

## Selling the Market Short? The Marketplace of Ideas and the Iraq War

To the Editors:

Chaim Kaufmann's recent article on the selling of the Iraq war makes a valuable contribution both to the debate over the origins of that war and to scholarship on threat inflation.<sup>1</sup> I agree with much of his argument: George W. Bush's administration misled the public on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability; its control over information helped skew the public debate; and the media were insufficiently critical of its claims. I take issue, however, with Kaufmann's contention that the White House enjoys unparalleled authority in foreign policy matters and that this mainly accounts for the administration's success. In contrast, I suggest an alternative explanation rooted in the transformative impact of the September 11 attacks on political contest in the United States.

### OVERSTATING THE MARKET FAILURE

Kaufmann's case hinges on establishing that the administration's claims went "beyond the range of ambiguity that disinterested experts would credit as plausible" (p. 8).<sup>2</sup> That criterion seems to have been met in the Bush team's allegations of an operational relationship between al-Qaida and Iraq, in its insinuations that the latter bore some responsibility for the September 11 attacks, and in its charges that Iraq was actively pursuing nuclear weapons components.

On other counts, however, Kaufmann is less persuasive. Before the U.S. invasion, many observers outside the administration suspected or believed that Iraq had active

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1. Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 5–48. All further references to this article appear in the text.

2. One might suggest that the very notion of "threat inflation" implies that threats exist independent of the viability of their articulation, that there is some objective baseline. The alternative view would hold that threats are by their very nature socially constructed and that the assertion of threat as well as the allegation of threat inflation are equally and inherently political interventions. I am sympathetic to this alternative argument, but here I proceed *within* Kaufmann's ontology. I see Kaufmann's other criteria to distinguish threat inflation from "ordinary conservatism"—consistent worst-case assertions, double standards, circular logic (pp. 8–9)—as signs that the boundaries of plausible ambiguity have been exceeded.

3. In his narrative on UNMOVIC, Kaufmann thus engages in some cherry-picking of his own.

WMD programs and chemical or biological weapons stocks. Among them were both the “dispassionate” (e.g., Hans Blix, then the head of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission [UNMOVIC]) and the “passionate” but opposed (e.g., nations such as France and Germany that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had disparaged as “old Europe”). In January 2003, before the UN Security Council, Blix hailed Iraqi cooperation, but he observed that Iraq’s December 2002 weapons declaration had failed to put to rest long-standing questions. Echoing the Bush administration’s logic, Blix cautioned that “inspectors can[not] close a file by simply invoking a precept that Iraq cannot prove the negative. In such cases, regrettably, they must conclude . . . that the absence of the particular item is not assured.”<sup>3</sup> He recapitulated this analysis at the end of the month and then again in February. As the United States ratcheted up the pressure, Blix sought to rein in the dogs of war: he praised Iraq’s progress and criticized U.S. intelligence. Nevertheless, as late as March 7, 2003, Blix noted that Iraq’s cooperative gestures “must be soberly judged by how many question marks they actually succeed in straightening out. This is not yet clear.”<sup>4</sup>

Although French and German politicians opposed the war, their countries’ intelligence agencies reached similar conclusions about the state of Iraq’s WMD programs.<sup>5</sup> In February 2001 German intelligence officials reported that Iraq had recently accelerated its chemical weapons program and its acquisition of biological weapons components. With regard to nuclear weapons, their conclusion—that Iraq would, if unobstructed, be capable of production within three to five years—was even more pessimistic than British and U.S. estimates.<sup>6</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies was skeptical of Iraq’s nuclear capacity in the absence of external assistance, but it strongly suspected that Iraq had retained significant biological and chemical agent and certainly had the capacity to produce weapons in short order.<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Pollack thus rightly concludes that “when the United States and its coalition partners invaded Iraq, the American public and much of the rest of the world believed that after Saddam Hussein’s regime sank, a vast flotsam of weapons of mass destruction would bob to the surface.”<sup>8</sup>

“Briefing of the Security Council, 9 January 2003: Inspections in Iraq and a Further Assessment of Iraq’s Weapons Declaration,” <http://www.unmovic.org>.

4. “Briefing of the Security Council, 9 January 2003: An Update on Inspections”; “Briefing of the Security Council, 14 February 2003: An Update on Inspections”; “Briefing of the Security Council, 7 March 2003: Oral Introduction of the 12th Quarterly Report of UNMOVIC”; and “Twelfth Quarterly Report,” S/2003/232, February 28, 2003. All available at <http://www.unmovic.org>.

5. Kaufmann shows that the administration manipulated and even fabricated evidence to bolster its case for war. My point is that even those who found its arguments on behalf of preventive war unconvincing and who had access to independent sources of information generally believed that Iraq had active WMD programs.

6. See “Iraq Could Build N-Bomb,” [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/1189182.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1189182.stm), among many other contemporaneous reports.

7. *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Net Assessment* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2002). See also the estimates of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, collected through September 2001, <http://cns.miis.edu/research/wmdme/iraq.htm>.

8. Kenneth Pollack, “Spies, Lies, and Weapons: What Went Wrong,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 293, No. 1 (January/February 2004), p. 80.

If the marketplace of ideas failed to weed out the Bush administration's unfounded claims, the latter's machinations cannot bear all the blame. Hussein's evasions played a role as well. Even a July 2004 U.S. Senate report that was blistering in its criticism of the U.S. intelligence community's performance concluded that "Iraq's efforts to deceive and evade United Nations weapons inspectors and its inability or unwillingness to fully account for pre-Gulf War chemical and biological weapons and precursors could have led analysts to the reasonable conclusion that Iraq may have retained those materials."<sup>9</sup> Hussein's behavior bolstered the administration's case that he was untrustworthy and gave life to speculation that Iraq had an active nuclear program.

Sometimes markets fail because of collusion, repression, and deception—the very mechanisms that Kaufmann describes. But a major limitation of the marketplace of ideas is that it lacks customary rules or even established standards of evidence for resolving interpretive and informational disputes. When that market fails, one should think first of the uncertainty endemic to international politics and of (Iraq's) private information, not the perversions of (U.S.) domestic politics.

The inherent difficulty of adjudicating such contests is reflected in Kaufmann's lengthy attempt to rebut Pollack's depiction of Saddam Hussein (pp. 11–16). Even if one finds fault with Pollack's claims about Hussein's risk orientation, it goes too far to suggest that these were obviously beyond the pale. Kaufmann rightly charges that "Bush and Pollack took ambiguous evidence and asserted a possible interpretation as a certain fact" (p. 16), but he appears to do the same in denying that Pollack's interpretations were plausible—even if they were, in Kaufmann's view, unwarranted.

#### EXAGGERATING EXECUTIVE AUTHORITY

The core of Kaufmann's argument is that the Bush administration dominated the debate in large part because in the United States the executive possesses unusual authority on matters of foreign policy. This made possible the administration's successful Arrovian issue manipulation and contributed to the silencing of the opposition (pp. 41–43).<sup>10</sup>

Much deference is today and has historically been granted to the president by Congress and the courts in foreign affairs, but Kaufmann overstates the executive's capacity to frame public debates, let alone to pronounce on questions of fact. George Edwards recently argued persuasively that the bully pulpit's power is limited and that on a wide range of issues—including national security—presidents have not regularly shaped

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9. U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, "Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq," 108th Cong., 2d sess., July 7, 2004, pp. 14–15.

10. Kaufmann also argues that issue manipulation is easier in foreign policy because the public is particularly ignorant of and uninterested in such matters (p. 36). But elite cuing is critical to the public's views on many questions, domestic as well as international. Moreover, the now-outdated conventional wisdom on which Kaufmann relies underestimates the strength and consistency of public attitudes on foreign affairs. See John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and John H. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida, "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates 'Waltz before a Blind Audience?'" *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (March 1989), pp. 123–141.

public opinion: they are more “facilitators” who reflect widely held views than “directors” who lead opinion.<sup>11</sup> The rise of cable television in recent years has further undercut presidents’ abilities to control public debate.<sup>12</sup>

Were Kaufmann correct, Franklin Roosevelt should have had an easier time in 1940 and 1941 silencing those who believed that the United States had little interest in the struggle against Nazism and persuading the public of the necessity for U.S. involvement. Yet it remains at least arguable that, had Japan not bombed Pearl Harbor and had Germany not thereafter declared war against the United States, America might have conceded Europe to the Nazis. Were Kaufmann correct, Harry Truman should have had little trouble quieting Senator Robert Taft and others who fulminated against a deeper U.S. commitment to Europe early in the Cold War. Although Truman pulled out the rhetorical stops, the commitment he sought would not become firm for over a decade.<sup>13</sup> Were Kaufmann correct, the Great Communicator should have encountered little opposition in calling for support for the Contra rebels. But Ronald Reagan’s “inability to communicate to the American people and to Congress the seriousness of the threat we faced in Central America” was one of his greatest “frustrations.”<sup>14</sup>

Kaufmann and other students of threat inflation have generally failed to consider the dogs that do not bark: those occasions on which presidents have tried to set the agenda but have fallen short.<sup>15</sup> Selecting on the dependent variable contributes to the misidentification of executive authority as a key explanatory factor. Moreover, selection effects skew the data set toward inflationary success: one would expect cases of attempted threat inflation to be unusually successful because political actors, who presumably have some inkling as to the likelihood of success, refrain from inflationary attempts whose prospects they do not deem bright.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT: 9/11, RHETORICAL COERCION, AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TERROR

Kaufmann recognizes the import of September 11—he argues that it rendered the scenario of weaker powers attacking the United States plausible and that it primed Americans for promises of action to bolster personal and national security (p. 46)—yet he is ultimately reluctant to accord it a central causal role. All but echoing McGeorge

11. George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003). See also Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don’t Pander* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy since Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For a dissenting view, see Jeffrey E. Cohen, *Presidential Responsiveness and Public Policy-making: The Public and the Policies That Presidents Choose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

12. Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell, “Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 93, No. 1 (March 1999), pp. 99–114.

13. Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

14. Quoted in Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*, p. 6.

15. See, for examples, Jane Kellest Cramer, “Sounding the Tocsin Redux: Persistent Patterns of Threat Inflation,” paper presented at the annual conference of the International Studies Association, Montreal, Canada, March 17–20, 2004.

Bundy's famous remark during the Vietnam War that Pleikus are like streetcars,<sup>16</sup> Kaufmann concludes that "the successful use of September 11 to promote a preventive war against an opponent unrelated to the original provocation suggests that there may often be flexibility in the use of external events to promote preferred policies" (p. 46).

The Bush administration exploited September 11 to advance its favored policy, but this was not some minor event blown out of proportion.<sup>17</sup> September 11 shattered a sense of American invulnerability that had survived even the dark days of the Cold War, and it reshaped the rhetorical space within which political disputes would be waged. When faced with the administration's varied case for invading Iraq, likely opponents found themselves without access to socially sustainable arguments to the contrary. In short, September 11 made possible what I have elsewhere called "rhetorical coercion."<sup>18</sup> Kaufmann and I agree that the scarcity of a vocal opposition was critical, but we disagree as to its source. For Kaufmann, its relative absence reflects the success of the Bush administration in splitting Democratic hawks from doves through issue manipulation (p. 44). But this begs the question: why did Democrats fail to effectively contest the introduction of the new issue in the first place?

The psychology of terrorism helps explain how September 11 reconfigured the rhetorical playing field and primed the American public for the Bush administration's case for war. First, the availability heuristic suggests that, in the face of uncertainty, people assess probabilities by searching for analogies. Recent terrorist events, particularly those on a large scale, are unusually salient and thus lead to exaggerated risk perceptions. Second, terrorism is, by its very nature, hard to control, and successful mass-casualty terrorist attacks on U.S. soil were nearly unknown. People are particularly afraid of such risks and thus are particularly prone to inflate them. Third, when circumstances call forth strong emotions such as fear, people tend to overestimate risk (including the risk of future attack): they consequently focus less on probabilities than on possibilities.<sup>19</sup> Intense fear leads people to favor policies that minimize risk (and further

16. A February 1965 Vietcong attack on the U.S. military base located in Pleiku, South Vietnam, prompted a vast U.S. bombing campaign targeted at North Vietnam: Operation Rolling Thunder. Bundy's comment suggested that the escalation of the war by Lyndon Johnson's administration was not really in retaliation for the Vietcong mortar attack. The latter was rather the pretext for a policy on which the administration had already decided in late January. Pleikus are like streetcars, said Bundy: if you miss one, another will come along soon.

17. Robert Jervis, however, argues that September 11 led the Bush foreign policy team to rethink standing threats such as Iraq. See Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 118, No. 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 371–373.

18. See Patrick T. Jackson and Ronald R. Krebs, "Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 27–31, 2003; and Ronald R. Krebs, *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming). For related dynamics, see Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and William H. Riker, *The Strategy of Rhetoric: Campaigning for the American Constitution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

19. Cass R. Sunstein, "Terrorism and Probability Neglect," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, Vol. 26, Nos. 2/3 (March–May 2003), pp. 121–136. See also Paul Slovic, *The Perception of Risk* (London: Earthscan, 2000).

feelings of fear) and thus to oppose military action overseas,<sup>20</sup> but only a small proportion of Americans felt fear after September 11 so deeply as to overwhelm the counterbalancing effects of increased appraisal of risk.<sup>21</sup> In short, Americans focused on what was possible, not what was probable, in the wake of September 11. The administration's success had little to do with the presidential structure of American democracy and far more to do with the ramifications of the attacks. The horrific vision of an Iraqi WMD strike on the U.S. mainland or of the Iraqi regime sharing these weapons with al-Qaida was, even by the administration's own reckoning, a low-probability outcome—but it was one that Americans were, after September 11, prepared to find plausible.

In the post-September 11 rhetorical space, the Democratic politicians who might normally have led the opposition to the invasion generally held their tongues. This was less because they had been persuaded of the Bush administration's logic and factual claims than because September 11 had deprived them of winning arguments, of socially sustainable avenues of reply. Space constraints prevent an exhaustive analysis of possible frames and counterframes, but consider the following. Opponents might have argued that Saddam Hussein was but a minor figure with small-time aspirations, but that flew in the face of long-standing U.S. policy with bipartisan support presuming that Hussein remained a substantial threat. Some maintained that Hussein was deterrable, but the purported link to al-Qaida and the testimony of Pollack combined to undercut that argument. Some challenged the administration's claims that Hussein was actively pursuing WMD, especially nuclear weapons, but after September 11 the possibility that he was doing so and would use them against the United States or its allies trumped the greater probability that he was not and would not. Others argued that the administration should instead concentrate on ensuring the safety of nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union or on rooting out al-Qaida, but at the time, when the administration forecast that the invading U.S. forces would be welcomed by liberated Iraqis, these hardly seemed like mutually exclusive courses of action. Recognizing that their justifications for opposing the war were unlikely to gain rhetorical traction, most Democrats who might otherwise have opposed the administration jumped on the bandwagon. They were the victims of successful rhetorical coercion.

Kaufmann argues that the potential opposition was mute because "the ordinary human tendency toward patriotism makes it too hard to publicly defend the proposition that foreign opponents may not have hostile intentions or may be justified in some of their actions" (p. 36). This implies that threat inflation always and everywhere succeeds and that the opposition is always and everywhere silent. But that is a vast exaggeration. Context is critical: countering attempted threat inflation is harder at some

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20. Yet prospect theory suggests that, when people are in the domain of expected loss, they tend toward risk-acceptant behavior. Recent findings have suggested, however, that these insights may be limited to "normal" times. See Katiuscia Sacco, Valentina Galletto, and Enrico Blanzieri, "How Has the 9/11 Terrorist Attack Influenced Decision Making?" *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 17, No. 9 (November/December 2003), pp. 1113–1127.

21. Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Galya Lahav, and Charles Taber, "Fear and Terrorism: Psychological Reactions to 9/11," in Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion Just, eds., *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 255–278.

times than others. The period after September 11 and before the botched occupation of Iraq was one of those times.

#### DEMOCRACY AND THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

Threat inflation is a democratic malady, for complete accuracy is at odds with the mobilization of public resources. Nearly every administration in U.S. history seeking to unify a fractious public for the collective enterprise of war has exaggerated the scope or the immediacy of threats. Less reliant on mass legitimacy and often fearful of involving the mass public, stable authoritarian regimes pursue their foreign policy ends without resorting to threat inflation.

Yet in relative terms, presidential and parliamentary democracies still look pretty good.<sup>22</sup> For while their markets are flawed, at least they exist. Political opponents in liberal democracies are only temporarily mute. When such opponents eventually recover their voices, market failures can be corrected. In the case of Iraq, the market failed in the short run, but it now appears to be in the early stages of correction—notwithstanding George W. Bush's re-election. Kaufmann's article might itself be seen as part of that protracted process. Illiberal regimes, however, lack any such mechanism, even in the long run, that might substitute for the absent marketplace.

Both democracies and autocracies make their fair share of mistakes in foreign policy. But the latter generally persist far longer in error and reverse course only when the situation has become dire. The Churchillian perspective on democracy continues to have merit: it is the worst of all possible systems of government, except for all the others.

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#### *The Author Replies:*

I appreciate Ronald Krebs's thoughtful comments on my recent article in *International Security*,<sup>1</sup> as well as the journal's editors for affording me this opportunity to respond. Krebs, however, misunderstands the issues at stake in three main areas: the measurement of threat inflation, presidential authority in foreign policy, and the marketplace of ideas.

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22. Presidential democracies, however, may be more prone to threat inflation than parliamentary democracies—but not for the reasons Kaufmann suggests. Rather, as Theodore Lowi long ago argued, the separation of powers may impart to executives unusual incentives to inflate threats and arrogate power. See Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy, and the Crisis of Public Authority* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969).

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1. Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 5–48. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.