

The Idea of an Iraqi Threat: A Constructivist Analysis of George W. Bush's Securitizing Move After 9/11

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Existing literature explaining the origin of the Iraq War is often either not sufficiently compatible with securitization theory's assumptions or overlooks the importance of the dynamics preceding the securitization attempt. This article thus seeks to explain why George W. Bush decided to securitize Saddam Hussein's Iraq by focusing on an individual level analysis of the U.S. president. The article utilizes Roxanna Sjöstedt's framework that includes the analysis of the idea diffusion process, identities as potential facilitators of idea acceptance and beliefs that affect the individual internalization of the said idea. The results show that all three factors were decisive for the securitization of Iraq to occur. Furthermore, they suggest the implication that individual-level factors also have significant and independent explanatory value in addition to more conventional system-level analyses of international security.

Keywords: *Iraq War, Securitization, Idea Diffusion, Identity, Beliefs, Operational Code*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

After the tragic terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush officially declared war on terror. In this context, the Bush administration accused Iraq of possessing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in an attempt to establish a connection between the Iraqi leadership and the new terrorist threat. The Iraq War seems especially controversial in hindsight because the WMDs, which served as a justification for the necessity of war, were not found, even after Saddam Hussein was removed from power. Thus, the assumptions on which the George W. Bush administration based its decision to go to war turned out to be false. Due to these circumstances, this article aims at illuminating the discrepancy between the invasion of Iraq and the lack of an Iraqi threat.

1.2. Literature Review

The reasons behind the controversial decision for the Iraq War, as well as the potential motivations of certain individual actors and the administration as a whole, have been subject to scrutiny by many scholars. Ahsan I. Butt, for example, sees the Iraq War as a struggle to reinforce American hegemony (2019). David A. Lake holds that Saddam Hussein's inability to credibly commit to not developing WMDs, together with "informational asymmetries," help understand the occurrence of the Iraq War (2010).

Other scholars correspond to this article's research in the sense that they identify potential reasons for the invasion on the individual level. David Patrick Houghton, drawing from political psychology, speculates about various potential reasons that may have contributed to the Iraq War decision. Some of the factors suggested by Houghton are impulsive gut

decisions, the principle of the drunkard's search — “[looking] for evidence in psychologically *convenient* [italics in the original] places”—the attempt to keep cognitive consistency and the groupthink phenomenon which can explain “dysfunctional behavior in groups” (2008). Colin Campbell tells the following causal story about the decision: the administration had

[personalized] the struggle against al Qaeda as a matter of “getting” Osama bin Laden. When bin Laden's escape, probably to Pakistan, proved that approach a failure, the political impasse thus created left the road open for administration hawks who had long been interested in overthrowing Saddam Hussein to change the subject and press for regime change in Iraq. This gambit played so well to the president's natural reflexes that it gained primacy within the political executive without a rigorous examination of the complexities of its implementation or the potential damage it could do to U.S. standing in the global community. (2004)

With this explanation, as this article's analysis shows, Campbell gets close to the core of the issue in two important regards: Firstly, the neoconservatives did indeed push for the removal of Saddam Hussein quite firmly when they saw the opportunity to do so effectively. Secondly, Bush's personality mattered a great deal in subsequently putting the issue on the administration's agenda. However, much more attention needs to be paid to the role of identity constructions and personal beliefs to add explanatory weight to these factors. Furthermore, much of the already existing literature is characterized by a theoretical incompatibility with securitization theory.

This theory posits that security problems are not pre-given but socially constructed. Through a speech act that describes an issue as an existential threat, the issue becomes a security problem (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). Because the alleged Iraqi threat proved to be wrong, viewing the nature of security through the lens of securitization theory can be very useful in this case (Hughes, 2007). An apparent securitization process took place, which turned Iraq into a security issue that necessitated immediate action. The Iraqi regime was eventually presented as a threat that required measures beyond normal politics (Hughes, 2007). This depiction constituted the securitizing move.

When looking at this case from this perspective, it becomes evident that realist attempts at explaining the Iraq War—even if not necessarily wrong—are not sufficient concerning the dynamics they can effectively demonstrate. Because of the lack of convincing evidence for a substantial threat emanating from Iraq, a constructivist security theory becomes more useful. As Bryn Hughes writes, “[i]f it is shown there is a weak connection between the practice of security and the existence of material threat factors, then traditional perspectives falter, whereas securitization's theoretical utility is apparent” (2007).

Even though literature that applies securitization theory to the case of Iraq exists, there remains a gap regarding the explanation of Bush's securitizing move. Hughes' analysis, for instance, focuses on the securitization process after the securitizing move. Hughes looks at the events preceding the Iraq War to find out if securitization theory can serve as a potent tool for explaining this case. He makes an essential contribution through his finding that securitization is indeed useful and appropriate in this context (2007). Consequently, it becomes viable to speak of the existence of a securitizing move performed by George W. Bush and to make an attempt to explain it. However, Hughes more or less views the Bush administration as one unit and suggests political motives as a significant reason for the securitization (2007). Here, the authors of this article disagree with Hughes. This article argues that George W. Bush, as the most important and powerful securitizing actor, needs to

be analytically divorced from the rest of the administration. Furthermore, Bush's motivation for securitizing Iraq was based to a great extent on his perception of Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a threat.

Additionally to the research done on the securitization process itself, some authors focus on the audience acceptance that made the securitization of Iraq successful. Ciaran O'Reilly, for instance, tries to contribute to answering the question of why the U.S.' securitization of Iraq was successful. He concludes that the American media played an important role in the public support of military intervention by not only being influenced by the post-9/11 patriotism that prevailed at the time but also by reinforcing it (2008).

Ido Oren and Ty Solomon offer a reinterpretation of the securitization of Iraq. They argue that the securitization was successful due to the "collective chanting of a phrase": weapons of mass destruction (2015: 316). The acceptance of securitization theory as a useful tool for explaining the Iraq War is growing. Nevertheless, none of these studies sufficiently explain the dynamics that led to the securitizing move itself.

This gap results in the article's research question: Why did George W. Bush perform this securitizing move? By answering this question, the article explains the securitization of Iraq and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the decision to invade Iraq. It further attempts to show that Bush as an individual actor and his perception—in contrast to political motives—were decisive. Furthermore, the article's relevance can be found in offering another empirical example for Roxanna Sjöstedt's framework for explaining securitizing moves, which is used to approximate the answer to the above-posed question.

1.3. Methodology

1.3.1. Theoretical Framework

Sjöstedt's framework follows a particular logic: When a specific idea is diffused, identities play a role in its rejection or acceptance by the decision-maker or securitizing actor. The degree of the subsequent internalization of the idea, which is influenced by the beliefs of the securitizing individual, is then decisive for whether an idea of a security threat is brought onto the agenda or not. The securitizing move follows from this process (2013). In actuality, however, the individual processes do not necessarily take place chronologically. They can be very much intertwined.

Sjöstedt's approach is useful because it allows for explaining why something is framed as a security problem at a specific instant of time (2013). Without tracing the internalization process of the idea the alleged threat is based on, it is impossible to tell when and for what reason the person in question made up his or her mind about an issue. Systemic theories are not well-suited for this endeavor because demonstrating the internalization is not viable without an individual-level analysis. This circumstance constitutes one of the reasons why Sjöstedt's framework proves much more beneficial than system-level theories of international relations such as conventional constructivism and neorealism.

The latter is not an appropriate tool for investigating how threats are created in any case. As Sjöstedt argues, "because neorealism views threats as objective and existing externally to individual perceptions, the whole problematization of threat construction becomes moot" (2013). It does not explain why some of the allegedly real threats become urgent security issues, while others with similar characteristics do not.

On the contrary, however, despite constructivism's being mainly concerned with the international system as the subject of analysis, this examination heavily draws on

constructivist assumptions. It can thus be called a constructivist analysis. The analytical framework adopted in this article, for instance, borrows the presumption that independent variables do not necessarily have to be material. Besides, constructivist security analysis often regards both ideas and identities as central concepts. However, by comprising individual internalization, the framework at use here deviates from “the constructivist focus on structures as determinants to behavior” (Sjöstedt, 2013).

1.3.2. Method

Methodically, the article utilizes textual analysis of primary and secondary sources with an interpretative method.¹ The internalization process is tracked through differences over time since they can be useful for determining an internalization (Sjöstedt, 2013). If the analysis finds significant change over time—meaning that later statements or behavior embrace the diffused idea—an internalization of the idea can be assumed. The analysis of Bush’s beliefs interprets the findings by drawing from the congruence procedure, which Alexander L. George describes as the conclusion from a consistency of the individual’s beliefs with the decision made—in this case, a securitizing move—to a potential causal character of the said beliefs. The interpretation of the effects of the beliefs on the decision is made deductively (1979). This article’s analysis is organized according to the three analytical steps in Sjöstedt’s framework. First, the idea diffusion process is demonstrated. The following chapter then illuminates identities that influenced the idea’s acceptance. Lastly, the analysis focuses on Bush’s beliefs and examines the degree to which he internalized the said idea.

2. THE DIFFUSION PROCESS OF THE THREAT IDEA (1996–2001)

2.1. Neoconservative Efforts to Demonstrate the Iraqi Threat Before 9/11

As Jeffrey Record states, “momentum for a war with Iraq had existed before 9/11 and even before President George W. Bush took office” (2010). Thus, efforts to spread the idea have been made already significantly earlier than George W. Bush’s first administration. The most influential ideological camp regarding the presentation of Iraq as a threat to the U.S. was the neoconservatives. Neoconservatives are convinced that the concepts of democracy and freedom can be used to defeat evil. They further advocate “an activist and interventionist foreign policy” (Richardson, 2014). An essential instrument for spreading neoconservative ideas was *The Weekly Standard*, which was a political magazine founded by William Kristol in 1995 (Record, 2010). According to John Dumbrell, *The Weekly Standard* formed, together with the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a key institution of neoconservative ideology (2005). Neoconservative sentiments also must have been imperative for William Kristol and Robert Kagan to found the PNAC in 1997. As stated by Tom Barry, the think tank was created to promote policies that would enable the U.S. to reign supreme in the new century (2006).

The years from 1996 to 1998 were a particularly productive period for the neoconservative idea entrepreneurs. For example, the founders of PNAC, Kristol and Kagan,

¹ The most significant primary sources are George W. Bush’s speeches and remarks. Others are newspaper articles. The most important secondary source this research draws on is Sjöstedt’s article that developed the theoretical framework at use here.

wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs*, in which they used the term “rogue state” to describe Iraq (1996). It does not require much fantasy to conclude that Iraq was presented as a threat in this context since the term “rogue state” itself implies a threat. Furthermore, as stated above, 1997 was the founding year of the PNAC, in whose Statement of Principles it said that “America has a vital role in maintaining peace and security in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. If we shirk our responsibilities, we invite challenges to our fundamental interests. The history of the 20th century should have taught us that it is important to shape circumstances before crises emerge, and to meet threats before they become dire” (Abrams et al., 1997).

In the same year, *The Weekly Standard* published an article that called for regime change in Iraq with military means. It further claimed dangerous progress in Saddam Hussein’s program to develop WMDs (Kristol and Kagan, 1997). Such statements implied that Iraq constituted a threat that needed to be taken care of before it could “become dire” (Abrams et al., 1997). In concurrence with this displaying of Saddam’s Iraq as a threat, a PNAC letter sent to President Bill Clinton in January 1998 directly called for regime change via military means (Abrams et al., 1998). However, the Clinton administration did not seem to show much interest in a solution involving the U.S. military (Loeb, 1998). The neoconservative idea entrepreneurs failed to convince the U.S. government to remove Saddam Hussein via the means they advocated.

With the Bush administration, the position of the idea entrepreneurs improved. As Charles-Philippe David holds, one strategy for entrepreneurs is to “position themselves as wielders of influence within the administration’s decision-making process” (2015). Hence, when many of them became part of the U.S. government, neoconservatives assumed a position of power, which is a crucial factor for increasing the entrepreneurs’ credibility and the attention paid to the idea (Sjöstedt, 2013). In other words, the probability that the central decision-maker, President George W. Bush, got exposed to the idea and decided in favor of the neoconservative agenda could be increased drastically.

Not long after Bush’s election, members of the administration addressed Iraq. Consequently, the Bush administration discussed the issue without, however, achieving any clear consensus (Mazarr, 2007). Nevertheless, “national security advice to the president was dominated by Vice President Cheney, and he was effectively able to manage the policy process” (Pfiffner, 2009). His preferences concurred with neoconservative ideas about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. Paul Wolfowitz, who served as Deputy Secretary of Defense under Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at the time, also pushed for actions against Saddam (Mazarr, 2007). Nevertheless, the debates during the early administration lacked urgency and did not result in any actions (Mazarr, 2007).

2.2. The Neoconservatives’ Establishing a Connection Between Iraq and the Terrorist Threat After 9/11

David writes that entrepreneurs “must take advantage of opportunities to frame the available options in the way most favorable to their view” (2015). With the events of 9/11, such an opportunity came along. Michael J. Mazarr supports the intentionality of these endeavors by stating that they “used the post-9–11 atmosphere to promote a policy option in which they fervently believed” (2007).

However, the proponents of regime change had to explain Saddam Hussein’s involvement logically. On September 20, for instance, a letter from the PNAC was sent to Bush. This letter suggested the possibility that Iraq was involved in the terrorist attacks. The letter went

on to argue for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in the context of fighting terrorism, even if lacking evidence for his involvement (Kristol et al., 2001). Record states that the underlying logic of this argument was that the assistance from a rogue state was needed to conduct “such spectacular actions” (2010). When the terrorist attacks on the U.S. happened, it only required a slight adjustment of the threat idea to effectively utilize the event for their purposes. This adjustment was the linkage of the Iraqi threat with the war on terror.

Since President Bush eventually made a securitizing move, it can be assumed that the idea entrepreneurs’ calculations tallied. Thus, this article concludes that not only the linkage of terrorism and rogue states but also the idea of Iraq as a threat to the U.S. were successfully diffused after 9/11. The next essential task is now to identify the identities that functioned as catalysts for the acceptance of the threat idea.

3. IDENTITIES AS CATALYSTS FOR THE THREAT ACCEPTANCE

3.1. The U.S.’ Democratic Identity

According to Jarrod Hayes, a democratic identity is not only decisive in regard to the relationship between democratic countries—states increasingly believe that democracies do not engage in activities of war with each other (Wendt, 1999)—but also consequential for how democratic states interact with others that do not belong to this group (2016).

Additionally to the constitution of the Self, ideas about the Other are also part of identities (Wendt, 1999). Hayes states that decision-makers in democratic countries “attempt to demonstrate that the external actor is beyond reason or trust and could use violence against the home state (an existential threat)” to justify policies involving force against such states. This behavior includes stressing how undemocratic they are (2016).

One example is the stark contrast in the U.S. policies toward the nuclear developments of India and Iran. While Iran, a state that signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), was presented as threatening, the same did not happen in regard to India despite its not even being a signatory to the NPT (Hayes, 2009). Hayes holds that “in democracies, securitization fails when the object is also generally regarded as a democracy” (2012). The undemocratic nature of an allegedly threatening Other, however, has the opposite effect. It drastically increases the likelihood of the securitization to succeed.

This article argues that such an identity also matters for the acceptance of a threat idea by decision-makers themselves because they possess the same democratic identity as the general public. As Hayes states, “leaders have internalized the democratic norms and identity, shaping their personal perception of threat” (2009). Thus, it is only logical that the presentation of a regime as undemocratic increases the probability that it is perceived as a threat. The idea entrepreneurs instrumentalized the democratic identity when trying to convince Bush of the Iraqi threat. Brian C. Schmidt and Michael C. Williams hold that “[a] democratic Iraq, it was argued, would result in a dramatic change in its foreign policy and would remove the terrorist threat that was (erroneously) argued to emanate from Baghdad” (2008). This argument undoubtedly implies a connection between the threat and Iraq’s undemocratic political system. In this way, the idea entrepreneurs could link their idea to Bush’s existing democratic identity.

Moreover, if democratic states do not pose a threat, the global spread of democracy can be presented as desirable. Why neoconservatives did so when diffusing the idea that Iraq

constitutes a threat becomes more apparent when considering that “[t]o be an authentic neoconservative was to be a crusader of sorts, if not on God’s behalf at least on behalf of liberal democratic ideals” (Bacevich and Prodromou, 2004). The U.S.’ identity as a “democratizer” after 9/11 (Sjöstedt, 2007) is thus related to its general democratic identity. According to Eric Van Rythoven, the “narrative of a destiny of democracy promotion and combating tyranny came to represent a unique and desirable self-image, an *identity* [italics in the original] of ‘American Exceptionalism’” (2016). Active democracy promotion is, thus, of further importance because it establishes a relation between the democratic identity and American exceptionalism, which is covered in the following section.

3.2. American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism is characterized by the conviction that the U.S. is not only superior and without equal but also “blessed by the divine [...] for a special mission” (Chapman, 2014). However, the early Puritan settlers advocated an exemplary kind of exceptionalism. Henry W. Brands writes that exemplarists see the U.S.’ responsibility only in serving as an example and are afraid that intervening in other states’ issues “could jeopardize American values at the source.” On the opposite side are the vindicators, who believe that military power should be utilized to deal with evil (1998). At the beginning of Bush’s first term, it seemed like a more exemplaristic form of exceptionalism was to be expected. For instance, Bush “argued that an arrogant and overbearing U.S. interventionism would generate resentment and only complicate U.S. foreign relations” (Herrmann and Reese, 2004).

However, the neoconservatives’ positions concurred with the description of vindicators above. Military intervention to enforce regime change and the subsequent establishment of a democratic political system are clear indicators of the imperialistic interpretation of American exceptionalism. As Barry holds, “exceptionalism and supremacy” were part of the PNAC’s Statement of Principles from 1997 already (2006). Therefore, the neoconservative ideology brought a rather imperialistic version of American exceptionalism into the Bush administration. Nonetheless, Bush did not decide in favor of regime change in Iraq through military means before September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks on the U.S., again, proved to be the decisive event.

Mike Milford argues that 9/11 revealed how vulnerable the U.S. was and endangered the superior feeling resulting from American exceptionalism: “When such crises occur, they undermine that assumption of supremacy and jeopardize the national identity it sustains” (2016). Such a loss of security concerning one’s identity requires an adequate response to counteract. Thus, President Bush made an effort to restore the identity of the U.S. (Milford, 2016) and emphasized its superior position. He utilized American exceptionalism to “[give] the audience a familiar frame through which to view the current crisis” (Milford, 2016). In other words, the Bush administration counteracted the insecurity of American identity by stressing the U.S.’ exceptionality. Bush, in this way, brought exceptionalism to the fore again.

Then, the neoconservatives used the attacks from September 11, 2001, as a chance to substantiate “‘America’s Mission’ to reshape the world” (Cha, 2015). Many justifications used by the neoconservatives were already deeply anchored in the self-conception of Americans. The neoconservatives easily connected their idea and American identity in this context. Consequently, this already existing aspect of Bush’s identity could be deftly altered. As the Bush Doctrine showed, the identity of exceptionalism moved closer toward its imperialistic form. Maria Helena de Castro Santos and Ulysses Tavares Teixeira “identify four major

tenets in the Bush Doctrine: preemption, unilateralism, military supremacy and the exporting of democracy” (2013). These principles show the influence of exceptionalism. Unilateralism can be viewed as exemption. Supremacy is a defining feature of American exceptionalism as well. What indicates this doctrine’s imperialistic interpretation of exceptionalism is the advocacy of preemption to deal with threats and the establishment of democracy in the targeted state. As de Castro Santos and Tavares Teixeira state, in the Bush Doctrine, democracy was “the ultimate and definitive solution to terrorism and tyranny” (2013). Hence, the events of 9/11 made it easier to resort to an imperialistic interpretation of exceptionalism in order to establish democracy in Iraq. Nicholas J. Wheeler comes to a related conclusion when he writes that the Bush administration used the unique terrorist threat to the U.S. as a justification for “laying claim to special rights that it wishes to deny to others” and “[using] its position of military superiority to promote a world safe for democratic values, and is thus justified in deciding when other states should forfeit their sovereign rights” (2003). Against this backdrop, it becomes difficult to avoid the argument that American exceptionalism facilitated the acceptance of the idea that Iraq and Saddam Hussein constituted a threat that needed to be addressed.

3.3. The Influence of Religion

In a democratic political system, it is necessary to tolerate religious differences (Hayes, 2009). In other words, the democratic identity overwrites religious identity to a certain degree and makes it more difficult to resort to the Christian identity of the majority of Americans as opposed to Iraq’s being primarily Islamic. Thus, at first glance, it seems likely that Christian identity was not decisive. However, there is a loophole in American identity that enables the exertion of influence by the religious identity of the U.S. on the acceptance of the threat idea. This loophole is civil religion.

Civil religion makes it possible for the government to uphold the principle of religious tolerance while simultaneously drawing from the Christian religion. According to Lee Marsden, “civil religion is based on a protestant belief system or morality and values and the need for a religious foundation to life. Divine characteristics are ascribed to the United States itself, while the president, rather than any religious leader, in times of crisis becomes pastor-in-chief” (2011). It is essentially the “intertwining of religion and patriotism” (Chapman, 2014). Civil religion creates an identity shared by all Americans. It further allows presidents to “draw from a Christian heritage, and often individual Christian belief, without alienating believers of other faiths and non-believers” (Marsden, 2011).

One significant consequence of civil religion combined with a self-perception based on exceptionalism was the enablement of an identity construction that juxtaposed in opposition the U.S. and terrorists after September 11. To be sure, Bush’s personal beliefs most likely gave the impetus to initiate this identity construction of a “good” Self against an “evil” Other that was constituted by terrorists and their supporters. However, such a constitution could be effective only due to the civil religion permeating American society and the self-understanding as a country chosen by God. Neil J. Smelser holds that a close connection between a country and God can lead to strife with another state being framed in terms of good against evil (2004). Furthermore, as Wade Clark Roof states, “[w]ith this identification of an enemy there came a resurfacing of the nation’s myths of innocence and goodness” (2009). The new identity construction as the good U.S. versus evil terrorists and exceptionalism, which emphasizes America’s goodness, reinforced one another. This article thus argues that

Table 1. Effects of Identity Constructions on the Idea Acceptance

Aspect of the U.S. identity	Identity Construction	Important Facilitating Factors	Result
Democratic identity	Democratic U.S. versus Iraqi dictatorship	The Iraqi threat was connected to its undemocratic political system	Iraq appeared more threatening because it belonged to the undemocratic outgroup
American exceptionalism	American exceptionalism moved toward a more imperialistic form	Increased influence of neoconservatives in the Bush administration & National vulnerability after 9/11	Iraq was more likely perceived as a threat that required extraordinary measures
Civil religion	Good U.S. versus evil terrorists (including its rogue state supporters)	The utilization of religious concepts such as “good” and “evil” & Iraq’s alleged support of terrorists	Iraq appeared to be a greater threat due to its leadership’s implied evil nature

this shared identity brought about by civil religion indirectly allowed for the perception of Iraq from a Christian perspective when Iraq was presented as a rogue state that allegedly supported Islamist terrorist groups. By establishing this link, the neoconservatives effectively shaped this identity construction. The acceptance of Iraq as a threat was consequently facilitated.

The diffused idea and the identity aspects together form the foundation for a potential internalization by the decision-maker in question. When an idea is diffused, particular identities can accelerate or inhibit whether the idea will be embraced or not. Unless, as Sjöstedt remarks, the threat is perceived because of a particular identity itself. Identities can thus function in both ways (2013). The former demonstrates the connection between identity—newly constructed or not—and internalization. As mentioned above, identity serves as a facilitator or impediment for a potential internalization of the idea that has been spread.

In summary, the democratic identity, exceptionalism and the religious character of American identity all contributed to enabling the idea acceptance. In the case of the identity construction of the good U.S. as opposed to evil terrorists, it can be further argued that this aspect of identity even constituted the threat to a certain extent. This concurs with the other function of identities, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Overall, the internalization of the threat idea becomes thus conceivable. If and to which degree this internalization took place is addressed in the next section.

4. BUSH'S BELIEFS AND THE INTERNALIZATION OF THE THREAT

4.1. The Process of Bush's Internalization of the Threat Idea

According to Bush himself, his administration was going to be characterized by humbleness (Bacevich and Prodromou, 2004). As Richard K. Herrmann and Michael J. Reese write, Bush expressed that imperiously intervening would cause irritation and thus impede relations with other countries (2004). Consequently, it can be assumed that he did not perceive any foreign countries as immediate threats to the U.S.' national security at this point. Thus, the idea of a threatening Iraq was not internalized yet.

Before 9/11, Bush was not entirely satisfied with the current policy toward Iraq but saw non-military options as plausible (Woodward, 2004). Mazarr, who interviewed former senior government officials in the Bush administration, supports this evaluation by stating that "no one with whom I spoke read the meeting as an indication that George Bush was anxious to go after Saddam" (2007). This statement refers to the first meetings of the National Security Council during the early Bush administration in January and February 2001 that addressed the Iraq issue. Hence, Bush did not seem to perceive Iraq as an urgent threat yet.

9/11 was decisive for the internalization process as well. To roughly demonstrate that an internalization process took place, this article divides it into three stages. These three stages are 1) when Bush viewed Iraq as threatening but not sufficiently to justify preemptive war, 2) when he began to consider going to war and gave instructions to plan such an option and 3) when the actual decision for military intervention was made. The second and third stages are viewed as a progressive intensification of the threat perception because unilateral military action hints at a greater threat due to the underlying urgency, especially when the use of force is preemptive. Hence, if Bush was willing to go down this path, it is likely that the perceived threat was significant enough to risk great reputation loss, which Bush himself declared to not only be aware of but also trying to avoid before as well as at the beginning of his presidency.

David Mitchell and Tansa George Massoud hold that the terrorist attacks not only changed President Bush's perception of Iraq but consequently also led to more support for the idea of the neoconservative advisors to Bush (2009). Nonetheless, the internalization of the threat idea did not seem to have reached its climax yet right after the attacks. On September 19, for example, when asked about a connection of Iraq with the attacks eight days prior, Bush avoided making any direct statement about Iraq and said that "anybody who houses a terrorist, encourages terrorism will be held accountable. And we are gathering all evidence on this particular crime and other crimes against freedom-loving people" (2001b). While the idea of terrorist-supporting states was established at this point, such an evasive statement makes possible the interpretation that the idea of the Iraqi threat was not internalized enough to make any confident statements about a direct relationship between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In the Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress, one day later, Bush also made no mention of Saddam Hussein or any connection of Iraq with the attacks in the context of the war on terror (2001c). Furthermore, Bob Woodward states that Bush was actually worried that Wolfowitz and Cheney might be trying to "settle old scores with Saddam Hussein" (2002).

However, even if Bush was not confident enough about the Iraqi threat to make an explicit statement at this point, he indeed began to internalize the idea shortly after September 11. Richard Clarke recalls President Bush's giving the following instructions just one day after the attacks: "See if Saddam did this. See if he's linked in any way." Even Clarke's

assuring that there was no evidence for such a connection was followed up by Bush with the repeated instruction to inspect Iraq (2004). Thus it can be safely assumed that Bush started to internalize the idea that Iraq was a threat since he suspected Saddam Hussein to be a supporter of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. Consequently, Bush pushed his team to uncover evidence that would support such a suspicion.

On September 17, only six days after the attacks, George W. Bush signed the war plan for Afghanistan, which also contained the instruction for the Pentagon to plan options to invade Iraq. Whether this can be regarded as a sign that Bush ordered the planning of a military operation at this point is questionable, in any case. As Glenn Kessler further remarks, this direction to plan a potential war in Iraq was mentioned in the more than 20 pages long document “almost as a footnote” (2003). At the latest in November 2001, it became clear, however, that Bush began to seriously consider the option to go to war with Iraq when he asked Rumsfeld to plan the invasion (Woodward, 2004). One speech act proving that Bush was considering the option of war was the following utterance: “Saddam’s a threat. This is an option” (Woodward, 2004).

In the State of the Union Address from January 29, 2002, Bush made one of the most explicit statements about the threat emanating from the Iraqi leadership by directly claiming that Iraq supported terrorists. Intentions to preemptively attack Iraq, however, were not explicitly stated (2002). James P. Pfiffner suspects that Bush “made up his own mind about the war sometime early in 2002” (2009). Richard Haass recalls Condoleezza Rice’s telling him that Bush decided for war in early July 2002 (Lemann, 2003). Therefore, at the latest in July, George W. Bush fully internalized the idea that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was a threat severe enough to enforce regime change by military means. In September of the same year, President Bush sought a congressional resolution that would authorize such a use of force (Mazarr, 2007).

The fast nature of the internalization process leads to the assumption that George W. Bush’s beliefs concurred with the threat idea to a great extent because concurring beliefs accelerate the internalization (Sjöstedt, 2013). Hence, the next section of this article examines which of Bush’s beliefs enabled such a quick internalization of the threat idea.

Tracing the internalization also adds weight to the argument that Bush’s threat perception was not entirely founded on supposed evidence of WMDs presented to him. While it is impossible to exclude an effect of the intelligence reports he received, the concurrence of observable change over time with the measurable change of his operational code—which is explicated below—lends credibility to this approach. Against this backdrop, it becomes less likely that the Iraq War occurred due to reasons predicted by traditional realist approaches to security. Even until well after Saddam was overthrown, substantial evidence of WMDs was not uncovered. It appears most plausible that Bush internalized the idea of an Iraqi threat for reasons that can be found in ideational factors, identity and personal beliefs. Even if unsubstantial intelligence reports demonstrating the alleged existence of WMDs affected Bush, it remains likely that they did so because of the factors laid out in this article.

4.2. The Change of Bush’s Operational Code

Operational code refers to “a significant portion of the actor’s entire set of beliefs about political life” (George, 1969) with two separate belief categories: instrumental beliefs about how to achieve certain political outcomes and philosophical beliefs “[referring] to assumptions and premises [...] regarding the fundamental nature of politics, the nature of

political conflict, the role of the individual in history, etc.” (George, 1969).

According to Sam Robison, Bush initially had a “moderately strong, positive belief in the use of cooperation toward achieving his policy objectives” and saw “himself as a benign leader in a moderately friendly world” (2006). Bush viewed the world as relatively harmonious and believed that cooperation was an effective approach to achieve one’s political goals. In regard to cooperation, Bush was even above the average of pre-9/11 U.S. presidents (Robison, 2006). As the results of Jonathan Renshon’s study demonstrate, Bush’s beliefs about the nature of the political universe were reinforced when he became president. He then viewed it even more optimistically (2008). It is plausible to assume that such optimistic political beliefs constituted a significant hindrance to the successful diffusion of the idea that Iraq was a threat that had to be taken care of urgently. By 2002, however, regime change in Iraq became the highest priority in the U.S.’ foreign policy despite rather weak evidence (Bacevich and Prodromou, 2004). The obvious reason for this policy change to suggest would be the terrorist attacks. However, not the attacks themselves, but the resulting changes in George W. Bush’s operational code were decisive for this policy change. After 9/11, Bush’s political beliefs changed quite drastically. Robison holds that Bush became not only “more conflict-oriented and hostile toward the rest of the world” but also “more pessimistic regarding the realization of his goals” (2006).

Renshon’s study of Bush’s operational code results in the same findings (2008), thus offering more evidence that Bush’s decisive political beliefs indeed changed. Renshon further writes that Bush’s “conception of the ‘other’ shifted dramatically” (2008). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Bush’s perception of Iraq as a threat increased after 9/11. He viewed the world as significantly more conflictual and hostile. Hence, the neoconservatives’ attempts to portray Iraq and Saddam Hussein as threatening matched well with Bush’s newly changed perception of the world itself. Robison similarly speculates that the philosophy of the more hawkish advisors in Bush’s administration seemed to be more reasonable to the president. Offensive action now appeared to be necessary (2006).

Interestingly, and crucial for one of the central arguments of this article—that George W. Bush as an individual made a decisive difference—Bush’s advisors did not change much after 9/11 regarding their political beliefs. While Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz—three primary idea entrepreneurs—held quite pessimistic and conflictual views of the world, more dovish members of the Bush administration such as Powell thought of it in more “cooperative and friendly” terms. According to Robison’s findings, they maintained their views even after the terrorist attacks (2006). These findings imply that the events of 9/11 were not necessarily causing a change in U.S. foreign policy. The fact that George W. Bush was the leader of the country played a crucial role in bringing about this new direction. Another president might have kept his more cooperative beliefs of the political world—assuming that they would have been cooperative to begin with—just like Powell did even after the shock of 9/11.

Religious beliefs could be a decisive factor explaining why George W. Bush’s operational code shifted after the terrorist attacks on the U.S. Below, this article elaborates on the specific role played by Bush’s religious beliefs for his changing perception of the world and, consequently, Iraq.

4.3. Bush’s Religious Beliefs

Andrew J. Bacevich and Elizabeth H. Prodromou hold that how Bush saw the global role of the U.S. was not influenced much by his religious convictions before the presidential

election (2004). This circumstance does not mean that he did not hold religious views. Instead, it seems that he did not apply them to foreign affairs before his presidency. One reason could be his “inexperience in world affairs” to which Bush himself admitted (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). However, he undoubtedly held particular religious beliefs that influenced how he approached politics. The prominent position religious guiding principles took in George W. Bush’s political life is demonstrated by his own words in *A Charge to Keep*: “I could not be governor if I did not believe in a divine plan that supersedes all human plans. Politics is a fickle business. Polls change. [...] My faith frees me. Frees me to put the problem of the moment in proper perspective. [...] Frees me to do the right thing, even though it may not poll well” (1999). Thus, religious values played a role for Bush already before 9/11 and even before he became the U.S. president. After 9/11 occurred, however, Bush’s rhetoric could be characterized as “messianic and crusading.” Lauren F. Turek speculates that Bush’s response to 9/11 was influenced by “his experiences as a governor, incorporating religious rhetoric into his political philosophy” (2014).

As Bacevich and Prodromou argue, after 9/11, “religion offered an immediately available frame of reference that enabled President Bush to make sense of otherwise senseless events” (2004). They further state that “Bush had to rely on his own resources and trust his own instincts. Thus the personal theology of George W. Bush began to infuse itself into the Bush administration’s statecraft” (2004). Hence, since 9/11, his religious values exerted influence on American foreign policy (Bacevich and Prodromou, 2004). This religious impact on U.S. foreign policy became evident through how the war on terror, as well as the Bush Doctrine, was articulated in distinctly religious language (den Dulk and Rozell, 2011).

Religious elements have been used in President Bush’s remarks and speeches frequently. To be sure, one could argue that Bush himself did not draft the latter. However, Bush’s principal speechwriter, Michael Gerson, knew and shared his faith (Mayer and Rozell, 2005). Moreover, Bush requested Gerson to include biblical references in the speeches he wrote for him, which are, as Alexander Moens phrases it, “pieces of Bush’s own identity” (2004). For these reasons, it can be assumed that Bush’s speechwriter had similar values and reflected Bush’s religious convictions in his speeches. Inferring Bush’s views regarding his religiosity from these speeches thus becomes viable and valid. Therefore, this article does not distinguish between spontaneous remarks and prepared speeches.

4.3.1. The Universal Desirability of Freedom

In his first inaugural address, Bush said that “[o]ur democratic faith is more than the creed of our country. It is the inborn hope of our humanity” (2001a), thus expressing that all humans equally desire democracy. Three years later, in his 2003 State of the Union Address, Bush revealed the religious nature of his belief in the universal value of freedom: “[T]he liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world; it is God’s gift to humanity” (2003). Not only is freedom a universal value but also given to humanity by God.

Here civil religion is of importance again. Robert N. Bellah states that one “important tradition of interpretation” is constituted by the ideas that “America is God’s country, and that American power in the world is identical with morality and God’s will” (1980). To be sure, the fact that there is a shared American identity under civil religion does not mean that such an extreme interpretation is necessarily shared as well. However, when taking a look at George W. Bush’s post-9/11 speeches, it becomes apparent that he shared this particular interpretation of civil religion to a certain degree. Consequently, civil religion had a significant impact on how Bush viewed the role of the U.S. in the world after the September

11 terrorist attacks. Since Bush relied on his religious compass immediately after the attacks occurred, his convictions came to the fore. Together with civil religion, they established a clear mission from Bush's perspective. Jillinda Weaver writes that "George W. Bush mixes civil religion and mission, religious symbolism and legitimation of national purpose" (2008).

What all of this means is that George W. Bush saw a religiously infused mission for the U.S. Based on his conviction that freedom is a universal value desired by all peoples, the U.S.' duty became the fight for freedom. In 2002, for example, Bush's State of the Union Address included the following words: "We choose freedom and the dignity of every life. [...] We have known freedom's price. We have shown freedom's power. And in this great conflict, my fellow Americans, we will see freedom's victory" (2002).

For the securitizing move, this is meaningful insofar as Bush's convictions about the universal nature of freedom and the desire of all humans to achieve it matched with the diffused idea. According to Weaver, the desire of Iraqi people to live free of an oppressing regime could be assumed by Bush because his beliefs implied that people in Iraq, just like anywhere else, want to live in freedom (2008). However, since the lack of freedom of other peoples does not necessarily threaten the U.S., this aspect of Bush's religious beliefs should be viewed more as a factor that facilitated the securitizing move. In other words, it further legitimized it from his perspective. More central to Bush's actual threat perception concerning Iraq and Saddam Hussein was the second significant aspect of his beliefs in the post-9/11 context, which was the existence of both good and evil.

4.3.2. The Struggle Between Good and Evil

John M. Murphy writes that "[f]or President Bush, the world is, as it ever was, divided between good and evil" (2003). These two opposites are further in a struggle between each other in which the U.S. is located on the side of the good, while its enemies are considered evil (Herrmann and Reese, 2004). The terrorists who attacked innocent people on September 11 assumed the evil side. To Bush, pure maliciousness was the only reason for the terrorist's actions (Bacevich and Prodromou, 2004). Correspondingly, the above-mentioned mission of the U.S. had another aspect to it, which was to "rid the world of evil-doers" (Perez-Rivas, 2001).

All it took to fuse the terrorist threat with an alleged threat emanating from Iraq was the idea of rogue states. If Iraq was a rogue state and supporter of terrorists, it belonged to the evil side of the struggle between good and evil. In this way, it constituted a threat to the U.S. Together with the accusation that Saddam Hussein possessed WMDs, the threat appeared to be a real and indeed immediate one. Hence, the 2002 State of the Union Address said that

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas and nuclear weapons for over a decade. [...] This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world. States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. (Bush, 2002)

According to Bacevich and Prodromou, "Bush's theology gives him confidence in his own ability to discern good from evil" (2004). Combined with his tendency to rely on his instinct (Pffner, 2004), it is plausible to assume that for President Bush, it was essentially a gut decision whether something was to be considered good or evil. Therefore, it is not

Table 2. Effects of Beliefs on the Idea Internalization

Belief	Change or Trigger	Result
Hostile and conflictual world	Belief change in the aftermath of 9/11	The internalization was facilitated because Iraq was perceived as more threatening
Universal desirability of freedom	Already existing belief coming to the fore because of 9/11	Legitimacy was given to extraordinary measures against Iraq
Existence of good and evil	Already existing belief coming to the fore because of 9/11	The internalization was facilitated because Iraq was seen as evil

surprising that he internalized an idea that made sense to him.

The idea diffusion matched Bush's beliefs so well because the neoconservatives thought about the world in similar ways. Similarly to George W. Bush, they "tended to see the world in stark, with-us-or-against-us terms." Moreover, they were long convinced "of American righteousness and of its mission to the world." However, for neoconservatives, it was less about a fight between good and evil, but more about opposing political systems—namely democracy versus dictatorship (Bacevich and Prodromou, 2004). Bush and neoconservatives had, in this sense, corresponding worldviews. One was based on a more religious fundament, while the other was framed in a more secular manner (Bacevich and Prodromou, 2004). Overall, the events of 9/11 forced Bush to utilize his religious compass to navigate the new situation. Since his religious beliefs matched extraordinarily well with neoconservative ideas, the idea diffusion efforts quickly came to fruition.

As can be seen in the summary table above (Table 2), the decisive beliefs that affected the internalization process concurred with the identity aspects significant for the idea acceptance and the enablement of the subsequent internalization (see Table 1). The democratic identity that allowed for the outgroup perception of dictatorial political systems to a certain degree matched the hostile image of parts of the world. However, since the latter became an issue only after 9/11 when Bush's operational code changed, the interpretation that this identity mattered specifically after September 11 becomes possible. The overlap of identity and belief is even more apparent for the second and third rows in both tables. An imperialistic version of exceptionalism that, among other things, advocates the promotion of democracy even by force if necessary is strongly undergirded by a belief in the universal desirability of freedom. If those peoples wish to be freed, military means can be justified more easily. Also, the belief in the existence of good and evil corresponds to the identity construction of the good U.S. and evil terrorists and their rogue state supporters. These concurrences hint at a discrepancy between the analytical approach and the reality: In actuality, it would not be easy to separate the effect of identities from individual beliefs.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary

The change of Bush's operational code and the triggering of his preexisting religious beliefs in combination with the above-described identities resulted in the securitizing

move after the threat idea had been diffused. These findings support the assumption that all three of these factors have to be scrutinized to effectively make sense of how a threat idea was translated into a securitizing move. Each factor additionally comes with its particular implications.

5.2. Implications

Idea diffusion efforts can be decisive for whether the securitization of an issue takes place or not. This circumstance becomes clear when asking the question of why Iraq was securitized while other dictatorships with comparable characteristics and threat potentials were not treated in the same manner. While it is undoubtedly clear that North Korea has been working on a nuclear weapons program, the results of which could end up in terrorist hands, North Korea was not securitized in the same manner as Iraq because there was no immediate idea diffusion of an urgent North Korean threat. Identities and personal beliefs could have had a similar impact as they did in the Iraqi case. Consequently, the lack of comparable idea diffusion can offer a partial explanation for the irrational and exclusive securitization of only one selected rogue state.

Moreover, the analysis of threat constructions and perceptions as well as decision-making would benefit significantly from an increased scholarly focus—especially in the field of security studies—on whether any identity constructions took place in a given situation. This article has shown that Sjöstedt's framework that incorporates identities indeed comes with significant explanatory value. Examining a threat construction process without looking at identities can thus inhibit its understanding substantially.

Another implication is that the entire Bush administration might not be the appropriate unit of analysis, depending on the research question. Considering the powerful position of the U.S. president, an individual-level analysis with him as a separate actor is necessary to understand why the administration—or the state as an extension of it due to the government's representative function—acted in a particular way. If one assumes that the president made decisions because of his own beliefs and that he genuinely perceived Iraq as a threat, it is plausible to conclude that he thought of his actions as doing what is right in the given situation. Such a perspective further suggests the absence of expediency. Political motives appear unlikely, at least for George W. Bush himself. This conclusion then implicates that one needs to pay more attention to the beliefs of an individual with high decision-making authority and effects of identities in order to prevent conflict or even war by recognizing dynamics and constellations in which threat constructions may take place and potentially escalate into an objectively unjustified—due to a lack of evidence of a threat—securitizing move.

For the Iraq War specifically, the implication is that an alternative actor perhaps would not have made a securitizing move because of differing beliefs and less or no internalization of the threat idea. Despite the significance of the events of September 11, which can easily be perceived as a primary cause at first glance, Bush as an individual made the decisive difference. As the results of Robison's study of Bush's and his advisors' operational codes show, the traumatic events of 9/11 did not change every actor's belief system in the same manner. The fact that Powell's beliefs, for instance, remained more or less cooperative, allows for the speculation that another president could have maintained cooperative views of the political world even after 9/11 and thus might have handled the situation differently.

Lastly, there is also an implication for securitization theory's normative aspect due

to the ability of beliefs to undergo a transformation. Renshon establishes the following implication from his study of Bush's operational code change: "How beliefs change has implications not just for the study of political leaders and decision making but also how we attempt to persuade others in the international system. For instance, the United States has evinced a desire for China to become more democratically accountable and to accept the responsibilities of being a world power. Coercion might change their behavior, but it is obviously preferable to effect a change in Chinese leaders' beliefs about how they should act" (2008). Even though Renshon's research was not conducted within the theoretical framework of securitization, a similar conclusion can be drawn in this case. The Copenhagen School of securitization theory generally advocates desecuritization over securitization. Political solutions to problems are preferred. In order to decrease conflict, effecting change in leaders' beliefs and thus potentially initiating desecuritization efforts would be preferable over allowing escalation into further securitization of an issue.

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