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Cherry-Picked Intelligence. The Weapons of Mass Destruction Dispositive as a Legitimation for National Security in the Post 9/11 Age

Liesbeth van der Heide*

Abstract: »Geheimdienste mit Scheuklappen: Das Dispositiv der Massenvernichtungswaffen als Legitimation für Nationale Sicherheit nach 9/11«. The claim that Iraq possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) led to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the US army. For the George W. Bush administration, the likely presence of WMD in Iraq was the major justification for going to war. However, Bush' opponents suspected he used the WMD-dispositive as a legitimation for an invasion that was already set in motion for different reasons. The Iraq invasion and the underlying ideas about the presence of WMD thus provide a tangible case for the analysis of theories of conspiracy and security. The development of the WMD-dispositive will be contextualized using the toolkit of securitization theory. The article explores the notions of security and conspiracy that were used to build the dispositive and shows how it ultimately failed and turned into a counter-narrative in which the Bush administration itself became the Great Conspirator.

Keywords: security, conspiracy, Iraq invasion, Bush administration, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), war on terror, national security.

1. Introduction

After 9/11 and the anthrax attacks that followed in 2001, fear increased in the United States (US) and Western Europe concerning the use of non-conventional weapons such as chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons (CBRN). Many viewed the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as the culmination of this fear, as the US government insisted that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and decided to unilaterally invade the country based upon this assumption. However, no WMD were found in Iraq.

A long tradition of propaganda and hyperbolic language has gone hand in hand with preparing public opinion for unusual exertions and potential war. According to Kenneth Waltz, when convincing the public of the necessity and

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legitimacy of going to war, a black and white picture must be painted and lines must be drawn between good and bad (Waltz 2001). This becomes clear, for example, when analyzing the Cold War. Although it is now widely conceded that the threat of a nuclear first strike or a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, let alone of the United States, was never a favorite option for the Kremlin, the menace of the Soviet Union was the pretext underlying every discussion on military expansion or offensive foreign policy maneuvers (Gaddis 1987). Senator Arthur Vandenberg told US President Harry Truman in 1947: “You are going to have to scare the hell out of the public” (Vanderberg 2003) in order for them to accept the huge increase in taxes to pay for the Cold War. Indeed, fear became the currency of the national security state, culminating in the “red scare” and witch hunts of the McCarthy era in the US during the 1950s.

However, selling the threat and convincing the public has rarely relied on detailed intelligence estimates. In the words of professor of War Studies Lawrence Freedman, it is “indeed remarkable how unimportant such estimates have been in the past in making the case for war” (Freedman 2004, 7). In general, evaluations of the adversary’s resources and intentions, his strengths and weaknesses and potential threat provide important arguments in the political debate on a *casus belli*, but they rarely cause initial hostilities. Thus, the prominent role of intelligence used in the performative speech act of Colin Powell during a plenary session of the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003 (Powell 2003) in justifying the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was unprecedented – not to mean that this was the precipitating event – and led to a heated debate about conspiracy theories behind the first Bush administration, the global war on terror, the “axis of evil” claim and the presence or absence of WMD in Iraq.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the US and the United Kingdom (UK) together insisted that Iraq posed a threat to international security because of the alleged possession of WMD. The UN Security Council passed a resolution (Resolution 1441) in November 2002, offering Iraq under Saddam Hussein a “final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations” – as prescribed in several previous resolutions adopted in 1991 (Resolution 687). With this resolution, the UN insisted Hussein should accept and cooperate with UN weapon inspectors to confirm the lack of cruise missiles and WMD in Iraq. Prior to the attack, no evidence for the presence of WMD in Iraq was found, but the leader of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, Hans Blix, felt that the inspectors still needed “months” to verify the accuracy of Hussein’s statements concerning Iraq’s weapon arsenal (Warren 2002).

In March 2003, the Bush administration told the weapon inspectors behind the scenes to quit their work and leave Iraq (Knight 2003). On March 20, a US-led coalition invaded Iraq without a war declaration, leading to the fall of Hussein’s regime in April 2003 and the occupation of the country. Following his capture by US soldiers in December 2003, Hussein was later tried and found guilty in an Iraqi court and consequently executed by the new Iraqi government

in Northern Baghdad (*BBC News* December 30, 2006). After the invasion, the Iraq Survey Group (ISG), a fact-finding mission sent to the country by the coalition to investigate the weapons claims, concluded that Iraq had ended its chemical, biological and nuclear program in 1991 and currently had no active weapon programs (Kay 2003). At the same time, the ISG stated that Iraq planned to resume its production as soon as the international sanctions against the country were lifted.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it is to reconstruct the discourse of the US-backed alleged Iraqi conspiracy to produce WMD and the “securitization” of the WMD threat as a justification for launching the Iraq invasion. Second, the paper intends to conduct a discourse analysis in the manner of Michel Foucault, using his concept of the *security dispositive* to inquire into the internal conditions of the discourse on the alleged Iraqi WMD possession, further operationalized by means of the conceptual toolkit of *Securitization Theory*. Securitization is an extreme version of politicization that enables the use of extraordinary means in the name of security (Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde 1998, 25). Balzacq defined securitization as

an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artifacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, [...], etc.) are contextually mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts and intuition), about a critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitizing actor’s reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development (2011, 3).

For democratic regimes to be successful in their assertions, the securitizing act must be accepted by an empowering audience. Securitization theory aims to understand “who securitizes (actors), what issues (threat assessment), for whom (referent object), why, with what results, and not least, under what conditions” (idem 1998, 32). In the case of the Iraq war, the question is whether the idea or theory that Iraq possessed WMD was a conspiracy legitimizing the extreme security measure of the invasion of Iraq. Legitimation is defined as “a process of normative evaluation from which the ascribed quality of legitimacy emerges” (De Graaf and Zwierlein 2013, in this HSR Special Issue).

First, the context of the Iraq War will be sketched by providing a concise history of the Gulf War. Second, the focus will be on the months leading up to the invasion in 2003 and the narrative that was constructed to justify the war. Third, the discourse after the invasion will be reconstructed by analyzing the main actors, narratives, controversies and the development of the “conspiracy dispositive” behind the Iraq war. The Iraqi conspiracy was constructed based upon power-knowledge relations utilized by different actors, who continuously frame and re-frame the subject and object of the threat. During the Gulf War, Hussein was the subject of the threat and Kuwait the object. This subject-object threat relation was extended to Iraq as the subject of threat and US national

security as the object during the Iraq war in 2003. Bush even stretched the subject to the “axis of evil” subject, threatening “our way of living”, resulting in the WMD dispositive. The WMD dispositive was essentially the narrative of the alleged Iraqi conspiracy to produce and possess WMD. However, in the end the conspiracy dispositive was switched around by the public when no WMD were found in Iraq, resulting in the alleged Bush conspiracy: where many were convinced that the Bush administration deliberately sought ways to invade Iraq. Through the creation of these grotesque subject-object threat definitions, the use of extensive security measures is legitimized. The article will methodologically follow the trail of the construction of the narrative through the lens of the “conspiracy dispositive” and by using the elements of securitization theory (actors, subject-object threat definition, threat assessment) to structurally analyze the narrative. The reconstruction of the narrative will lead to some preliminary conclusions on the use of intelligence and the function of the conspiracy dispositive to legitimize national security in the post 9/11 age.

2. History of the Gulf War

In 1979, Saddam Hussein gained power as the successor of President Ahmed Hassan Al-Bakr (who was forced to resign by Hussein), becoming both president and chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council. Between 1980 and 1988, Iraq engaged in an eight-year war with Iran over territorial disputes, known as the longest conventional war of the twentieth century (Javid 2010). Just after the war ended in 1988, Hussein invaded Kuwait over another long-standing territorial dispute in 1990. Out of fear that the Iraq army would invade Saudi Arabia, US President George Bush Sr. quickly announced that the US would launch a “wholly defensive” mission to prevent Iraq from invading Saudi Arabia. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 687 in November 1990, demanding complete withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait. When Iraq failed to comply with the UN’s demand, the UN-backed, US-led Gulf War commenced in 1991. In his address to the Joint Session of Congress on September 11, 1990, US President George Bush Sr. said: “Within three days, 120,000 Iraqi troops with 850 tanks had poured into Kuwait and moved south to threaten Saudi Arabia. It was then that I decided to act to check that aggression”.

The Pentagon claimed in September 1991 that satellite photos showing a buildup of Iraqi forces along the border were the source of the information, but this was later shown to be false. A reporter for the Saint Petersburg Times acquired two commercial Soviet satellite images made at the time in question, which showed nothing but empty desert (Peterson, 2002). Other motivations for the Gulf War included Iraq’s alleged possession of chemical and biological weapons, the abuse of human rights under Hussein’s government and Iraq’s

nuclear capabilities – although a report about the nuclear programs in January 1991 was declassified by the CIA (Atomic Scientists of Chicago 2003, 33). A US-led coalition force of 34 countries started the Gulf War in January 1991 with an extensive aerial bombing campaign. In total, the death toll in Iraq between August 1990 and February 1991 was estimated to be as many as 100,000 soldiers and tens of thousands of civilians on both sides (between 20,000 and 30,000 casualties on Iraqi side). Yet Iraq was not to be liberated along with Kuwait and thus, the regime itself was allowed to survive. The decision by President Bush Sr. not to push through to Baghdad and topple Saddam Hussein’s regime was viewed by many contemporaries as a prudent, yet dangerous decision; one which was later asserted by his son, Bush Jr., as a political failure.

3. 1991-2001

After the Gulf War, the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) was set up in 1991 as an inspection regime to ensure Iraq’s compliance with UN weapons policies concerning the production and use of WMD after the Gulf War (Zilinskas 1995, 232).

The Commission reported in 1998 that Iraq had failed to provide a full account of its biological weapons program, thus leading many to believe that the country still retained biological agents in several places. Besides the UNSCOM reports, based on aerial and satellite intelligence, US sources believed that Baghdad was storing a significant amount of chemical weapons in secret. This conclusion was shared by an independent analysis carried out by four researchers of the *Carnegie Endowment* (Carnegie Endowment Issue Brief No. 11, 2002). As for nuclear capabilities, the general belief was that Iraq was not in the position of acquiring those in the near future. However, nobody really knew when or how Iraq would possess the means to deliver nuclear, chemical or biological weapons (Tucker 2002).

Between 1991 and 2001, the dispute between Iraq and the UN about the inspection of Iraq’s weapons arsenal lingered on. Hussein’s cooperation with the inspection teams was questioned several times. Instead of complying with the demands made by the UN, he resisted the UN Special Commission’s attempts to destroy materials and facilities for the production of WMD repeatedly. The post-war policy practiced by the US and the UN was characterized as a policy of “containment”, including significant coercive elements. Especially the US tried to put pressure on Iraq through the UN by suggesting resolutions and adapting strong(er) language and measures towards Hussein’s regime. A UN resolution condemned the suppression of the Kurds in Northern Iraq and provided grounds for installing a no-fly zone. Another resolution by the Security Council permitted the use of “all necessary means” to manage conflict with

Iraq, leaving room for the use of force (United Nations 1990). Thus, the tone towards Baghdad grew bolder. In 1993, the FBI asserted that Hussein had attempted to assassinate former President Bush during an earlier visit to Kuwait (FBI Laboratory 1993). As a response to Iraq's alleged assassination plot, US warships stationed in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea launched a cruise missile attack on the Iraqi Intelligence Service building in downtown Baghdad. President Clinton briefed the then presidential candidate – and son of the former president – George W. Bush about the plot and the response in December 2000, expressing his regret that the world's two most dangerous people, including Hussein, were still alive and free. He warned Bush that Hussein “will cause you a world of problems” (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008).

American military presence in neighboring countries and continued economic sanctions on Iraq maintained pressure on the resistant Hussein regime throughout the 1990s. However, on the international stage, loosening the pressure on Iraq was advocated, making the containment policy increasingly problematic. Within the US, voices demanding a toughening policy regarding Iraq became increasingly loud. This became clear in January 1998, when the neo-conservative think-tank *Project for a New American Century* sent an open letter to the president urging a new policy towards Iraq with the ultimate goal of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and removing his regime from power.

The only acceptable strategy is one that eliminates the possibility that Iraq will be able to use or threaten to use weapons of mass destruction. In the near term, this means a willingness to undertake military action as diplomacy is clearly failing. In the long term, it means removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power. That now needs to become the aim of American foreign policy (Project for the New American Century 1998).

Many distinguished politicians, authors and thinkers signed the letter, Francis Fukuyama, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz among them (Wedel 2007, 170). Ten of the eighteen signatories later joined the Bush Administration and were heavily involved in the Iraq invasion in 2003. The signers argued that Hussein would pose a threat to the US, its Middle East allies (and their oil resources in the region), if he succeeded in maintaining his “stockpile of WMD”. The PNAC neoconservatives did not seriously expect President Clinton to attack Iraq in any meaningful way, one of the authors later concluded. Instead, they were positioning themselves for the future. “The neocons were maneuvering to put this issue in play and box President Clinton in. Now, they could draw a dichotomy. They could argue to their next candidate, ‘Clinton was weak. You must be strong’” (Unger 2007, 158). These neoconservative policy makers and intellectuals spread their views and kept the cause of disposing of Hussein's regime alive during the mid- and late 1990s through scholarly conferences, forums and foreign policy magazines. When many of the signatories returned to power in the Bush administration, their views dominated the administration's policy, defining a significant conservative shift in US foreign

policy. Also in 1998, UNSCOM called its inspection team back due to a lack of cooperation on Hussein's side. Following the reports about continuing Iraqi obstruction, air strikes against military facilities and governmental targets were initiated in December 1998 by the US president at that time, Bill Clinton. The strikes were mainly justified by emphasizing the reinforcement of the containment policy, reminding Hussein that if he did not comply with UN demands, the coalition of the US and the UK was prepared to act.

Looking at the years between the Gulf War and 9/11, analysis shows that uncertainty was the defining factor in assessing Iraqi capabilities, even though the different political actors in the field all advocated their own interests in the debate on Iraq. The neoconservatives, being a product of the Reagan era, had been advocating a tough position towards Iraq for a long time and they occupied influential positions in the political arena, both in the White House and in the Pentagon. President Bush relied heavily on this group of inner circle political advisors (called *the Vulcans*) with a long shared experience in government dating back to Ford, Reagan, Nixon and the first Bush administration (Mann & Mann 2004). The top six members of the Vulcans were Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Condoleezza Rice and Richard Armitage. After Bush's electoral victory in 2001, it was widely expected that the Vulcans would restore US foreign policy to its conservative roots, just as they did under earlier Republican administrations. There was constant tension between Iraq (as Hussein refused to provide openness and compliance with UN weapons inspectors) and the US (where internal political forces were pushing for action). President Clinton, on the other hand, had a more internationalist, legalistic approach and was less inclined to ideologically driven unilateral interventions. According to Condoleezza Rice, for the Clinton administration "the support of many states – or even better, of institutions like the United Nations – is essential to the legitimate exercise of power" (Kagan 2004). In the US political arena, the neoconservatives thus were the driving force presenting the Republican point of view, advocating the use of force and regime change in Iraq, while the Clinton administration did not securitize the issue of WMD and opposed the interventionists' calls for invasion. Often, the tensions led to UN resolutions and in some cases to the explicit use of force. However, over the years no convincing narrative was constructed on the basis of which a full-blown war could be initiated. Threat assessment thus remained a difficult exercise, which is why many on the international political stage stressed the need for weapon inspectors to go back into Iraq.

Later Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld headed the nine-member Commission to assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States from January to July 1998. In its findings, the commission concluded that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea could develop intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities in five to ten years and that US intelligence would have little warning before such systems were deployed. When asked about the time he headed the Commis-

sion, Rumsfeld – who in the meantime had become Secretary of Defense – stressed the importance of the “unknown unknowns” in a famous statement to the press in February 2002. “Known threats are not the worry,” he said. The real killers were the times when US intelligence didn’t even know what they didn’t know (Woodward 2005, 320). From the perspective of the evolving dispositive of Hussein’s possession of WMD, Rumsfeld’s statement played a crucial role in the build-up of the conspiracy dispositive. Instead of falsifying the narrative due to lack of evidence of the presence of WMD, Rumsfeld actually extends the scope of the conspiracy by arguing that if we cannot see or find the weapons of mass destruction, it means they are hidden even better than we thought. He argues: what we see is not what we see; bigger threats loom in the background. The impact of such a statement cannot be underestimated, especially since it can never be refuted. It reinforces the idea of an evil enemy plotting against “us”, and if we do not see it, that only means the enemy is even smarter and more dangerous than we thought. In the construction of conspiracy narratives, what kind of knowledge is “true” is not a matter of objectivity but a social construction reflecting the power positions of those who are capable of discriminating between “real knowledge” and “false knowledge” (Miller 2002).

The object and the subject of the threat were extended throughout the creation of the conspiracy dispositive of Hussein’s alleged possession of WMD. First, Saddam Hussein himself was posed as the subject of the threat, and the object of threat was Kuwait, which Hussein threatened to invade. However, the neoconservatives extended the object of threat by arguing that it was not just Kuwait, but now also US national security that was being threatened by Hussein’s regime. The actors advocating this conspiracy narrative had been voicing their interventionist ideas ever since the first Gulf War, through public letters, articles in foreign affairs magazines and lobbying in and around the White House. By extending the threat to US national security and constructing the WMD dispositive, the room for security policies and measures to counter this threat was stretched significantly. If weapons of mass destruction, threaten to be used against the US, the government is allowed to do anything in its power to counter the WMD threat, using force if necessary. President Bush senior’s resistance towards toppling Hussein’s regime in 1991 had important implications for his son, George W. Bush, who later called his father’s decisions a political failure (Lemann 2009).

In 2001 republican candidate George W. Bush was elected president. During his campaign, he sent mixed messages on his stand on Iraq. On one hand, his attitude was non-interventionist; saying that the US should be “humble abroad” and not “engage in nation-building”, and that the US should not commit itself to things like Clinton’s Bosnia and especially the disastrous Somalia mission (Suskind 2004). On the other hand, he promised to deal with Saddam Hussein in a way “he won’t like” if he were to be found developing WMD (Freedman 2004, 15). Bush was inexperienced in foreign policy before he announced his

candidacy for the presidency. He was reportedly introduced to Condoleezza Rice in 1998, at his father's initiative, and during the two years before his inauguration he attended several sessions on foreign policy with Rice, Wolfowitz and the other *Vulcans*.

3. Months Leading up to the Iraq War

3.1 Aftermath of 9/11

The 9/11 attacks proved to be the turning point in US foreign policy concerning Iraq. On the afternoon of September 11, Secretary of Defense in the Bush administration Donald Rumsfeld issued rapid orders to his aides to look for evidence of possible Iraqi involvement regarding the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. According to notes taken by senior policy official Stephen Cambone, he issued orders saying "Best info fast. Judge whether good enough to hit SH (Saddam Hussein) at same time. Not only UBL (Osama bin Laden)". Cambone's notes also quoted Rumsfeld as saying "Need to move swiftly – Near term target needs – go massive – sweep it all up. Things related and not" (Borger 2006; Roberts 2009). That evening President Bush spoke to the nation from the Oval Office. In his address to the nation he declared that the US would "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them" (CNN 2001). To many observers, the president's words set the tone and direction for the Bush administration's policy on Iraq (Lindviksmoen 2007, 9). President Bush himself never publicly blamed Iraq or Hussein for the 9/11 attacks, but he consistently linked Iraq and Saddam Hussein with terrorism and al Qaeda, thus providing the context from which such a connection could be made. He also never publicly connected Hussein to Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005, 525). Even so, research shows that Bush successfully framed the war in Iraq as part of the war on terror and an extension of the response to 9/11 (idem, 527).

During a Pentagon briefing, Paul Wolfowitz (Undersecretary of Defense) elaborated on the president's words, announcing the enlargement of the "war on terror" to include Iraq.

I think one has to say it is not just simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism. And that's why it has to be a broad and sustained campaign (Warner 2001).

Through quotes like these, the narrative of the WMD dispositive was successfully incorporated into the global war on terrorism, and also included states which supported terrorism, leading to the effective securitization of the threat posed by Iraq. Now, the subject of threat became not just Iraq but also Bin

Laden and al Qaeda, while the object (that which is under threat) shifted from US national security to global security.

In the days following the attacks, an invasion of Iraq was actively debated between Bush's security team and key players Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Paul Wolfowitz. However, it was decided that the initial military response would be confined to Afghanistan, as harboring the Bin Laden network. Rumsfeld later recalled questioning Bush's intended response of attacking terrorists – no matter from which territory they planned and operated. He wondered whether that would include attacking American allies. He therefore recommended broadening the scope to include state sponsors of terror, including Sudan, Libya, Iraq and Iran (Rumsfeld 2011, 346). However, Colin Powell and others were alarmed by both Wolfowitz's inflammatory words about "ending states" and Rumsfeld's recommendations. Powell responded during a meet-the-press: "We're after ending terrorism. And if there are states and regimes, nations that support terrorism, we hope to persuade them that it is in their interest to stop doing that. But I think ending terrorism is where I would like to leave it, and let Mr. Wolfowitz speak for himself" (Tyler and Sciolino 2001, 1). Thus, the two narratives of interventionist versus containment policy clashed through speeches and public statements. Ultimately, Powell had to give in and the militant narrative, building on the WMD dispositive, overruled the legalistic, internationalist approach.

3.2 2002

In his first State of the Union address in January 2002, Bush declared Iraq, Iran and North Korea to be "an axis of evil". This statement can be viewed as the official endorsement of the most extensive conspiracy narrative to that point, both regarding subject and object of the security threat postulated. By labeling some countries an "axis of evil", this axis figuratively divided the whole world and threatened not just a territory but a way of living. In that same speech, he laid the foundation for the invasion of Iraq when he said that the real peril and potential catastrophe was the growing availability of Weapons of Mass Destruction to terrorists or to these regimes (Woodward 2005, 329). In the weeks following his speech, the US increased support to the Iraqi opposition, intensified intelligence gathering inside Iraq and made preparations for the deployment of US Special Forces and CIA paramilitary teams – all of these measures legitimized by the exceptional, broad threat. In April, Bush declared publicly that he wanted regime change in Iraq. In June, adding to this, the president declared that he would launch a preemptive attack against any country posing a serious threat to the US.

Here, it becomes visible how the WMD conspiracy dispositive was actively constructed by the Bush administration. First, the conspiracy of Hussein's alleged possession of WMD was launched. Second, this conspiracy dispositive

became the starting point upon which the narrative was built – in which the subject and object of threat were broadly defined and extended over time, legitimizing a large-scale response of security measures and policies. The fact that Bush Sr. initially chose to leave Hussein in power was seen as a political failure, reinforcing the idea that something definitely had to be done this time.

Between June and August, speculation about Iraq filled the news media. During the last months of 2002, the Bush Administration began pushing for international support for an invasion of Iraq. In an interview in August, Bush addressed the Iraq issue by saying: “We may or may not attack. I have no idea, yet. But it will be for the objective of making the world more peaceful”, thereby confirming the idea that the world at large was under threat and creating the necessity for a grand strategic counter-narrative. On the morning of August 27, *The New York Times* opened on the front page with the quote: “Cheney says peril of a nuclear Iraq justifies attack”.

The introduction of the Homeland Security Act, in the aftermath of 9/11, marked another important building block in the construction of the conspiracy narrative. The Homeland Security Act, introduced by the Bush administration after 9/11 and enacted on November 25, 2002, purported to be the largest reorganization of the Department of Defense since the Second World War. Military power in the US is organized (unlike most civilian state functions such as education and healthcare) through federal institutions and the president acting as Commander-in-Chief. Symbolically, the military and the concept of national security are very much tied to the nation-state. The recourse to military symbolism following 9/11 thus used the role of the military as a “glue” to connect the concepts of citizenship, power and nationhood to each other.

3.3 European Actors

In Europe, the conspiracy narrative did not gain ground so easily. Most European countries had a common problem vis-à-vis the Iraqi conflict: a situation in which most European people did not consider Iraq a direct, imminent threat but the US (and Britain) pressing for action. Making the case for war was only possible if solid arguments about the WMD threat could have been provided by the official channels of UNSCOM and the Security Council. This was, however, not the case.

Summarizing, we can conclude that two clashing narratives divided the two sides of the Atlantic. In the US, the failure of Bush Sr. to topple Hussein’s regime in 1991 echoed through in US foreign policy and was picked up by the neoconservatives who gained more and more support for the conspiracy narrative that Hussein possessed WMD and posed a threat to the US. After 9/11, the object and subject of threat were largely extended to a global war on terror, in which an “axis of evil” threatened the liberal, western way of living, leading to the justification of a megalomaniac package of security measures that needed

to be taken. In Europe, some politicians and heads of government bought into the Bush narrative (notably the UK and Spain), but the overall European perspective remained firmly embedded in the dispositive of a legalistic UN approach and united international attempts at diplomatic solutions. The European states underlined the lack of convincing evidence, not just concerning the possible link between Saddam and al Qaeda, but also concerning current Iraqi capabilities. But in the eyes of Washington, Europe's unwillingness to consider even the potential, longer-term Iraqi threat as a priority severely weakened its bargaining position to influence US policy.

3.4 The Invasion of Iraq

The US, Britain and Spain together proposed the so-called *18th resolution* in the beginning of 2003, in order to provide a deadline for Iraq to comply with previous resolutions enforced by the threat of military action. However, the resolution was withdrawn due to lack of support on the UN Security Council. In particular, NATO members France, Germany and Canada and non-NATO member Russia were opposed to military intervention in Iraq – arguing that the level of risk to international security was too high (Chirac, Putin 2003). Instead, they defended disarmament through diplomacy, thereby reinforcing their UN, legalistic, internationalist approach – opposed to the US WMD conspiracy dispositive.

The campaign leading to the invasion of Iraq culminated in Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003. This was an utterly important performance in light of the construction of the conspiracy narrative, since Powell himself had always been viewed as a more moderate voice in the debate on Iraq. During his speech, Powell visualized the conspiracy dispositive by showing satellite images, playing intercepted telephone calls and holding up "a vial that could contain anthrax", in his words (Weisman 2005), all to strengthen the US interventionist narrative. Because gaining support for additional UN authorization failed, a so-called "coalition of the willing", led by the US and including the UK and small contingents from Australia, Poland, and Denmark, launched an invasion on March 20, 2003. On that day, at 5:34 am (local time) the military invasion of Iraq, known under the code name 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', began. There was no formal war declaration. The US-led "coalition of the willing" included approximately forty countries that participated by providing Special Forces, troops, equipment, services, security.

According to General Tommy Franks, who was in charge of the invasion, the objectives of the invasion were:

First, to end the regime of Saddam Hussein. Second, to identify, isolate and eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Third, to search for, to capture and to drive out terrorists from that country. Fourth, to collect such intelligence as we can related to terrorist networks. Fifth, to collect such intelligence

as we can related to the global network of illicit weapons of mass destruction. Sixth, to end sanctions and to immediately deliver humanitarian support to the displaced and to many needy Iraqi citizens. Seventh, to secure Iraq's oil resources, which belong to the Iraqi people. And last, to help the Iraqi people create conditions for a transition to a representative self-government (Sale and Kahn 2003).

By the 1st of May 2003, the major combat operations had been concluded and Iraq was largely under control of the US-led coalition, as massive air strikes destroyed Iraqi command and control facilities and prevented effective resistance of the Iraqi forces. Kurdish rebels joined the coalition forces against the Iraqi army, securing the northern part of the country. The occupation of Baghdad was finished on April 9, 2003, forcing Hussein and his government to go into hiding. Saddam Hussein himself was captured on December 13, 2003, by the US Army (Lewis 2003). An end to all combat operations was declared on May 1, as the occupation of Iraq was completed – and the period of the military occupation began.

4. Discourse after the Invasion

The arguments for war made to the rest of the world through months of negotiations at the UN and through diplomacy, before and after the dispatch to Iraq of a greatly strengthened WMD inspection team, built on the conspiracy dispositive, effectively securitizing the policy towards Iraq. The basis for international action is stated in UN Security Council Resolution 1441, paragraph 2, as “bringing to full and verified completion the disarmament process”. Powell’s detailed description to the Security Council on February 5, 2003, confirmed what had been argued before: the issue was the threat from Iraq’s possession of WMD. All other matters were at most, a minor afterthought. And Powell’s speech had an enormous performative effect, not just on the members of the Security Council, but also on the larger audience: the US citizens and the international community.

Because the WMD threat was publicly presented as the reason for invading Iraq, the large divergence between prewar descriptions of the threat and what had been discovered in the nine months since the war was a matter of some consequence. The discrepancies raised questions whose answers led to the first notions of “conspiracy thinking” on the part of the Bush administration. At the same time, these discrepancies were countered by Rumsfeld’s analysis of the “unknown unknowns”, arguing that even though nothing concrete had yet been found, this could also mean the evidence was hidden even better than expected, or had quickly been replaced by the Hussein regime.

After the invasion, the discourse took an unexpected turn when a counter-narrative took shape. While the Bush administration, backed by the neocon-

servatives, had built and expanded their conspiracy dispositive over the last years, leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, after the invasion the building blocks of the conspiracy narrative were evaluated one by one and many of them were judged to be invalid. Thus, even though the conspiracy dispositive had been stretched to declare a global war on terror, demanding that the whole world take a side, after the invasion the dispositive reached its limits and bounced back towards the point where instead of Hussein, Bush became the villain. Not Hussein had been conspiring to hide WMD, but Bush and his administration became the target, being accused of willfully conspiring to start a war in Iraq to further US interests.

Already in 2003, criticism of the invasion of Iraq was voiced in several large newspapers in the US and Europe. Christopher Dickey wrote in an article for *Newsweek* how both Bush and Rumsfeld admitted that information to substantiate this popular fantasy just did not exist. “We’ve had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved with September 11”, Bush had said in an interview, almost matter-of-factly, on Wednesday September 17 (Dickey 2003).

Former Bush treasury secretary Paul O’Neill said that “contingency planning” for an attack on Iraq had been planned since Bush’s inauguration and that the first National Security Council meeting involved discussion of an invasion (CNN 2004). “From the start, we were building the case against Hussein and looking at how we could take him out and change Iraq into a new country”.

In 2004, a book written by Ron Suskind was published, claiming that the Bush administration deliberately concealed the fact that it knew Saddam did not have an active WMD arsenal in February 2003, a month before the invasion of Iraq was launched. The most controversial claim in the book was that the White House directed the CIA to fabricate a letter from an Iraqi intelligence official linking Hussein to the September 11 attacks. Suskind’s claim rested on several interviews, including interviews with three former intelligence officials. However, after the publication of *The Way of the World*, not a single official surfaced to back up his allegations – including the people he claimed to have interviewed for the book. It met mixed critical reviews but inspired considerable media attention and controversy.

The White House denied the allegations, saying: “The notion that the White House directed anyone to forge a letter from the head of Iraqi Intelligence, General Tahir Jalil Habbush al-Tikriti to Saddam Hussein is absurd” (Al Jazeera 2008). The former director of the CIA, Philip Giraldi, stated that “there was no such order from the White House to me nor, to the best of my knowledge, was anyone from CIA ever involved in any such effort”, adding: “The notion that I would suddenly reverse our stance and have created and planted false evidence that was contrary to our own beliefs is ridiculous” (Blackledge 2008). Here, the first signs of the concept of “false evidence” surrounding the WMD conspiracy dispositive surface, placing the WMD dispositive on the defensive. The fact that former CIA officials discussed the

accusations only underlined the importance of the discussion, linking the Bush dispositive to notions of fraud and deception.

Some intelligence officials accused the Bush Administration of “cherry-picking” intelligence on Iraq to justify a decision it had already reached to go to war, and of ignoring warnings that the country could easily fall into violence and chaos after an invasion to overthrow Saddam Hussein (Pincus 2006).

In 2006, a declassified report following a two-year investigation into detainee abuse was released by the Senate Armed Services Committee. In the report, a former US Army psychiatrist told the investigators that interrogators at the Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, detention facility were under “pressure” to produce evidence of ties between al Qaeda and Iraq. “While we were there a large part of the time we were focused on trying to establish a link between al Qaeda and Iraq but we were not successful”, Burney told the Committee. “The more frustrated people got in not being able to establish that link [...] there was more and more pressure to resort to measures that might produce more immediate results”.

The Committee Chairman called Burney’s statement “very significant”, especially in the light of Cheney’s earlier assertions that a senior Iraqi intelligence officer had met Mohammad Atta, the leader of the 9/11 hijackers, in the Czech Republic capital of Prague just months before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The FBI and CIA found that no such meeting had occurred. He concluded: “I think it’s obvious that the Bush administration was scrambling then to try to find a connection, a link (between al Qaeda and Iraq). They made out links where they didn’t exist” (Landay 2009). Despite widespread feelings that the Bush administration had been searching for a reason to invade Iraq, regardless of the presence of WMD, doubts in the debate on either position were also voiced. A former CIA director stated that “as of yet, there is no evidence of explicit state sponsorship of the September 11 attacks. But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (Woolsey 2001).

All in all, several counter-narratives to the WMD dispositive appeared, either accusing Bush and his administration of naivety or stupidity, or of cherry-picked intelligence (and thus portraying a professional bias towards invading Iraq), or the most serious narrative: that the Bush administration had conspired to invade Iraq to secure its own oil interests.

Bush sought to distance himself in March 2006 from the allegation of any link. In a speech in Cleveland he said: “First, just if I might correct a misperception, I don’t think we ever said – at least I know I didn’t say that there was a direct connection between September the 11th and Saddam Hussein” (White House Archives 2006-I). Bush reaffirmed the White House position in even stronger terms in a press conference on 21 August 2006. When asked what the connection was between Iraq and the September 11th attacks, Bush replied,

“Nothing. Nobody has ever suggested that the attacks of September the 11th were ordered by Iraq” (White House Archives 2006-II).

Also in 2008, the Center for Public Integrity published a study that concluded that the Bush administration had issued false statements over a two-year period (Douglass 2008). It found that in speeches, briefings, interviews and other venues, Bush and other officials in the government stated unambiguously on at least 532 occasions that Iraq had weapons of mass or was trying to produce or obtain them, or had links to al Qaeda, or both. In an overview of the study it said:

It is now beyond dispute that Iraq did not possess any weapons of mass destruction or have meaningful ties to al Qaeda. In short, the Bush administration led the nation to war on the basis of erroneous information that it methodically propagated and that culminated in military action against Iraq on March 19, 2003.

In December 2009, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated that he “would still have thought it right to remove Hussein” regardless of whether the country possessed weapons of mass destruction, or not. Through his statement, Blair created a post-hoc new narrative to justify the invasion: he replaced the WMD dispositive with a so-called “topple-the-dictator” narrative. However, Sir John Sawers, his foreign policy adviser in early 2001, told the Iraq Inquiry that the prime minister had not urged regime change at that stage: “I don’t recall a serious and considered challenge to the existing policy of containment” (Reynolds 2009). Blair’s statement further convinced those who did not believe the arguments about the presence of WMD that they were right all along to say that this was always about regime change – and that the Bush administration, together with Blair, had conspired to invade Iraq long before the invasion in 2003. Before the invasion, Bush and Blair had been advocating making the world a safer place, not regime change and freeing Iraq from its dictator. Former Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, was quoted in an interview saying “the war was illegal” and “not in conformity with the Security Council” (*BBC News* September 16, 2004).

The counter-narrative of the conspiracy by the Bush administration became dominant, as shown in the visual and popular support for the Bush-conspiracy idea in Hollywood blockbuster movies. In 2010, *The Hurt Locker*, a film focusing on a team of bomb technicians who have to deal with the Iraq war’s modern IED warfare, won Oscars for best director and best picture. The same year, another movie situated in Iraq, *The Green Zone*, premiered in cinemas and was received as a warning against putting too much trust in governmental decision-making. When the director of the film, Paul Greengrass, explained his drive to make the film in an interview, he said: “I genuinely believed Blair”. These efforts showed how “the fictional Iraq has the potential to overshadow the reality”, as James Denselow concluded in *The Guardian* on March 12, 2010.

Thus, the narrative unfolded, focusing on who had said what exactly when and why, creating two poles on the political stage opposing each other's narrative.

On the one side, people argued that the key players within the Bush administration had decided to go to war with Iraq long before and thus conspired against Hussein and the rest of the world by starting the narrative of the Weapons of Mass Destruction. On the other side, the argument was that it was necessary to invade Iraq because of the threat it posed to the rest of the world. The discussion about the many reasons for invading Iraq heated up in newspapers and on Internet forums. Some argued that the "real" reason for toppling Saddam Hussein's regime was to eliminate the man who rewarded families of suicide bombers and posed an implacable threat to Israel. Others said that the "real" reason for attacking Iraq was to intimidate Syria and Iran. Or the "real" reason had to be found in the politics of the oil business; to secure America's long-term supply of oil. Rumsfeld wrote in *Known and Unknown*, 'Looking back on the weeks following 9/11',

some accounts suggest an administration that seemed to have a preordained response to the attacks. From my vantage point, however, quite the opposite was the case. It was a time of discovery – of seeking elusive, imperfect solutions for new problems that would not be solved quickly. There was no guidebook or road map for us to follow (Rumsfeld 2011, 352).

Discussion on the true reasons behind the invasion of Iraq thus grew louder and louder, demanding the answer to the question: what is the real story behind the Iraq war? Was it oil? Power politics? Was it Freudian psychology, Bush Jr. trying to overcome his own father or to correct his father's mistake? Or was it a coup by the neoconservatives in US politics? Many in the public held an opinion somewhere in between the two poles. A journalist for *Newsweek* wrote in September 2003:

The problem is not really that the public was misinformed by the press before the war, or somehow denied the truth afterward. The problem is that Americans just can't believe their eyes. They cannot fathom the combination of cynicism, naiveté, arrogance and ignorance that dragged us into this quagmire, and they're in a deep state of denial about it (Dickey 2003).

Altogether, some prominent members of the Bush administration, such as Rumsfeld, struggled to provide clarity but failed to do so, only leading to more questions about the rationale behind the Iraq war. Several counter-narratives were launched after the invasion, supported by popular books and movies, all reinforcing the idea that it had in fact been the Bush administration itself that had conspired to invade Iraq in the pursuit of its own interests.

5. Conclusion

This article attempts to provide an overview and clarify the complex narrative and building of the conspiracy dispositive of Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. It examined administration statements, intelligence reports (on the nuclear, biological and chemical capabilities of the Hussein regime) and the international discourse in the run-up to and aftermath of the Iraq invasion, tracing the creation and turning point of the conspiracy dispositive created by the Bush administration.

The issue of the presence of WMD in Iraq falls into a bigger debate that can be characterized by three main concepts: the global war on terror, the axis of evil and global security. Bush himself announced already two months after the invasion that "The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11, 2001" (White House Official Press Release 2003). Thus, Iraq and WMD became an element in the larger narrative on the war on terror that Bush had declared in 2001. As mentioned before, within this war narrative, lines were drawn and stark contrasts sharpened between "those who are with us" and "those who are against us". In this story, Iraq was on the wrong side, according to many already when Bush became president. He was the one who named Iraq as one of the three countries that posed "an axis of evil" in the world. The Bush administration, backed by the neoconservatives, constructed their WMD conspiracy narrative over time. It started by posing Hussein as the object of threat through his possession of WMD; Kuwait being the subject of the threat. Over time, both the object and the subject of threat were extended to incorporate Iraq posing a threat to US national security. And after 9/11, the threat was stretched to its limits through Bush's speech declaring a global war on terror, between an "axis of evil" and the liberal, western way of living. Through this extension, the Bush administration justified the large-scale measures and intense response of the invasion of Iraq. Even though competing narratives existed (both within the US where a more moderate approach towards Iraq was voiced and in the EU, portraying a more UN-legalistic approach), the WMD conspiracy narrative dominated. However, in this narrative, the notion of "global security" and how it ties into the conspiracy dispositive of the Bush administration had not yet been analyzed. Concepts of global security and the military – and in the midst of that: what it means to be an American – are two magnetic poles that thrive on notions of security and conspiracy, mutually reinforcing each other.

In the context of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, we traced the development of the narrative and institutional deployment of "global security" and "weapons of mass destruction" as the ultimate threat to this security. In this narrative, the rhetoric on the global war on terror exposes a two-fold *insecurity*: national security once again becomes more important than international security, and the idea that anyone possessing weapons capable of destruction on a large scale

poses a threat and has the ability to cause “terror” is actually reinforced through the narrative. This became especially clear through the concept of the so-called “unknown unknowns”, clothing the conspiracy dispositive in an irrefutable logic that can never be countered.

The irony of the alleged conspiracy of Hussein to possess weapons of mass destruction, constructed by the neoconservatives and the Bush administration, is that it was stretched to such a large extent that after the invasion of Iraq, it turned on the narrators themselves and was quickly transformed into a counter-narrative in which the Bush administration itself became the Great Conspirator. Even though several counter-narratives were constructed and the motivations behind the Iraq war remained unclear, the prevailing idea was that President Bush and *the Vulcans*, his main circle of advisers on foreign policy, had themselves conspired against Hussein in pursuit of their own interests.

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