

POLITICIZATION OF MEMORY

World War II as a Metaphor for Iraq

Abstract: This article explains how the administration of George W. Bush and media outlets invoked the memory of World War II to justify U.S. intervention in Iraq. Through metaphors between Iraq and the “good war,” the Bush administration attempted to confront the legacy of the Vietnam War and overcome the problems posed by their ill-defined policy goals. While these connections may superficially appear sound, they are ultimately artificial and display the political uses of history.

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In April 2003, Saddam Hussein’s government in Iraq collapsed, and U.S. Marines helped topple a 20-foot statue of the Iraqi president in downtown Baghdad. Weeks later, U.S. President George W. Bush stood aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln and proclaimed, “The tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free”; he went on to reference Normandy, Iwo Jima, and Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms.¹ This invocation of World War II history was not a singular occurrence. For years, analogies between the “good war” and Iraq had suffused and shaped discourse surrounding American intervention in the Middle East. The Bush administration and media outlets used the popular memory of World War II to justify intervention in Iraq and to give form to hazy foreign policy goals. However, many of the WWII metaphors applied to Iraq break down under scrutiny, and some can even be applied against America itself. This article examines how these metaphors were constructed, how they topple under close examination, and how they ultimately display a politicization of history.

THE “GOOD WAR”

Though World War II ravaged Europe and involved the deaths of over 50 million people, it occupies a surprisingly positive place in the collective memory of Americans. Known as the “good war,” WWII represented an ideal war for the U.S.: “Fought for an unquestionably just cause, ending in total victory, World War II could be reliably invoked to remind Americans of their own best selves.”² American citizens viewed this war in highly moralized terms – good triumphing over evil. And this righteousness became linked with force. Professor of Peace Theology Ted Grimsrud describes this phenomenon when he writes, “It [WWII] provided a mythology of the redemptive possibilities of violence. It was a ‘good war’ that defended the American way of life and defeated forces that were clearly evil. As such, it set the tone for belief that America was a force for good in the world, that America’s ongoing military actions were in continuity with the Good War...”³ Thus, the remembrance of the Second World War signaled an intersection of national



Statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled (2003)
Source: Tim McLaughlin (Wikimedia Commons)

exceptionalist pride with the view of America’s new role as an omnipresent military power. Despite the trials and tribulations of the late twentieth century, World War II always served as a reminder of America’s exalted place in the world, a “moral touchstone” for United States citizens.⁴

Because of the historical space World War II inhabited, American officials began employing memory of the War to gain popular support for military intervention and to simplify U.S. foreign policy towards Iraq. The main factor necessitating

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the use of WWII memory was the lack of popular desire to go to war. Largely due to America's experience in Vietnam, the idyllic post-WWII view of military might as a panacea had dissipated. Professor Emeritus of History Jeffrey P. Kimball supports this view by explaining that the U.S. experience in Vietnam represented a "shattering of the myth of American omnipotence" - a myth that had stemmed from earlier U.S. success in world affairs, such as in World War II.⁵ Therefore, to mobilize the American public to support a war in Iraq, the Bush administration had to overcome "Vietnam syndrome," or the growing reluctance of Americans to use military force as a policy tool.⁶

Another barrier to intervention was the haziness of U.S. foreign policy goals in Iraq. Unlike in most previous conflicts, American citizens in the wake of 9/11 had no grasp of the enemy: Were they to target just the perpetrators of the attacks? Or were they to target the roots of those attacks, the terrorist organizations or even the states harboring those organizations? President Bush's ill-defined "war on terrorism" did not adequately answer these questions, and the public was still reticent to expand U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. To confront both these problems (the legacy of Vietnam and ill-defined policy goals) the Bush administration began to draw connections between contemporary events and World War II. Invocations of the Good War reinvigorated popular belief in the "necessity and even moral 'goodness' of military force" while reducing Middle Eastern conflict into metaphors that the public could easily consume.⁷ Analogies between WWII and Iraq quickly proliferated. For historian John Dower, "such plundering from the last 'good war' was natural, irresistible, almost addictive, and took on a certain momentum all its own."⁸

CONSTRUCTION AND TOPPLING OF METAPHOR 9/11 AS PEARL HARBOR

A year before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, conservatives who would later become influential in the Bush administration's foreign policy contemplated "some catastrophic and catalyzing event - like a new Pearl Harbor" that could facilitate a shift towards military expansion in the Middle East.⁹ This soon became reality. After the tragedy of September 11, 2001, newspaper headlines instantly cemented the connection that those neoconservatives had made a year before. The Boston Globe headline proclaimed "New day of infamy," while the Washington Post plastered Franklin Roosevelt's exact quote on its front page: "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy."¹⁰ These media outlets signaled the onset of a very powerful analogy between 9/11 and Pearl Harbor that pervaded American discourse. To most, the connection seemed solid. Both the Islamic terrorists and the Japanese displayed a "holy-war fanaticism," and both times American officials failed to anticipate the attack.¹¹ The feeling of vulnerability that Americans had felt after Pearl Harbor resurfaced in the wake of 9/11, for American soil was very rarely attacked. Additionally, both attacks appeared reckless, yet revealed

imminent threats. Speechwriter David Frum explained the Bush administration's espousal of these historical connections in his insider account of the Bush presidency:

"Saddam was as reckless as the Japanese had been. He had started two mad wars already - one against Iran, one against Kuwait. During the Gulf War, not content with fighting the United States, Britain, France, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and all the Arab states except Jordan, he had also tried to provoke an air attack from Israel. No country on earth more closely resembled one of the old Axis powers than present-day Iraq. And just as FDR saw in Pearl Harbor a premonition of even more terrible attacks from Nazi Germany, so September 11 had delivered an urgent warning of what Saddam Hussein could and almost certainly would do with nuclear and biological weapons."¹²

These implicit, superficial threads connecting 9/11 with Pearl Harbor inhabited the minds of the Bush administration, political pundits, media outlets, and everyday Americans. Soon, the connections were expanded and cemented into American discourse through metaphor.

Since most Americans already saw the parallels between the two attacks, war hawks only had to build on these existing thoughts to push their agenda. One way to further affix the Pearl Harbor metaphor was through a rhetorical use of language. For example, some news sources likened the 9/11 attacks to kamikaze attacks, despite Japanese kamikaze tactics having no relation to Pearl Harbor; also, the smoldering remains of the World Trade Center were designated "Ground Zero," a name originally given to the obliterated sites of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹³ Even though these two historical connections had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor, they subtly linked terrorist activities with the actions of Japan during World War II, forging a subliminal connection between terrorists and Japan. Another way to solidify this analogy was emphasizing "remembrance." This tactic functioned on two levels: on the surface level, remembrance securely fastened 9/11, and the existing connections to Pearl Harbor, into American minds through repetition and ubiquity. It would have been hard for Americans to push the event out of their minds with politicians, media outlets, and peers constantly reiterating, "Never Forget." On a deeper level, remembrance did not merely secure the analogy, but furthered it. The rallying cry "9/11 - We Will Never Forget" mirrored the oft repeated phrase "Remember Pearl Harbor." Pulitzer Prize-winning author John W. Dower explains that, "Like the language of 'infamy,' the call for everlasting remembrance of September 11 was all the more effective because most adult Americans immediately grasped - or grasped at - the resonance between the two catastrophes."¹⁴ With all of these intersecting linkages between 9/11 and Pearl Harbor, many Americans conflated the two. However, this conflation was for a political purpose; war hawks simplified the two events into a historical parallel in order to increase the public's receptivity to military intervention.



Plumes of smoke billow from the World Trade Center towers after the September 11 attacks (2001)

Source: Michael Foran (Wikimedia Commons)

When closely examined, the Pearl Harbor analogy reveals deeper policy goals and cracks in logic. Rahul Mahajan, an administrator of the anti-war coalition United for Peace and Justice, adeptly summarizes the main purpose for lumping together the two attacks: “It’s not difficult to surmise that the invocation of Pearl Harbor was a way to galvanize the nation, assert that the danger to the world was similar to that posed by the Axis in World War II, suggest that the retaliation on yet unnamed targets should be as severe as it was in that war...”¹⁵ The construction of this parallel aimed to inculcate the public’s response to Pearl Harbor: widespread support for war. As Mahajan points out, this metaphor also served as a substitute for an information void; the public would be open to war despite lacking the knowledge of who the targets were. The Bush administration would be able to retroactively define the war after the public already pledged their support for it. Similar to FDR in World War II, constructing 9/11 in a similar light as Pearl Harbor “enabled Bush to don the cloak of a ‘war president.’”¹⁶ Many scholars, nonetheless, saw through this ploy and questioned the accuracy of linking 9/11 with the Japanese attack. To start, Pearl Harbor was a “purely military objective.” The U.S. had implemented an oil embargo against Japan, an act of aggression, so tensions existed between America and Japan; when Japan launched its surprise attack, it exclusively targeted American military assets. Conversely, the 9/11 attacks were unprovoked and took the lives of many innocent civilians. These attacks “lacked the essential relationship between violent means and political ends that ...

must govern any act of war.”¹⁷ The two attacks also differed in the threats they posed, with the Pearl Harbor attack supported by a nation with a powerful economy and military, and the 9/11 perpetrators a small group of militants with much fewer resources.¹⁸ Once these, along with other criticisms of the metaphor, surfaced, John Dower saw a unintentional offshoot of the Pearl Harbor/9/11 analogy, which he dubbed the “boomerang effect.” Instead of connecting Pearl Harbor to 9/11, he compared Pearl Harbor to America’s eventual decision to invade Iraq. In both Pearl Harbor and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the attackers had no endgame; they were so concerned with the initial offensive drive that they did not adequately think about the ramifications.¹⁹ In one fell swoop, Dower subverts the mainstream metaphor and flips it on its head. This demonstrates the malleability of memory and the factual holes in the Pearl Harbor metaphor. However, the World War II seed had been planted in the mind of the general American public, and “‘Infamy’ and ‘Remember Pearl Harbor’ turned out to be but opening notes in an expansive rhetorical interplay of past and present.”²⁰

POST-WAR IRAQ AS POST-WAR JAPAN

When confronting concerns about occupation of a post-Hussein Iraq, the Bush administration once again turned to a World War II metaphor to simplify their problem. Questions over America’s ability to democratize Iraq after removing Hussein’s government permeated public discourse and raised doubts about the prudence of invasion. To quell these



Saddam Hussein addressing state television (2001)
Source: BBC News (Wikimedia Commons)

fears, government officials referenced the success of U.S. occupation in post-WWII Germany and Japan. Particularly using Japan (since it was not partitioned as was Germany), officials used examples from history as “a reassuring preview of what could be anticipated in Iraq: cordial welcome of the conquerors, followed by impressive accomplishments in reconstruction and democratization.”²¹ This comparison ignored the societal, political, and historical uniqueness of Japan and Iraq to create an artificial, simplistic parallel between the two societies. But accuracy did not matter as long as the comparison could be used instrumentally to advance the Bush administration’s agenda.

As before, scholars quickly grasped the incongruity of the two regimes and attempted to redefine the discourse through offering historical facts. John Dower once again rose to the challenge. In a *New York Times* op-ed article entitled “Lessons From Japan About War’s Aftermath,” Dower completely dismantled the administration’s conflation of a post-war Iraq with post-WWII Japan. His discussion addressed many problems with the Japan-Iraq metaphor, but a few points particularly stand out. First, the Japanese occupation had legitimacy, both “moral and legal,” in the eyes of the world community and the Japanese; this critique proved very prescient, for the U.S. ended up breaking international law to invade Iraq, depriving the invasion of any legal legitimacy. Next, Dower explains how Japan was

physically isolated from potentially intrusive neighbors and lacked the “religious, ethnic, regional and tribal animosities that are likely to erupt in a post-war Iraq.” Also, Japan had prewar democratic traditions and a surviving bureaucratic apparatus, which fostered America’s democratization efforts. Iraq would have neither. Dower ends his article by trying to shift the way history was being used: “While occupied Japan provides no model for a postwar Iraq, it does provide a clear warning: Even under circumstances that turned out to be favorable, demilitarization and democratization were awesome challenges. To rush to war without seriously imagining all its consequences, including its aftermath, is not realism but a terrible hubris.”²² Through this vitriol, he tries to shift Japan’s legacy from an all-clear to a warning. History should not be reduced into easily digestible schemata for political purposes but instead be examined carefully, in all its complexities, to make informed decisions. And the hauntingly prophetic nature of Dower’s article serves as an example of the benefits of this approach.

THE “AXIS OF EVIL”

“States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”²³ In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush resolutely proclaimed that Iran, Iraq, and North Korea were seeking to develop WMDs and provide them to terrorists. Despite the reductive good/evil invocation, Bush’s metaphor had a more mundane, political purpose: “...Bush’s main concern was to link Iraq with 9/11 and fasten on weapons of mass destruction to justify preemption – in a way, however, that would still move Congress to support him if no WMDs were found.”²⁴ Part of the efficacy of this soundbite was its clear relationship to World War II. Foremost, the usage of the word “axis” clearly referenced the AXIS powers – the tripartite pact between Rome, Berlin, and Tokyo in WWII. Investigative journalist Bob Woodward assents, stating that, “It was a nice phrase with overtones of the World War II Axis powers.”²⁵ David Frum, the figure primarily responsible for defining the case for intervention in Iraq, explained that the relationship between terror organization and terror states resembled the Tokyo-Rome-Berlin Axis because the only unifying factor in both cases was “resentment of the power of the West and contempt for democracy.” Beyond that, they only shared distrust, contempt for free thought, and love of death, characteristics that Frum argued mirrored those of WWII-era European fascism.²⁶ President Bush added to this connection: “The terrorists are the heirs to fascism. They have the same will to power, the same disdain for the individual, the same mad global ambitions. And they will be dealt with in just the same way.”²⁷ The rhetorical repetition of “the same” subtly enhances the more overt attempt to establish continuity with the past. Also, by playing into the dynamics of good and evil, the “axis of evil” metaphor related to the memory of World War II as a triumph against evil. Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, saw the benefit of this strategy of oversimplification and understood

how defining the problem in these reduced, dichotomous terms grabbed the public's attention without committing to any concrete policy.²⁸ The words "axis" and "evil" both referenced the memory of World War II – a simpler conflict where enemies were tangible and the U.S. public was unified on a moral mission; the Bush administration tried to link the "War on Terrorism" with these ideals to surmount the problems posed by an ill-defined enemy and divided public.

For how influential the "axis of evil" language ended up being, its origin story reveals the sloppy fabrication of the metaphor. Michael Gerson, President Bush's chief speechwriter, asked Frum to delineate a reasoning for war against Iraq. Accordingly, when Frum finally formulated his idea about a network of terrorists and states, he originally singled out Iraq; only later was Iran added, and then "North Korea as a seemingly casual afterthought."²⁹ This story reveals how the Bush administration crudely fit current events into rigid historical paradigms. The three member states of this twenty-first century "axis" had no relation to the original WWII AXIS powers. Iraq, Iran, and North Korea did not have the military pact, formal ties, armies and arsenals, or professed expansionist plans that the original AXIS powers had.³⁰ American officials just bundled them together in a forced analogy to create a good sound-bite and rally the public by connecting to an uncontroversial war. Also, this analogy vested the Bush administration with massive power in constructing the foreign policy climate. Most notably, the administration used this metaphor to define who the enemy was: first, it focused on retaliating against the perpetrators of 9/11; then, it expanded that focus to stopping terrorists from obtaining weapons of mass destruction (WMDs);

Snyder, research professor at the National Defense University, explains that Munich has "come to symbolize the dangers of ignoring geopolitical reality in favor of salvaging a peace that appeared to some to be within reach and to be worth whatever price was asked."³³ Compromise became anathema and isolationism was enabling. The Bush administration clearly fell into this ethos, signaled by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's assertion at the 2003 Conference on Security and Cooperation: "To fail to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein would be to fail to learn the lesson of Munich."³⁴ Though scholars like Jervis recognize that this "lesson" is "a caricature of the events that transpired in 1938," the legacy of Munich redefined foreign policy strategies in the later twentieth century and continued to appear in discussions of U.S. intervention in Iraq.³⁵

"A suggestion: anyone resorting to the term *Munich* should be obliged to identify the Hitler actor – that is, the insatiable expansionist – in the situation under discussion," writes Cornell history professor Walter LaFeber.³⁶ And the Bush administration did exactly that. The "axis of power" metaphor had already invoked fascism, and references to Munich had invoked appeasement; naturally, a Hitler figure emerged – or rather, was constructed. Marilyn B. Young, the late New York University professor of history, explains that President Saddam Hussein filled this role. With his history of persecution, savagery, and moustaches, Hussein appeared to be the perfect parallel to Hitler. Additionally, his 1990 invasion of Kuwait served as the perfect parallel to Hitler's expansionistic policy.³⁷ Much like the "axis of evil" language, the creation of a figurehead to epitomize evil gave the American people a concrete enemy. Consistent

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finally, it linked terrorist organizations to states, and aimed to prevent these states from supplying WMDs to terrorists.³¹ Through the metaphor, and the resulting shift in focus, Bush and his associates made an ambiguous, alien foreign policy situation seem clear and familiar. Additionally, circulating language of fascism and the AXIS powers opened up avenues for other World War II metaphors.

THE “LESSONS” OF MUNICH

In the aftermath of World War II, America's foreign policy had been drastically altered. In what political scientist Robert Jervis coined the "deterrence model," Western powers began to believe that compromise with tyrants should be rejected and that military-backed interventionism should be embraced.³² This dramatic shift in paradigm primarily stemmed from the failures of the 1938 Munich Agreement and the policy of appeasement in pacifying Hitler's expansionistic thirst. Jed C.

with the other WWII metaphors, however, the supposed relationship between Hussein and Hitler quickly collapses under scrutiny. Rahul Mahajan summarizes the employment of the Hitler-Hussein metaphor and then points out a flaw in the connection:

“In a similar vein were the numerous invocations of Neville Chamberlain's concessions to Hitler in Munich (where he accepted Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia), always in response to any antiwar arguments. It had a powerful emotive force, because of the obvious fact that capitulation then had meant that the eventual war with Germany was far more destructive. For similar reasons, the same analogy was repeatedly used when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, even though Hussein had neither the capability nor the will to invade any other countries. The analogy was also strained by the fact that no one in the antiwar movement or elsewhere advocated appeasement.”³⁸

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This argument deprives Hussein of the defining characteristic of a Hitler figure (at least as defined by LaFeber): the role as “the insatiable expansionist.” Thus, the depiction of Hussein as Hitler was a straw man that the Bush administration created to mobilize the American public against a visible, tangible enemy. In his *House of War*, James Carroll elucidates the devious ways in which historical memory can be twisted; he describes how Hussein’s worst crimes like gassing the Kurds and Shiites in the 1980s, those crimes that would connect him with Hitler, had never drawn protests from Washington until the administration needed a Hitler figure.³⁹ This detail displays how those in power can selectively use history to their own political agenda. Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein had almost nothing in common, yet the Bush administration managed to fabricate an analogy between the two that increased the urgency American intervention in Iraq by connecting with a popular perception of evil.

CONCLUSION

Through these various World War II metaphors, Washington officials twisted, simplified, and misapplied history to advance their political agenda in the Middle East. They played on popular memories of the Second World War as the “great war,” crudely fitting contemporary people and events into historical templates. Though these analogies may have been based in historical fact, close examination completely destroys the rationale behind them. Americans must learn from history but do so without overgeneralizing it into cookie-cutter paradigms. And as these cases display, collective memory is easily constructed and manipulated. Therefore going forward, citizens must be prudent about blindly accepting information, remembering that objective historical events are always interpreted and disseminated through subjective human agents. 🏛️

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