Al Gore's War, Part II:
Was Gore motivated enough to invade Iraq?

KELLY McPARLAND

From Sunday's National Post
December 28, 2008

Frank Harvey's study on the Iraq war, which investigates whether Al Gore would have been likely to follow a similar path had he been elected in 2001 in place of George Bush, has drawn considerable interest and much debate. Following is an edited transcript in which Mr. Harvey responds to several questions about the study.

Q: Would Al Gore have been motivated to invade in a similar way as Bush was?

A: I'll make four quick points here before moving on to other questions. First, I am convinced Gore would have been motivated to make very similar decisions for all of the personal (idiosyncratic), organizational, political, societal and international reasons I've outlined in the paper. In fact the entire argument is about why Gore, like Bush, would have been motivated to behave similarly enough to take us down the same path to war. Keep in mind, my argument is NOT that Gore's behavior would have been identical – I don't have to defend that argument (or meet that standard) to take Gore down the same path to war. To push the 'path' analogy a little further -- Gore's pace, stride and movements would no doubt have been different but not his general direction or destination. In my opinion, the differences would have been trivial and largely inconsequential in competition with the pressures to make the same big decisions that produced the momentum to war. Differences are not always path changing and often represent descriptive details that do not have a substantive (theoretically relevant) effect on the foreign policies in question. Once again, in order to establish the relevance of these differences one would have to pay the same careful attention to historical detail as I have -- that case has not yet been made.

Second, with respect to ideological motivations, Gore and his advisers were as hawkish as Bush's. Recall his many foreign policy speeches from the 2000 campaign (and his unwavering defence of American foreign policy when he was in power). Gore offers a considerably MORE enthusiastic endorsement of what he referred to at the time as "assertive multilateralism" and "forward engagement" (i.e., the Democrats' terms for preventive diplomacy). In direct contrast, Bush and most other conservatives (and neo-cons, although no one referred to them in these terms until after the Iraq war) were very critical of Clinton/Gore efforts at nation building in Bosnia/Kosovo. In other words, Gore's foreign policy ideology (when combined with the other pressures I cover in the paper) would logically have motivated his administration to follow the same path to war, perhaps with even stronger pressures to go in earlier with a much larger invasion force (and likely with stronger European and Canadian support for a U.S. Democratic regime).

Third, motivations change over time as the costs and benefits of previous decisions become more obvious. Bush's and Blair's motivations to fight a war in 2002, for example, were not as strong as they were in March 2003. The same combination of pressures would have re-shaped Gore's motives and incentives over time -- these are not isolated and unchanging pressures. In fact, as I point out in the paper, Gore arguably would have been more motivated to address the mistake he and Clinton made when they decided to bomb Iraq in 1998 (based on mistaken WMD intelligence) -- a blunder that led to the four year absence of inspectors. Why wouldn't Gore have been highly politically motivated to correct that mistake in the aftermath of 9/11?

Fourth, with respect to your interpretation of Gore's 'different' motives, wouldn't the same counterfactual questions apply to your version of history? What facts, speeches, behaviors, experiences, decisions, policies, statements, etc. from Gore's (or his advisers') past would we need to see to point us in a different direction with respect to motivations? What political costs/benefits would he have experienced if he was so motivated? Simply asserting the possibility of a different set of motivations derived from a different configuration of societal, political or international forces does not in any way establish the point -- it simply raises the same questions and poses the same evidentiary challenges. But this alternative counterfactual case (derived from a belief that Gore would have been motivated by a different set of factors than those that compelled Bush) has to be carefully constructed in light of (not in spite of) the arguments and evidence I present in the paper. Keep in mind, my objective was not simply to defend the Gore-war counterfactual, but to refute the Gore-peace alternative by pointing to the absence of evidence in its favour -- including the absence of evidence that Gore would have been motivated by a different combination of powerful political, societal or international factors. That case has not been made.

My point is very simple, -- when we combine 9/11 with the powerful effects of entrenched institutional and bureaucratic infrastructures that surround the President of the United States (e.g., intelligence organizations), the domestic political and societal pressures Presidents are forced to consider when contemplating big decisions (pre- and post-9/11 consensus on Saddam's WMD was virtually unanimous), and the complex array of international factors Presidents (and British and Australian Prime Ministers) are compelled to confront, these forces create and shape the conditions AND motivations under which American leaders process information and ultimately act. With respect to the decision to go to war in Iraq, these forces would have compelled Gore to make many of the same interim (generally praised) decisions for many of the same reasons. Momentum would have done the rest. I am still waiting to see a carefully constructed, historically informed case study that supports the alternative (Gore-peace) counterfactual. Until someone comes up with that story the only reasonable conclusion is mine -- the most commonly accepted understanding of the Iraq war is just wrong. The really interesting question, which I will address at length in the book manuscript, is why the wrong version of the "truth" remains so popular despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

Q: After Afghanistan, there was considerable public questioning of the need to take similar action against Iraq. Bush succeeded in winning the public argument, but would Gore have made the same effort?

A: Yes, for two reasons. First, Gore (and all of those who would have advised him) shared the view that the dangers posed by the Iraqi regime were related to terrorism and WMD proliferation -- these generally held perceptions (promoted by a CIA director Clinton/Gore appointed) would have framed Gore's post-9/11 operational code, especially after relatively quick and successful operation in Afghanistan.

Second, I believe Gore would have been motivated to make the same big interim decisions for the same reasons -- these choices promised a much better return in post-9/11 public opinion (please refer to the polling results), stronger political capital in Congress, and a more impressive post-9/11 record on security. All of these were essential to political gains in the first post-9/11 election in 2004. Remember, the Republicans did VERY well in the 2004 election despite being wrong about WMD. There is no reason to believe Gore would have been incapable of making the same strategic calculations – consider the praise Bush received for his Iraq strategy from Richard Holbrooke, a very likely candidate for Gore's Secretary of State (quoted in the paper).

Q: Even given his hawkish stance and the public statements of many of his advisers, you could make a strong argument that the Democratic team lacked the fire to confront Saddam that the Republicans had. So Gore might have come under pressure, but not in the wat Bush did from Rumsfeld, Cheney etc.

A: Rumsfeld and Cheney actually LOST many of the key arguments and decisions throughout 2002-2003. It was liberals like Tony Blair and Colin Powell who were considerably more influential with respect to the course of action (i.e., the interim, momentum building decisions) Bush ultimately selected. As both Blair and Powell point out in their respective memoirs, Cheney and Rumsfeld lost their battle to ignore and bypass the UN and were forced to accept the Blair-Powell recommendation to get Congress to pass the war resolution from Congress, deploy the troops to the region to establish a credible threat of force, and obtain UNSC 1441. These were NOT neo-con preferences, they were liberal and Democratic preference, which is precisely why they were praised by almost every senior Democrat at the time. There is no compelling reason (or evidence) to believe Gore would have been motivated (politically or otherwise) to select a different path. The problem, as I explain in the paper, is that once these uniformly praised decisions are taken, momentum does the rest.

I think it's very important for critics to understand that the invasion was the 'final' stage of a very complex process involving many previous crises (1998 bombing of Iraq by Clinton/Gore), multiple UN resolutions, and several world leaders, organizations, institutions and states. As I point out in the concluding section of the paper, the 'final' decision to invade Iraq unfolded through time and stages and constituted the end product of several previous decisions and choices -- choices most senior American leaders at the time (including all senior Democrats) regarded as perfectly rational, reasonable and appropriate (the foreign policy equivalent of a 'no-brainer'). These earlier rational and very popular decisions (i.e., return of inspectors, mobilization of troops, UNSC 1441) created the US-UK-Australia momentum to war (with Canadian military support as well). Despite efforts by critics to describe this as a single decision by an individual (Bush), the final decision was supported by MOST of 'new' and 'old' Europe (France, Germany and Belgium were the exceptions) and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt and Jordan (the subject of my other book, Smoke and Mirrors, 2004).