

## MAN HEARS WHAT HE WANTS TO HEAR AND DISREGARDS THE REST George W. Bush and Iraqi WMD

**Wesley B. Renfro**

St. John Fisher College

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### RESUMEN

A lo largo del 2002 y la primera parte de 2003, George W. Bush aseguró que Irak buscaba armas de destrucción masiva. Más tarde se comprobó que sus alegaciones sobre los programas de Bagdad no eran ciertas. Bush creía sincera pero incorrectamente que Irak buscaba armas biológicas, químicas y nucleares a pesar de numerosas pruebas en contra de esa creencia. ¿Por qué el cuadragésimo tercer presidente creía que Irak desarrollaba estas capacidades a pesar de la falta de pruebas a su favor? Utilizamos el Análisis de Rasgos de Liderazgo de Margaret Hermann para argumentar que el nivel excepcionalmente alto de desconfianza en los demás, manifestado por Bush, puede explicar sus falsas creencias sobre Irak, así como el proceso de decisión de iniciar la guerra en Irak en 2003. La desconfianza en otros es una variable poderosa que se puede aplicar a muchos casos para entender mejor el cómo y el porqué del liderazgo y del proceso de decisiones en el ámbito de la política internacional.

### ABSTRACT

Throughout 2002 and early 2003, George W. Bush claimed Iraq was seeking weapons of mass destruction. His allegations about Baghdad's programs were later shown to be false. He genuinely, but incorrectly, believed that Iraq was seeking biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons despite substantial evidence that contradicted his beliefs. Why did the 43rd president believe that Iraq was developing these capabilities despite a lack of confirming evidence? I use Margaret Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis to argue that Bush manifests unusually high levels of distrust of others and that this accounts for his incorrect beliefs about Iraq. Finally, this finding is significant because it suggests that distrust of others is a powerful variable that may be applied to a range of cases to better understand the how and why of leadership and decision-making in international politics.

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**Key words:** liderazgo, desconfianza, toma de decisiones, conflicto, Presidencia americana [Leadership, distrust, decision-making, conflict, American presidency]

“Saddam Hussein is a homicidal dictator who is addicted to weapons of mass destruction.”  
-- George W. Bush

In a September 2002 press conference, George W. Bush bluntly announced that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD), (Bush, 2002a). Although he was known for his clumsy delivery, this was not a slip of the tongue. Rather, this was the first of many statements in which Bush

claimed that Iraq had active biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons programs. His claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction eventually served as the public rationale for the 2003 Iraq War. By one estimate, there are 232 instances of the 43<sup>rd</sup> president incorrectly stating that Iraq possessed WMD (Lewis and Reading-Smith, 2008). One very direct example of this pattern occurred on October 7, 2002, when the president asserted, "It [Iraq] possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons. It is seeking nuclear weapons," (Bush, 2002b). In the buildup to the March 2003 invasion Bush routinely invoked the notion that Hussein possessed WMD and constituted a threat to American national security -- a threat so dire that it warranted regime change because, left unattended, Baghdad would certainly conspire to use biological, chemical or nuclear weapons against the United States or its allies.

While it is clear that many analysts and officials believed Iraq may have had WMD, Bush was never presented with strong evidence demonstrating with anything approaching certainty that Iraq had active non-conventional weapons programs. There were, moreover, credible dissenters that opposed this position. They included the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research Annex to the (in)famous October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) and Brent Scowcroft's very public editorial piece on Iraqi WMD that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. Thus, a more relevant and nuanced puzzle is why the president accepted the reports suggesting that Hussein had WMD while rejecting the reports that cast doubt on these claims? This paper argues that within this uncertain and murky landscape, the president's system of political beliefs and basic approach to the world, characterized by high levels of distrust, caused him to reject contrarian views and spuriously conclude that Iraq had WMD. In other words, he heard what he wanted and disregarded the rest.

Any honest examination of this puzzle must begin with the acknowledgement that Bush was not alone in his conclusions about Iraqi WMD. Many policymakers, members of the intelligence community, and the outside analysts thought it was plausible and perhaps even probable, that the Hussein regime had obtained WMD (Haass, 2009; National Intelligence Estimate, 2002). Numerous studies and reports have subsequently documented that the intelligence community generally misread Iraqi capabilities and overestimated the likelihood of Hussein possessing biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons (Cirincione et. al., 2004; Isenberg, 2005; Pillar, 2006).

I argue that Bush generally viewed the world as a hostile, threatening environment, and that after 9/11 he displays an unusually high level of dis-

trust in others, a psychological trait, which accounts for his unwillingness to consider the very real possibility that Hussein did not possess WMD and helped him conclude that military action and regime change were necessary. In short, this work suggests that his high levels of distrust led him to reject alternate explanations and to a specious conclusion about Iraqi WMD which constituted the public basis for the March 2003 invasion.

This question and its answer are important for several reasons. While a substantial and growing body of literature connects individual-level attributes with a host of decision-making styles and empirical outcomes in international relations and political science, this work remains incomplete. A better understanding of the connections between leaders' characteristics and specific foreign policy decisions is needed to better understand the essence of decision and the causes of conflict. This research is useful as it provides insight into the cognitive processes and decision-making scheme that produced a war and decade long occupation, claimed thousands of lives in Iraq, and cost the United States in excess of one trillion dollars. This represents a positive contribution to the literatures on decision-making, political psychology, leadership, and the Iraq War because it allows us to understand how an individual-level trait influenced decision-making in an important case. Finally, this contribution is significant as it helps illuminate decision-making in a single important case but also suggests an avenue for further inquiry that may help scholars better understand how and when leaders choose conflict over other policy options. This is important because while scholars have extensively studied the Iraq case, they have not yet used this case as a springboard for theory building (Houghton, 2009).

The remainder of this paper is divided into sections that: briefly review the literature on leadership, distrust, decision-making, and the extant scholarly literature on the 2003 Iraq War, (Mazarr, 2007; Shannon and Keller, 2007; Renshon, 2008; Houghton, 2009; Mitchell and Massoud, 2009; Duelfer and Dyson, 2011), an introduction to the quantitative *at-a-distance* assessment scheme that provides the basis for my claims about Bush's levels of distrust, empirical data for the 43<sup>rd</sup> president's level of distrust, a case study that reconciles the predicted behaviors with Bush's actual behaviors, and a conclusion with some implications for further research.

### **Leadership and Distrust**

There is a rich literature on distrust demonstrating that individuals with higher levels are suspicious of perceived enemies, view their foes (real or imaginary) as implacable and hostile, believe the international system is

generally ominous and threatening, and also are often unwilling to believe evidence presented by others that contradicts their preexisting assumptions (Holsti, 1962; Druckman, 1968; George, 1969; Driver, 1977; Hermann, 1977; Stuart and Starr, 1982; Shannon and Keller, 2007; Oppenheimer, 2009). Hermann (1980, p. 21) sums the behaviors associated with high levels of distrust when she writes that leaders exhibiting this trait manifest, “General feelings of doubt, uneasiness, and misgiving about others; an inclination to suspect and doubt the motives and actions of others.” Related works exploring the role of misperception generally reach similar conclusions (Jervis, 1972; Levy, 1983; Vertzberger, 1990).

Moreover, as Dyson and Duelfer (2011, p. 76) note, “Misperception has both situational and individual causes. It is more likely in situations with inherent ambiguity, involving complex causal interactions among actors and where many interactions are occurring simultaneously. This is a description that fits international politics well: states interact in numerous ways with often murky motives, operate in a context that switches between zero-sum and positive-sum depending on the issues and actors involved, and frequently have opaque internal decision making processes.” My research concludes that Bush exhibited all these behaviors in a set of conditions that were ambiguous and complex and that in this specific instance of alleged Iraqi WMD programs, the president rejected information that did not conform to his already formulated images about Iraq.

Applied studies have connected high levels of distrust with similar outcomes. Holsti (1962) offered what he called an “inherent bad faith” model to describe American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ closed cognitive system that caused Dulles to reject information that did not conform to his preexisting beliefs about the Soviet Union. Stuart and Starr (1982) replicated Holsti’s research in their work on John Kennedy and Henry Kissinger and found that these negative or enemy images, also known as distrust, are an important part of the decision-making process. As Oppenheimer notes, “When present, enemy images or negative stereotypes are self-fulfilling and self-reinforcing. On the basis of such images, people tend to act more aggressively toward the other group,” (2009, p. 271). Thus, distrust of others may be a powerful explanatory variable and as Malici notes, it is often self-fulfilling (2009).

Furthermore, individuals prize consistency between their already formulated beliefs and the empirical world. Accordingly, an individual may often attempt to, “establish harmony, consistency, or congruity among his opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and values,” (Festinger, 1957, p. 260). This phenomenon is commonly known as cognitive dissonance and it is abun-

dant in human decision-making (Aronson, 1969; Heider, 1958). Holsti reveals that Dulles “fit” the facts about the Soviet Union, including troop reductions and other signs that Moscow wanted to drawdown tensions, with his already established beliefs about the Kremlin’s irredentist goals and reached incorrect conclusions (1962). Renshon, discussing the same phenomena, comments, “Confirming evidence is easily assimilated into existing our existing beliefs, whereas dissonant information is discredited, minimized, or ignored altogether,” (2008, p. 823). Houghton (2009) cites this as one possible cause of the Iraq War. Discussing multiple narratives explaining the Iraq War, he comments on cognitive consistency and writes,

Although the president and many of his advisers were convinced that Saddam was a real threat, so this account goes, they fitted intelligence to the theory – not out of a desire to deceive, perhaps, but out of a mistaken belief that proved resistant to the facts. As Simon and Garfunkel put in their song, *The Boxer*, “a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.” To maintain cognitive consistency, decision makers may even fabricate causal connections in their own minds that do not exist in reality (2009, p. 183).

This work is a natural extension of Houghton’s as it take one of the mechanisms he spotlights and seeks to demonstrate the connection is clear, empirical terms using leadership trait analysis (LTA).

Recently, Redd and Mintz (2013) provide a comparative evaluation of policy-making and national security outcomes and find that several key approaches have a perceptual component. Duelfer and Dyson, discussing perception and misperception between Washington and Baghdad, also conclude that enemy images were an important element in the 1991 and 2003 conflicts between Iraq and the United States (2011). While their analysis is useful and helps shed much light on a case of dyadic misperception, Dyson and Duelfer focused their analysis on states, not individuals. Shannon and Keller, however, explore how individual traits affected the Iraq War decision-making and single out distrust as a *particularly important* trait in a leader’s willingness to violate international norms (2007, p. 80). They continue, Our findings regarding distrust help explain President’s Bush’s insistence that Saddam, his WMD stockpiles, and his links to terror constituted a severe threat to America’s security in a post-9/11 world, when others were more skeptical (despite believing that Iraq possessed WMD) and more amenable to the notion that Saddam could be successfully contained, deterred, or perhaps disarmed through UN inspections.

Although Shannon and Keller provide a cogent and compelling account of Bush and his advisers’ willingness to violate international norms, they

leave question of the president's belief in WMD understudied. Their focus is on norm violation and not Bush's willingness to accept the allegation that Hussein possessed WMD. While their work is a positive contribution to the scholarly literature of Iraq decision-making, it focuses on key Bush administration officials and is not an in-depth study of the 43<sup>rd</sup> president, his traits, and his decision in the Iraq case. As Houghton argues, "Iraq seems at the very least to have been a very private and very presidential thing..." (2009, p. 173). Therefore, this paper's consideration of Bush's cognition and distrust is much warranted.

Mitchell and Massoud (2009) also look at Bush's decision-making in the Iraq case. However, their work hinges on an integrative decision-making model that connects Bush and his advisers with a broader set of dependent variables. This paper complements the earlier works of Shannon and Keller, Mitchell and Massoud, Houghton, and Renshon but is more narrowly focused on why the president accepted that Iraq possessed WMD which informed his decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Thus, this project is consonant with Shannon and Keller's call that, "Taking leaders' beliefs, perceptions, and decision-making styles seriously as a set of explanatory variables, and empirically examining how these characteristics interact with the structures that leaders confront is an important step in sharpening our analytic power and gaining insight into the defining events of our times" (2007, p. 99).

### **Leadership Trait Analysis and at a Distance Measures**

Since political elites are often unaware of their motivations and unwilling to share information that could jeopardize future moves or political legacies, scholars have developed remote assessment techniques to overcome these and other problems, including lack of access. These remote or "at-a-distance" measures allow researchers to operationalize and measure individual-level psychological traits, including distrust, by engaging in a content analysis of spoken or written records. This approach is particularly compelling because when words are data and data are plentiful, words overcome the small *n* problem (King, 1993) and the general lack of access (Riley, 2008) issue that often stymie research on individual leaders.

The underlying theories suggest that it is possible to create leadership profiles for individuals based on the words they select when speaking about foreign policy because these words reveals certain attitudes, beliefs, and traits vis-à-vis the outside world (Schafer, 2000; Suedfeld et al., 2003). Remote assessment techniques measure individual traits through a leader's own words and these words provide a reliable basis for reconstructing per-

sonality. Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) is one method of content analysis that uses *remote assessment* or *at-a-distance measures*. LTA posits that the more often a leader selects certain words, the greater the connection between the word and the leader's own personality (Hermann, 2003). LTA provides a score for specific traits in leaders that ranges from 0 to 1 with higher scores indicating the salience and strength of the attribute, in this case distrust of others (DIS). A generation of scholars has successfully used this approach to profile over 100 political leaders (Hermann, 2003), explore the relationship between American presidents and their advisers (Preston, 2001), chronicle Tony Blair's Iraq War decision-making (Dyson, 2004, 2006), and explain George W. Bush's willingness to violate international norms in the Iraq War (Shannon and Keller, 2007). LTA now uses a fully automated and computerized coding scheme, *Profiler Plus*, which greatly facilitates this research by eliminating the laborious process of hand coding.

### **Method and Data**

This study uses a dataset that contains the entire universe of spontaneous, i.e., unscripted, foreign policy remarks made by American presidents from January 1953 through January 2009. The text comes from the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States of America* available online through the University of California, Santa Barbara's *American Presidency Project* (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>). Because the dataset is comprehensive no sampling procedure is necessary. It contains 2.85 million foreign policy words, organized by quarter, that provide a stable reference group for every president from Dwight D. Eisenhower through George W. Bush.<sup>1</sup> Because this dataset contains every spontaneously and publicly spoken word relating to foreign policy, it provides an overall means of assessing presidential psychology and LTA.

### **George W. Bush's Distrust Scores**

This paper argues that Bush exhibits high levels of distrust and that the prevalence of this trait helps explain a process of cognition that led him to spuriously conclude that Iraq possessed WMD. Bush's overall level of distrust, based on his spontaneous foreign policy utterances, is .21 (.05), which is nearly a standard deviation higher than the mean of all U.S. presidents at .15 (.08).

One question of considerable importance to this research is how 9/11 affected Bush's orientation to the external environment. While previous research generally suggests that personality is stable, this is not an absolute. Robison seeks to establish the degree of change in Bush's personality as

measured through operational code. He finds that, "Following 9/11, Bush's belief system changes significantly," (2006, p. 111). He stresses, "This means that Bush's view of the political universe became much more negative after 9/11," (2006, p. 111). Renshon (2008) also uses operational code and concludes that Bush finds the world less friendly after 9/11. The paper reaches similar conclusions about the September 11, 2001 attacks on Bush's levels of distrust.

During the months leading up to al-Qaeda's attacks, Bush averages a distrust score of .11. This score is based on his spontaneous verbal output during quartres1 and 2 in 2001. The number of words in this section of the dataset is 16,870. The 43<sup>rd</sup> president's average for the remainder of his presidency is .22 based on the remaining 732,112 words in his dataset. This is a significant and lasting increase. This indicates that 9/11 deeply moved the president and altered his basic vision of the outside world and that the change was seemingly permanent. While traits are typically stable, Renshon notes that, "The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are representative of a second class of belief-changing event: the traumatic shock," (2008, p. 821). The findings in this paper use LTA to confirm the claims that Robison and Renshon make using operational code analysis. These findings are significant because they suggest how basic traits may change, e.g., shock, but also demonstrates that 9/11 was the seminal event of the Bush presidency that changed his basic perspective about the outside world.

### **Bush and Iraqi WMD: a man hears what he wants to and disregards the rest**

The paper now turns to a case study that seeks to establish harmony between Bush's expected and actual cognitive processes and by extension his behaviors, with respect to his belief that Iraq already possessed WMD. The case study first argues that the 43<sup>rd</sup> president had long viewed Hussein as a threat, not a difficult task given the history between George H.W. Bush and Hussein. Next, the case study demonstrates that Iraq became an immediate focal point of Bush's foreign policy anxieties in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, despite a lack of evidence connecting the Hussein regime with international terrorism. Finally, the study details that dissenting views of Iraq's WMD were systematically dismissed and not given serious consideration.

#### *Candidacy Through 9/11*

Although Bush entered the Oval Office with little foreign policy experience, he, and most others in Washington, had a negative view of Hussein



(Mann, 2004). Writing in 2000 and commenting on then candidate Bush's views, Lancaster writes, "While avoiding specific comments, Bush has vowed publicly that he would adopt a more aggressive posture than President Clinton has taken toward Iraq." Bush, in a candidate forum, did foreshadow his thinking about Iraq when he claimed, "If I found in any way, shape or form that he was developed weapons of mass destruction, I'd take 'em out," (Bruni, 1999). Bush later claimed his comments were misinterpreted and that he was referring only to the weapons. His comments, however, are telling and suggest that he had strong latent suspicions about the Iraqi dictator. Upon entering the Oval Office, Bush and his advisers participated in a series of National Security Council meetings during January and early February 2001 in which they discussed the need to reformulate Iraqi policy. Suskind (2004) claims that the meetings focused on removing Hussein. Mazarr (2007) disputes Suskind's account but does note that many viewed Iraq as much more serious problem than the Clinton administration. Regardless of the degree to which Iraq featured in these meetings, it does seem clear that Bush viewed Iraq more warily than the preceding administration (Fallows, 2006, p. 49; Mitchell and Massoud, 2009, p. 274). However, it is important to note that while Bush and his advisers viewed Iraq as a problem there was not a clear movement towards military action. Iraq, before 9/11, was just one of a host of contentious foreign policy problems occupying the new administration.

This case study argues that Bush's distrust of Hussein grew upon entering office, largely because of 9/11. Mitchell and Massoud comment, "After the attacks on the United States, the president perceived the threat from Iraq in a new light. This led him to stronger, more rigid position on Iraq than he had held before 9/11," (2009, p. 279). In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Bush began to routinely invoke the notion that there "would be a monumental struggle between good and evil..." (Greenstein, 2003, p. 10). Former Director of Policy Planning at the State Department Richard Haass echoes this sentiment when he writes that 9/11 was a turning point for the administration (2009, p. 186). Bush's post-9/11 mindset provided a means to link his latent suspicion of Hussein to demonstrable threat, i.e., weapons of mass destruction. After 9/11, the president, for his part, immediately wanted to know if Iraq was involved (Feith, 2008, p. 14). Bush was convinced that this attack was, somehow, connected to Iraq. Haass writes, "But it is worth noting that the first instinct of the president was to push the bureaucracy to find a connection between Saddam and the attacks" (2009, p. 192). Mazarr nicely captures this, writing, "There is little question that

the attacks of September 11, 2001 brought new urgency, and readiness to take bigger risks, to the administration's thinking on Iraq (2007, p. 5).

Although no evidence ever emerged to support the alleged ties between Baghdad and al-Qaeda (The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004), Bush downplayed suggestions that Hussein was not a threat to American interests and began advancing a policy aimed at regime change in Iraq predicated on the argument that Hussein possessed WMD and was likely to use them against the United States (Fallows, 2006). The president, in an interview with Bob Woodward, recalled 9/11 shifting his thinking on Iraq and Hussein. Woodward quotes the president as saying, "[A]ll his terrible features became much more threatening. Keeping Saddam in a box looked less and less feasible to me....He had used weapons of mass destruction in the past" (2004, p. 27). For Bush, with lower Manhattan still smoldering and a series of unresolved domestic anthrax attacks, the world looked much more hostile post-9/11 (Renshon, 2008) and Hussein was the convenient face of all the unknown dangers threatening the homeland.

#### *From 9/11 to Certainty*

In the weeks and months following al-Qaeda's attacks, Iraq played an increasingly central role in debates over America's foreign policy responses to terrorism. Bush tasked Rumsfeld with planning an invasion (Mitchell and Massoud, 2009, p. 275). The president began more and more public discussion of Iraq policy as well. Responding to reporters on November 26, 2001, the president said, "In order to prove to the world he's [Hussein] not developing weapons of mass destruction, he ought to let the inspectors back in." When pressed about the consequences for not complying, Bush replied, "That's up for --. He'll find out," (Bush, 2002d). Throughout the fall of 2001, the president continued to publicly press for Iraq to readmit the UN weapons inspectors charged with making sure Baghdad had no WMD capability back into the country after Hussein had ordered them out in 1998. In late November, the Blair government in Britain passed the Bush administration information suggesting that a Pakistani nuclear weapons expert was offering to sell plans for how to build a nuclear device to one of MI6's undercover agents. This report, coupled with others indicating that in a video bin Laden waved a canister allegedly filled with radioactive material and that basic diagrams for a nuclear device were found in al-Qaeda headquarters in Afghanistan, deeply affected Bush. Woodward says, "It was an electric moment when all this came together for the president" (2004: 46). Although these reports were faulty on numerous accounts, they seemed to

confirm the president's view of the world as threatening and hostile. For Bush, it was not a difficult cognitive leap for him to connect threats to America with Hussein.

The president next used his January 2002 State of the Union Address as a platform to argue that Hussein was threatening the United States. During this speech before an estimated television audience of 52 million, Bush condemned Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. He asserted that these regimes are "arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger," (Bush, 2002c). In the coming months, the administration would continue its public position that war was not inevitable. Washington maintained that if Iraq would disclose its WMD programs, which did not exist, there was hope for a peaceful resolution.

Brent Scowcroft, a Republican stalwart and former National Security Advisor in the Ford and H.W. Bush administrations, wrote a highly publicized piece that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* on August 15, 2002 counseling against war. Scowcroft wrote, "We need to analyze the relationship between Iraq and our other pressing priorities -- notably the war on terrorism -- as well as the best strategy and tactics available were we to move to change the regime in Baghdad" (2002). He continues by pointing out that Hussein, even if he had WMD, was unlikely to use them or pass them to anti-American radicals. The president was unmoved by Scowcroft and others' arguments about Iraq's WMD programs and the merits of a potential invasion and occupation. Bush dismissed, downplayed, or ignored accounts that contradicted his own worldview and assessment of Iraq.

Bush relied on a faulty National Intelligence Estimate (2002) to convince lawmakers that Hussein was already armed with weapons of mass destruction. Paul R. Pillar, a key intelligence figure during the first term, eventually broke ranks with the White House and publicly accused Bush and others of "cherry-picking" evidence (Pillar, 2006; Pincus, 2006). Haass later confirms this view and writes, "It [intelligence reporting] was more a case of people selecting ('cherry-picking') reports that supported a certain position and going with them despite questions about their accuracy" (2009, p. 231). A careful reading of the NIE indicated that there was consensus and little certainty on the Iraqi WMD question. At one point, the NIE suggests that it would several years before Iraq obtained a nuclear device. The report also notes that they have low confidence in their ability to predict, "When Saddam would use weapons of mass destruction, whether Saddam would engage in clandestine attacks against the US Homeland, and whether in desperation Saddam would share chemical or biological

weapons with al-Qa'ida," (NIE, 2002). Bush happily used sections of the NIE that fit the argument that Hussein had WMD and was likely to use them but ignored the sections of the document that did not fit this general assessment of Iraqi intentions and capabilities. Moreover, as Woodward (2004, p. 199) notes, "The State Department intelligence bureau filed an 11-page annex outlining its objections and disagreements with the NIE, particularly on nuclear weapons, saying that evidence did not add up to a compelling case that Iraq has an integrated and comprehensive approach to acquire nuclear weapons." This opposing view failed to gain traction with Bush.

More evidence of this faulty intelligence process surfaced in the leaked "Downing Street Memo" which claimed, "Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence facts were being fixed around the policy" (Rycroft, 2002). In another illustrative example of how the White House handled dissenting views, Haass (2009, p. 193) recounts an incident in which the administration jettisoned a State Department White Paper on 9/11. The president, during his 2003 State of the Union Address, asserted that Hussein's agents had attempted to purchase uranium in Africa, a clear indication that Baghdad was developing nuclear weapons. In his speech, the president dismissed Iraq's report to the UN, said Hussein had "much to hide," and revealing his own assessment of the Iraqi leader, said, "If this [Hussein's regime] is not evil, then evil has no meaning," (Balz, 2003). Bush's statements are characteristic of a leader with high levels of distrust.

During early 2003, Bush also downplayed the findings of Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, who issued several reports indicating that there was not yet a basis for concluding that Iraq had active WMD programs. ElBaradei testified before the Security Council on January 27, 2003, providing a long view of the UN sponsored inspections program dating back a dozen years, stating, "While we did not claim absolutely certainty, our conclusion at that time [1998] was that we had neutralized Iraq's nuclear weapons programme and that there were no indications that Iraq retained any physical capability to produce weapons usable nuclear material," (ElBaradei, 2003b). Commenting on the most recent round of weapons inspections, he said, "No prohibited nuclear activities have been identified during these inspections," (ElBaradei, 2003b). His analysis also rejected the claim that Iraq's much publicized aluminum tubes were intended for a nuclear weapons program when he stated, "From our analysis to date it appears that the aluminium tubes would be consistent with the purposed stated by Iraq," (ElBaradei, 2003b).

In his conclusion, ElBaradei made plain that there was little evidence supporting the Bush's charges. He testified, "To conclude: we have to date found no evidence that Iraq has revived its nuclear weapons programme since the elimination of the programme in the 1990s," (ElBaradei, 2003b).

In a bid to woo international support, the administration sent Powell, who many in the public and press saw as a dovish, reluctant warrior to sell the war at the United Nations. Although Powell's February 5, 2003 performance was brilliant and convinced many of the merits of the proposal (Haass, 2009, p. 242), he was also contradicted by Hans Blix's presentation a few days later (Plesch, 2003). Blix, chairman of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), enjoyed much support at the UN, had found no evidence suggesting that Iraq had WMD programs. Mohammed ElBaradei issued another report to the Security Council on March 7, 2003 that continued to cast doubt on Bush's claims. He noted that, "There is no indication of resumed nuclear activities in those buildings that were identified through the use of satellite imagery as being reconstructed or newly erected since 1998, nor any indication of nuclear-related prohibited activities at any inspected sites," (ElBaradei, 2003a). Using exceptionally strong language (ElBaradei, 2003a), he continued,

There is no indication that Iraq has attempted to import uranium since 1990. There is no indication that Iraq has attempted to import aluminium tubes for use in centrifuge enrichment. Moreover, even had Iraq pursued such a plan, it would have encountered practical difficulties in manufacturing centrifuges out of the aluminium tubes in question....After three months of intrusive inspections, we have to date found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons programme in Iraq.

Although Bush convinced a majority of Americans that Iraq possessed WMD and that war was necessary (Fallows, 2006, p. 221), there were prominent domestic voices expressing skepticism of the president's claims about Iraqi WMD. For example, in a letter dated March 17, 2003, California Representative Henry Waxman (2003) wrote,

The most persuasive justification for this war is that we must act to prevent Iraq from developing nuclear weapons. In the last ten days, however, it has become incontrovertibly clear that a key piece of evidence you and other Administration officials have cited regarding Iraq's efforts to obtain nuclear weapons is a hoax. What's more, the Central Intelligence Agency questioned the veracity of the evidence at the same time you and other Administration officials were citing it in public statements.

Waxman continues and provides a laundry list of sources that cast serious doubt of the administration's claims about Iraqi WMD, including El-Baradei's testimony, investigative reporting by the *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post*, and a definite lack of consensus in the CIA.

Waxman's letter was the last in a long series of dissenting views on the alleged Iraqi WMD programs. Two days later, the President Bush announced to the nation that, "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," (Bush, 2003). In his address he claimed, "Our Nation enters this conflict reluctantly....The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder." Bush, it seems, was a true believer in the case against Iraq -- despite sufficient evidence to cast serious doubt on his beliefs that Baghdad had or sought WMD and was an imminent threat to the United States or its allies. Table 3 provides a list of sources of evidence that cast doubt the claims that Hussein had or was developing weapons of mass destruction, notably nuclear weapons. They include a public rebuke from a close family friend, State Department reports, and the testimony and reporting of UN Weapons Inspectors. Taken together, they very strongly suggest that the conclusion that Iraq had WMD was quite possibly incorrect. Yet, it seems as if the 43<sup>rd</sup> president casually disregarded these bits of contrarian evidence in favor of his preexisting, but incorrect, beliefs about Hussein and Iraqi WMD.

## **Conclusions**

George W. Bush justified the 2003 invasion of Iraq by claiming that Iraq possessed WMD and that these weapons would, at some point in the near future, threaten the United States and its allies. Bush was incorrect. Iraq had no such programs. It also seems clear that Bush was not simply telling falsehoods. Rather, the president believed that Iraq had these programs and capabilities -- despite dissenting, credible domestic and international sources. The president, in a drive for cognitive consistency, routinely cherry-picked information that affirmed his preexisting views and dismissed contradictory views without first examining their veracity. Although he entered the presidency with an already negative image of the Iraqi leader, the 9/11 attacks changed Bush's basic worldview and further convinced him that Hussein was an imminent threat seeking to harm the United States with WMD. This conviction led Bush to hear what he wanted and to disregard the rest and to authorize the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Table 1 summarizes some of the key points at which the president rejected contrarian

information that might have otherwise cast significant doubt on his conclusions about Iraqi WMD.

**Table 1.**  
*Rejected Evidence*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Evidence</i>	<i>Significance</i>
8/2002	Scowcroft's Editorial	Casts doubt on claims about Iraqi WMD; argues that Iraq is a distraction from real threats
10/2002	National Intelligence Estimate	Key findings seem to support claims about Iraqi WMD but the remainder of the document is more cautious and ambiguous; suggests it will be several years, at a minimum, before Iraq has nuclear capacity
10/2002	State Department Annex to NIE	Provides an alternate reading of intelligence on Iraqi WMD and argues there is no compelling evidence of Iraq seeking nuclear devices
12/2002	Iraqi Weapons Declaration	Bush dismisses document out of hand; no consideration given to its accuracy
1/2003	ElBaradei's UN Testimony	Notes that weapons inspectors had high confidence that they had already eliminated Iraq's nuclear program; states they have found no prohibited activities
2/2003	Blix's UN Testimony	Contradicts Powell's findings; testimony support ElBaradei's conclusions
3/2003	ElBaradei's UNMOVIC Report	Reiterates earlier views; testifies it is not plausible that Iraq has active nuclear program
3/2003	Waxman's Letter	Compiles a list of sources that cast doubt on Bush's beliefs about Iraqi WMD

Although Bush was the most important decision-maker to incorrectly conclude that Iraq was seeking, or already possessed, WMD, other senior administration officials reinforced this view. Presidential advisers often play an important role in shaping foreign policy outcomes (George and George, 1956; Preston, 2001) but the scholarship on the George W. Bush presidency suggests that some of his advisers were unusually influential, especially in Bush's first term (Mann, 2004; Dyson, 2009). Although it is not possible to provide an exhaustive account of the advice provided by each "principal" between 2001 and 2003, it is possible to divide Bush's key advisers into two broad camps: moderates led by Secretary of State Colin

Powell and hawks led by Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

While the former generally advocated for a more cautious approach that favored multilateralism, the latter reinforced Bush's dire assessment of Baghdad's capabilities and intentions and argued that delay would imperil American national security (Woodward, 2004). In particular, Dyson's (2009) work on Rumsfeld suggests that the Secretary of Defense was very influential and this helps explain the power of the hawks in reinforcing Bush's own thinking. Rumsfeld's motivations, however, were not wholly identical to Bush's. Nonetheless, the record indicates that he played a key role in undermining the moderates vis-à-vis Iraqi WMD. The moderates were also handicapped by Powell's lack of a personal relationship with the president and Bush's inherent mistrust of multilateralism and his general reluctance to rely on the United Nations (Woodward, 2004). Finally, as Jervis notes, "He [Bush] also was averse to compromise and had great trouble getting his subordinates to work together or to bring up their differing views on issues that he himself had to decide. Some of these characteristics may explain why he never held a meeting to thrash out whether to invade Iraq..." (2013, p. 174). Given these conditions, it is not surprising that the president genuinely, but incorrectly, believed that Iraq was seeking WMD and sided with advisers who had reached similar conclusions.

Because this paper focuses on the salience on one particular trait, distrust, in a specific case much additional work remains in order to better specify how distrust is linked to leaders' decisions. Future studies should pair distrust with other individual-level traits in an attempt to build more comprehensive, and potentially powerful, understanding of how various combinations of traits affect cognition, decision-making, and the use of force. In the case of the George W. Bush, additional research might seek to confirm the findings presented here by applying these trait scores with other foreign policy decisions, including Bush's overall policies known as the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Subsequent investigations should also test other cases for similar results, in the W. Bush presidency and beyond. A number of historical cases come to mind, e.g., Truman's stubborn instance that North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950 was orchestrated by Stalin, despite evidence to the contrary. The data need to be further mined to determine how specific trait scores vary by source and by topic, if it is possible to make inferences based on differences in trait scores, and if other traits, e.g., cognitive complexity, are as robust as distrust of others. This research also helps confirm the finding of Robison (2006) and Renshon (2008) that 9/11 fundamentally changed George W. Bush's basic belief



system with respect to his external environment. These findings, taken together, are useful because they lend further credence to earlier scholarly claims about the mutability of personality traits and the conditions under which they change.

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**Wesley B. Renfro, Ph.D.** is Assistant Professor of Political Science St. John Fisher College 3690 East Avenue Rochester, New York, 14618USA. [wrenfro@sjfc.edu](mailto:wrenfro@sjfc.edu). My scholarly interests involve political psychology and decision-making as well as international security and U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf. My work has appeared in several journals and other outlets. I am currently authoring a book on international relations in the Middle East that is scheduled for publication in 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> One interesting pattern that emerges from an analysis of the data is that over time U.S. presidents simply speak more. On a quarterly basis, there is a general upward trend in the number of foreign policy words presidents utter. This trend becomes especially pronounced beginning in the George H.W. Bush presidency. H.W. Bush, Clinton, and W. Bush occupied the White House for 20 years, 36% of the years under consideration, but account for 64% of words in the dataset.