations' experiences, Putin reinvented a story of historical connection among the Russian, Belarus, and Ukrainian people, and argued that his invasion of Ukraine aimed at uniting the ancient Rus people.[186] He emphasized the Soviet 'charity' of handing parts of land to Ukraine without mentioning the malicious Soviet efforts to Russify the East of Ukraine and starve Ukrainians to death in this process. Putin's cherry picking of historical facts are part of his propagandist strategy that helps him retain domestic support and project Russia's power abroad by spreading fake narratives.

For Bush, history did not play as significant of a role in constructing a plausible case for invading Iraq as it did for Putin. However, Bush also had to put forward narratives that were not necessarily supported by evidence. The difference is that Putin as an autocratic leader unabashedly spread false narratives, while the Bush administration used public diplomacy to establish a purported linkage between al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, and WMD. Falsification of history is a significantly more challenging task in a democracy like the U.S. where academic freedom is highly valued than in an autocracy like Russia where the ruler can exercise control over every institution. However, the Iraq case demonstrates that public diplomacy is a powerful tool that can be used to justify an invasion, and if used right, even democratic citizens can be prone to flawed narratives.

To sum up, historical memory was a strong biasing factor for Bush and Putin. For both leaders, it served as availability heuristics as well as an inspiration to demonstrate

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[186] (Putin 2021)

power proportional to the reputation of their countries and of them as leaders. For Russia, however, history was of far greater importance than the U.S. Putin reinvented the shared history of Ukrainians and presented it as affable to demonstrate the kinship between the Russians and Ukrainians to justify 'reunification' of the two peoples. Bush did not alter the U.S. history of terrorist attacks and the Gulf Wars to gain support for the war, but he used public diplomacy to influence public opinion and construct a plausible case for invading Iraq. Thus, history is an influential biasing factor for both democratic and autocratic leaders, and while it cannot be used as effectively to manipulate public opinion in a democracy, public diplomacy still offers a latitude to do so.

4.2. Leaders' Political Vision As a Source of Biases

Autocratic and democratic leaders both have political vision and ambition that inspire their strategy, particularly when it comes to invading another country. In this study, I have uncovered that the decision to invade Iraq and Ukraine were part of the presidents' goals to execute their strategic vision and demonstrate their power. In President Bush's case, the invasion of Iraq fell under his new doctrine of preeminence and the war on terror. For President Putin, attacking Ukraine was a continuation of his imperialist policy that is largely inspired by Russia's previous geopolitical significance that he wishes to restore. The presidents' decisions to go to war, as I argue, were influenced by their strategic formulation of their and their country's role in the international system, which is also to an extent shaped by historical memory.

President Bush, for example, as Draper argues in his book, had an ambition to align himself with great American leaders like Lincoln and Washington by demonstrating America's global power in the aftermath of 9/11.[187] As Condoleezza Rice also suggests, President Bush wanted to provide a proportional response to terrorism not insignificant steps to just contain al Qaeda, further demonstrating the president's commitment to not only respond to terrorism but to project America's power and demonstrate his strong leadership. This attitude, which also played a role in his biased approach, stemmed from the historical image of the U.S. as a major power and other great leaders who have left their footprints on history.

The Bush administration formulated a new strategy that reflected the intention to fight terrorists with arms and encoded it in the national security strategy.[188] What is now known as the Bush doctrine rested on two pillars. First, it deemed containment, deterrence, or post factum measures inadequate to respond to terrorists and rogue regimes with WMD, and the U.S. could not abstain from using force preemptively rather than reactively. Second, it suggested that the U.S. should have promoted democracy in the Middle East to halt the spread of religious radicalism.[189] The invasion of Iraq fell under this twofold strategy. The fact that the president had announced his plans to attack Iraq in 2002[190] shows that his administration had already decided to put his strategy in action.

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[187] (Draper 2020)

[188] ("The National Security Strategy 2002" 2002)

[189] (Kaufman 2007)

[190] ("President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point" 2002)

Thus, the broader security strategy also played a role in shaping the U.S. course of action in Iraq.

President Putin's strategy is a resurrection of the old Russian practices. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, Putin's imperialist foreign policy is almost a continuation of the Soviet practices. He particularly shares many similarities with Stalin who also saw the world divided into the spheres of influence and pursued policies to ensure his presence in power for decades. Putin, who borrows strategies from Stalin, wishes to restore Russia's past glory akin to the Soviet Union, expand its orbit to the post-Soviet zone, and use disruptive tactics, like wars in Georgia and Ukraine, to achieve these goals. Similarly to Bush, he also compared himself to great Russian leaders like Peter I,[191] pointing to his ambitious personality and desire to present himself as a powerful global leader. This kind of ambitious imagery of himself and Russia motivated Putin to invade Ukraine to project his power.

Leaders in both democracies and autocracies build imagery of their legacy, develop strategies around their vision, and invade countries if it fits into their goals. The cases of Iraq and Ukraine demonstrate that the presidents' strategic vision that implies a military intervention can incentivize the leaders to go to war despite the contradictory evidence. In other words, if the presidents have acknowledged the plausibility of the use

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[191] (Roth 2022)

of force to reinforce their political ambitions – the preemptive strategy in Bush's case and previous record of invasions in Putin's case – they will be prone to construct a case to launch an invasion.

4.3. How Staff Can Foster Confirmation Biases

This research has uncovered that along with historical memory and leaders' imagery of their political legacy, their staff also play an important role in confirming presidents' biases. This was the case in both the Bush and Putin administrations when it came to deciding to go to war. While the Bush administration staff influenced the president's response to 9/11 to invade Iraq, the Putin administration blindly followed Putin's agenda. In the end, both administrations supplied the presidents with information that aligned with their beliefs and vision, which nourished the presidents' confirmation biases.

The Bush administration involved some high-level officials like Paul Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney who were associated with PNAC, a nonprofit known for advocating preeminence and the expansion of the 'zone of democratic peace.' His national security advisor Condoleezza Rice was also a known supporter of realpolitik, who had previously expressed that any efforts to acquire WMD should have met with "clear and classical deterrence."[192] Bush, who had limited experience in foreign policy largely relied on his staff, who demonstrated interest in invading Iraq and signed onto creating a plausible

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[192] (Rice 2004, 61)

case that would have Congressional, public, and international support. In this situation, it is natural that the staff supplied the president with information that confirmed his allegations of the culpability of Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. In other words, his staff constituted a source of his confirmation biases.

Similarly to Bush, Putin is also surrounded by people who advocate his disruptive policies and even feel content executing them. However, the difference between the two cases is that Putin's government suppresses any critical opinion and leaves no room for those who show a slight disagreement with his policies. Putin's aspiration as an autocratic leader was intentional, while Bush did not show signs of eradicating different opinions. In the democratic process, certain ideas stand out as a result of discussions and dialogues, and invading Iraq was a dominant theme in the post-9/11 climate. In other words, the supporters of invasion of Iraq outnumbered the opponents. In an autocracy like Russia, on the contrary, critical discussion within the president's close circle or beyond is not an option, as Bondarev demonstrates.[193] As a result, President Putin has created an insulated circle around him, and his staff mostly supplies him with the information that he wishes to hear. The failure to overlook the Russian military's limitations and anticipate the severity of the West's response to the war can to a large extent, attributed to Putin's lack of access to accurate as opposed to aspirational information.

The case of Iraq and Ukraine demonstrate that even though democracy encourages critical thinking and diversity of opinions, it is still prone to biased and erroneous decisions to go to war. In this process staff can play an important role by

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[193] (Bondarev 2022)

supplying the president with the information that confirms his thoughts. Unlike the U.S, the Russian government purposefully suppresses ideas that challenge the status quo or the leader's agenda, but in the end, biased thinking can lead to wars in both cases.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study has suggested that wars are often the products of biased decision-making, as opposed to systemic factors that are popularly used for explaining the wars in Iraq and Ukraine. The Bush administration argued that the war in Iraq was meant to neutralize the threat coming from Saddam Hussein's WMD and Mearsheimer suggested that NATO was the primary trigger of the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, I have laid out the biases that have guided President Bush's and President Putin's thinking: historical memory, which served as availability heuristics; their ambitions and political vision that turned into 'obsessions' and opportunities to demonstrate power; and their unwaveringly supportive staff who intentionally provided the confirming information to the presidents' beliefs. These trends in the presidents' decision-making, I argue, have a far more significant stake in waging war than systemic factors.

This study has also found that while the decision-making process is different in a democracy and an autocracy, leaders in both systems are prone to biases that can encourage them to escalate wars. For example, while Bush did not try to revise U.S. history like Putin did to 'legitimize' the war in Ukraine, he effectively used public diplomacy to link al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, and WMD together. Once on the ground, however, the U.S. forces did not find a relationship between the three. The methods of justifying the two wars were different, but they still lead to the effective conflict framing that was compelling to their target audiences.

History also served as availability heuristics for both leaders. The previous cases of al Qaeda's terrorist attacks in the U.S. and Saddam Hussein's presence in power after the Gulf War immediately designated al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein as suspects in the 9/11 attacks. This strong and prevalent belief in the Bush administration guided his thinking as opposed to the IC reports or other reputable sources. Similarly, Russia's successful incursions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 sparked Putin's belief that he would effectively invade Ukraine in 2022 in a relatively short period and with little resistance. However, the fact that the war has been protracted for over a year points to his unrealistic estimations. For both presidents, history provided compelling evidence, and they made limited efforts to further confirm their beliefs with other sources.

The presidents' staff played a considerable role in validating both presidents' biases that stemmed from historical evidence. Putin has built a system in which there is only room for his supporters, and those who oppose him are either in jail or in exile. His staff follows his vision without question, which is why Putin only gets the information that he wants to hear, not necessarily the *truth*. While democracy encourages the diversity of opinions and the freedom of expression, a similar confirmation bias was also present in the Bush administration. The senior officials of the Bush government advocated a preemptive strategy and invasion of Iraq. They supplied the president with the information that encouraged him to attack Iraq and helped him construct a compelling case for the war. Thus, democracy as a system cannot free leaders from confirmation biases, which their staff can provide.

While democracy has lucid advantages that this research has pointed out, such as the use of public diplomacy instead of revising history, freedom of expression, the

importance of public opinion and international partners – it also has shortcomings that make them less peaceful than democratic peace theorists argue. As this research has demonstrated, the democratic system leaves significant room for biases in leaders' decision-making that can encourage them to wage war and lead them to the same outcome as autocracies. Even though the checks and balances are designed to make the system just, fair, and transparent, they are not always effective enough for preventive wars triggered by the leaders' biased approaches.

The examples of the wars in Iraq and Ukraine show that more diversity of opinions, information exchange with international partners, and reliance on intelligence and other facts-based evidence as opposed to personal beliefs are crucial for less biased and more accurate decision-making. In a democracy like the United States, it is more plausible to address these shortcomings than in an autocracy like Russia, where Putin is synonymous with the system itself. The democratic peace theory has made a valuable contribution by identifying a more peaceful nature of democracies, but it overlooks personal factors such as leaders' biases. Mearsheimer and offensive realism also vest too much significance into systemic factors like NATO's expansion to Russia's borders, undermining the complex historical background of Russo-Ukrainian tensions, Putin's imperialist aspirations, and Ukrainians' rationale to join the alliance. One should not forget that systems and states are operated by humans, and as this research has demonstrated, humans are prone to biases despite a political regime. For this reason, foreign policy actors should approach what might seem *obvious* critically, especially when it comes to escalating a war, and let the evidence guide their beliefs, not the other way around.

The findings of this research can be useful not only for analyzing the past but also for approaching present or future strategic competitions, such as the one between the U.S. and China. The possibility of a war between the two large powers has become a popular topic within foreign policy circles. Almost every reputable Western publication prints about the U.S.-Chinese relations frequently and uses the word *war* somewhere in the text.[194] U.S. Four-Star General Mike Minihan even warned his troops that his "gut" tells him "we [U.S.] will fight in 2025."[195] This trend alludes to the presence of both pro- and anti-war sentiments with China, and the governments now have the responsibility to avoid escalating another war triggered by biases.

The recent developments within the U.S.-Chinese relations have already constructed the history of rivalry, which can serve as availability heuristics for the leaders, if it comes to the conflict escalation. For example, U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in the summer 2022 triggered stark opposition from Beijing and raised concerns within the U.S. and around the Indo-Pacific about the implications of the visit for the U.S.-Chinese rivalry.[196] Following her visit, Beijing launched large-scale military exercises, which started discussions about a possible Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis.[197]

Shortly after Pelosi's trip, the Biden administration signed the CHIPS and Science Act that was meant to "lower costs, create jobs, strengthen supply chains, and counter

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[194] (see Bandow 2023, Beckley 2021, Pomfret et al. 2023, Kristof 2023)

[195] (Campbell 2023, n.p.)

[196] (Blanchette et al. 2022)

[197] (Lin et al., n.d.)

China."[198] As Michael Schuman wrote in his *Atlantic Council* article, Biden "dropped the hammer on China's semiconductor industry by fully implementing a slew of tough controls on the export of American chip technology to China. This is a painful blow to Xi's ambitions to rival the U.S., delivered at the very moment when the Chinese leader has reached the pinnacle of his political influence."[199] The Chinese lashed out at a $52 billion program to expand chip production in the U.S., saying that the Act contains elements that "violate fair market principles and targets Beijing's own efforts to build a semiconductor industry."[200] Beijing perceived the Act as an offensive against Chinese growing technological capabilities,[201] which Xi Jinping considers central to his and China's success.[202]

In February 2023, the IC noticed a Chinese spy balloon 60,000 feet above Montana,[203] which, according to some, was part of China's global surveillance efforts to collect information on the military capabilities of different countries.[204] This event was another blow to already soured relations between the U.S. and China.[205] This dynamic implies that the rivalry between the two powers will intensify, "no matter what strategies

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[198] ("FACT SHEET: CHIPS and Science Act Will Lower Costs, Create Jobs, Strengthen Supply Chains, and Counter China" 2022)

[199] (Schuman 2022, n.p.)

[200] (*Bloomberg.com* 2022, n.p.)

[201] (Ibid)

[202] (Schuman 2022)

[203] (*CNN* 2023)

[204] (Buckley 2023)

[205] (Long, Miller, and Madhani 2023)

the two sides pursue or what events unfold."[206] However, it does not have to turn into a bloody war, which would be far more devastating than "anything Americans faced before."[207]

A war, however, will become more likely, if this ongoing rivalry is paired with a president's obsession to attack China, and even more likely if his/her staff will almost unwaveringly support the decision, as this research suggests. The growing tensions between China and the U.S. put pressure on the U.S. government to closely follow the evidence as opposed to personal beliefs or "gut"[208] feelings, to counter possible biases and avoid blundering into another war.

Out of the three factors that this research has identified as sources of leaders' biases – historical memory, leaders' ambitions and political vision, and unwaveringly supportive staff – the first one is already present. The history of the U.S.-Chinese rivalry is shaping up now, and it can serve as availability heuristics in decision-making in the future. The U.S. and the rest of the world have the responsibility of avoiding the other two factors from developing. Otherwise, the planet could face another calamitous war.

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[206] (Rudd, Mitter, and Fellman 2021)

[207] (Babbage 2023, n.p.)

[208] (Campbell 2023, n.p.)

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Appendix:

Abbreviations:

CIA - Central Intelligence Agency

IC - Intelligence Community

ISIS - the Islamic State also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

KGB - Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (Russia's Committee of State Security)

PNAC - Project For a New American Century

SSR - Soviet Socialist Republic

USSR - Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics or the Soviet Union

WMD - Weapons of Mass Destruction

9/11 - September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks