A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE 
ON THE U.S. MILITARY ACTION AGAINST IRAQ 

(TEORETICKÝ POHLED NA OZBROJENÝ ZÁSAH USA PROTI IRÁKU) 

PhDr. Vilém Kolín, MGS 

Anotace: 

Důvody, který vedly k válce mezi Spojenými státy a Irákem, měly pramálo společné s 
realistickým vyvažováním. Anarchie hrála určitě důležitou roli, ale hodnoty a identita byly 
pro konflikt klíčové, zatímco distribuce schopností představovala mímořádně okrajový prvek. 
Článek analyzuje chování Spojených států z neorealisticke, konstruktivistické a post-
strukturalistické perspektivy, aby v rovině teorie mezinárodních vztahů vysvětlil, co bylo 
„opravdu“ důležité ve válce proti Iráku. 

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The State of Play 

We are in the midst of an international debate about how to force Iran and North 
Korea to give up their nuclear ambitions. The current debate mirrors the discussion about 
when states may use force to settle their international disputes, which took place three years 
ago with regard to the US military action against Iraq, in what it became to be known as the 
Second Gulf War. As a matter of fact, it may now be the right time to analyze the causes of 
war against Iraq from a perspective of international political theory, an approach that would 
allow us to provide a compact analysis of the conflict short of normative considerations on the 
legal and legitimate use of force in international relations, which since then have taken much 
of scholarly writings on this matter. Drawing upon the ontologically incompatible yet 
irrefutably illuminating perspectives of Kenneth Waltz, Alexander Wendt and David 
Campbell, such an analysis would provide us with a coherent explanation of the US war prone 
behavior which goes well beyond the particular case of the intervention in Iraq. 

Anarchy 

Addressing the question of the causes of the US military action against Iraq from 
Walz’s perspective, anarchy is certainly an important part of the story. As the most important 
structural feature in the Walz’s account of international politics, the absence of central rule in 
international relations means that no one by virtue of its authority is entitled to command and 
no one, in turn, is obliged to obey. It follows that because states are the constitutive units of 
the system (a structure and interacting units), and there is no centralized authority in the 
system, states themselves are ultimate arbiters of force. The desire of states as units, at a 
minimum, to survive is assumed and the organizing principle of international relations in an 
anarchic order—self-help—is postulated: under such constellation every state will try to put 
itself in the position to be able to ensure its own survival by taking care about nobody else. 
The United States thus were entitled to take military action against Iraq, as their survival was
claimed to be at stake and, in the anarchical realm of the system, nothing could prevent them from doing that. The United States did not need to care about balancing, as they were, indeed still are, the only real great power (hyperpower) in the system, so there was nobody to balance against from their point of view. The distribution of capabilities is also of a minor importance in this case, as it says nothing about the behavior of the United States besides the fact that they behaved in the way they actually behaved because of their dominant position in the system.

**Culture**

What was of a real importance in this case were values and identity, about which Waltz has nothing to say. It makes little sense to try to understand how states behave without knowing first who (or what) they are. Such an inquiry would touch a lot more on the substance of a state than the realist vision of a state as a “black box” holding a particular quantity of power. Realism with Walz, as a neo-realist in the forefront, focuses on what states (are forced to) do. Constructivist and post-structuralist approaches reflected in Wendt and Campbell writings focus instead on who we are. We thus face not competing theories, but radically opposed ideas of what it is important to explain. For both Wendt and Campbell the question of identity is absolutely essential to any international analysis. In Waltz’s account identity is shaped by structure of anarchy. There is no space for functional differentiation, as states are shaped and shoved in the same way by structure. Internal attributes of states are given. Changes in actor behavior, and system outcome, are explained not on the basis of variations in states’ characteristic, but on the basis of changes in the attributes of the system itself. For Wendt, identity of states is shaped by cultural selection through imitation and social learning (cognitive dimension). For Waltz, states either reproduce themselves or fade away in what can be called natural selection (mechanical dimension). In Wendt’s account states imitate those who succeed in acquiring power or wealth, or those who succeed in acquiring prestige—a passive process from the point of view of states which follow the model. From his perspective, states also learn through interaction with other states, making themselves through interaction with others—an active process for states participating in the interaction. In Waltz’s perspective, there is no space for socialization, process is a unit level and units are given. They are the same. For Wendt, this is also true, but he reveals some system-wide processes that can cause the structural change. For Wendt, the change of structure is the change of culture, which has many forms (Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian). The change in structure and culture, respectively, changes the identity of the unit through, what he calls master variables (interdependence, common fate, homogeneity and self-restraint). So, he can explain the change of identity of the units. Why, for example, it has come about that the France is no longer the House of Bourbon, but the house of French, and how it happened.

**Identity**

Campbell, drawing upon the constructivist approach, went one step further, in grasping the way how culture is fixed and contingent (constructed). As far as the identity of the United States is concerned, Campbell proposed an argument that the identity of the United States is formed and shaped by their foreign policy. Identity is product of the foreign policy of a particular state, as well as the source of its foreign policy. In other words, foreign policy is the production and reproduction of identity in whose name it operates. In the case of the foreign policy the United States, which is in the centre of Campbell’s investigation, he argues that the identity of the United States was not based on the ethnicity, or historical experience,
which were crucial for the creation of the identity of most European states, but on the clash with enemies. As Campbell argues, the identity of the United States was created around the fear from others. The foreign policy of the United States has redefined American values, interests and identity through the interaction with outside world, finding and defining what the United States stand for. What Campbell demonstrated is that the foreign policy of the United States was not simply generated by identity in the sense of the traditional view, which consider foreign policy an one-way through process (inside out), but that the identity in the case of the United States was, and still is, generated by the conduct of the foreign policy and vice versa.

… and the United States

What then is the relevance of Campbell’s argument for the purpose of this inquiry? In line with Campbell’s line of reasoning, the United States need an enemy to be able to know who they are. Without an enemy the United States do not know who they are. In such a case, they are not sure about their own identity. During the Cold War the enemy was clear—the Soviet Union—and the identity and foreign policy of the United States were shaped accordingly, as Campbell demonstrated. However, after the fall of the Berlin wall and the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the enemy was not clear at all. There was no clear identity maker and shaper in this respect. But the terrorists’ attacks of September 11 changed this situation substantially. Although the civilian deaths as a result of these attacks were marginal in comparison to how many Americans are killed every year in car accidents or die as a consequence of drug addiction, the response of the United States was overwhelming, if not disproportionate. And, the reason for that? Following the logic of Campbell’s argument, the era of an uncertain enemy, and the time of uncertain identity of the United States is over. The new enemy became clear: international terrorism; and the United States behave accordingly. The US response to the terrorist attacks in fighting terrorists and their protectors in Afghanistan and all around the world, the new national strategy of the United States, articulating a comprehensive policy against the new enemy, the change of US posture to outside world from defensive to offensive (preemptive action), to note just the most significant examples, illustrate the importance of enemy for the identity formation of the United States and their foreign policy practice.

Beyond Iraq

Why then as a target of the US action was selected Iraq, and not Iran or North Korea, other enemies of the United States, for instance? This is another question, a question of historical contingency that can be answered by an analysis of US-Iraq relations, and their relevance to the war against terrorism, the United States are now waging.

Clearly, however, Waltz’s account can explain very little about war between the United States and Iraq. Anarchy is certainly an important part of the story, but values and identity are central to the conflict while the distribution of capabilities is an extraordinarily peripheral element. The main explanation for the current conflict lies in the way the identity of the United States has been shaped by facing enemies of the past and those of the present, by the interplay of the foreign policy conduct and identity formation. If Campbell is right, the United States need an enemy to be able to define themselves, to be able to know who they are. They need to face clear and present danger embodied in an enemy to be able to know upon which their “we” is based and where it comes from, and they can know this only through the clash with others. That the target of their action was Iraq, and not Iran or North Korea, is a different story.


References

1. For news coverage on nuclear issues with regard to Iran and North Korea see e.g. the special reports on BBS News, North Korea: Secretive State and Inside Iran (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/asia_pacific/2006/north_korea/default.stm; and http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/middle_east/2006/inside_iran/default.stm [last accessed October 2006]).


5. See ibid., pp. 80-82, 102-107.


11. Both realism and neorealism treat states as unitary actors, seeking to maximize power. Both approaches consider states’ internal affairs of a minor, if not of any, importance for the explanation of states’ behavior in the international arena, which is the main focus of the study. See most prominently Hans Morgenthau, Politics among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace (7th. ed.; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) and Waltz, Theory of International Politics.


13. See ibid., pp. 80, 87-93, 97-101, 107-111.


15. See Waltz, Theory of International Politics, pp. 76-77.

16. See Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, pp. 326-335.

17. See ibid.


19. See Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, pp. 246-312.
20. See ibid., pp. 343-369.
22. See ibid., pp. 35-72.
23. See ibid., pp. 91-132.
24. See ibid.
26. See ibid.
29. See e.g. Victor Davis Hanson, Between War and Peace: Lessons from Afghanistan to Iraq (New York: Random House, 2004); Hall Gardiner, American Global Strategy and the "War on Terrorism" (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005); Fawaz A. Gerges, The far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Alan O’Day, War on Terrorism (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004); and Harry Henderson, Terrorist Challenge to America (New York: Facts on File, 2003).
When Saddam refused to leave Iraq, U.S. and allied forces launched an attack on the morning of March 20; it began when U.S. aircraft dropped several precision-guided bombs on a bunker complex in which the Iraqi president was believed to be meeting with senior staff. This was followed by a series of air strikes directed against government and military installations, and within days U.S. forces had invaded Iraq from Kuwait in the south (U.S. Special Forces had previously been deployed to Kurdish-controlled areas in the north). To authorize the use of United States Armed Forces pursuant to United Nations Security Council Resolution 678. In GovTrack.us, a database of bills in the U.S. Congress. GovTrack.us. (2020). H.J.Res. 77 Æ” 102nd Congress: Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution. Retrieved from https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/102/hjres77. ÆœH.J.Res. 77 Æ” 102nd Congress: Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution, Pub. L. No. 102-1, H.R.J. Res. 77, 102nd Cong. (1991). America had never suffered such an attack on its own soil before. It had a devastating impact on the population. They regarded themselves as at war. The Taliban, who had given sanctuary to AQ, had been removed from power in Afghanistan in November 2001. But the 2002 Bali bombing, in which over 200 victims, mainly Australians, lost their lives, showed the continuing threat. Whilst they accept that it was my prerogative as PM to decide to be with the USA in military action, the Inquiry questions whether this was really necessary. 9/11 was an event like no other in US history. I considered it an attack on all the free world. I believed that Britain Æ” as AmericaÆ™s strongest ally Æ” should be with them in tackling this new and unprecedented security challenge.