'America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.' –
John Quincy Adams, Sixth President of the United States of America,
1825–29

In the history of conflicts and wars, there are few instances that match the
invasion and occupation of Iraq for complexity of motive and ambiguity of
purpose. A seemingly endless chain of causal events have been put forward to
explain this most extraordinary episode in contemporary times, but none, it
would seem, has provided a satisfying and comprehensive answer. Why did
the world’s only superpower see fit to marshal its huge military and financial
resources, cross the oceans, and overthrow a tyrant and his brutal system of
rule, in the teeth of overwhelming international hostility?

The overthrow of the regime that ruled Iraq was achieved in record time,
no more than a few weeks of sporadic fighting. The euphoria that accom-
panied this effortless victory quickly gave way to increasing bewilderment as
to what to do with this ‘prize’, as the occupiers came face to face with the real-
ities of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq and the mysteries of this most complex of
countries. Nothing that had preceded the war – certainly nothing coming out
of the innumerable conferences and policy papers from think-tanks, Iraqi
oppositionists, academic pundits, and the warrens of government – could
have prepared the Coalition, that unwieldy term for the United States and its
allies, for what they actually found. It would seem that a massive momentum
had developed that propelled the USA to war, only to be replaced a few weeks
into the occupation by bewilderment and confusion rapidly growing to
supplant the purposeful front that had been so carefully crafted.

The hunt for Saddam’s elusive weapons of mass destruction (WMD), osten-
sibly the casus belli, was quickly forgotten as it dawned upon the Coalition that
there were none to be found. There were no public cheers for democracy, no
indications that this was a people hungering for the freedoms and liberties of

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the west. The most public early demonstrations of what the mass of people appeared to crave were manifestations of popular religiosity that had no counterpart in the west. Equally, the world was not expecting the outbreak of looting on the massive scale that affected not only Baghdad but also far-away oil installations, power lines and Iraqi army bases. The inchoate attacks on government property, the wanton burning of ministries, libraries and even sports stadiums, the images of booty being carted off by frenzied crowds, frequently with TV cameras in tow, somehow didn’t quite fit with the behaviour of a grateful people who had just been liberated from tyranny. This grating disjunction between official wisdom on Iraq and Iraqis prior to the war, and the harsher facts of the country and its people, became a recurrent theme in the months and years that followed the fall of the Saddamist regime. And this was not confined to the proponents and apologists of the war. Those who opposed the war, especially in the Arab world, had different, but equally distorted, expectations as to the response of the Iraqi people to the invasion and occupation of their country. The ignominious collapse of the Iraqi army (including the much-vaunted Republican Guard) in a matter of weeks, the evident abandonment by the regime of the Arab ‘volunteers’ who swarmed into Baghdad to fight the invaders, the reaction of the average Iraqi, who didn’t appear to be outraged by the violation of the country’s sovereignty and the obvious affront to Arab independence, didn’t match the forecasts of the doomsayers. Anyone who had defended Saddam and his regime could only stand shamefacedly in front of the mass graves that were being unearthed almost daily in the aftermath of the war. The barbarism of the Ba’athist state was becoming exposed in all its naked truth. Once again Iraq had confounded its interpreters. The conjunction of forces that came together to propel America to war, and the perplexing reality of the country that became the object of its invading and reforming zeal, has had far-reaching consequences that have reverberated well beyond the borders of Iraq.

The march into this war was to the drumbeat of a triumphalism that curiously manifested itself before, rather than after, the event. There was no doubt who was going to win. The eagerness to embrace war was palpable in large swathes of American public opinion, not least in Washington. Every other option was systematically closed or dismissed, often with no reason given. The targets of this assembling host, the relics of a tottering dictatorship, scurried around the world screaming at whoever would listen – the United Nations (UN), France, the Arab League – exposing themselves for the friendless and abandoned minnows that they were. But although the world was increasingly exasperated by the antics of the Saddamist regime, it was not enough, it would seem, to allow the USA unfettered access into Iraq.

For a long time Iraq had been viewed through a particular prism as regards US foreign policy, not for its own sake, but as part of a larger concern.
Throughout the 1950s, when the country formed part of the anti-communist regional alliance, the Baghdad Pact, Iraq was seen primarily as a staunch and vital ally against Soviet expansionism in the Middle East. Following the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, American concern was primarily focused on thwarting the drive to power by the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). When this threat was averted in the early 1960s, the USA settled into a policy bordering on indifference to the goings-on in Baghdad. With the Ba’ath Party having emerged victorious from the scrum of political contenders in 1968, the USA did not materially alter its stance. Throughout the 1970s, US policy towards Iraq was increasingly determined by a new strategic variable: the emergence of the Shah’s Iran as a key ally in the area. Whenever the USA was seen to be interfering in Iraq’s affairs, it was to enhance the relative power of Iran in the struggle for supremacy in the Gulf. Iraq was relegated to the second drawer of US concerns in the area. All this changed with the collapse of the Shah’s rule and the establishment of the virulently anti-American Islamic Republic of Iran. The threat to the Gulf states was too real to ignore, and the hitherto neglected Ba’ath of Iraq, especially after the ascendancy of Saddam Hussein to unchallenged power in 1979, became a crucial instrument in blocking, and possibly reversing, the march of revolutionary Islam.

The war that Iraq fought with Iran (1980–88) was as much to do with protecting and advancing the interests of the west as with local and regional considerations. The USA viewed Saddam’s Iraq as the single most valuable, albeit indirect, bulwark against the spread of revolutionary Islam into the Gulf region. After the Iran–Iraq War, the USA once again abandoned an assertive Iraqi policy, leaving the country with a bloated army, huge international debts and an embittered leadership that felt its sacrifices on behalf of others had not been properly acknowledged. In this short twilight period between 1988 and 1990, the USA allowed Iraq to stew in a dangerously delusional and sour condition – until Saddam made the cardinal sin of invading and annexing Kuwait, a major oil producer and an important and longstanding ally of the United States in the Gulf. The direct challenge to vital American and western interests, and the enormous effects this would have if it were not reversed, galvanised America into action. The objective became the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and then a strategy to ‘contain’ Iraq. The latter was designed to disarm, isolate and weaken the regime, remove it as a threat to regional security, and keep it politically off balance. The Ba’ath regime was kept in a state of high anxiety by the USA’s support for Kurdish autonomy from the central government, and by the conditional recognition of the disparate Iraqi opposition groups. By and large, in spite of a number of dramatic incidents that somewhat dented this scenario, this policy stayed the course throughout the 1990s, surviving three different administrations in Washington.
The administration of George W. Bush took office in January 2001. It was assumed that because of the bevy of neo-conservative advisers and officials who streamed into government, the strong streak of American ultranationalism in a number of key appointments, and the effects of the religious right on Bush personally, fundamental precepts of American policy towards Iraq would change substantially. In spite of the increasing volume of invective against the Saddamist regime, however, initially, there were no major changes in American policy towards Iraq. It took the attacks of 11 September, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to create the breach in the policy ramparts into which marched the proponents of the 'Alternative Discourse'. It was only then that Middle Eastern policy, in particular the policy towards Iraq, began to undergo a fundamental and far-reaching revision.

Several strands of thought, which had previously been consigned to the periphery of official policymaking on Islam and the Middle East in the Washington of the 1980s and 1990s, began to gather serious traction in the White House. Much has been written about the influence of the neo-conservatives, but in reality they were only one of several different, and often clashing, currents. These included 'Wilsonian' internationalists, who prescribed that the USA should be actively engaged with the world to promote the spread of democracy and liberty; the Christian Right with their apocalyptic visions; and the proponents of a muscular form of American nationalism, who believed that the country should not shrink from using its immense global power to promote its narrow interests.

This ascendant and new *zeitgeist*, anchored in a deep loathing and resentment for all symbols and verities of the 'soft' liberalism that appeared to infuse American culture and society of the 1960s and 1970s, became, as it were, the forces of the new counter-reformation. Each of these strands saw in the post-9/11 world the possibility of advancing its own parochial points of view, and each catalysed official policymaking into focusing on Iraq as the locus of its plans. Some elements were genuinely concerned with the possibility that Iraq had WMD, ostensibly the only 'legitimate' grounds upon which an aggressive policy of regime change could be based. Such national security interests, not only of the United States, but also of Israel, played a large part in the thinking that underlay the decision to invade Iraq. Other factions had different agendas, including that of implanting the ideals of liberal democracy in the rocky terrain of the Arab world as an antidote to fundamentalist Islamism.

It would take some stretch of the imagination to align the disparate threads that drove the United States into the extraordinary decision to invade Iraq and to turn its own foreign policy on its head. The intellectual underpinnings of the 'Alternative Discourse', however, had been quietly fermenting in the corners of academic departments and obscure postgraduate seminars on political thought and Islamic history for some time. If ever ideas and the
advancement of a particular perspective on events were to play a part in the unfolding of decisions of momentous consequence, then a good case could be made for the influence of Leo Strauss and Bernard Lewis. These two scholars probably never met, but their ideas pervaded the American project to refashion Iraq and beyond.

Strauss, a political philosopher, believed in the role of the wise elite, schooled in Platonic ideals, exercising power over the mass, who would maintain harmony and quietly propagate the principles of the virtuous state and society. Members of the elite’s main tasks were to act as counsellors and guides, preferably discreetly and anonymously, to the rulers who were committed to the shared symbols and ideals of their societies. The mass should be silently directed in subtle ways to protect them from their worst instincts and drives, while preserving their adherence to the basic principles and values of their societies. The fragility of liberal democracy and the ever-present threat of it being fatally undermined by either mass indifference, alarmingly present in modern western consumer societies, or by an aggressive and determined totalitarian adversary, became a recurrent theme in Strauss’s writing.

Straussian thought began to take hold in the 1960s and 1970s. His ideas permeated the thinking of the budding counter-attack that emerged within the Reagan administration of the 1980s, and took form as the ideological underpinning of the shift in policy that displaced ‘détente’ with radical confrontation of the Soviet Union. When the administration of the second Bush was being organised, the Straussians, who had regrouped and strengthened themselves and their policies in various think-tanks and universities during their long exile in the Clinton years, were ready to assume leadership roles in key parts of the government, not least in the Defense and State departments and the National Security Council. The threat to America’s national security from radical Islamism fitted exactly into the Straussian construct of what constituted a mortal danger to western democratic values, requiring a forceful and wide-ranging response in the form of the War on Terror. Strauss’s followers in important positions in the government provided a philosophic structure and rationale for the way that the War on Terror was going to be fought. This, of course, merged into the other currents of what came to be called ‘neo-conservatism’, all of which were galvanised by the events of 11 September, 2001 and the predisposition of George W. Bush personally to accept and act upon these arguments.

None of these neo-conservative ideologies was in any way particularly involved with the Middle East, except in the narrow sense that there was a frequent overlap between their concern with American power and national security, and the security and defence of Israel. Nevertheless, the fact that these groups adopted Bernard Lewis’s perspective on the Middle East allowed for the formulation of a policy that seemed to have all the ingredients of specificity for
the Middle East, and in particular Iraq, when the time came to justify the invasion/liberation of that country.

Bernard Lewis studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, specialising in Islamic history. Lewis developed a particular slant on Islam’s encounter with modernity that ran counter to the then prevailing wisdom. The conventional view was that the political oppressiveness, social inequalities and economic backwardness in the Middle East were mainly because of the legacy of western imperialism and the west’s incessant interference in the area’s affairs. Lewis, however, postulated that the Islamic world’s problems were mainly of its own making, driven by a congenital inability of Islamic civilisation to accommodate to its diminished status in the world. ‘The Roots of Muslim Rage’, the title of Bernard Lewis’s now classic essay, was ultimately linked to the failure of Islamic civilisation to accept that it had been relegated to a secondary status by the manifest political and technological superiority of the west. This was even more galling, for this new world was dominated by Islam’s historic rival, Christendom. Without this acknowledgement, Muslim societies were unable to rejuvenate themselves and adjust to modernity. Lewis wrote that ‘This is no less than a clash of civilisations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.’

Lewis’s band of admirers grew perceptibly in the 1980s and 1990s and, with the advent of the Bush administration, joined up with the other strands of the ‘Alternative Discourse’ to dominate Middle East policymaking. Lewis himself put on the mantle of the ‘public intellectual’, appearing on numerous TV shows, and mentoring and advising all manner of officials in the post 9/11 Bush administration. The ‘Lewis doctrine’ became official policy, all the more so as Lewis was an enthusiastic advocate of using force to effect change. The invasion of Iraq could now be given a scholarly sheen, carrying the imprimatur of the ‘most influential post-war historian of Islam and the Middle East’, as Lewis was called by one of his academic followers. The grand scheme of dragging the Middle East, kicking and screaming, into the democratic and secular future designed for it by the ‘best and the brightest’ of the new Washington, would now begin in earnest. Iraq was in the right place and it was the right time to start the make-over of the region. Lewis and Strauss were profound influences, in deep and subtle ways, on the nexus of advisers, policymakers and war-planners that pushed the USA into invading Iraq.

But in their unseemly drive to war, the invasion’s advocates forgot to consider other, more cautionary, narratives. The great sociologist Robert Merton died on 23 February, 2003 at the ripe old age of 92. In 1936 he wrote a seminal paper that should have been read – but probably was not – by the war’s planners and boosters entitled ‘The Unanticipated Consequences of
Purposive Social Action’. It showed how the actions of peoples and governments always result in unintended consequences, which can distort, negate, but rarely enhance, the desired outcome. Merton isolated five contributing factors to unintended consequences, each of which singly, or in combination, can gravely affect the outcome of collective action or public policy. Merton’s five sources of unanticipated consequences were ignorance of the true conditions pertaining; error in inference; the primacy of immediate interests; the ideological imperative (or the imperative of ‘basic values’ as he called it); and self-fulfilling prophecy, a phrase that he actually coined. The implications were that if policymakers did not minimise or militate against these factors, then the outcome of a particular course of policy action would be undesirable, or at least unexpected. Presumably, if all five variables were ignored, the outcome might be catastrophic, from the policymaker’s perspective. George W. Bush’s war of choice in Iraq was just that: a litany of unintended consequences – a few astonishing, some surprising, some unwelcome, but most disastrous. All of Merton’s five contributing factors had been, wilfully or otherwise, neglected in the decision to go to war. Iraq would be the first casualty; then the region; and finally America itself.

In official Washington, the ignorance of what was going on inside Iraq before the war was monumental. None of the proponents of the war, including the neo-conservatives, and also no one in the institutes and think-tanks that provided the intellectual fodder for the war’s justification, had the faintest idea of the country that they were to occupy. The academics and researchers who congregated around the Washington think-tanks and the vice-president’s office, who had made Iraq their pet project, were blinkered by their dogmatic certainties or their bigotries. There was a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of Iraqi society and the effects on it of decades of dictatorship. Each strand of American thinking that combined to provide the basis for the invasion was isolated from any direct, even incidental, engagement with Iraq. The State Department, supposedly a citadel of realist thinking, had little first-hand experience of the country, instead relying on inference and analogous reasoning when trying to unravel the possible outcomes in the post-war period. The only certainty was provided by the American military who knew that the Iraqis were no match for their kind of warfare, and who also knew that they were facing a dispirited and ineffectual army.

It was not only the absence of any systematic analysis, based on a wealth of information and experience about the country that was the cause of this woeful condition. It was more a deliberate revelling in the debunking of whatever knowledge on Iraq existed. For nearly a decade, Iraq had been the stomping ground of innumerable UN missions and teams. It had never been the hermetically sealed country that many had supposed, and embassies and
foreign businesses continued to function throughout the 1990s. But knowledge of the country’s internal conditions that might have been gained by these and other sources was never usefully employed to determine the possible outcomes to an invasion of the country. The Iraqi opposition, or at least those people who had access to official Washington, were no better. The exile groups, each with their different agendas, could not and did not provide the USA with a clear and reasonable assessment of the circumstances in Iraq. They were either too parochial in their concerns or simply too eager to assume power after America had removed Saddam. Such groups had no interest in shaking America’s resolve by highlighting problems and pitfalls. The British, supposedly the wiser and more jaded of the two partners in the Anglo-American alliance, did not, and would not, play Athens to America’s Rome. They were mired in balance-of-power rationalising, and had an obsessive fear of disrupting the status quo in the Middle East. Prime Minister Tony Blair believed that Britain had to be seen as a staunch American ally; he was overly concerned to stay on the right side of a belligerent president, almost irrespective of the merits of the situation. He saw himself as a bridle to Bush’s wild horse; in the event, however, he was simply dragged along in whatever direction the horse led. Whatever qualms the British might have had were quietly laid aside. Merton’s first rule had been broken. Ignorance of the conditions inside Iraq would very likely set off a cascading chain of unanticipated consequences.

The second of Merton’s maxims was that error – in appraisal of a situation, in selecting an appropriate course of action, or in its implementation – would profoundly impact on the outcome of a policy decision. The invasion and occupation of Iraq comprised an index of errors of commission and omission. It would be difficult to catalogue them. There were just too many. They ranged from the numbers of troops deployed, to the type of people who ran the country, to the policy changes, to the off-handedness regarding decisions of monumental consequence. The range, number and pernicious effects of these errors were astounding. Merton might have well been writing of post-war Iraq when he described this type of error as a ‘pathological obsession where there is a determined refusal or inability to consider certain elements of the problem’. This was seen time and again in Iraq, where a fixation on one milestone or another, or a determined insistence on pursuing an imagined goal, distorted an objective assessment of the circumstances. Wish-fulfilment was a consequential aspect of the work and pronouncements of the decision-makers in Iraq. This, as Merton said, has to do more with psychiatric literature. The persistence in pursuing erroneous policies – for fear of being off-message; for fear of jeopardising one’s career; for fear of the political consequences of ‘incorrectness’; or because of an unwillingness to produce, or an incapability of producing, an alternative – was a feature of the entire post-war period.
The third of Merton’s tenets was the ‘imperious immediacy of interest’, where the desire for an outcome is so great that there is a wilful ignoring of its effects. This is, of course, different from ignorance that comes from simply not knowing. Elections were held despite the Sunni boycott; constitutions were delivered in record time, even though there were glaring flaws that had to be rectified. Months after the elections of December 2005, there was still no sign of the promised parliamentary committees to reconsider the offending constitutional articles. The issue of federalism for the South, on which the future of Iraq as a unitary state may well rest, was rammed through with nary a debate. The desire to play out the process according to its original blueprint was so great that it overshadowed, and precluded, any alternative line of reasoning, even when the country’s constitution-drafters had to produce a historic document in a few weeks. This was an absurd outcome that reverberated against the entire process. Deals were cut that could not withstand the test of reason or time.

The fourth Merton principle that went unheeded was the effect on decision-making of actions that were driven by a moral or ideological imperative. This was not supposed to happen within the rules of statecraft, where the interests of the state took precedence over other considerations in the formulation of policy. The Bush administration had come into office by castigating the ‘immorality’ of the previous president, and promised an era of principled government that would be guided by a Higher Authority. ‘There is a higher father that I appeal to,’ as Bush said. Bush’s intense religiosity coloured all his actions, and it certainly played a part in his decision to invade Iraq. In the detailed account of America’s march to war, Bob Woodward wrote in his 2004 book, Plan of Attack, about Bush’s communion with the Almighty that Bush ‘was praying for strength to do the Lord’s will’. But in a denial that was more of an admission, Bush said, ‘I’m surely not going to justify war based upon God. Understand that. Nevertheless, in my case, I pray that I will be as good a messenger of His will as possible.’ With a certainty that comes from a burning faith – something that more cynical Europeans could not understand – there was no room to sit and measure out the consequences of faith-driven decisions.

The religiosity of Bush united with an important constituency of the Bush presidency, the Religious Right, who were well represented in both official Washington and the Baghdad occupation authorities. There, it was a belief that the Iraq war was an enactment and harbinger of a number of eschatological prophecies, and that they were the handmaidens for the imminent Second Coming. Other, equally zealous, political ideologues added to the brew of religious verities. None of these groups, which ranged from radical neo-conservatives, champions of frog-marching the Arabs into democracy, geopoliticians intent on ‘containing’ Iran and militant Islam, would brook any
discussion of their ideas, or the assumptions that underlay them. The Iraq war was a godsend – for some literally – as it would allow them to play out their theories and fantasies on the *tabula rasa* of a new Iraq. No one had any time or desire to examine the consequences of the decisions that they were proposing, or pushing for others to adopt. For example, America’s toppling of Iran’s bitter foe, Saddam, immensely strengthened the influence and power of Iran in Iraq. This was hardly the intended consequence of those who sought to create a democratic bulwark in Iraq as a goad to the Iran of the theocrats. Similarly with democracy itself. The vision of a liberal, secular Iraq governed by elected officials through representative institutions sank with the realisation that democracy might well empower the very groups that were thought to be most hostile to it or those communities that saw the democratic process simply in terms of strengthening their side’s control over the state apparatus.

The last of Merton’s principles that was ignored was the self-fulfilling prophecy that might come back and haunt the architects of the war. This was especially true in the matter of the War against Terror, Bush’s mobilising cry for the American people after the 9/11 attacks. The American public became convinced that there was a link between the Saddam regime and the threat of further terrorist attacks. In fact, the Ba’ath regime, which had a terrible record otherwise, steered clear of being associated with acts of terror against the USA. The WMD argument might possibly have fitted (at its edges) with the War against Terror, if such WMD had indeed existed in Saddam’s Iraq. After an exhaustive search for several months by the Iraq Survey Group, however, none was found – and neither was there any incriminating evidence connecting the former regime either with the 9/11 plotters or the al-Qaeda organisation. But then something unexpected happened: Iraq became a centre for global terrorists of the Islamist variety. The fight against terror in Iraq, where previously international terrorists had existed purely as a supposition, now turned into reality. Terrorists were drawn into Iraq not only to fight the USA, but also to fight a host of other enemies that had not been there before the war – mainly the Shi’a ascendancy and the Iranians.

The law of unintended consequences exploded with such force in Iraq because the planners of the war ignored or minimised the hazards of their decisions. Shrewder and/or more perceptive people knew instinctively that the invasion of Iraq would open up the great fissures in Iraqi society, with enormous regional and international consequences. By far the most significant and historically resonant was the tipping of the scales in favour of the Shi’a. The USA may have fallen for the self-serving description of Iraq’s Shi’a as a force that was simply waiting to express its democratic proclivities and its gratitude to its liberators. Rather, the invasion achieved what they had thought impossible: the removal of their nemesis by an irresistible external force. Moreover, the new force was eager to seek their community’s support