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Using a Virtual History Conference to Teach the Iraq War

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In teaching the causes of the Iraq War, the use of "virtual history" can be employed in a conference setting in which different individuals are assigned to different plausible counterfactuals they use to construct virtual histories. The Iraq War lends itself to the virtual history approach because of the availability of many plausible counterfactuals at each of the various levels of analysis (individual, state/group, and international) at which the war has been explained. I report here on both the theoretical and pedagogical value of the virtual history conference in the study of the Iraq War.

Keywords active learning, counterfactuals, Iraq war, virtual history

Introduction

Teaching the Iraq War, as Burgos (2008) noted, is challenging because of the highly partisan frames that many students bring to the classroom. Indeed, as time passes, the war is seen by many as a brief period of lunacy in American foreign policy. Whatever the normative validity of such arguments, it makes getting at the empirical causes of the war more difficult. Placing ourselves back into the subjective viewpoints and contemporary conditions that preceded this war (as well as others) is vital in order to teach (and research) the causes of war.

One way of tearing ourselves away from retrospective biases in both teaching and research is to use so-called "virtual history" simulations in which a plausible historical record is re-created under counterfactual conditions. This can often aid scholars and students in thinking about the relative importance of different factors in the onset of the war, strengthening the validity of causal arguments and improving classroom learning.

Here, I introduce and apply the concepts of virtual history and the virtual history conference to the Iraq War. I show how virtual history can be employed for teaching purposes by reporting on two student-led virtual history conferences on the war's onset. My purpose is to contribute to the reviving interest in historical reconstructions as a useful tool in political science teaching and research.

I appreciate comments from three anonymous reviewers and from participants in the American Political Science Association 2012 Teaching & Learning Conference Conflict and Conflict Resolution Track. The course syllabus is available at www.web.pdx.edu/~gilleyb/0Syllabus_Iraq.pdf, while the course bibliography is available at http://www.web.pdx.edu/~gilleyb/0IraqBibliography_LiveVersion.pdf.

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Counterfactuals and Virtual History

The use of counterfactuals to test historical claims has a long and distinguished lineage. Isaiah Berlin (1955) argued that considering counterfactuals was both a logical necessity in order to validate causal arguments about what happened in the past as well as a descriptive necessity in order to understand the sense of uncertainty about the future in which contemporary actors lived and planned. Counterfactual analysis is an alternative to within-case variation by splitting a single case into two cases in which causal claims can be scrutinized.

Berlin's purpose had been to rescue history from a sense of determinism or inevitability, lest the ability to judge the actions of individuals be lost. But Berlin warned against the tendency to imagine whole new worlds that could not possibly have existed. The solution was to consider only *plausible* counterfactuals that had a reasonable probability of actually occurring.

In order to distinguish between plausible and implausible historical counterfactuals, Ferguson (1997) introduced the idea of "virtual history," a distinctive form of counterfactual theorizing informed by a strong sense of the reality of alternatives. A key question addressed by Ferguson was *how* to identify such plausible counterfactuals. Ferguson and collaborators went to great lengths to identify and substantiate those counterfactuals that could really have happened or that, in Weber's words, required only "minimal rewrites" (Weber 1905/1949) of history.

Ferguson's preference was for those counterfactuals that were seen as possible or even likely in the *subjective* perceptions of contemporary actors and observers. In doing so, Ferguson placed virtual history within the limits of past perceptions. One good reason for this was that such perceptions exerted actual causal influence over actor decisions—as, for example, U.S. concerns in 1941 about a Nazi beachhead in Latin America (Haglund 2005) that contributed to the U.S. entry into World War II. In such cases, those counterfactuals are not wholly virtual but partly real in the sense of factors that motivated action by contemporaries. As Lebow (2000, 555) wrote: "We often need to understand the factual and counterfactual beliefs of historical actors to account for their behavior . . . . Some of these beliefs took the form of conditional expectations, and with the passage of time they became historical counterfactuals." There is a long literature that inquiries into the sorts of counterfactuals that leaders use in making foreign policy decisions (Khong 1992).

But Ferguson's justification had more to do with the historian's preference for documents on which to rest analysis; a concern that political scientists more schooled in analytic reasoning may feel is less important. Contemporary observers, after all, could have been flat wrong and thus have fundamentally misunderstood the historical moments in which they lived. The alternative approach is to identify counterfactuals that could be justified through empirical analysis as having been *objectively* possible, irrespective of what contemporaries thought. Thus, the first stage in any virtual history involves the selection of counterfactuals most likely to have occurred.

A second question that was treated less fully by Ferguson was how to construct a virtual history based on such counterfactuals that is not full of wishful thinking and excessive speculation. Most of the research on this issue, especially as it concerns international relations, has centered on standard questions of social science methodology (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 2009; Fearon 1996; Lebow 2010). Virtual histories should be initially constructed, according to these works, by grounding them

strongly and narrowly in relevant facts *prior to* the counterfactual itself. In other words, every "fictional" claim of a virtual history should be plausibly linked to a "factual" observation preceding the counterfactual. Obviously, *some* facts after the counterfactual could be considered where they would not likely have been altered by the counterfactual itself, but, in many cases, the counterfactual would create a new reality in which all subsequent facts would be new as well.

To take a concrete example, statements by Al Gore on the Iraq War *following* his loss of the 2000 presidential election are strictly speaking "out of bounds" to any virtual history of what Gore would have done in Iraq had he won the presidency. The reason is that there would have been no "Gore in opposition" under such a counterfactual scenario. Only Gore's views on Iraq *prior to* the 2000 election are in bounds in constructing a virtual history.

A second principle of construction, emphasized in particular by Fearon (1996, 66), is to limit virtual histories to *only one* causal step from fact to fiction, ideally a short and well-understood step. Further steps of fictions based on the previous fictions, or long-range steps that hypothesized far-out effects, would be liable to spiraling levels of uncertainty and guesswork. For example, even if every inference has a 75% chance of being right, the chances of being right decline to less than one third by the fourth step. A classic example is the claim that if the Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez had drowned rather than been miraculously rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1999 and then handed back to his father in Cuba by the Clinton administration in 2000, more Cubans in Florida would have voted for Gore in 2000, and there would not have been an Iraq war. But this claim involves three steps—from "drowned" to "more Gore support among Florida Cubans" to "decisive win in Florida" to "no war"—or two beyond what is allowed. Such virtual histories are always in danger of becoming worse than "rubbish," Blight and colleagues argued, but actually "motivated rubbish" because analysts would be prone to drive this new history in the direction of a moral critique (or encomium) of what actually happened. As Blight, Lang, and Welch (2009, 25, 28) put it: "In virtual history, the ratio of fact to fiction is roughly the reverse of [unrestrained] counterfactual history. If done rigorously, we believe, there need be no fiction in virtual history at all, in the sense of something 'made up' that never happened."

Thus, we are bound, in virtual history, to keep the analysis heavily grounded in known facts *prior to* the divergence in actual and counterfactual histories. Those known facts (including beliefs) form the basis of carefully constructed simulations. In Lebow's (2000, 556) words: "Every good counterfactual [history] thus rests on multiple factuals." This does not mean we cannot speculate beyond the virtual history. Indeed, it provides the basis for showing how other outcomes were feasible and reminds us of how contingent the actual outcome may have been.

We can represent virtual history visually as in Figure 1, where three histories are considered. One history (H1) is the history that actually happened. A second, following the same line (H2), is a virtual history in which the counterfactual occurred but in which none of the relevant outcomes changed. The third (H3) is one in which the counterfactual occurred and the relevant outcomes changed, perhaps dramatically. The counterfactual (C) should be plausible in terms of retrospective objective evidence. The relevant prior facts (F_1, $F_2 \ldots F_n$) are chosen for their significance to the outcome. As stated, this vector cannot be drawn from facts in the actual history *after* the counterfactual (H1). The virtual history inferences (I_1, $I_2 \ldots I_n$) are then a series of inferences each of which is directly linked and justified as being a reasonably

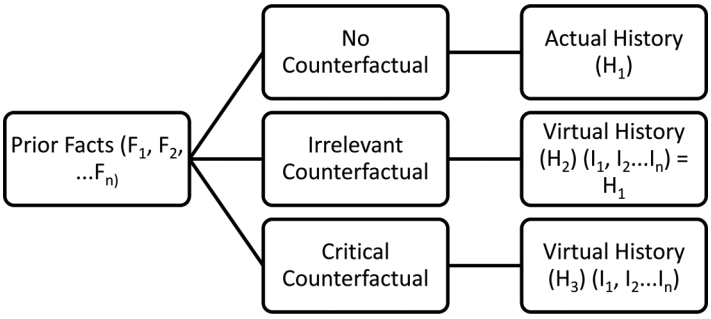

Figure 1. Representation of virtual history.

likely consequence of one or more of the set of prior facts taking into account the counterfactual.

Finally, the overall outline of the virtual history (H2 or H3) is then constructed, taking care to ground it only in the series of inferences (I_1, I_2. . .I_n), stating uncertainty levels along the way. A key point is that the inferences themselves may not contain a direct answer to the Big Questions of concern. Rather, they can be used to show how such outcomes would have become more or less likely.

The Virtual History Conference as Methodology

Most counterfactual analysis of international relations involves solo works by singular or coauthors (Harvey 2011; Herrmann and Lebow 2004; Levy and Goertz 2007; Wiest and Doidge 2010). Their virtual histories are derived from the standard methodologies of counterfactual theorizing. However, these approaches may be insufficient in the case of virtual history for two related reasons.

One is that virtual history by its nature trades in unknowable predictions, not known antecedents. As a result, what is up for scrutiny is not one account but many, often fundamentally, different ones. While evaluating the relative merits of multiple plausible accounts of the same phenomenon through debate is not new, it is particularly important in the case of virtual history precisely because the inferences are predictions not facts. As Lebow (2010, 137) noted: "There is an ineradicable element of subjectivity in these debates over historical causality. A strong case can be made for rigorously scrutinizing potential cognitive biases in how historical observers go about evaluating the relative plausibility of competing what-if scenarios."

Lebow's solution was to expose experts and students to a range of counterfactuals and to probe their different reactions. This process would create "an unnatural cognitive act: to give more thought than they normally would to alternative pathways history could have followed" (Lebow 2010, 138). The result would be that researchers would become more circumspect or even change their minds.

A second shortcoming of standard social science inquiry not addressed by Lebow's approach is that in order to "do fieldwork" for a virtual history, one has to, as much as possible, re-create, or "bring back to life," historical moments of concern. Scholars must place themselves back into the "time machine" of the past prior to the counterfactual moment (C) when the future was unknown.

For both reasons, Blight and colleagues introduced the idea of a "virtual history conference" or a deliberative meeting at which as many of the prior facts as possible

were aired and debated. For scholars of contemporary international affairs, the idea of a virtual history conference opens up a potentially powerful tool for both teaching and research. Through the discussion of multiple historical records (and testimonies of multiple contemporary actors where available), the conference can re-create the "sense of history" in which actors operated "in a fog of highly imperfect understanding, burdened with many misperceptions, hoping for the best, and bracing themselves for the worst" (Blight, Lang, and Welch 2009, 22).

The virtual history conference is a simulation exercise similar to those that have been used by many scholars and teachers of international relations to test assumptions and to rethink analyses by operating within a constructed reality (Goon 2011; Hermann and Hermann 1967; Simpson and Kaussler 2009). The added value of virtual history simulations (simulating H2 and H3) as opposed to actual history simulations (simulating H1) is that students regain the sense of uncertainty and agency that pervades actual decision making. Compared to fictional simulations, meanwhile, the added value is that the virtual history simulation is constrained by the reality of preexisting facts (F_1, $F_2 \ldots F_n$). In other words, to paraphrase Marx, students make their own history but not as they please.

In the methodology developed by Blight and colleagues, initial virtual histories written by individuals are subject to scrutiny, debate, and deliberation in the conference setting. Conference participants challenge one another's inferences by stepping back into the "time machine" provided by the prior fact set (F_1, $F_2 \ldots F_n$) again and again. Collective discussion is informed by multiple fact sets and multiple perspectives in order to enhance validity and to reduce biases. Blight and colleagues have fruitfully applied the virtual history conference to the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992; Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993) and the Vietnam War (Blight, Lang, and Welch 2009).

Virtual History and the Iraq War

Of all contemporary international conflicts, the Iraq War looms as the most important of the past decade. Many counterfactuals concerning the occupation could be considered, but I limit the discussion here to five counterfactuals concerning the origins of the war. As several scholars have argued (Burgos 2008; Harvey 2011), teaching and researching the causes of the Iraq War is in particular need of disciplined and objective methodologies because of the extent to which the causes have been often simplistically reduced to some version of what we might call the "Bush and neocons" argument. In particular, popular and polemical accounts of the war, which may form the starting assumptions for many students and scholars, have overwhelmingly concentrated on a very narrow range of factors relating to President Bush and his neoconservative advisors (Davis 2006; Heilbrunn 2008). Such accounts ignore causes relating to Saddam's missteps in 2001–2003 (Braut-Hegghammer 2006), the failure of sanctions and coercive diplomacy (Gordon 2010), weapons inspections and intelligence (Jervis 2006), the role of 9/11 (Smith 2005), and the role of U.S. allies (McHugh 2010), to take just a few of the most obvious competing explanations.

The Iraq War can easily be seen as "inevitable." That is, while there are many plausible historical counterfactuals to consider, virtual history might show that none of these would have changed the outcome (H2). On such accounts, critical causality depends on factors for which there is no plausible counterfactual. Examples of such

factors would include the fact of U.S. unipolarity (Lebow 2007; Mowle and Sacko 2007) and the brutal nature of Saddam's regime (Sassoon 2012; Woods 2006). If U.S. unipolarity and a tradition of "wars of choice," for instance, more or less determined that the most prominent threat to U.S. security would be invaded in the early 2000s, then the analysis is complete. Similarly, if the seeds of the 2003 invasion were laid over the period since Saddam's invasion of Iran and then Kuwait, then the resumption of hostilities to deter his regime was again nearly inevitable (as leading figures in both major U.S. political parties argued in the late 1990s). If so, then the value of a virtual history conference would be to show that Bush and his administration merely filled the functional roles of putting the deterrence back into motion (H2).

On the other hand, it is possible to argue for the critical causal role of some factors that *did* have a plausible counterfactual value. In such cases, virtual history simulations might lead to a finding in which war does *not* occur (H3). If so, then the role of agency and contingency, and thus judgment, regains a place in the study of the Iraq War.

The Iraq Virtual History Conference

I have taught a course on the Iraq War four times. The last two times, I have employed a virtual history conference as an aid to improve teaching and learning. My purpose is to bring history alive for the students. However, the issues, methods, and results are of interest for teaching and research alike.

The conference is held about midway through a 10-week quarter, following several weeks on the causes of the war. In those weeks, we examine individual, state/group, and international levels of analysis as causal factors. Five counterfactual questions are given to the students that draw directly from the readings on the syllabus (available at the author's Web site; see above) to help them think about them during lectures and class discussions. One class is entirely devoted to discussing the theory and practice of virtual history and to planning for the conference itself.

Early in the course, students sign up to research and present virtual histories on one of the five counterfactual questions. The ground rules for research, in addition to following the principles of good counterfactual analysis in general, are that students should work individually and cite mainly scholarly literatures. Students are expected to explain whether they think the counterfactual mattered and, if not, what variable or level of analysis they think was more important. One important ground rule is that students are to assume that other historical variables remain the same—thus, for instance, we are to assume that George W. Bush is the U.S. President in all cases except for that in which he loses the 2000 election to Al Gore.

To guide their preparation, I give students the following simple template to follow for their briefs for the conference:

1. State the counterfactual and argue why and the degree to which it is a plausible counterfactual.
2. Set out a range of facts prior to the counterfactual that you feel is relevant to the question of a U.S.-Iraq conflict at some point in the future.
3. Run the virtual history simulation. Describe a series of virtual facts that can reasonably be predicted from the known facts you have set out in the previous section assuming the counterfactual has occurred.

4. Provide your bottom-line conclusions about the likelihood of a U.S.-Iraq war based on your findings in the previous section. State your level of uncertainty.

Each question is then considered during the virtual history conference (consisting of three 65-minute classes during one week) by panels of students who signed up for each question (typically 4 to 5 students per question and 30 minutes per panel). Students generally coordinate their presentations beforehand so that those who believe there would be no effect (H2) begin and those who believe the effects would be greatest (H3) follow. Students post five-page briefing notes of their presentations on the course Web site (currently we use Desire-To-Learn) prior to the conference week. Each is given five minutes to summarize their brief. The remaining time in each panel is taken up by class discussions. On the final day, the second half of the class is devoted to summarizing our learning. To track student views, students complete a questionnaire about the impact of the counterfactuals on the likelihood of the war in the first week of class and then again after the conference.

In general, the virtual history conference elicits wide enthusiasm and debate. In anonymous course evaluations, the conference is described as a "valuable experience," "engaging exercise," and one that "required critical thinking." One student wrote that they were "inspired to hold a workshop" to replicate the conference. Several students appreciated the opportunity to move "beyond bumper stickers" (as one put it) in thinking about the causes of the war. What is particularly compelling is to see students spring to life in the virtual history conference and to passionately defend a certain perspective and debate complex facts and interpretations of events. The great value of the conference is to bring students back into those historical moments where everything seemed possible, or not. The conference may reinforce a sense of determinacy in some cases, unwind it in others and simply heighten the sense of uncertainty in yet more. In our conferences, students were divided as often on the relevant prior facts as on the subsequent outcomes. In other words, they often agreed but for different reasons, which means that they did not agree at all.

In the following sections, I briefly describe five of the counterfactuals we debated. I also show student views before and after the conference (see Figure 2).

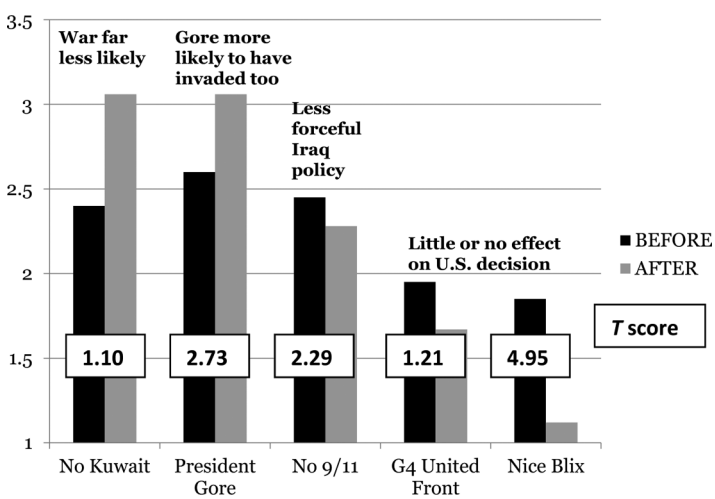

Figure 2. Student views before and after virtual history conferences.

Counterfactual #1: No Invasion of Kuwait

This counterfactual stated: "If Saddam Hussein's Iraq had not invaded Kuwait in 1991, leading to the First Gulf War, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 would have been . . . " The responses on the questionnaire were: (1) Just as likely, (2) Somewhat less likely, (3) Far less likely, and (4) Highly unlikely.

Scholars and students often come to the study of the Iraq War with very little understanding (or interest) in the politics and causal questions emanating from Iraq itself. Yet, given the highly volatile and personalistic nature of Saddam's regime, it is possible to establish a range of plausible counterfactuals relating to his behavior. The invasion of Kuwait, a decision he seems to have made precipitously (Woods and Stout 2010), is one such example.

In two iterations of this question, student views tended to shift slightly from about 2.4 to about 3.0, although the shift was not highly significant. The reason for the diverse responses to this question, as highlighted in the conferences, was that this is the counterfactual that is chronologically farthest from the 2003 war. As a result, the inferences we can make about Iraq-U.S. relations could only extend to the early 1990s. Thus, even though the First Gulf War seems so critical to the 2003 resumption of hostilities, the uncertainty about what else Saddam might have done in the 1990s gave participants very little confidence that some other event might not have triggered a U.S.-Iraq war. Indeed, the discussion elicited the counterintuitive possibility that Saddam could have proven a much *greater* menace to the Middle East and to the international community had he *not* drawn the attention of that community as early as he did.

The value of the conference debate on this issue was to reinforce the unpredictability of the Saddam regime. Methodologically, it is perhaps the most useful counterfactual because it forces conference participants to constrain their willingness to make far-out predictions and reinforces a particular sense of history, namely the sense in which history is contingent and causally complex.

Counterfactual #2: President Gore

This counterfactual stated: "If Al Gore had won in 2000 rather than George W. Bush, then after 9/11 . . . ." The responses were: (1) Gore would have downplayed or basically ignored Iraq as irrelevant to the challenge of terrorism, (2) Gore would have made a point of strengthening existing UN and NATO policies of containing Iraq, (3) Gore would have pressed harder on Iraq through new UN resolutions and threats of tactical strikes or even invasion if there was broad NATO support, and (4) Gore would have replicated Bush and invaded Iraq.

This counterfactual has been subjected to intensive research by Harvey (2008, 2011), who argues that Gore would likely have followed Bush and invaded Iraq. On the other hand, many scholars of the war consider this contention highly dubious (Badie 2010; Dumbrell 2005). Conference participants are therefore doubly challenged to make up their own minds amidst a debate that has already been well elaborated by leading scholars. If nothing else, this counterfactual highlights the importance of uncertainty about claims about the decisive nature or irrelevance of the 2000 presidential election.

Since the 9/11 attacks were being planned prior to the 2000 election and, since there is no reason to believe that Gore would have responded differently to

intelligence about possible Al Qaeda plans to attack the United States, most conference participants operated on the assumption that the attacks would have taken place under President Gore. Beyond that agreement, this question most clearly splits the participants and elicits the liveliest debate.

A main contribution of this debate is to bring out the many ways that Gore was a hawk on the Iraq issue, first as a senator and later as vice president, and had surrounded his 2000 campaign with interventionists like Sandy Berger and Leon Fuerth, who were convinced that the Iraq containment regime was failing. Much as the Blight and colleagues conference on "Vietnam if JFK had lived" resulted in steep reductions of wishful thinking about what JFK would have done, this question steeply reduced wishful thinking about a peaceful President Gore in Iraq. Student views moved modestly, but significantly, in the direction of predicting a Gore policy that more closely approximated the Bush policy, although the consensus was still that he would be reluctant to invade because doing so would have alienated so much of his constituency.

An equally interesting debate that arose on this question is whether Gore would have fought an Iraq War differently—more boots on the ground, more allied support, and a greater emphasis on civilian protection. For many participants, this was the more interesting question and served as a reminder that virtual history conferences can bring out multiple consequences of any counterfactual.

Counterfactual #3: No 9/11

This counterfactual stated: "If the 9/11 attacks had failed or been stopped, then Bush would have . . . ." The responses were: (1) Launched few if any new initiatives related to terrorism, (2) Launched new antiterrorism initiatives through allies, possibly including sanctions on Afghanistan and Iraq, (3) Given U.S. air support to an overthrow of the Taliban but not of Saddam Hussein, or (4) Still have invaded Iraq using other justifications.

The 9/11 attacks are generally considered a seminal event in both the public and administration processes that led to the U.S. decision to invade Iraq. Therefore, a conventional wisdom prediction would be that without 9/11 there would have been no war. While there was a general tendency in the conference to assume this, and this view strengthened following the conference, the resilience of the "no change" viewpoint was remarkable. The reason is that the conference brought to life the already-fraught relationship between the United States and Iraq prior to 2001 so that the 9/11 attacks often seemed more like a proximate than critical cause of the war. The growing sense on both sides of the aisle in the late 1990s that the Iraq containment regime was breaking down and that the United States was running out of options to deal with Saddam became palpable in the conference setting, as did Saddam's increasing delusions about his ability to snub, to threaten, and otherwise to flaunt U.S. power in the region.

A key issue for participants here was to be precise about the counterfactual—which could range from no attempted attacks to attacks that were all thwarted in the air.

One participant imagined a drone strike that killed Bin Laden in 2000, while others imagined that all four airplanes crashed with a loss of all lives aboard but without hitting their targets. In the former case, there is very little sense of heightened threat perception in the homeland whereas, in the latter case, there is still quite a bit.

The great methodological value of this question, then, concerned both the status of 9/11 as a nonreplicable cause as well as the nuances often contained within every seemingly precise counterfactual.

Counterfactual #4: United Front of the G4

This counterfactual stated: "If China, Russia, France, and Germany had formed a united front in opposition to the US/UK plan to invade Iraq, then the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq would have been . . . ." The responses were: (1) Just as likely, (2) Somewhat less likely, (3) Far less likely, and (4) Highly unlikely.

In general, the diplomatic causes of the Iraq War remain understudied and perhaps underappreciated, despite some excellent works (Antonopolous 2004; Clarke 2004; Malone 2006). This is ironic because subjectively at least one key actor who believed that diplomacy would avert a war was Saddam himself (Braut-Hegghammer 2006; Woods, Lacey, and Murray 2006). Like the Kuwait question, this counterfactual brought about indecisive changes in participant views. But, unlike the Kuwait question, where the uncertainty arose from the lack of proximity between the counterfactual and the outcome of interest, in this case, the two things are so closely pressed up against one another as to create another sort of uncertainty, namely that of the pressures and passions of last-minute efforts to avert what seemed an inevitable war. Watching some of the testimony of the dramatic February 14, 2003 UN Security Council meeting helped to re-create the sense of crisis.

This counterfactual is the one that is closest to the factual itself, since, as the semi-official French news agency Agence-France Presse noted in early March, "Russia along with fellow veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and France, and non-permanent member Germany, are seeking to avert a US-led war against Iraq" (Agence France-Presse 2003, paragraph 1). Thus, participants must begin by specifying a "united front" counterfactual in which the G4 actually formulates an alternative coercive inspections plan with a war trigger clause, as the United States was seeking.

A key question that arose at the conference was whether such a plan would have split the United Kingdom and United States, as well as some of the other key members of the U.S.-led coalition such as Australia and Italy. Another key question is how Saddam would have responded to, say, a G4 plan of coercive inspections. Some believed he would have capitulated while others believe he would have resisted. Both sides agreed that U.S. behavior would have enjoyed more international legitimacy as a result.

Counterfactual #5: Blix Backs Saddam

This counterfactual stated: "If UN weapons inspectors had been less critical of Saddam Hussein's response to the 'enhanced' inspections process under UNSCR1441 (8 November 2002), the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq would have been . . . ." The responses were: (1) Just as likely, (2) Somewhat less likely, (3) Far less likely, and (4) Highly unlikely.

Like the previous counterfactual, this was chosen in order to elicit a sense of the possible importance of last-minute decisions in the march to war. While the general tone of UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix's reports and comments on Iraqi compliance from January through March 2003 was positive, they are better remembered

for the occasional notes of uncertainty, frustration, and criticism. These notes were seized upon by the United States and United Kingdom as evidence that the inspection process was failing.

In the counterfactual, Blix interprets Iraqi compliance in a more wholly positive light, something quite plausible in light of the evidence in January that the UN was in danger of losing control of the issue and that the United States could abandon the process as ineffective as a result. Given the sense of impending war, Blix's general view that the process was working, and that the UN was in danger of being marginalized in the crisis, Blix could well have offered more positive assessments that might have stalled the United Kingdom's willingness to go to war and have offered succor to those within the Bush administration who supported the UN process.

In our conferences, there was a large and highly significant decline in participant views of the potential role of Blix and his report. In an unexpected way, the debate here reinforced a sense of determinism about the war, at least at this late stage. A "nice Blix," as we termed it, would either have lost credibility with the United States or stoked U.S. motivations for war. In this case, placing ourselves back into the "time machine" of the intense and dramatic inspections debates of November 2002 to March 2003 did *not* create a sense of the importance of those events but, oddly enough, with the benefit of hindsight, suggested its irrelevance.

The views of students on these counterfactual questions taken at the beginning of the course and following the virtual history conferences are shown in Figure 2. While some of the changes may reflect course learning outside of the conference, in general, the treatment of counterfactuals was limited to the conference itself. Did the views of the students come closer to the conclusions of professional social scientists as a result of the conferences? In three of the five questions, this is likely the case. Besides the work of Harvey, whose work has attracted wide attention (Isaac 2013), there are other scholars who downplay the significance of the Bush presidential victory in 2000 on the war, often arguing explicitly for the "Gore war" counterfactual (Herman 2008). At the very least, the postconference belief that a more assertive (if not war-prone) Gore would have emerged after 9/11 jibes with the wide consensus in the literature about the centrality of 9/11 in creating a more assertive America (Pauly and Lansford 2005; Smith 2005). In that vein, the shift in student views to attach greater importance to the 9/11 attacks also meshes with professional conclusions, as does the view that without the long "paper trail" created by the first Gulf War, the onset of hostilities in 2003 would have been unlikely (Gordon 2010).

It is only on the latter two questions concerning the fevered diplomatic activity in the months preceding the invasion that student views seemed to depart from the views of those professional scholars who emphasize the failures of diplomacy (Clarke 2004; Malone 2006). Yet, it must be admitted that the indifference of students towards questions of diplomacy and international law largely reflects the conclusions of mainstream international relations scholars (critics and advocates of the war alike) who share the unipolar view of the United States (Hinnebusch 2006; Mowle and Sacko 2007). The tragedy of the classical realist analysis of Iraq (Lebow 2007) is that the logic of preemptive action is replicated in classroom debates.

Conclusions

The use of a virtual history conference to study the causes of the Iraq War has both methodological and substantive value. Methodologically, it opens up a new

approach to social scientific inquiry, including international relations. By taking the study of the Iraq War into a discursive setting (such as a classroom or a conference of experts), multiple virtual history claims can be brought into play simultaneously, strengthening the ability of students and scholars alike to challenge their own assumptions and to consider causes they had previously ignored. To understand the causes of war, one might say, you have to argue about them. This will help develop what Lebow (2000, 557) calls "understandings of outcomes as the products of complex, conjunctional causality."

Substantively, the virtual history conference tends to draw attention away from the singular importance of President Bush and his neoconservative advisors, what Harvey (2008) called "conventional 'W'isdom" on the war, and reintroduce the importance of historical, systemic, and non-U.S. factors. The virtual history conference restores the sense of how Iraq happened and why such a war may not happen again.

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