

Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq war: realism versus neo-conservatism

John Mearsheimer

Hans Joachim Morgenthau was one of the most important political thinkers of the 20th century and one of the great realist thinkers of all time. Morgenthau, along with almost all realists in the United States – except for Henry Kissinger – opposed the Vietnam war. Their opposition came early, long before it became clear that the war was a lost cause; in fact Morgenthau was warning against American military involvement in Vietnam in the late 1950s.

Equally, almost all realists in the United States – except for Henry Kissinger – opposed the war against Iraq. Many supporters of that war are now having second thoughts, since it is becoming increasingly clear that American troops are stuck in an open-ended conflict from which there seems to be no exit. The realists, however, anticipated big problems before the war began; in this, they have been proved largely correct.

Taken together, these facts raise the obvious question: would Hans Morgenthau, the realist who opposed going to war in Vietnam, also have opposed the war on Iraq? We can never know for sure and it would be foolish to say with total certainty that Morgenthau would have opposed the Iraq war. Nevertheless, given his theory of international politics, his opposition to

the Vietnam war and the parallels between the two conflicts, it is highly likely.

The neo-conservative case: military power

The dispute about whether to go to war in Iraq was between two competing theories of international politics: realism and the neo-conservatism that underpins the Bush doctrine. To understand the realist case against Iraq, it is necessary first to lay out the neo-conservative strategy that the realists were challenging.

Neo-conservative theory – the Bush doctrine – is essentially Wilsonianism with teeth. The theory has an idealist strand and a power strand: Wilsonianism provides the idealism, an emphasis on military power provides the teeth.

Neo-conservatives correctly believe that the United States has a remarkably powerful military. They believe that there has never been a state on earth that has as much relative military power as the United States has today. And very importantly, they believe that America can use its power to reshape the world to suit its interests. In short, they believe in big-stick diplomacy, which is why the Bush doctrine privileges military power over diplomacy.

This belief in the utility of military force explains in large part why the Bush administration and the neo-conservatives favour unilateralism over multilateralism. If the United States emphasised diplomacy over military force, it could not act unilaterally very often, because diplomacy by definition is very much a multilateral enterprise. But if a state has awesome military power and can rely heavily on that power to do business in the international system, then it will not often need allies. Instead, it can rely almost exclusively on its military might to achieve its goals. In other words, it can act unilaterally, as the Bush administration often did during its first term.

The key to understanding why the neo-conservatives think that military force is such a remarkably effective instrument for running the world is that they believe that international politics operate according to “bandwagoning” logic. Specifically, they believe that if a powerful country like the United States is willing to threaten or attack its adversaries, then virtually all of the states in the system – friends and foes alike – will quickly understand that the United States means business and that if they cross mighty Uncle Sam, they will pay a severe price. In essence, the rest of the world will fear the United States, which will cause any state that is even thinking about challenging Washington to throw up its hands and jump on the American bandwagon.

Before the Iraq war, realists would say to the neo-conservatives that if the United States threatens Iran and North Korea by putting them on the “axis of evil” along with Iraq, it will drive them to redouble their efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Neo-conservatives would say to realists that Iran and North Korea will respond to the fall of Saddam by understanding that they are numbers two and three on the hit list, and will seek to avoid the same fate by surrendering. In short, they will jump on the American bandwagon rather than risk death.

Critics of the Iraq war would also say to the neo-conservatives that it would make sense to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before invading Iraq. Neo-conservatives would answer that an American victory in Iraq would compel Yasser Arafat to sign a peace treaty with Israel. The road to Jerusalem, they would argue, runs through Baghdad. If the mighty United States got tough with troublemakers in the Arab world, the Palestinians would read the writing on the wall.

Bandwagoning logic also underpinned the famous “domino theory”, which was a critical factor in the American decision to go to war in Vietnam. According to the domino theory, if Vietnam were to fall to communism, other countries in southeast Asia would quickly follow, and then countries in other regions would begin to fall under the rule of the Soviet Union. Eventually almost every state in the international system would jump on the Soviet bandwagon, leaving the United States alone and weak against an unstoppable juggernaut.

Some forty years later, the Bush administration thought that it could turn the domino theory to its advantage. Knocking off Saddam, the war party thought, would have a cascading effect in the middle east, if not the wider world. The Iranians, the North Koreans, the Palestinians, and the Syrians, after seeing the United States win a stunning victory in Iraq, would all throw up their hands and dance to Uncle Sam’s tune.

Knocking off Saddam, the war party thought, would have a cascading effect in the middle east, if not the wider world.

The neo-conservatives’ faith in the efficacy of bandwagoning was based in good part on their faith in the so-called revolution in military affairs (RMA). In particular, they believed that the United States could rely on stealth technology, air-delivered precision-guided weapons, and small but highly mobile ground forces to win quick and decisive victories. They believed that the RMA gave the Bush administration a nimble military instrument which, to put it in Muhammad Ali’s terminology, could “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.”

The American military, in their view, would swoop down out of the sky, finish off a regime, pull back and reload the shotgun for the next target. There might be a need for US ground troops in some cases, but that force would be small in number. The Bush doctrine did not call for a large army. Indeed, heavy reliance on a big army was antithetical to the strategy, because it would rob the military of the nimbleness and flexibility essential to make the strategy work.

This bias against big battalions explains why deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz (a prominent neo-conservative) and secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld dismissed out of hand (the then US army chief of staff) General Eric Shinseki’s comment that the United States would need “several hundred thousand troops” to occupy Iraq. Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz understood that if the American military had to deploy huge numbers of troops in Iraq after Saddam was toppled, it would be pinned down, unable

to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. A large-scale occupation of Iraq would undermine the Bush administration's plan to rely on the RMA to win quick and decisive victories.

In sum, the RMA was supposed to make bandwagoning work, which, in turn, would make big-stick diplomacy work, which, in turn, would make a unilateralist foreign policy feasible.

The neo-conservative case: Wilsonian idealism

The idealist or Wilsonian strand of the neo-conservatives' theory of international politics focuses on promoting democracy, which they believe is the most powerful political ideology on the face of the earth. Moreover, they believe that the world divides into good states and bad states, and that the democracies are the white hats.

Democracies have benign motives and are naturally inclined to act peacefully toward other states. Democracies only act in a bellicose fashion when the black hats, invariably non-democratic states, leave them no choice. Of course, they believe in democratic peace theory, which says that democracies hardly ever fight each other. Thus, if the United States could help create a world populated exclusively with democracies, there would be no war and we would have reached what Francis Fukuyama famously called "the end of history". If every state in the system looked like democratic America, which is obviously a virtuous state, we would live in a world of all white hats and no black hats, which, by definition, would be a peaceful world.

Fukuyama thought we had reached the end of history in 1989 with the end of the cold war, and that boredom would be the main problem in the decades ahead. But 9/11 made it clear that the west was not going to be bored for the foreseeable future, because it faces a major-league terrorist threat emanating from the Arab and Islamic world, especially the middle east. The neo-conservatives reacted to this problem by arguing that the root of the problem was the almost complete absence of democracy in the middle east.

End of history logic, in other words, did not apply to this area because virtually no state looked like America. The solution was obvious: export democracy to the middle east, and hopefully to the wider Islamic world. Transform the region and make it into a zone of democracies, the neo-conservatives argued, and the terrorism problem would go away. After all, no state modelled on the United States would resort to terror.

Thus, the Bush doctrine emphasises the importance of spreading democracy, especially in the middle east. Iraq was the first major effort in this endeavour, although it could be argued that the war against Afghanistan was the initial step and Iraq was the second one. Regardless, Iraq was not intended to be the last step.

In the heady days after Baghdad fell on 9 April 2003, the Bush administration and its neo-conservative supporters made it clear that they intended to use the threat or application of military force to topple the regimes in Iran and Syria and eventually to transform the entire region into a sea of democracies. This was to be social engineering on a massive scale and it was to be done with a mailed fist.

To call the Bush administration conservative, at least in its foreign policy, is mistaken. It is pursuing a radical foreign policy, regardless of what one thinks of its merits. No true conservative would embrace such a grandiose policy. Moreover, the label neo-conservative seems like a misnomer when one considers the scope and ambition of the foreign policies that neo-conservatives prescribe for the United States.

Neither the neo-conservatives nor President Bush ever explained in detail how democracy was going to take root in the middle east, where there was hardly any history of democracy. Furthermore, little was said about how the United States was going to effect this transformation at the end of a rifle barrel. It was just assumed that democracy would sprout once Saddam Hussein and other tyrants were removed from power.

The American people, much to their discredit, never demanded an explanation as to how the United States military, which has never been particularly good at nation-building, was going to do massive social engineering in a foreign and probably hostile culture.

The bottom line is that the neo-conservative theory of international politics that moved the invasion of Iraq has a power-based strand which emphasises big stick diplomacy and bandwagoning logic, and an idealist strand that calls for spreading democracy across the middle east and maybe even the entire globe.

Hans Morgenthau and the realist critique of neo-conservatism

What, then, is the realist critique of this neo-conservative theory, and how might Hans Morgenthau have reacted to the arguments for and against the Iraq war?

Realists do not believe that we live in a bandwagoning world. On the contrary, realists tend to believe that we live in a balancing world, in which, when one state puts its fist in another state's face, the target usually does not throw its hands in the air and surrender. Instead, it looks for ways to defend itself; it balances against the threatening state.

Thus, realists predicted that Iran and North Korea would not react to an attack on Iraq by abandoning their nuclear programmes, but would work harder than ever to acquire a nuclear deterrent so as to immunise themselves from American power. Of course, this is exactly what has happened over the past two years, and there is no sign that either of the remaining members of the axis of evil is likely to cave into the Bush administration's threats. Simply put, we live in a balancing world.

It is also worth noting that the neo-conservatives expected America's allies in Europe to change their tune after Iraq and support the Bush doctrine. Once the United States demonstrated the power of its sword, the weak-kneed Europeans would have to accept the fact that they live in a world that operates according to American rules and nobody else's. So far, the French and Germans do not appear to be following that script.

As far as Morgenthau's views on balancing versus bandwagoning are concerned, the critical issue is how he thought about the domino theory, which is based on bandwagoning logic and which was at the heart of the debate about whether to fight in Vietnam.

Morgenthau, not surprisingly, thought that the domino theory was hokey. Like all realists, he understood that we live in a balancing world and that the fall of Vietnam would not have a cascading effect in southeast Asia, much less across the entire globe. It is hard to believe that he would have accepted the neo-conservatives' claim that invading Iraq would cause America's other adversaries to start dancing to the Bush administration's tune.

On the idealist strand of neo-conservative theory, the argument is even stronger that Morgenthau, like almost all contemporary realists, would have opposed the Iraq war. Realists tend to believe that the most powerful political ideology on the face of the earth is nationalism, not democracy. President Bush and his neo-conservative allies largely ignore nationalism. It is simply not part of their discourse. For them, the emphasis is constantly and emphatically on democracy, and they believe that invading countries to facilitate the spread of democracy is an attractive option.

Realists, by contrast, think that nationalism usually makes it terribly costly to invade and occupy countries in areas like the middle east. People in the developing world believe fervently in self-determination, which is the essence of nationalism, and they do not like Americans or Europeans running their lives. The power of nationalism explains in good part why all of the great European empires – the British, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman and the Russian – are now on the scrapheap of history.

There are other cases which demonstrate that nationalism quickly turns liberators into occupiers, who then face a major insurrection. The Israelis, for example, invaded Lebanon in 1982 and were at first welcomed as liberators. But they overstayed their welcome and generated an insurgency which drove them out of Lebanon eighteen years later.

The American experience in Vietnam and the Soviet experience in Afghanistan fit the same basic pattern, although the American and Soviet learning curves were a bit steeper than the Israeli. In short, realists thought from the start that it was foolish in the age of nationalism to think that the United States could invade and occupy Iraq and other countries in the middle east for the purpose of altering their political systems in ways that would make them friendly to America.

There is little doubt that Morgenthau saw nationalism as a potent political force and that, more than any other factor, it drove his opposition to the Vietnam war. Many argued during the Vietnam years that the fight was a war between democracy and communism that the United States could not afford to lose. Morgenthau rejected this view, and argued that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong (the guerrilla forces in South Vietnam) were motivated mainly by nationalism, not communism, and that they would invariably view American troops in their midst as colonial occupiers whom they would fight hard to expel.

Morgenthau understood that if the United States committed large-scale military forces to Vietnam, it would face a major-league insurgency that would be extremely difficult to beat. It is natural to conclude that he would have understood that this same basic logic applied to Iraq, and thus would have opposed the Iraq war as fiercely as he opposed the war in Vietnam.

[Realism, democracy, and American foreign policy](#)

There is no question that the revolution in military affairs helps the United States conquer countries in the

middle east quickly and easily, although it is not clear that the RMA is essential for that purpose. After all, the Soviets did not need the RMA to overrun Afghanistan in 1979, and the Israelis did not need the RMA to overrun Lebanon in 1982. The United States almost certainly could have defeated Iraq in short order without the RMA. In fact, it is relatively easy for a powerful country like America to conquer states in the developing world.

The real trouble comes once the United States owns the country it has overrun, and the Americans are seen as occupiers and face an insurgency. The RMA is largely useless in combatting an insurgency, against which a large army is needed, as the Bush administration has discovered in Iraq. But once the United States commits huge numbers of soldiers in a country like Iraq, it is no longer free to invade other countries because it is effectively stuck in a quagmire.

When that happens, bandwagoning is taken off the table, simply because America's other adversaries no longer have to fear that the American military will swoop down out of the sky and finish them off; thus they have no reason to throw up their hands and surrender to the Bush administration. In short, occupation stokes nationalism, which leads to insurgency, which undermines any hope of making bandwagoning logic work, which undermines big-stick diplomacy.

If a misunderstanding of nationalism is the first problem with the idealism of the neo-conservatives, the second is that democracies, for all their virtues, do not always pursue benign foreign policies. I have no doubt that democracy is the best political system and I think that spreading democracy across the globe is a noble goal. I am glad that Germany is a flourishing democracy today and I hope that Iraq follows suit sooner rather than later. Nevertheless, when it comes to foreign policy, democracies are not always the white hats that President Bush and his neo-conservative supporters make them out to be.

For example, it is often argued that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was especially evil because it used chemical weapons against both Iran and the Kurds in the 1980s. However, at the time, the United States was providing Iraq with overhead satellite imagery so that it could use its chemical weapons more effectively against the Iranian army. When Iraq came in for condemnation for using chemical weapons at the United Nations and in the US Congress, the Reagan and first Bush administrations went to considerable lengths to shield Saddam's regime from criticism in those august bodies.

The United States not only has dirty hands from Iraq, but it has also engaged in barbaric behaviour of its own. One should not underestimate how ruthless democratic America can be when pushed to the wall. American bombers pulverised German and Japanese cities in the second world war, killing about a million Japanese civilians in the process. Moreover, the United States is the only country in the world that has used nuclear weapons against another country.

Of course, most Americans believe that there was nothing wrong with bombing Germany and Japan or using nuclear weapons against Japanese civilians, because we are the white hats and the victims were the black hats. However, when you are at the other end of the American rifle barrel, it usually does not look that way. When you are staring down the barrel of that rifle, it is the United States that looks like the black hat.

As Morgenthau clearly understood, it is often difficult to distinguish between good and bad guys in international politics, which means that there is likely to be much resistance to America's big-stick diplomacy, since many people around the world are likely to view the Bush administration as a bully, not a liberator.

There is another problem with democracies portraying themselves as the white hats in the world: it encourages them to go on crusades to crush non-democracies and transform the world into one giant zone of democracies. This tendency was definitely on display in the United States during the first half of the 1960s, when intervention in Vietnam was being debated. Not surprisingly, Morgenthau warned about the dangers of pursuing global crusades in making his case against the war in Vietnam. This same tendency was in play again in the run-up to the second Gulf war of 2003 when the Bush administration laid out its case for transforming the middle east with the mailed fist. Morgenthau almost certainly would have criticised that policy and the impending war loudly and clearly.

Creating democracies in areas like the middle east, where there is little experience with that form of government, is a daunting task. The United States has not had much success with nation-building in the past and there are no good theories that explain how to succeed at it. There are many reasons to think that spreading democracy with military force is not an effective way to build democracy in Iraq, or any other place for that matter.

Not surprisingly, Hans Morgenthau was an ardent critic of the American effort to democratise Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Morgenthau was not

opposed to making Vietnam democratic. He just thought that Vietnam was not ready for democracy and American efforts to impose it on that country would ultimately fail, regardless of US intentions.

Realists are often accused of disliking democracy and even of being anti-democratic. This is a bogus charge. Every realist I know would be thrilled to see Iraq turned into a thriving democracy. Realists, however, are well aware of the difficulty of spreading democracy, especially by military means. They also understand that even if the enterprise is successful, that is no guarantee that peace will break out. Democracies as well as non-democracies like having nuclear deterrents, and both kinds of states support terrorism when it suits their interests.

In conclusion, neo-conservatives and realists have two very different theories of international politics, which were reflected in their opposing views on the wisdom of invading and occupying Iraq. Actually, the war itself has been a strong test of the two theories. We have been able to see which side's predictions were correct. It seems clear that Iraq has turned into a debacle for the United States, which is powerful evidence – at least for me – that the realists were right and the neo-conservatives were wrong.

I think that Hans Morgenthau, who some four decades ago made the realist case against escalation in Vietnam using arguments similar to those realists employed in the run-up to the Iraq war, would have opposed that war as well if he had been alive.

Hans J Morgenthau

Hans Joachim Morgenthau (1904-80) was the foremost scholar in the field of international relations in the mid-20th century, and the leading architect of “political realism”.

He was born in Coburg, Germany in February 1904 and studied in Munich and Frankfurt before teaching law in Geneva and Madrid. His early thinking was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, and he was also marked by the ideas of Max Weber, Hans Kelsen, Carl Schmitt, and Reinhold Niebuhr (see Christoph Frei, *Hans J Morgenthau: an intellectual biography* (2001)).

He emigrated to the United States in 1937 and taught at the University of Kansas before moving to the University of Chicago in 1943. There he wrote his defining work, *Politics among Nations: the struggle for power and peace* (1948), which influenced post-1945 American diplomatic thinking as deeply as George Kennan influenced its national security ideas.

Morgenthau became Michelson Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago; among his later works were *In Defense of the National Interest; A Critical Study of American Foreign Policy* (1951) and *A New Foreign Policy for the United States* (1969).

In 1976, Morgenthau listed the ten books that meant most to him as: Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*; Aristotle's *Politics*; EH Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*; *The Federalist Papers*; Plato's *Symposium*; Pascal's *Pensees*; CN Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture*; Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*; *The Political Writings of Max Weber* and *The Collected Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*.

Morgenthau's “six principles of political realism” (5th edition, 1978) sought to identify the conditions of rational political action in the international arena. His “concept of interest defined in terms of power” led him to make “a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible” in order to analyse “political acts performed and ... the foreseeable consequences of these acts”.

Morgenthau likened the “difference between international politics as it actually is” and “a rational theory derived from it” to that “between a photograph and a painted portrait. The photograph shows everything that can be seen by the naked eye; the painted portrait does not show everything that can be seen by the naked eye, but it shows, or at least seeks to show, one thing that the naked eye cannot see: the human essence of the person portrayed.”

Morgenthau highly valued prudence, “the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions”. His ideas led him to sharp warning against and (when the warnings were ineffective) vehement opposition to, US military involvement in Vietnam (see this 1965 essay).

Hans Morgenthau died in July 1980. Some contemporary critics have adduced from the ideas of *Politics among Nations* – including its final chapter's “four fundamental rules” and “five prerequisites of compromise” – Morgenthau's likely attitude to the “war on terror”.

By contrast, the then US secretary of state Colin Powell offered the view on 12 September 2002 that: “Hans Morgenthau would have felt right at home in this new world of ours because he understood the essential partnership between morality and power, which is at the core of American foreign policy.”

The concepts of power and interest that underpinned Hans Morgenthau's "political realism" were instruments of his effort to identify "the autonomy of the political sphere". He was profoundly aware of the moral significance of political action: "There are some values that matter beyond maximizing power. It's a question of how you use power, in the service of what principles. And power brings certain duties as well as certain restraints."

David Hayes

John J Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and the co-director of the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago. He is the author of The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (WW Norton, 2001).

Copyright © John Mearsheimer, 21-04-2005. Published by openDemocracy Ltd. Permission is granted to reproduce this article for personal, non-commercial use only. In order to circulate internally or use this material for teaching or other commercial purposes you will need to obtain an institutional subscription. Reproduction of this article is by arrangement only. openDemocracy articles are available for syndication. For institutional subscriptions, syndication and press inquiries, please call +44 (0) 207 608 2000.
