

Rod Bruce
Project report
STS390, “Media, war and peace”
Spring session, 2004
Science, Technology & Society
University of Wollongong

Media, War and Peace Project Report

By Rod Bruce

rjb92@uow.edu.au

Synopsis

For this report I have sought to analyse some events of the recent war in Iraq using the backfire framework. Martin’s theory can initially help to prove that the war was made possible and at least partially legitimised, due to backfire on Saddam Hussein’s human rights abuses. The United States was able to frame its attack on Saddam’s regime as being part of a promotion of human rights. However, it will be demonstrated by using the case study of Guantanamo Bay that American claims of spreading human rights have been undermined. The American policy of housing enemy combatants at the US military prison in Cuba, coupled with the recent revelations to come out of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, have backfired badly as human rights violations committed in the interests of the US have been publicised. Australian participation in the war and the government’s reluctance to intervene on behalf of Australian citizens imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay will also be examined, with a view to analyse the impact on John Howard’s government. These case studies all demonstrate the validity of the backfire framework.

Backfire on Saddam Hussein's human rights record led to his downfall

Saddam Hussein became the President of Iraq on July 16, 1979. Shortly after, in order to consolidate his power, Saddam purged the Ba'ath party of top ranking officials and military officers. In April 1980, Saddam banned the leading Iraqi opposition the Da'wa Party and membership in its ranks became a crime punishable by death. In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran which began a war that lasted eight years and is estimated to have caused one million casualties. In the latter years of the war, Saddam repressed the Kurdish population of Iraq and many thousands disappeared or died. In March 1990, a British journalist was executed for spying and the West finally stood up to take notice of the brutality of Saddam's regime. In 1990, Saddam ordered the invasion of Kuwait and refused United Nations directives to leave that country, provoking the first Gulf War in 1991.¹ This war ensured that Saddam Hussein had the attention of the world, in particular the United States and its allies.

In the years following the Gulf War, Saddam continued to antagonise the West and test the will of the United Nations, in particular by flouting no-fly zones and by non-compliance with UN weapons inspectors. These events led to more bombings by US and UK warplanes and in 2002 the Americans refocus their efforts on ousting Saddam. Eventually the US and its 'coalition of the willing' started 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' which removed Saddam's regime from power. In late 2003, Saddam was captured and remains in custody of the US military.

As noted, Saddam committed various attacks during his reign on a great number of targets. Each attack committed by the Iraqi ruler or in his name also represented a fundamental attack on human rights. While the coalition's main rationale for going to war was to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, it will be demonstrated that that Saddam's cruelty backfired because his attacks on human rights were instrumental in his eventual overthrow and capture by the United States. In proving this point, the validity of the backfire framework can be examined.

A method of attack used by Saddam's regime was torture and execution of perceived political enemies by his state security apparatus. One article included in the appendix titled "I will never forget how Saddam's men came for my son"² is one primary source that effectively demonstrates the attacking role of torture and execution during Saddam's reign of terror in Iraq. One Iraqi mother describes the disappearance of her son Mustafa who was taken away by the security forces, never to return: "I was angry for my son ... but what could I do? This was the situation of all Iraqis. I know so many mothers who have suffered as much as I have or more. Two thirds of all young Iraqi people are underground - killed by the regime." Mustafa's brother Mohammed was himself a victim of Saddam's torturers and noted that the usual methods were "beatings, kickings and electrical shocks", and suggests that his brother "has been killed and thrown away for the dogs to eat." According to the article, this is an "everyday story of Iraqi people" and that at any house in Basra, "you will find similar tales, of sons and husbands missing, of murder and torture by a state desperate to stamp out any dissent, real or imagined." These constant attacks on the Iraqi citizenry backfired, as it is a fair statement to suggest that the shocking human rights situation

¹ Biography of Saddam available: <http://www.iraqfoundation.org/research/bio.html>

² Telegraph [UK] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2003/04/13/wirq113.xml>

in Iraq helped in part to legitimise any attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

In September 2002, President Bush moved to promote backfire on a global scale by addressing the United Nations General Assembly³ and *exposed the attacks*. (Relevant article included in appendix). President Bush noted that “the U.N. Commission on Human Rights found that Iraq continues to commit extremely grave violations of human rights, and that the regime's repression is all pervasive.” He continued, “tens of thousands [have suffered] arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, summary execution, and torture by beating and burning, electric shock, starvation, mutilation, and rape.” Bush noted that Saddam inhibits backfire by *covering up the attacks* which are “concealed from the world by the apparatus of a totalitarian state.”

While Bush continued to promote backfire by *blaming* Saddam, the Iraqi leader could not inhibit this charge until after his arrest, when he reportedly *devalued the target* of his attacks. According to The Guardian, “Saddam has dismissed his victims as 'criminals' and 'thugs' who deserved what they got. He claims he was a 'fair and just' ruler.”⁴ (Article included).

One of President Bush’s aims in promoting backfire was to *encourage intuitive interpretation* of Saddam: no doubt the inclusion of graphic description of torture were intended to portray the Iraqi leader as a psychotic madman who was a danger to his own people and therefore the rest of the world. In response to the criticism on human rights, Saddam attempted to inhibit backfire when he forced the world to *reinterpret events* as he freed all prisoners within Iraq. A CNN correspondent noted that this event “really does diffuse one of the strongest criticisms over the past decades of Iraq's human rights records, that it does jail political prisoners and that nobody knows what happens to them.”⁵ TIME Magazine suggested that Saddam’s “mass amnesty for Iraqi prisoners suggest he may be planning to further muddy the waters with more gestures of magnanimity toward his own people and the wider Arab world.”⁶

President Bush continued to promote backfire on Saddam Hussein in 2003 as he *mobilised public concern* in his State of the Union address. Bush referred to Saddam as a “dictator who is assembling the world's most dangerous weapons [and] has already used them on whole villages -- leaving thousands of his own citizens dead, blind, or disfigured.” The President once again catalogued some despicable methods of torture that have been allegedly used in Iraq: “electric shock, burning with hot irons, dripping acid on the skin, mutilation with electric drills, cutting out tongues, and rape.” He continued, “If this is not evil, then evil has no meaning.” The listener has little choice but to be concerned for the plight of Saddam’s victims. According to Martin’s framework, Saddam could have *used official channels* in order to “give the appearance that justice is being done” and therefore reduce backfire. However, this was almost impossible as the dictator’s atrocities were so widespread and well documented by various international bodies such as the UN and Amnesty

³ US Dept of State: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html>

⁴ The Observer [UK]: <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1111165,00.html>

⁵ CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0210/20/sm.06.html>

⁶ Time Magazine: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,389696,00.html>

International that any internal investigation or prosecution of perpetrators would have severely lacked credibility and legitimacy.

One way Saddam Hussein attempted to inhibit backfire from his vile attacks on human rights is by *intimidation and bribery*. During Saddam's reign, there was no freedom of the press within Iraq. Any criticism of government policy by journalists or citizens would almost certainly result in severe reprisals. The discomfort experienced by Iraqi journalists is characterised by *Reporters sans frontiers* in the following quote by Saad Al-Bazzaz, a man who held high-ranking positions in the media until 1992: "[it was] extremely difficult to be a journalist. Like the majority of my colleagues, I suffered enormously. We would pretend to be sick so that we would not have to write, or so that we could leave to get medical treatment abroad."⁷ Al-Bazzaz mentioned several of his colleagues who had to endure imprisonment or torture in the 1990s for being directly or indirectly critical of the regime. This a very credible source as the witness has intimate knowledge of the situation.

Prior to the war, the US State Department moved to promote backfire by *exposing intimidation and bribery*:

In September 1999, Hashem Hasan, a noted journalist [and someone mentioned by Saad Al-Bazzaz], was arrested after he declined an appointment as editor of one of Uday Hussein's government-controlled publications. His fate is unknown. Press freedom is nonexistent because the government controls the media... Professors and journalists who are allowed to leave the country are interrogated upon their return to ensure that they are still "loyal" to the Iraqi government.⁸

The United States used the backfire process more effectively than Saddam Hussein's regime. This helped to legitimise the invasion of Iraq. In a poll I took of 20 people, all believed that Saddam's lack of respect for human rights were of concern to the international community, even if only 7 believed regime change was a reasonable excuse for the US to invade Iraq. In a TIME/CNN poll of 1,000 adult Americans taken on February 5 and 6, 2004, 53% believed the war in Iraq will have been worthwhile even if weapons of mass destruction are never found.⁹ The Bush administration knows that some semblance of support for the war remains due to humanitarian grounds and continues to hammer that point home even after Saddam has been deposed. The issue of Saddam's backfire due to human rights abuses was also noted by various authors before the original Gulf War in 1991. "Those who supported the war described Saddam Hussein as the new Hitler: They emphasised the parallels between Saddam's gassing of the Kurts and Hitler's gassing of the Jews, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia and Poland, and Saddam's and Hitler's build up of armaments."¹⁰

It is difficult to imagine the United States invading a democratic country on the single charge of possessing weapons of mass destruction. Promoting backfire on Saddam's human rights abuses worked against the Iraqi dictator as it cast him in an unfavourable light: as a threat to the international community who needed to be

⁷ The Iraqi Media: 25 years of relentless repression
http://www.rsfs.org/article.php3?id_article=5008

⁸ Iraq: A population silenced <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/15996.htm>

⁹ "When credibility becomes an issue" TIME Magazine, February 16. Page 23

¹⁰ Various examples cited by Pratkanis and Aronson in *Age of propaganda*, 2001

overthrown. Ironically, the Bush administration itself is now facing backfire for presiding over human rights abuses during its so-called “war on terror”.

Backfire to Guantanamo Bay policy undermining American credibility on human rights

It was written in 1970: "Human rights are already very largely respected in the United States, and remaining shortcomings are under attack. To promote human rights internationally is thus to promote the extension to other countries of principles to which the United States is already committed."¹¹ Many commentators would argue that American promotion of human rights internationally helped to bring about the downfall of totalitarian communism as a viable alternative to Western liberal democracy. Over a decade later, it has been demonstrated that the US took what could be described as the moral high ground in regards to human rights against Saddam Hussein. This would suggest that American conduct in the area of human rights should be near impeccable. However, it has become apparent in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, that upholding human rights at home and abroad poses a number of challenges for the US. Since the terrorist attacks, a number of notable incidents have backfired on the Bush administration and had the wider effect of undermining American claims of standing for human rights and democracy.

The longest running example involves the detainees held at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Hundreds of prisoners are being held without charge and without any legal rights. The US government justifies this by saying that the detainees are not POWs and goes one step further by saying they are not even entitled to be treated according to the Geneva conventions. This has caused an enormous amount of debate worldwide. While there are obvious benefits to the United States to treat these detainees in such a manner, there are also drawbacks. Nineteen of 20 people who I surveyed believed that the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo has backfired in a manner that casts doubts on American commitments to universal human rights. This is despite the fact that only 6 of 20 surveyed feel sympathy for those held at Guantanamo Bay.

The Bush administration has moved to inhibit backfire in a number of ways. They have attempted to *cover up* what is occurring in Guantanamo Bay by making it difficult for the media to report at the location. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press published an account of Miami Herald reporter Carol Rosenberg who visited Guantanamo Bay: "Now, there's a virtual absolute control over who we talk to and how, and a deep degree of distrust of allowing reporters to talk to people doing their job."¹² (Article attached). The Bush administration have *devalued the target*:

The Bush Administration argued that the conventions weren't appropriate for many detainees because they were essentially criminals--that is, terrorists without countries or uniforms who do not "carry arms openly and respect the laws and customs of war," as the third convention states in defining who should be classified as a POW and therefore enjoy its protections.¹³

This also represents an attempt to *reinterpret events*, as does the claim by the Bush administration for the necessity to hold the detainees in limbo: that they are the side of good protecting the American people from dangerous criminals. Defence Secretary

¹¹ Van Dyke, V. *Human Rights, the United States and World Community* 1970. Page 5

¹² <http://www.rcfp.org/news/2002/0918gitmoj.html>

¹³ What's fair in war, CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/03/31/timep.rules.tm/>

Donald Rumsfeld says that “focusing on the way that the prisoners are being treated conveniently leaves out the fact that these people are killers. They are the hardest of the hardcore - and they are extremely dangerous.”¹⁴ The *use of official channels* is another attempt to inhibit backfire, as military tribunals have been set up to determine the guilt or innocence of certain detainees sometime in the future. Furthermore, after questions were raised about abuse of detainees, two US soldiers were punished by the military after assaulting Guantanamo inmates¹⁵. *Intimidation and bribery* have been used to some extent: for example Terry Hicks, father of Australian detainee David Hicks, claimed that their first phone conversation was monitored and certain topics were off limits unless they wished for the phone call to be terminated.¹⁶

Other parties sought to promote backfire on the Bush administration in regards to the validity of the Guantanamo Bay detention centre. Greens Senator Bob Brown interrupted President Bush’s address to the Australian parliament to heckle him on the issue.¹⁷ This brought worldwide attention. The media in particular also moved to *expose* what was happening. British newspaper The Mirror published a series of articles on Guantanamo Bay which blamed the Bush administration, and encouraged intuitive interpretation by quoting Amnesty International as saying “the more cells Mr Bush adds to Guantanamo Bay the more the US reputation as a defender of international justice will suffer.”¹⁸ The Mirror in the UK and similar news reports in other countries intended to *mobilise public concern* about the plight of the detainees and on the credibility of the US as a defender of human rights. Terry Hicks also sought to mobilise public concern when he shut himself in a wire cage in New York City to highlight his son’s plight.¹⁹ (Article attached). Terry Hicks stated “I wouldn’t even keep a dog like this.” Media outlets such as the Mirror also strive to *expose intimidation and bribery*.

The Bush administration has sufficiently inhibited backfire within America to ensure that public opinion supports them on the issue: one ABC News poll suggested that 65% of Americans support the government in holding terrorism suspects without trial at Guantanamo Bay.²⁰ However, the US does not have similar support internationally. The recent events at Abu Ghraib prison, where Iraqi detainees were abused and photographed by members of the US military, further outraged the world and amplified the backfire from Guantanamo Bay. American foreign policy has been severely undermined as the Bush administration’s claims to be liberators spreading the causes of democracy and human rights worldwide look increasingly dubious. This fact that has come about as the result of American actions demonstrates the validity of the backfire framework.

¹⁴ Rumsfeld confident US will defeat terrorism

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1762971.stm>

¹⁵ Two Guantanamo Guards Punished for prisoner abuse

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/national/20040506-114301-9677r.htm>

¹⁶ <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/dec2003/hick-d30.shtml>

¹⁷ Bush hecklers ordered out

<http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/10/23/apec.special.bush.heckle/>

¹⁸ The Land of the free?

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/allnews/page.cfm?objectid=12071893&method=full&siteid=50143>

¹⁹ Hicks’ dad cages himself in New York as protest

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/07/29/1059244589271.html>

²⁰ http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/World/sept11_terrorwar_poll030910.html

Possible backfire on Australia: involvement in US war on terror

The Howard government's strong support of the Bush administration's prosecution of the war in Iraq has been a matter of controversy. Senior Cabinet Minister Tony Abbott conceded that the majority will of the Australian public was unfavourable to the war: "Confronted with the prospects of war, the natural reaction of a pacific people is to say no, it's not our job, it's the wrong place, it's the wrong issue, it's the wrong time."²¹ Tens of thousands protested against Australian involvement in Iraq. However, the government eventually deployed troops to the war, a decision which polls suggest was against the wishes of the Australian public. The Coalition government is attempting to inhibit backfire, which in turn the Opposition and minor parties are trying to promote. Each side is trying to demonstrate to the Australian public that they have a more coherent strategy in Iraq and are more capable in fighting the "war on terror". I wrote to a number of federal politicians for their opinion in order to gauge the impact that backfire will have in the leadup to the federal election.

Not surprisingly, Federal Opposition Leader Mark Latham was too busy to respond to specific questions but did take the time to email me a copy of a speech he delivered recently which addressed almost all of the questions I had asked him.²² Latham clearly believes that Australian involvement in the war in Iraq cannot be justified on humanitarian grounds and launched a scathing attack: "One of Labor's first tasks will be to extract Australia from the Howard Government's failed policies in Iraq. This has been one of the great debacles of Australian foreign policy - a war conducted for a purpose that was not true." This is clearly an attempt to promote backfire on John Howard's government.

In regards to Guantanamo Bay, Latham spelt out on radio that his main concern is for the Australian detainees, who he believes should be brought home to face charges under new laws which should be applied retrospectively.²³ Latham stated "We shouldn't be giving away our legal sovereignty to other countries." Attorney General Phillip Ruddock has stated that laws will not, and cannot be applied retrospectively, and that there are no laws currently in place that would stop the Australian terrorist suspects from being released into the community. Latham used this point to promote backfire: "Well it's a stunning admission by the Federal Government that we haven't got adequate anti-terrorism laws in Australia. It's a stunning admission to say that after eight years in government we haven't got anti-terrorism laws that are adequate." Latham also highlights the inability of the Australian government to secure the release of its citizens as a weakness associated with only being a "deputy sherriff", a term he spoke scornfully of in the speech that he forwarded to me. These are clearly actions in order to promote backfire on the Howard government and to portray Labor as more capable of leading Australian foreign policy.

Latham also recently suggested that photographs of American soldiers humiliating and abusing Iraqi prisoners undermined the Government's argument for going to war and told Labor MPs to use the coming sitting weeks to raise the issue. A Caucus spokeswoman quoted Latham as having told the party room, "the argument about liberating the Iraqi people has been damaged by the shocking footage and

²¹ ABC Radio - PM: <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/s777287.htm>

²² Labor and the world: Lowy institute. Wednesday 7 April 2004.

²³ ABC Radio - World Today: <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2004/s1049746.htm>

photographs of the treatment of Iraqi prisoners...It is our responsibility to be urging the Government to be more proactive on these human-rights issues.”²⁴ This suggests that Latham does not trust our American allies to uphold human rights and that these events have impacted negatively on Australian promotion of human rights internationally.

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