

# LEADERS IN CONFLICT

BUSH AND RUMSFELD IN IRAQ

*Stephen Benedict Dyson*



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*To Mum and Dad*

# Contents

<i>List of tables</i>	ix
1. Leaders in conflict	1
2. Leaders and international politics	8
3. The emergence of the Bush doctrine	40
4. Rumsfeld and the invasion plan	57
5. The governance plan	68
6. Coalition Provisional Authority	80
7. Rumsfeld's exit strategy	94
8. Bush takes charge	105
9. Leadership and the Iraq war – Lessons learned	125
Appendix: Measuring the Bush and Rumsfeld worldviews using quantitative content analysis	132
<i>Index</i>	136

# List of tables

2.1	Number of references to advisors in Iraq policymaking books	33
3.1	Bush, Rumsfeld and the emergence of the Bush doctrine	41
4.1	Bush, Rumsfeld and the war plan	58
5.1	Bush, Rumsfeld and the governance plan	69
6.1	Coalition Provisional Authority	81
7.1	Rumsfeld's exit strategy	95
8.1	The surge	106
9.1	Bush and Iraq	128
9.2	Rumsfeld and Iraq	129
10.1	Trait scores for Rumsfeld and Bush	134

# 1

## Leaders in conflict

When George W. Bush fired Donald H. Rumsfeld in November 2006, he ended a conflict. Not the Iraq war, which would go on for several more years, but a war about the war, fought in the shadows and engaged largely through inaction, the fudging of differences, and misdirection rather than open hostilities. In Iraq, the president was prepared to pay a high cost in American lives, treasure, and prestige to win. The secretary of defence favoured turning the war over to the Iraqis, and was comfortable with the risk that Iraq would disintegrate into chaos. With Rumsfeld removed, the president brought US strategy into line with his goals, sending additional troops to Iraq and committing to continued US involvement. Bush abandoned Secretary Rumsfeld's withdrawal approach, predicated upon the beliefs that 'it's the Iraqis' country', and 'we have to take our hand off the bicycle seat'.

Bush and Rumsfeld thought about international politics, and about leadership, in divergent ways. The president embraced binary thinking, was visceral in his commitment to the war, and had a strong belief that the US both could and should shape events in Iraq. The secretary saw the world as complex, and was sceptical of the extent of US influence over events and of the moral imperative to stay involved. They did not, of course, have stand-up fights about policy: Bush disliked disagreement, Rumsfeld was a canny courtier, and any secretary of defence openly and repeatedly confronting a president would either resign or be dismissed.<sup>1</sup> Bush's leadership style was to delegate, to maintain personal comity, and to be unfailingly loyal to subordinates. Rumsfeld stressed complexity and contingency, disliking grand proclamations and stating strong views. Their conflict, then, was simmering and mostly unacknowledged until the situation in Iraq was almost beyond repair. That the conflict was largely subterranean made it all the more devastating. It would have been better, for the US and for Iraqis, had the president and the secretary of defence confronted their differences much sooner than they did.

### Iraq puzzles

Many paradoxes and puzzles surround US involvement in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Why did the president of the United States allow a persistent disjunction between his goals and the

strategy being followed by the forces under his command? Why talk of victory while the secretary of defence sought withdrawal? How could a policy of administering Iraq through a Coalition Provisional Authority be allowed to develop when it was the preference of neither the president nor the secretary of defence?

These questions are at the core of this book. I examine them as results of the clash of worldviews and decision-making styles of President Bush and Secretary Rumsfeld. I build the case that leaders matter in international politics and foreign policy decision making. Leaders differ in the way they see the world, the degree of control they believe they have over events, and their decision-making and management styles. These differences can be systematically measured and carefully traced in their impact upon policy processes and policy choices.

I seek to see the conflict through the eyes of the two principal decision makers in wartime: the president as Commander in Chief and the secretary of defence as what Eliot Cohen has termed the 'Deputy Commander in Chief'.<sup>3</sup> Leaders at this highest of levels fulfil two distinct functions. First, they are strategists who seek to understand the nature of the international system and the problems it generates. They develop and articulate a concept of their state, its interests, obligations, and challenges. Second, leaders at the top are administrators, charged with implementing a policy through the collection of information, effective interactions with associates and subordinates, and the management of complex organizations.

Leaders, then, develop an *external* worldview, and an *internal* management approach. Bush saw the world as one of absolutes, saw himself as a history maker, and preferred to set a general course and delegate implementation. He was averse to interpersonal conflict and saw the maintenance of optimism and morale inside his administration as a key function of leadership. Rumsfeld perceived the world as enormously complex, and saw himself, and the US, as managers rather than makers of history. He saw interpersonal conflict as productive and held in disdain those who shrank away from his probing, interrogatory style.<sup>4</sup>

My analysis begins with the different reactions of the president and the secretary of defence to the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 terrorist attacks. Bush had not thought about foreign policy in any great depth prior to this day. Reconstructing his response to the attacks allows us to track the interaction of Bush's temperament with these radically changed circumstances. Bush begins in the hours, days, weeks, and months following the attacks to outline a strategic response that was doctrinaire, ambitious, and moralizing. This set of policies became known as the Bush doctrine, and provided the rationale for the invasion of Iraq.

Rumsfeld responded differently to the attacks. He also, of course, experienced outrage – the secretary was a first responder tending to the wounded at the Pentagon. But his temperament quickly asserted itself. Whereas Bush reacted viscerally, Rumsfeld was analytical. His goal was to understand the dimensions of the new situation, and he did not want to make grand pronouncements before more was known. He disliked the notion of a war on terror, believing that it implied a vengeful and



solely military response rather than a precise and multifaceted reaction. The secretary did not find it prudent to issue sweeping statements about reshaping the world.

Rumsfeld preferred the practicalities of war planning to the vagaries of grand strategy. He began a process of cajoling, interrogating, persuading, and prodding General Tommy Franks, who would command the invasion of Iraq. The secretary's goal was to produce a war plan built from new assumptions concerning force size, speed, precision, and agility. He was fully immersed in the process, and his relationship with Franks evolved from a contentious beginning to a constructive partnership.

President Bush was not deeply involved in planning for the invasion, receiving regular briefings but not asking many questions. Reassured by Rumsfeld's confidence and Franks' military bearing, Bush did not concern himself with the details. This distant and deferential relationship toward his generals held until the surge decision of late 2006.

Neither Bush nor Rumsfeld planned effectively for the governance of post-war Iraq. Both experienced some dissonance between aspects of their worldview. Bush was emotionally wed to a democratization agenda that implied the transformation of Iraqi society. Yet he had not resolved the contradiction between this and his aversion to the nation-building he associated with the Clinton era. Moreover, the president's set-the-goals but delegate-the-details management style was apparent on this issue. Bush did not thoroughly investigate the practicalities of what was going to happen on the ground after the Saddam regime was dismantled.

Rumsfeld also experienced dissonance amongst his goals. He was averse to nation-building. As a philosophical conservative, he saw enough problems with government attempts to shape society in the US, let alone abroad. Yet Rumsfeld did not trust the cadre of exiled Iraqi leaders that was the only real alternative to a US occupation. The secretary vacillated on the question of what form of government should come after Saddam, and hoped to dodge the decision.

The net result was that a compromise policy – the US would immediately stand up an Iraqi Interim Authority and oversee a rolling transfer of power – was agreed to but never implemented. Bush's inattention and Rumsfeld's vacillation allowed presidential envoy L. Paul Bremer to exercise an astonishingly broad interpretation of his instructions. He formed an instrument of occupation: the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Bush's tendency to delegate and Rumsfeld's indecision ensured that a strong-willed agent – Bremer – could exercise a great degree of autonomy from his Washington-based superiors. In response, Bush bolstered Bremer's confidence rather than closely supervising him. Bremer mapped out an extensive, multi-year path to sovereignty for the Iraqis, one that proved to be more than the political and security situation in Iraq could sustain. After a year of running Iraq, the CPA was disbanded.

Rumsfeld now considered US obligations in Iraq to be at an end. His goal was to find an exit. Rumsfeld believed that the new Iraqi political process would bring

greater Sunni participation. Iraqi government forces would grow more numerous and more competent. The insurgency would become a tractable problem, the Iraqis more capable, and the US less visible. Bush did not involve himself much in this strategizing. He had set the goal of a safe and democratic Iraq, and if Rumsfeld and the new commanding General George Casey said this was the means to that end, then Bush would support them.

As 2005 wore on, though, signs of success were scarce. The Sunnis remained largely outside of the now Shiite-dominated political system, and a violent minority of the Sunni community, abetted and incited by an Iraqi affiliate of the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization, continued a vicious insurgency. The problem of Shiite militias, in particular Moqtada Sadr's Mahdi army that straddled the worlds of politics and violence, remained unsolved. Rumsfeld and Casey's strategy was intended to place the US on a glide path to withdrawal, but this seemed to be an unpowered flight straight over a cliff.

In February 2006, the most holy mosque in Shiite Islam, at Samarra, was bombed by Al-Qaeda. The Shiite response, directed against their Sunni countrymen rather than US forces, was devastatingly violent. Bodies piled up in the major cities, and the country was in the midst of civil war. To Rumsfeld, this was a situation that was beyond the realm of US responsibility or capacity to rectify. He believed that the US should have left long before, and should certainly leave now. A civil war was, by definition, for the Iraqis themselves to fight.

For Bush, to leave under these circumstances was an admission of defeat. He took the most risky decision of a president in recent history. The US would not leave, scale down its goals, withdraw its forces over the horizon, or follow any other of the varieties of retreat, as Bush saw it, that were being counselled. Instead, more troops would be sent. This very personal choice – to surge troops into a situation widely regarded as beyond redemption – was a bald assertion of presidential will driven by Bush's temperament.

## **The core points of the study**

The core points of the study are that, first and most basically, leadership matters. Bush and Rumsfeld's worldview and style shaped policy in Iraq at the key junctures. Many approaches to political science, as discussed in Chapter 2, seek to avoid close study of individual leaders and their personalities for the understandable reasons that these things are difficult to measure and sometimes of only peripheral importance to political outcomes. But, in the key episodes examined in this book, worldviews and management styles are traced to pivotal decision points, and I make the case that other individuals would have acted differently. In Iraq, and by extension in much high-level decision making on questions of war and peace, leaders are central to complete and satisfying social scientific explanation.

Second, each configuration of style and worldview brings advantages and disadvantages. This is not a story of irrational or pathological personalities, as studies of political leaders sometimes are. Bush's approach worked at some stages, such as the surge, and was disastrous at others. Rumsfeld shaped a strong invasion plan, but his hands-off approach to the post-war was in conflict with the core goals of the enterprise as envisaged by the president. Individuals, including top-level political leaders, occupy subjectively rational worlds. They do things for reasons that they consider valid at the time. Neither Bush nor Rumsfeld had an interest in creating a suboptimal strategy or a broken policymaking system. That they did so, despite their best efforts, emphasizes the importance of studying the distinctive individual characteristics of those at the top of the political system. Only by understanding how the leader saw the world, and how they sought to put their vision into action, can we understand why they did what they did.

Third, leadership is multifaceted, having both external (worldview) and internal (management style) elements, and one does not determine the other. We might expect a leader with as clear-cut an approach as Bush to be hands-on in implementing his ideas, and a leader like Rumsfeld who stresses uncertainty and complexity to be interpersonally reticent. But this was not the case. Bush had strong ideas and a weak approach to implementing them. Rumsfeld deployed a hard-charging style in service of a fairly modest worldview.

## Plan of the book

In the following chapter, I seek to answer two questions: when and how are leaders important in shaping foreign policy? Which dimensions of leadership matter? I argue that leaders are significant when the environment is malleable, when they occupy a position of importance within the environment, and when they hold distinctive beliefs about what should be done. I develop a typology of leadership styles focused upon two dimensions of worldview and two of management style. In terms of worldview, *Complexity* addresses whether the leader sees the world as complex or straightforward. *History Maker vs. History Manager* addresses whether they believe they have control over what happens. In terms of management style, *Dictator or Delegator* deals with the degree of control the leader attempts to maintain over the policy process, while *Approach to Interpersonal Relations* addresses how the leader relates to advisors and other subordinates.

In the second part of Chapter 2, I develop a profile of Bush and Rumsfeld according to this typology. As noted above, Bush held a straightforward worldview and believed he was a history maker, whilst preferring a delegatory management style and a bolstering – almost cheerleading – approach to interpersonal relations. Rumsfeld saw the world as complex and had a history manager temperament, whilst he utilized a complicated management style based upon prodding and cajoling,

sometimes seeming to be a bully and sometimes seeming to want to disavow responsibility for what occurred. His interpersonal approach was often brusque and sometimes interrogatory. It worked with some people, and not with others.

These profiles are presented in qualitative form in the chapter. In an appendix, I report on a quantitative analysis of the speech of Bush and Rumsfeld aimed at isolating aspects of worldview through coding spoken words. This analysis provides quantitative support for the dimensions of worldview discussed above, and readers who desire additional evidence for the portraits of Bush and Rumsfeld will find it useful. It is in an appendix in order that readers satisfied by the qualitative evidence regarding Bush and Rumsfeld's worldview can immediately move to the analysis of the policy decisions. Management style cannot be measured by content analysis of policy-related speech and so is analyzed using only qualitative methods.

Chapter 3 establishes the format for the case studies of key policy decisions in the Iraq war by displaying an overview, in table form, of how Bush and Rumsfeld's leadership characteristics shaped policymaking, and then proceeding to an in-depth analysis of how their styles mattered. In the case of the Bush doctrine, the chapter shows the dominance of President Bush's worldview, that Secretary Rumsfeld was uncomfortable with the doctrine, and therefore that the Bush doctrine is aptly named.

Chapter 4 applies this format to the planning for the military operation to remove the Saddam Hussein regime. Chapter 5 considers planning for post-war Iraq. Chapter 6 examines Bush and Rumsfeld's approach to the Coalition Provisional Authority. Chapter 7 asks why policy was allowed to drift after the disillusion of CPA, with Rumsfeld looking for an exit strategy and Bush failing to perceive the disjunction between his goals in Iraq and the strategy his defence secretary was executing. Chapter 8 details the break between Bush and Rumsfeld, as the president takes control of the war and surges troops into Iraq. Chapter 9 draws the study together, summarizing the specific elements of the Iraq decisions that were shaped by Bush and Rumsfeld as leaders, and drawing general lessons for the study of foreign policy and of leadership.

## Notes

- 1 Compare, for example, the conflict analyzed here with the experiences of Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, both of whom fudged differences with President Lyndon Johnson on the escalation of the Vietnam War, feeling that first loyalty, and then indirect opposition to the president, represented the only available strategies at their disposal. Both departed the administration soon after President Johnson became fully cognizant of the differences between their views and his own. See H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Lead to Vietnam* (New York: Harper, 1998); and Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Holt, 2009).

- 2 This continued to be the case in the administration of President Bush's successor, Barack Obama. See Michael R. Gordon, 'In US Exit from Iraq: Failed Efforts and Challenges.' *New York Times*, 24 September 2012. Available at [www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/world/middleeast/failed-efforts-of-americas-last-months-in-iraq.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/world/middleeast/failed-efforts-of-americas-last-months-in-iraq.html). A fruitful area of future research will be a comparative study of the decision-making style and strategic principles of Bush and Obama on both Iraq and Afghanistan, two conflicts Obama inherited from Bush and upon which both made decisions of tremendous importance.
- 3 C-SPAN, 'Q & A with Eliot Cohen', 21 July 2005. Accessed 17 October 2010. [www.c-spanvideo.org/program/187812-1](http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/187812-1).
- 4 Bush and Rumsfeld as individuals excite high – and amongst academic observers usually negative – emotions (see, for example, the survey at: [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/03/the\\_ivory\\_tower?page=0,6](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/03/the_ivory_tower?page=0,6)). It is important to stress at the outset that I seek to analyze their worldviews and decision styles and consider how they shaped the major decisions in the Iraq war, rather than to indict or vindicate them as individuals. The question I hope to prompt in the reader's mind is not 'is this pro or anti Bush/Rumsfeld?' Rather, the relevant question is 'were these individuals important to what happened, and would matters have unfolded in a different way with a different president/secretary of defence?'

# 2

## Leaders and international politics

In this chapter, I seek to answer crucial questions: when and how do leaders matter in shaping a state's foreign policy? Which dimensions of leadership are important? I then offer a portrait of Bush and Rumsfeld as leaders, utilizing multiple sources of evidence to understand their worldviews and management styles. Readers less concerned with matters of political science and more concerned with Bush, Rumsfeld, and Iraq, can move to Chapter 3 without significant loss of understanding.

There are two affirmative statements about the importance of leaders in shaping foreign policy that we should consider: *leaders always matter* and *leaders sometimes matter*. In the former, leaders are seen as *causal mechanisms*: components of systems that transmit causal force between an input such as a strategic imperative, and an output such as the action of a state.<sup>1</sup> In the latter, we regard leaders as *causal variables*, interacting with material and ideational forces as explanatory factors accounting for state action.

I subscribe to the position that leaders *always* matter in the sense of their actions always being necessary for the state to do anything (leaders as causal mechanisms), but the really interesting cases are where different leaders, in similar situations, do or want to do different things (leaders as causal variables). The argument of the book is that Bush and Rumsfeld were different types of leaders, they wanted to do different things in Iraq, and this is crucial in understanding US policy.

We should first consider the argument that *leaders always matter*. Individuals in executive positions at the top of their state serve, in this reading, as the locus of integration for the material and ideational factors that bear upon a state's options and actions. When international relations theorists talk about 'the state' as doing or thinking something, they are engaging in shorthand, personifying for convenience an entity that, when considered literally, is incapable of doing or thinking anything. The state, then, is its decision makers.<sup>2</sup> These decision makers perceive the situation they are in, consider options, choose, and implement. Some schools of thought argue or implicitly assume that individual leaders do this in uniform ways and so are largely interchangeable. This is the position, most obviously, of rational choice theory. Realism, especially the newer 'neo-classical' variant, pays some attention to

individual differences. But most theories of international politics subscribe to the assumption that leaders are basically the same, and if we understand the imperatives of the situation they are in, we can understand why they act as they do. Constructivists at first glance seem amenable to the influence of leadership, as their opening gambit is that material factors are indeterminate causes of outcomes. Yet, for the most part, constructivisms seek to focus on 'collectively held' ideas along the lines of 'the UK's self-image as a post-imperial power' rather than upon variation in the individual beliefs of decision makers.

In this line of thinking, then, leaders need not be studied by political scientists as the goal is to model the essential parts of reality, rather than describe every detail. Yet, not even the strictest proponent of IR theory would deny that leaders are important in transmitting the causal force of material or ideational variables into state action. They would just say that since any leader would respond to the material or ideational environment in broadly the same way, leadership variance is negligible and so there is little to be gained – and much loss of parsimony – by including leaders in the causal model.<sup>3</sup>

What if leaders do not always transform material and ideational stimuli into action in identical or even similar ways? If political leaders have idiosyncratic belief systems, personalities, and past experiences – in other words, if political leaders are like all other human beings on the planet – then the choices they make will be the most interesting part of international affairs. If leaders are not interchangeable, then we need to understand the differences between them. In this line of argument, failing to take leaders into account results in incomplete explanations of foreign policy. Grand international relations theories may do well in explaining broad patterns of outcomes across international systems and over large numbers of years, but explanation of specific state actions will often require investigation into policy actors and processes. Sometimes material and ideational factors will present such compelling incentives for and against courses of action that leaders will indeed respond in largely uniform ways.<sup>4</sup> Yet sometimes material and ideational incentives will be weaker, or the subjective construction of the meaning of these incentives by the leader will be very strong, and who leads will matter. Leaders then become more than causal *mechanisms*; they become causal *variables* in their own right.

In the first position, leaders *always* matter, but in causally trivial ways as mere automatic mechanisms for transferring material and ideational forces into state action. In this second view, leaders *sometimes* matter, but when they do, they are crucial in determining what the state does and what processes lead to this action. Leaders become shapers, rather than mere mirrors, of their environment.<sup>5</sup> When will leaders shape, and not just reflect, their circumstances?<sup>6</sup>

Two further questions can sharpen our thinking.<sup>7</sup> We should first ask: *if the leader is removed from the situation, would the outcome change?* This is a matter of placement within the environment, and of the malleability of the situation. Is the leader in a position to shape events, and is the situation fluid enough to be shaped? If I lead a

small state within an international system dominated by great powers – say, Cuba during the Cold War – most actions that I take will not massively alter the course of world history. If, though, I am the leader of a superpower, then my actions are much more likely to be consequential. Or if the superpowers find themselves in direct confrontation over happenings within my small state – as the United States and the Soviet Union did in October 1962 over the placement of Soviet nuclear weapons on Cuba – then my actions as leader of a small state could be the hinge upon which rests the fate of the world. The same leader – in this case, Cuban President Fidel Castro – can be seen as less central to the broad sweep of superpower history during much of his time in office but entirely crucial for the specific period of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Moreover, if the research question is changed from what explains the broad contours of great power politics to what explains the foreign policy of Cuba, then Castro's placement within the relevant environment is suddenly more central. Whilst it would be reductionist to explain the entirety of the Cold War by studying Castro's worldview, it would be absurd to explain the Cuban Missile Crisis, Cuban foreign policy, or interactions between Cuba and the superpowers without doing so.<sup>8</sup>

The malleability of the situation also affects the scope for influence by leaders. If the situation is highly structured then what any individual does is unlikely to change history. Once the United States entered the Second World War on the allied side, for example, most courses of action open to Adolf Hitler would have resulted in German defeat. His decisions could hasten or forestall the defeat, but the blunt fact of allied victory was, as Winston Churchill put it, merely a matter of 'the proper application of overwhelming force'.<sup>9</sup> If, though, the situation is fluid or novel, then individual action has greater scope to shape outcomes.

Environmental placement and malleability are the components of what Fred I. Greenstein terms *action indispensability*: the actions of a strategically placed individual in a malleable situation are more likely to be indispensable to (necessary causes of) an outcome than the actions of an individual on the periphery of events within a heavily structured setting.<sup>10</sup>

A second question to ask is *whether any individual, put in the same situation, would take the same actions?* A choice can be so obvious that it is hard to imagine anyone taking a different course. This is sometimes a matter of compelling circumstances combined with the basic rationality of the human species (when a room is on fire, we all run for the exit), sometimes a matter of individuals being drawn from common cultural and historical reference points, and sometimes both. No British prime minister, for example, will take office and immediately declare war upon the United States, for reasons both of rational self-interest (the British would lose) and cultural commonality (the UK and the US are friends).

However, many situations are sufficiently ambiguous that different individuals would make different choices. Tony Blair, for example, had a distinct set of beliefs about the world and about the alliance with the United States. He supported the US in Iraq, where many others who could have taken his place would have made



a different choice.<sup>11</sup> This is Greenstein's concept of *actor indispensability* – are the specific characteristics and beliefs of the leader necessary causes of (indispensable to) the choices that individual makes, or would anyone in that position do the same thing? If we ask questions about highly structured situations and we are interested in non-controversial courses of action – not declaring war on your superpower ally, for example – then the personality and beliefs of an individual leader are not major causal factors. If, though, we ask about fluid situations and courses of action about which reasonable people disagree – such as supporting your superpower ally in a war of choice opposed by a majority of your population – then the leader looms large as a worthwhile topic of investigation.

We must ask, then, *if this leader had not been in office, how would events have differed? Would anyone, faced with these circumstances, have done what this leader did?* Considering these questions can carve out for us justifications for considering political leadership as causally crucial under certain circumstances. But what aspects of political leadership matter? How do political leaders differ from one another in ways that can impact policy process and policy choice and so shape state foreign policy and – ultimately – international outcomes?

## **Worldview and management style: dimensions of leadership**

Understanding the linkage between politicians' personalities and their policy choices has proven challenging for political scientists. Two difficulties recur – developing conceptualizations of individual characteristics that allow for differentiation between individuals yet are broad enough to permit comparison across individuals; and the related challenge of measuring personality in ways that are reliable and non-tautological (i.e. not merely inferring policy beliefs from policy choices).<sup>12</sup>

Early attempts to link personality to policy were heavily influenced by the depth psychology associated with Sigmund Freud. The cornerstone of this approach was that personality was essentially determined in early life by interactions with the mother and father, and focused upon the related drives of aggression and sexuality. This approach was made explicitly relevant to political leadership by Harold Lasswell, who posited that behaviour was essentially the projection of private needs upon public objects.<sup>13</sup> The US government, in the first attempts to utilize personality profiles of adversaries to formulate government policy, commissioned studies of Adolf Hitler that traced his expansionist policies to his damaged sense of self, and accurately predicted his suicide as Germany faced its final defeat.<sup>14</sup> In political science and history, this approach became known as 'psychobiography', and reached its highpoint in the magisterial study of Woodrow Wilson by Alexander and Juliette George, which traced Wilson's consistent inability to compromise in order to achieve his political goals to his fraught relationship with a domineering father.<sup>15</sup>