

*RISKS OF ACTION AND INACTION – AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT OF THE PLANNING AND
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IRAQ WAR*

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Douglas Feith, War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism (New York: HarperCollins, 2008)

Ten years have passed since the 9/11 attacks, and 2011 marked important events that can be seen as the end of the decade of the war on terror. Osama bin Laden is dead, the last American troops are leaving Iraq by the end of the year, and the political landscape of the Middle East is significantly changed by the Arab Spring. NATO's actions in Libya have shown a different form of Western intervention in regional affairs: although serious questions remain about the future, the alliance successfully contributed to the fall of the Gaddafi regime. What lies ahead is still unknown, but the sweeping changes provide an opportunity to look back at the policies of the last decade and put them in perspective.

Starting war against Iraq was inarguably the most debated foreign policy decision of the United States of this decade. The administration of George W. Bush went on to remove Saddam Hussein from power by force despite serious international and domestic concerns. At certain moments, the war seemed to become a symbol of failed American policies in the post-9/11 world: from its planning to the implementation, it revealed serious flaws of the decision-making process. Despite all the mistakes, some members of the previous Administration still insist on the necessity of the war in retrospect. Douglas J. Feith who was Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Pentagon led by Donald Rumsfeld makes a compelling case for this in his 2008 book "War and Decision".

Feith achieves more by aiming at less. He was among the leading neoconservative officials arguing for the war, but in the memoir, he does not want to convince the reader that this was the only reasonable decision. Instead, he gives an exhaustive and credible account of the issues raised during his term; he thoughtfully describes his views, but does not discredit alternative opinions. In a frank and well-written style, Feith sheds light on the Bush Administration's decision-making process; he unveils the deficiencies while also disproves some widespread myths. As Henry Kissinger praised the book, one does not have to agree with his conclusions to "gain a better perspective from reading" it.¹

Although the book covers other issues Feith was preoccupied with as Under Secretary of Defense – most prominently, the war in Afghanistan, – two thirds of the main chapters deal with the case of Iraq. Therefore, it is reasonable to discuss here primarily this most controversial topic. Based on the book, we can focus on the following questions: First, *why* did President Bush decide to use force against Saddam? Second, on the basis of Feith's account, what can we say about *how* the planning and implementation of the war was carried out? And third, how does it relate to the broader picture of the war on terror? Of course, a comprehensive overview of any of these points would demand more elaboration, but we can still make some important observations. The failures of the planning and implementation can be seen in the framework of the so-called 'governmental politics' model of decision-making, while in relation to the last question, the theoretical background of the 'doctrine of preventive war' or 'anticipatory self-defense' can be examined. In order to get a fuller picture, Feith's account should also be contrasted with critics of the Administration's policies – an example for a thorough insider's critique is found in the book of Richard Haass who was Director of Policy Planning in the State Department in the run-up to the war.

Reasons to Act

¹ Henry A. Kissinger, http://www.waranddecision.com/about/buy_book.asp

9/11 fundamentally changed how the Bush Administration viewed the world. In the wake of the attacks, senior officials re-evaluated the threats posed by hostile regimes. According to Feith, the Iraq war was in this way a consequence of 9/11 – not because a direct link was supposed between Saddam and the perpetrators of the attack, but because of the changed perception of risks. After the attacks, the Administration had to “take a new look at *all* national security dangers,” and Iraq was one of them, Feith argues,² and others confirm this. Donald Rumsfeld stated once that the United States did not act in Iraq because it “had discovered dramatic new evidence in Iraq’s pursuit of weapons of mass destruction [rather because it] saw the existing evidence in a new light.”³ In this sense, it was not Saddam who suddenly became more dangerous, but the world surrounding him changed, and probably he failed to understand its importance and this is why he did not take the American buildup more seriously.⁴

Of course, the issue of Iraq was not brought up from nowhere: in fact, Iraq had been a serious foreign policy concern of the U.S. ever since the end of the First Gulf War. Many experts believed that *Operation Desert Storm* ended prematurely, and the danger of another attack similar to the invasion of Kuwait would not go away unless Saddam was removed from power. There were serious reasons to believe this: after the first war, the Iraqi regime brutally crushed opposition, which led to the establishment of no-fly zones. Saddam repeatedly violated the ceasefire agreement and the resolutions of the UN Security Council; he did not cooperate with weapons inspections, and regularly attacked Coalition planes enforcing the no-fly zone resolutions. Although the Clinton Administration did not consider Iraq a priority issue – though US and British forces still carried out a short bombing campaign in 1998, – it remained on the agenda: Congress adopted the Iraqi Liberation Act in 1998, and influential members of the foreign policy community urged the President in a letter to remove Saddam by “a full complement of diplomatic, political and military efforts.”⁵ Many of the signatories later joined or advised the Bush Administration, and after America was attacked by Al Qaeda, they connected the Iraqi threat to the threat of terrorism.

Even before 9/11, the Administration started to re-examine the Iraqi threat. Feith cites a memo from July 2001 in which Donald Rumsfeld argued that not only the no-fly zones but “the broader subject of Iraq that merits the attention of the Administration”, and presented a set of options. The Secretary of Defense claimed that Saddam could not be kept “in the box” by sanctions, and the chances for him to respect “an acceptable accommodation of our interests over a long period” were slim. He predicted that should they continue the policies of containment, “[w]ithin a few years the U.S. will undoubtedly have to confront a Saddam armed with nuclear weapons.”⁶ The issue of Iraq came up again at a meeting as early as a few days after 9/11, but President Bush first wanted to concentrate on the war in Afghanistan – though he told Condoleezza Rice that “they would return later to the question.”⁷

As the title of one chapter in Feith’s book states, the Administration had to calculate the “risks of action and inaction.” Obviously Feith and others in prominent position⁸ claimed that leaving Saddam in power could trigger much serious consequences based on his past of aggression and the erosion of sanctions. However, Richard N. Haass argues that “no systematic, rigorous, in-house debate” preceded the President’s decision,⁹ and the risks of the war were not measured thoroughly against the dangers of inaction. In retrospect, he believes that the potential benefits of the war – even if Iraq becomes a stable and democratic country, which still cannot be taken for granted, since the outcome after the withdrawal of American troops is highly unpredictable – “must be weighed against the enormous human, military, economic, strategic, and diplomatic costs of the policy.”¹⁰ To be fair, in fact Rumsfeld did write down a long list about how the war

² Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 213.

³ Alex Roberto Hybel and Justin Matthew Kaufman, *The Bush Administrations and Saddam Hussein: Deciding on Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 126. See also: Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2005), p. 127.

⁴ For the reason why so many people falsely believed that Saddam had WMDs, Feith suspects that he might have wanted to pretend that he had such weapons to deter Iran, but may have miscalculated the seriousness of U.S. intentions. (Feith, p. 330.)

⁵ Project for the New American Century, *Letter to President Clinton on Iraq*, January 26, 1998. <http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm>

⁶ Feith, pp. 210-211.

⁷ Bob Woodward, *A támadás terve* (Budapest: Geopen, 2004), p. 35. Translated from the original *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁸ Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz had been an advocate for action against Saddam for a long time.

⁹ Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. xx. (Preface to the Paperback Edition)

could go wrong. This “Parade of Horribles”¹¹ – as Feith calls it – was a strong analysis of the potential downsides of the campaign, though questions still remain whether these factors were considered sufficiently in the decision-making process.

For Feith, the biggest problem with the handling of the *why* question was its reduction to only one issue: weapons of mass destructions (WMD). As no such weapons were found after Saddam’s fall, the argument for the war seemed to be disproved. But Feith claims that the WMD threat was only a part of the rationale, and Saddam posed a wider danger. He summarized the four main problems with the regime as “WMD and the three Ts”, where the Ts stood for *threats* to Iraq’s neighbors, *terrorism* and *tyranny*.¹² However, according to Wolfowitz, mainly because of bureaucratic reasons, the Administration settled on the WMD question as the “core issue”.¹³ It was the key point of Colin Powell’s presentation at the United Nations, and in August 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney claimed that “there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction.”¹⁴ While Feith argues that the main issue was not whether Saddam actually possessed stockpiles but his capability to resume the programs, the poor presentation of the case “jeopardized the war effort itself.”¹⁵

A lot can be discussed about the other parts of the rationale too. Among Feith’s “three Ts”, terrorism was a key issue, and Saddam’s relation with Al-Qaeda became a hotly debated topic. Some critics claim that the Administration manipulated evidence to magnify this relation and “sell the war.”¹⁶ Feith denies these accusations, stating that the Administration had never claimed that Saddam had had anything to do with 9/11, instead, they were concerned that Iraq might provide WMDs for terrorists. He also argues that contrary to widespread assumptions, it was not the Pentagon who tried to influence intelligence reports, but rather CIA members intended to politicize intelligence.¹⁷ Of course, this is no excuse for the serious intelligence flaws, but it paints a more nuanced picture of the run-up to the war. About the *tyranny* part of the three Ts, Feith explains that the absence of domestic checks and balances made it impossible to curb Saddam’s ambitions thus strengthened his threat. However, he emphasizes that ‘ending tyranny’ and ‘creating democracy’ was by itself not a reason for action, and the Pentagon repeatedly tried to tone down the language of ‘exporting democracy.’¹⁸

Planning and Implementation: Governmental Politics

After the Cuban missile crisis, Graham T. Allison presented three models to explain the actors’ behaviors. The resulting book, *Essence of decision* became one of the most important works of foreign policy analysis.¹⁹ Out of the three, “governmental politics” is the most complex explanatory model, and it is worth considering some of its aspects in the Iraq case in the light of Feith’s – and others’ – account. In this model, foreign policy decisions are not made by the state as a unitary actor, but rather they are “results of bargaining games” in the government, determined by competing preferences and “various conceptions of national, organizational and personal goals.”²⁰ Ultimately, action is decided through a process of pulling and hauling, and different groups intend to influence the decision in different directions based on their distinct responsibilities and interests. In a 2008 article, Martin A. Smith pointed out that the model has limitations in explaining decision-making on Iraq – or any other crisis, – and while “it can help shed new light on how decisions are made, it is less likely to [explain] why they are made.”²¹ However, considering the *how*

¹¹ Feith, pp. 332-335.

¹² Ibid, p. 283.

¹³ Martin A. Smith, ‘US bureaucratic politics and the decision to invade Iraq,’ *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (March 2008), p. 91.

¹⁴ Haass, p. 218.

¹⁵ Feith, p. 228.

¹⁶ See for example, Chaim Kaufmann, ‘Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,’ *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), pp. 16-19.

¹⁷ Feith, pp. 265-269.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 284-285.

¹⁹ Based on new materials coming to surface, Allison rewrote the book with Philip Zelikow. Zelikow later gave advice to Condoleezza Rice about the 2002 National Security Strategy (which highlighted the importance of preventive action, thus was often seen as a justification for the Iraq war), and he went on to become director of the 9/11 Commission. (Haass, p. 221.)

²⁰ Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd Edition. (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 255.

²¹ Smith, p. 103.

question can also reveal important information about the planning and implementation of the war, therefore Allison's model can be a useful tool.

In the governmental politics model, it is important to identify the different players and their roles.²² In order to understand better the decision-making process in the case of Iraq, the relationships between the senior officials of the White House, the Vice President's Office, the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA can be investigated. Feith paints a more nuanced picture of Donald Rumsfeld compared to common descriptions: he presents the Secretary as a "courageous and skeptical intellect" who posed serious questions in his memos known as 'snowflakes', though he admits that his "style of leadership did not always serve his own purpose" because he made too many enemies.²³ Colin Powell is described by Feith as someone who "went along with the President's Iraq policy halfheartedly at most," but did not give alternative options, rather just led a "neither-fish-nor-fowl faction."²⁴ Although it is certainly true that Powell had both personal and organizational disadvantages because he did not have as close relations to the President as others in the Administration,²⁵ he did raise some objections, and, some arguments were made in the State Department too, as Haass recollects.²⁶ Of course, it is less known how strongly these counter-arguments were presented or considered.

The rivalry between State (often supported by the CIA) and Defense surely undermined the Administration's ability to conduct the operation properly. The differences between the two departments were partly based on personal convictions, partly on the interests and traditions of the distinct organizations – this latter is summarized by Allison as the principle of "where you stand depends on where you sit."²⁷ In some cases, personal rivalry contributed to the not-so-friendly relationship.²⁸ Furthermore, the departments fought over certain positions of the post-war civil administration, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA): when Rumsfeld rejected some candidates proposed by State, Powell and Armitage were infuriated. This strained relationship, according to Feith, was not "wore off ... as long as either Powell or Rumsfeld remained in his job,"²⁹ which was not ideal at times of war. Ultimately, Feith argues that interagency decision-making lacked clarity, and "basic disagreements were allowed to remain unresolved,"³⁰ which surely hindered the successful implementation of the Administration's plans.

Out of the main "players" in the Administration, it is useful to note the role of then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. Rice – who had strong personal relations with Bush – was criticized by many people for not articulating her positions well enough. From the point of view of Powell's team, on most issues, she and her staff "leaned toward the stances put forward by OSD [Defense] and OVP [Office of the Vice President]."³¹ However, in her new memoir, Rice recalls some disagreements with Pentagon officials – primarily over post-war planning, – and she admits remaining "skeptical [about Iraq] until the day Bob Gates became secretary of defense," and Rumsfeld left the Administration.³² For Feith, the biggest problem was that the National Security Advisor intended to "produce bridging proposals" between the highly divergent opinions of the different departments instead of presenting the President with clear choices.³³ However, Rice was unable to resolve interagency disputes.

²² Allison and Zelikow, pp. 275-278.

²³ Feith, p. 509. Rumsfeld's ability to lead an organization effectively can also be questioned based on the accounts, as he preferred convincing others to issuing orders, but in some cases this meant a lack of control of his subordinates.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 246.

²⁵ Smith, p. 101.

²⁶ About the memo written by Haass to Powell on the pros and cons of the war, see: Haass, pp. 224-226. On the August 2002 discussion between Bush and Powell, see: Woodward, pp. 172-175; Feith, pp. 247-248; Haass, p. 214. However, Feith still believes that Powell should have made a stronger case against overthrowing Saddam if he had disagreed strongly with the President's policy.

²⁷ Allison and Zelikow, p. 307.

²⁸ Feith discusses that the two No. 2s of the departments – Richard Armitage and Paul Wolfowitz – had cool relations because of "job-related resentments," as both were candidates for the job of Deputy Secretary of Defense – and Wolfowitz obtained the position (Feith, p. 204.).

²⁹ Feith, p. 288.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 245.

³¹ Haass, p. 184.

³² Christopher Dickey, 'Condi's Freedom War', *Newsweek*, October 31, 2011,

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/10/23/condi-s-dangerous-years.html>

³³ Feith, pp. 143-144.

This last observation leads us to an important question about the decision-making process in the Bush Administration. Rice's practice of "bridging proposals" could have inhibited discussion of major challenges. In fact, Haass argues that "there was no meeting or set of meetings at which the pros and cons were debated and a formal decision was taken", and instead, this decision "happened," and it was "cumulative."³⁴ While some analysts claim that this process is an example for what Allison describes (based on Irving Janis's concept) as 'groupthink' – the cohesion in a group that "produces a psychological drive for consensus, which tends to suppress both dissent and the consideration of alternatives,"³⁵ – Feith believes that the problem was not that Bush "discouraged challenges."³⁶ In any case, the discord inside the Administration and the absence of an open debate seriously complicated planning and implementation.

Finally, we can just name a few issues based on the literature, where the planning and implementation was negatively influenced by faulty intelligence, interagency disharmony, and all the factors previously considered here. The Administration's post-war plans proved to be insufficient, and they were also paralyzed by conflicting interests. The State Department and the CIA tried to diminish the role of "external" Iraqis (emigrants who organized the opposition from outside the country), while the Pentagon would have counted on them.³⁷ For Feith, the most serious problem was that contrary to the original plans, U.S. occupation lasted for more than a year, which catalyzed insurgency and later sectarian violence. Feith argues that should the U.S. have handed over power to the Iraqis earlier – preferably shortly after Saddam's fall, – many of the post-war failures could have been prevented. However, Haass believes that it was not possible because of the lack of plans adjusting to local realities, and the main lesson learnt from the campaign was that implementation is not a second-order concern.³⁸ Moreover, in some cases, it was not evident who was in control: Paul Bremer, leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority was formally a subordinate of Rumsfeld, but claimed to be the representative of the President, and often contradicted to the policy proposals coming from the Pentagon.

Risk Management in the War on Terror and Anticipatory Self-Defense

In conclusion, it is important to look at the broader concept of the War on Terror, and the potential theoretical background for analyzing it. 9/11 changed how the U.S. government viewed the risk of terrorism, though its responses were intensely debated. In the first place, the term itself – whether it can be called 'war', and whether it is fought against an abstract concept – can be contested, and Haass argues that it "could mislead."³⁹ Feith himself admits the ambiguity of the term, but he points out that no one in the Pentagon ever claimed that this 'war' can be won by only military means.⁴⁰ However, he believes there was no better expression to articulate that the aim of American policies was not just to retaliate, but to prevent the next attack; that the enemy was not a particular organization, but the broader network of terrorism whose ideology also needed to be countered;⁴¹ that the U.S. was committed to fighting terrorism actively, because this was the only way they could preserve their "way of life" as President Bush said.⁴²

In any case, the debate over the term will not go away – and the lessons from the actual wars might raise further questions. It remains to be decided whether the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq can be seen as parts of the same "war on terrorism", or rather it is more adequate to speak of separate 'wars' against terror. Another key issue is that, by definition, it is impossible to declare when this war is won. While – as Feith points out – no terrorist attack has occurred in the U.S. over the past ten years, we can never be sure about the future, and

³⁴ Haass, p. 234.

³⁵ Allison and Zelikow, p. 283. For the role of groupthink in the decision on Iraq, see: Hybel and Kaufman, pp. 140-141.

³⁶ Feith, p. 273.

³⁷ Of course, the two sides have conflicting accounts of this. While the State/CIA side claims that Pentagon officials wanted to help Ahmed Chalabi, a controversial figure of the opposition, Feith writes that they pressed the issue because they supported the greater role of 'external' Iraqis in general, and it was the State Department that was biased toward certain Iraqi politicians, and against others (for example, Chalabi).

³⁸ Haass, p. 271.

³⁹ Haass, p. 189.

⁴⁰ Feith, p. 86.

⁴¹ Though Feith claims the Administration's efforts to counter the ideology of terrorism remained "inadequate". (Ibid, p. 510.)

⁴² Ibid, p. 507.

as Haass argues, “[t]errorists succeed even if they fail most of the time.”⁴³ These observations lead to some theoretical aspects of new kinds of security challenges like terrorism.

Some experts of security studies call these challenges ‘risks’ in order to distinguish them from more conventional ‘threats’. (The term is coming from the sociological concept of ‘Risk Society’ introduced by German sociologist Ulrich Beck.) While threats are more concrete, finite, and coming from power, risks are considered to be more uncertain, they are infinite and “transcend time and space.”⁴⁴ Therefore, risk management turns to be a never-ending process, and many believe this happened in the case of the Bush Administration’s conflicts. In a famous speech in 2002, Rumsfeld warned that in the post-9/11 world, the U.S. has to deal with ‘unknown unknowns’, risks they even don’t know what they don’t know about them.⁴⁵ This is the reason why Feith still believes that the “risks of inaction” were too high not to act in Iraq, and this is how the Bush Administration established the doctrine of preventive war – or, as members of the Administration preferred calling, anticipatory self-defense.

In his book, Feith cites a memo from August 2002 in which he made the case for anticipatory self-defense, and addressed some concerns about its relation to sovereignty and about the potential misuse of power. He argued that while “[i]n general, the United States supports traditional concepts of sovereignty”, there is a need for “certain narrow but important exceptions” like in the case of weapons of mass destruction.⁴⁶ Feith’s thought-provoking paper could provide a basis for further discussions and raises many questions⁴⁷ of which just a few are mentioned here. Can we call the Iraq war ‘anticipatory self-defense’ even if Feith himself admits that Saddam might have “prefer[red] to leave [the U.S.] alone,”⁴⁸ thus he was not likely to constitute a direct threat? If Saddam was not an ‘imminent threat’, can we still speak of a ‘pre-emptive action’, or was it rather a ‘preventive war’ as critics like Haass⁴⁹ claim? Since Feith and other proponents of the war emphasized often the ‘risks of inaction’, how can we measure these risks, and can we weigh them adequately against the potential risks of actions and unintended consequences? And more theoretically, how can we define the limits of using force for justified preventive action in order to preserve the concept of sovereignty?

General Tommy Franks – whose handling of post-war planning is criticized sharply in the book – once called Feith, according to Bob Woodward, the “stupidest guy on the face of earth.”⁵⁰ The two men evidently did not get along well, but this claim is certainly untrue. Although one can debate his positions, Feith does provide a thorough insight into the Administration’s handling of the war on terror. “War and Decision” explains the rationale behind the Iraq war more than any previous account, while it does not withhold the problems and failures. As the decade of the fight against terrorism fades away, there will be more room for nuanced analyses of the controversial decisions. Douglas Feith’s memoir is not only the source of useful information, it is also likely to inspire further thoughts and discussions.

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⁴³ Haass, p. 189.

⁴⁴ M. J. Williams, ‘(In)Security Studies, Reflexive Modernization and the Risk Society,’ *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol.43. no.1, 2008, p. 66.

⁴⁵ Rumsfeld answered a question relating to the Iraqi WMDs that “as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know.” (Ibid, p. 67.; <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636>)

⁴⁶ Feith, pp. 295-298.

⁴⁷ Feith himself ends his memo with a string of questions.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 308.

⁴⁹ Haass, p. 222.

⁵⁰ Woodward, p. 315.