

Leffler, Melvyn P. *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Vii +368 pages. Hardcover, \$27.95.

On the twentieth anniversary of the United States' invasion of Iraq, preeminent diplomatic historian Melvyn P. Leffler offers a compelling account of the Bush administration's decision to wage war against Saddam Hussein's regime and, ultimately, to unseat the Iraqi dictator. Contrary to the widely held view that President Bush was somehow coaxed or coerced into the conflict by members of his inner circle of neoconservatives—most notoriously Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld—Leffler contends that the President himself was the ultimate driver of the War on Terror. Leffler's account strongly opposes the caricature of an inattentive, dimwitted, and easily manipulated 'W.,' now so often parodied by the news media and in popular culture. In contrast, Leffler repeatedly describes Bush as "focused," "determined," and "self-confident" after 9/11. "None of his advisors," Leffler writes, "doubted that George Bush was in command" (p. 242).

Leffler's narrative is personality-driven. This is evidenced by the fact that he begins his account with what can only be described as two 'miniature biographies' of two very different men: President George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein. These and the succeeding chapters offer several telling revelations that help contextualize the 2003 invasion. First, Leffler debunks the assertion that Bush arrived in office in 2001, having already decided to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam. He describes the president as largely disinterested in foreign policy and far more concerned with his domestic vision of compassionate conservatism. Leffler further demonstrates convincingly that, even after 9/11, Bush struggled with the prospect of regime change in Iraq. Second, Leffler condemns any notion that the invasion of Iraq took place on ideological grounds or for the promotion of democracy. The President was humiliated by his administration's inability to protect the American people on September 11, and he became

obsessed with the prospect of a second catastrophic attack on the United States that would destroy America's credibility, as well as his own. It is Leffler's conclusion that the administration based its decision to invade on the grounds of cold, hard realpolitik—or what Leffler calls “coercive diplomacy.” Blinded by the fog of war and paralyzed by the fear of national vulnerability, “Bush took charge” (p. 243), and in a world full of threats, Saddam Hussein stood as “the exemplar of the forces of evil in the world” (p. 119). In the final assessment, Leffler concludes, “Bush failed to achieve his goals at an acceptable cost” (p. 248). His administration's efforts were marred by dysfunction, faulty information, hubris, and imprecision that had disastrous consequences both for Iraq and the global perception of the United States that persist to this day.

Confronting Saddam is an excellent and timely retrospective of one of the most consequential events of the young twenty-first century. Through exhaustive research and countless interviews with high-level officials in the Bush administration, Leffler brings much-needed clarity to the War on Terror and our understanding of how it emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. True to form, Leffler further places the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the larger context of American foreign policy, writing: “However tempting it is to level criticism at President Bush and his advisers—and we most definitely should—we need to recognize, collectively, that the exercise of prudence and the judicious use of power have not, historically, been among our finest qualities as Americans. We must improve” (p. xviii). This type of valuable analysis has long characterized Leffler's academic contributions. It continues to make his work mandatory reading for students and scholars interested in American foreign relations.

Undoubtedly, some readers will decry Leffler's assessment as too generous to the president. Now twenty years removed from the events in question, most scholars and pundits still

depict George W. Bush as one of the great villains of American history. Leffler offers a more even-handed interpretation of the forty-third president as a well-intentioned leader, hell-bent on protecting American lives, who “allowed fear to overcome prudence” (p. 256).

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