

Wanting War: Why the Bush Administration Invaded Iraq

By Jeffrey Record

Washington, DC: Potomac

Books, Inc., 2010

217 pp. \$24.95

ISBN: 978-1-59797-437-0

Reviewed by

JOSEPH J. COLLINS

President John F. Kennedy reminded scholars and pundits of their limits: “The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer—often, indeed, to the decider himself. . . . There will always be dark and tangled stretches in the decision-making process—mysterious even to those who may be most intimately involved” (Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 1999). The young President, himself an author of note, knew the difficulties of reconstructing the past and the delicate complexities of navigating the shoals of motivation. It is nevertheless imperative that national decisions, policies, and operations be dissected, analyzed, and assessed, lest we repeat our mistakes, a common failing of great powers.

Jeffrey Record, an Air University scholar-practitioner with impeccable credentials, has taken up that challenge on the war in Iraq. Drawing on

the growing record of how we entered into our second war with Iraq, Record has produced an excellent interpretative analysis of the rationale for the George W. Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq. Along with the post-Inchon phase of the Korean War and the Vietnam conflict, Record believes that Operation *Iraqi Freedom* was America’s third costly and unnecessary war of choice. In a scorching attack on the neoconservative reasoning underpinning the war, Record’s central thesis is that the decision to invade was:

more about the United States than about Iraq. Specifically, the invasion was a conscious expression of America’s unchecked global military hegemony that was designed to perpetuate that hegemony by intimidating those who would challenge it. The invasion represented power exercised first and foremost for its own sake.

Record skillfully weaves insights from many previous studies, including my own (*Choosing War*, INSS Occasional Paper No. 5 [NDU Press, April 2008]), into his narrative. The heart of his book is the nearly 70-page chapter 4, “The Reasons Why.” There, the author discusses the rationale, aims, objectives, and motives of the war. Among the “reasons why”—and I draw on his terminology spread over a few dozen pages—he analyzes the need to redeem the false victory in *Desert Storm*, demonstrate a new willingness to use force, assert the principle of preventive military action, intimidate North Korea and Iran, promote political reform in the region, create a regional alternative to Saudi Arabia, eliminate an enemy of Israel, vindicate defense transformation, and reestablish the imperial presidency. Record concludes by looking at the consequences of the war, which he believes will be regarded as “a horrible mistake.”

The final few pages of the book assess the war in Iraq in light of the Weinberger Doctrine. Record wisely concludes that the war violated the doctrine’s prudent prescriptions, but that doctrine itself is not an accurate gauge for assessing future cases where the use of force may be necessary.

While one may salute Record’s attempt to get at the root causes, it is also important to pay attention to what the people who made or contributed to these decisions were thinking at the time. For example, in the Pentagon in 2003, we told ourselves that invading Iraq was about the “3 Ts plus WMD:” *threats* to the region from Iraq, the *tyranny* of Saddam’s regime, its support to *terrorist* groups, and of course, Iraq’s stockpile of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and its research and development programs. The WMD issue created the sense of urgency, and its veracity in our eyes had been validated by the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. It is easy to dismiss this thinking today, but the climate of fear in the country and among national decisionmakers in 2002 was sufficiently strong to warp both visions of the future and the decisionmaking process.

Under fear and pressure, smart people can do things that in retrospect appear stupid. While postwar studies can and should create elaborate maps to the rationale that underpins decisions, the actual decisionmaking process is messier and warped by bureaucratic pathologies. There are often as many prime motives as there are senior participants in the process. Learning takes place but often does not insulate an administration from making mistakes. Important warnings that do not fit preconceptions are ignored. Scholars of decisionmaking have to restrain themselves. Things are not always

subject to strict tests of rationality. Without prudent judgment, scholars can impose too much order on the confusion that is modern-day policymaking.

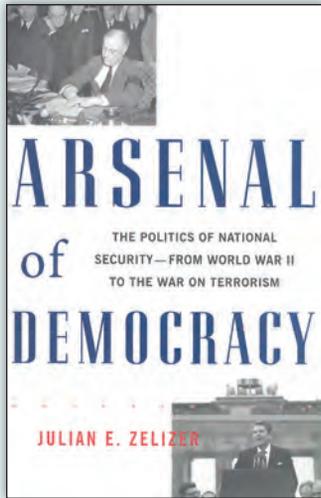
Record makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the underlying rationale behind the invasion, but he would, I am sure, agree that much work remains to be done. Picking up the banner, the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute is working on a series of 10 or more monographs to comprehensively examine the strategic decisions related to the war. The *Operation Iraqi Freedom Key Decisions Monograph Series*, edited by Colonel John R. Martin (Ret.), is off to a great start with two important volumes by Steven Metz, the first on the decision to go to war (*Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: Removing Saddam Hussein by Force*) and the second on the Surge (*Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Strategic Shift of 2007*). The U.S. Naval Institute Press has done its part by publishing John Ballard’s 2010 book, *From Storm to Freedom: America’s Long War with Iraq*, which will help to create a fuller narrative by taking the reader from Operation *Desert Storm* in 1990–1991 to the current war.

The war in Iraq continues, and it remains difficult to draw a final conclusion on our efforts there. Jeffrey Record’s book provides a useful placeholder:

The experience of the Iraq War almost certainly will diminish America’s appetite for the kind of interventionist military activism that has characterized post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy, especially that during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. . . . Future enemies undoubtedly will attempt to lure the United States into fighting the kind of . . . messy wars into which it stumbled in Vietnam and Iraq. But if such

wars are wars of choice rather than wars of necessity for the United States, it should think more than twice before entering them. JFQ

Joseph J. Collins teaches strategy at the National War College. He was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Stability Operations from 2001 to 2004.



**Arsenal of Democracy:
The Politics of National
Security—From World War II to
the War on Terrorism**

By Julian E. Zelizer

New York: Basic Books, 2009

583 pp. \$35

ISBN: 978-0-465-01507-8

Reviewed by

JORDAN MICHAEL SMITH

According to realism, the dominant form of American international relations theory since the discipline first emerged, countries act primarily in response to the anarchical structure of the international system. In *Arsenal of Democracy*, Julian Zelizer subtly aims to upend that belief. He argues that, far from being an incidental factor in foreign policymaking, domestic factors have always been prominent: “Even during the Cold War,” that sup-

posed golden era of bipartisanship, “partisan and intra-partisan competition over national security was much stronger than most accounts suggest” (p. 4). From Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama, there has rarely, if ever, been a period of national consensus over international affairs, Zelizer claims.

Zelizer, a Princeton political historian, argues that Democrats have oscillated between two foreign policy agendas—one emphasizing the FDR- and Truman-nourished commitment to liberal internationalism, and the other more skeptical toward military intervention after Vietnam. Republicans, meanwhile, have bounced between an isolationism wary of foreign commitment and a large security state, and a unilateral internationalism bordering on militarism (pp. 5–6).

Zelizer is a Democrat who clearly favors the liberal internationalist approach he outlines, but he recognizes that it is not without flaws. Because it prioritizes alliance and diplomacy, a traditional liberal foreign policy is particularly susceptible to demagogic charges of softness and even treason from the right wing. In the book’s telling, the midterm elections of 1950 destroyed the Democrats’ sense of self-confidence: “The wounds that Republicans inflicted during these elections would not heal for many decades. Psychologists talk about how entire generations can be emotionally scarred as a result of living through war. The story is much the same in these formative years of the Cold War. Democrats would not for decades feel secure with the issue of national security as they had under FDR and, for a while, under Truman” (p. 120). The election also permanently transformed the Republicans: the “GOP, internalizing the arguments of the Republican Right, crossed a threshold in how far it was willing to go in calling

Democrats weak on national security and in making partisan use of the issue.”

The 1950 election traumatized two Democratic Senators (and eventually Presidents) of particular note: John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Both men were terrified of appearing soft on national security, and as a result felt unable to retreat from Vietnam (though Zelizer is clear that Johnson also believed abandoning South Vietnam would be disastrous for national security reasons). The trauma of the Vietnam War, in turn, shellshocked Democrats into being wary of using force abroad, which further hampered their credibility on national security in the eyes of the electorate.

None of this is exactly new, but never before has anybody laid out so comprehensively the partisan debates over foreign policy. After reading Zelizer’s book, it is impossible to believe that a bipartisan foreign policy has ever existed for more than brief, rare periods. Security challenges have always been matters that parties and politicians fought over and sought to leverage electorally. More depressingly, both parties have been persistently willing to put electoral concerns ahead of national security interests. Many Republicans at the time knew Eugene McCarthy was lying but kept quiet because his smears were effective. Similarly, if less ruinously, many Democrats attacked the Bush administration in 2006 for letting operations at major American ports be bought by a Dubai company, even though they understood the acquisition brought no actual threat to national security.

Among the most exciting attributes of *Arsenal of Democracy* is its grasp of the relevant literature. On everything from Vietnam to Iraq, Zelizer uses the most recent, accurate, respected scholarship. Time and again one

jumps to the endnotes to check the source of a novel quotation, only to be impressed with the breadth of research undertaken. Nearly as impressive is the book’s even-handedness. Though Zelizer is a liberal, he is critical of liberalism and can be complimentary toward conservatives. The only real exception is Ronald Reagan, who is not given enough credit for bucking his base and recognizing early on that Mikhail Gorbachev was indeed a different type of Soviet leader. The book is highly critical of President George W. Bush (justly, in my view), and sees the present as an opportunity for the Democrats to rebrand themselves as the party that can once again be trusted to secure the country.

The book does not quite answer realism’s charge. Zelizer never explores why American voters preferred certain stances—say, zealous anticommunism in 1950—over others. A realist might say that, in a democracy, voters and elites will likely support policies that give their state power and security. Indeed, with the book’s thesis being that America’s two major parties have always fought over national security credibility, *Arsenal of Democracy* could be taken as evidence of the power of the international system to influence a state’s behavior. I would argue that the anarchical world causes American voters to seek security.

In any case, Zelizer’s book is not primarily theoretical, but historical. And as history it is consistently readable and important. It deserves a wide readership. JFQ

Jordan Michael Smith is a writer living in Washington, DC.