

Book Reviews

War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars

By **Richard N. Haass**
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REVIEWED BY T.X. HAMMES

In his introduction to this new edition of *War of Necessity, War of Choice*, Richard Haass states that the “book’s core is a distinction with a difference. There are wars of necessity and wars of choice. Confusing the two runs the danger of ill-advised decisions to go to war.” He might have added “or to continue a war.”

The new edition comes at a time when Americans are considering the rationale behind continuing one war (Afghanistan) and perhaps initiating another (Iran). The public debate includes strong voices concerning the appropriate U.S. action in both countries. That makes this edition both timely and important.

In the Bush 41 administration, Haass was “special assistant to the president and senior director for Near East and South Asian affairs on the National Security Council.” He was responsible for North Africa, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and South Asia. He notes that at the beginning of the administration,

his focus was on Israel-Palestine, post-Soviet Afghanistan, and India-Pakistan, as well as responding to congressional investigations of previously approved Commodity Credit Corporation loans to Iraq. Otherwise, Iraq simply was not a priority. Key decisionmakers were even busier. Thus, like many crises, the potential Iraqi invasion of Kuwait did not get the full attention of these decisionmakers until very late. Even when the administration’s focus turned to the crisis, it failed to understand that Saddam Hussein was serious about invading Kuwait and thus missed the opportunity to prevent the invasion.

As a close inside observer of the decision-making process that led to Operation *Desert Storm*, Haass argues that it was a war of necessity. He writes:

The United States had vital national interests at stake. A Saddam who controlled Kuwait would dominate the oil-rich Middle East, given the value of Kuwait’s oil and the likelihood that other Arab states would fear standing up to him lest they suffer Kuwait’s fate. It would only be a short while before he gained nuclear weapons. Israel’s security would be badly compromised. At the same time, there is little in the history of sanctions that suggested that they alone would provide enough leverage. . . . This was a war of necessity if ever there was one. The stakes were enormous, and we had tried and exhausted the alternative to employing military force.

Interestingly, Haass weakens his own argument that *Desert Storm* was a war of choice. He states, “A different president and set of advisors

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might have tolerated Iraqi control of Kuwait and limited the U.S. response to sanctions so long as Saddam did not attack Saudi Arabia.” In short, another administration might not have seen this as a war of necessity.

After leaving during the Clinton administration, Haass returned to Government service with the Bush 43 administration as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State. While admittedly more distant from the decisionmaking process, he argues that Operation *Iraqi Freedom* was a war of choice rather than a war of necessity. Haass believes that “wars of choice tend to involve stakes or interests that are less clearly ‘vital,’ along with the existence of viable alternative policies.”

While Haass provides interesting views of the decisionmaking process as seen from his post at State, he is not totally convincing in calling the 2003 invasion of Iraq a war of choice. In fact, the Bush 43 administration used some of the same reasons that Haass lists above for Bush 41 to justify action against Iraq, such as the fear of Iraqi nuclear weapons and the weakness of sanctions as a deterrent.

Later, he concedes that “not once in all my meetings in my years in government did an intelligence analyst or anyone else for that matter argue openly or take me aside and say privately that Iraq possessed nothing in the way of weapons of mass destruction.” This statement weakens his argument that the invasion of Iraq was a war of choice since the key justification for the war was the “fact” that Iraq was working to obtain nuclear weapons.

Haass’s narrative and honest opinions indicate that, except in the case of responding to an attack, the difference between necessity and choice is primarily one of judgment. While not the intention of the book, his statement that different people using essentially the same

facts will arrive at different conclusions about the necessity of an action does seem to point to judgment rather than to indisputable facts as the determining factor. This should not be surprising. The problems that lead to war are inherently “wicked problems,” and, by definition, experts will strongly disagree about both the definition of the problem and its potential solutions.

While the title of the book focuses the reader on determining whether a war is necessary, the author provides thought-provoking observations on two other topics. First, he notes the importance of proper process in developing a solid understanding of the potential conflict and in particular its costs and benefits. Second, he highlights the critical role assumptions play in the decision process and how failure to ensure a common understanding of those assumptions can lead to misunderstanding—and poor decisions.

His narratives highlight the wide difference between the approaches taken by Bush 41 and 43. He clearly describes the way Bush 41 used the formal National Security Council (NSC) process and included the key executive branch departments in a thorough, effective cost/benefit analysis of the decision to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. Just as important, the process ensured an effective analysis of the probable cost of continuing the war into Iraq. He makes the point that once Saddam was ejected from Iraq (his war of necessity), any decision to continue to Baghdad would represent a war of choice. Thus, *Desert Storm* achieved its goals at a reasonable strategic cost.

In contrast, in the run-up to invading Iraq, Bush 43 short-circuited the process and moved the bulk of the cost/benefit evaluation to a close circle of trusted advisors who were predisposed to invade Iraq and highly optimistic about the outcome. Thus, Bush was never

confronted with the potential costs of his decision. Compounding the problems created by the poor decision, Haass notes, “The lack of any meaningful interagency process or oversight of the aftermath made it all too easy for the Defense Department (which was essentially left by the NSC to oversee itself) to ignore advice from the outside” (p. 228) in its planning for the invasion of Iraq. The end result was a massively costly effort in Iraq for strategic results that are dubious at best.

Another issue Haass explores is the vital importance of clearly articulating the assumptions upon which a plan is based. He notes that the assumptions underpinning the first Gulf War were clearly stated and thoroughly vetted. In contrast, the 2003 assumptions were deeply flawed—in particular the ideas that all Iraqis would see U.S. forces as liberators and that the Iraqi government would continue to function and rapidly evolve into a democracy. The failure to use the process to develop and examine these assumptions led to massive failures in establishing security and reconstructing Iraq.

This caution has particular applicability as we begin to execute the new strategy in Afghanistan. Neither the Obama administration nor the commanders have ever publicly stated the assumptions upon which our population-centric approach is based. How can the American people evaluate whether they should continue to support the effort if they have no idea what assumptions underpin it? The Senate clearly failed to demand a serious discussion of assumptions prior to acquiescing to invading Iraq, and it has not questioned the assumptions underpinning our new approach in Afghanistan. If we lean toward military action against Iran’s nuclear weapons program, the Senate must demand that the administration state clearly the assumptions upon which they based their plans.

In summary, Haass’s book remains both useful and relevant. He focuses on the idea that a nation should know whether it is embarking on a war of necessity or of choice. However, he also highlights how devilishly difficult it is to determine to which category a conflict belongs. His narrative shows how honest people, even experts, can disagree based on their interpretations of the situation. However, Haass makes it clear that it is essential to effectively use the process to truly understand the nature of the problem and the potential costs/benefits of each course of action. Part of that examination must be a careful vetting of the assumptions behind the proposed actions. While the leaders may still decide to go to war, they will at least be aware of the range of potential costs as well as benefits.

A final caution may be appropriate. Wars of choice usually do not turn out well for those who start them. In the last couple of centuries, only the Germans under Bismarck and the Japanese against the Russians in 1905 seem to have achieved their aims when they chose to go to war—and the Japanese paid a high price. Looking at others who chose to go to war—the Germans twice in the 20th century, the Japanese against the United States, the North Koreans, the United States when it chose to enter Vietnam and Iraq, the Argentines in the Falklands, the Chinese against the Vietnamese, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the French attempt to reassert control over Vietnam and Algeria, and even the Israelis in 1967—indicates that those starting a war rarely achieved the results expected and usually suffered significant strategic losses. Perhaps the major point of Haass’s work is that wars of choice should be avoided. [PRISM](#)