

Pick one of the three theories outlined in “One World, Rival Theories” in order to answer the following question. Was the United States justified in its invasion of Iraq? Give counter-arguments based on one of the other theories.

The decision by the United States government to invade the sovereign country of Iraq represents one of the most controversial moves by the government of a liberal democracy in the 21st century. In the modern era of the twenty-four hour news cycle, it is easy to frame the debate over such issues through thirty second sound. However, in the study of political science, theories such as realism, liberalism, and idealism have been developed for use as a lens through which to analyze the actions and motivations of state leaders. The purpose of this essay is to identify the realist arguments in favor of using American force in Iraq as well as the counter arguments developed from the liberalist point of view.

In his article, “One World, Rival Theories,” Jack Snyder portrays realism, liberalism, and idealism as theories that “shape both public discourse and policy analysis [1].” He defines the core beliefs of realism as the relations between “self-interested states compet[ing] for power and security,” and those of liberalism as stating that the “spread of democracy, global ties, and international organizations will strengthen peace.” Under realism, the main instruments of international relations are wielded by states and comprised of military power and state diplomacy. Within the realm of liberalism, states come together in international institutions and global commerce in order to advance towards a common good.

In the case of Iraq, the United States had several reasons to sense a threat to its national security. The first was the perceived ability of Saddam Hussein to produce chemical, biological, and/or nuclear weapons of mass destruction (WMD). At a juncture in history where Al-Qaeda, a non-state actor, had recently executed the most deadly attack on the American homeland in generations, the ability of a state such as Iraq to supply terrorists with weapons they could use to engage the United States in asymmetric warfare stood as a significant threat. Also, after initiating two wars in the Middle East, a region whose oil reserves represent a strategic resource to the United States, Saddam Hussein remained a potential destabilizing threat.

The primary tenet of realism is that states are responsible for advancing their own security and interests through the use of military power and state diplomacy. Although Saddam Hussein had represented a potentially destabilizing threat to the Middle East’s oil supplies for decades, the combination of the September 11 attacks and perceived ability for Iraq to develop WMD left American realists in a position where they believed the United States faced a real and immediate threat. The realist’s toolbox consists primarily of state diplomacy and military power. After previously endorsing sanctions, the oil-for-food program, and engaging in limited air strikes, American realists believed their options for carrot and stick diplomacy were both exhausted and ineffectual. That left the option of exercising military power, which American realists favored and eventually saw employed.

The primary tenet of liberalism is the use of international institutions and global commerce to spread democracy, international cooperation, and economic ties. Their motivations are embodied by the concept that democracies do not fight one another. Therefore, the primary counter argument of a liberalist to the US invasion of Iraq would have been that international institutions, such as the United Nations, stood a better chance of identifying and enforcing a long term solution than immediate military action. Primarily, this argument is driven by the notion that strong international norms promote their own adherence. Therefore, they would argue, the United States is better serving its own security interests by using the United Nations to confront its threats, than by setting a precedent that could be used in the future by other countries in a manner inconsistent with American security objectives.

In conclusion, the use of political theories as a lens allows for the debate of actions by states in a logical framework that bypasses a large part of the emotion and political wrangling of media portrayal. By understanding the varying methods used to confront a perceived threat by both realists and liberalists, the debate shifts towards the optimal manner in which to implement the tools of both viewpoints in a balanced manner, instead of simply blind support or rejection of state policies.

[1] Jack Snyder, "One World, Rival Theories," *Foreign Policy*, November/December 2004, pp. 53-62.