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US–French relations in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq (2002–2003):

Insider accounts two decades on

Stosunki amerykańsko-francuskie w okresie poprzedzającym inwazję USA na Irak (2002–2003):

Wywiady z urzędnikami dwie dekady później

Keywords:

US Foreign Policy,
Iraq invasion, France,
United Nations, Insider
Accounts

Słowa kluczowe:

polityka zagraniczna
USA, inwazja na Irak,
Francja, ONZ, wywiady
z urzędnikami

US–French relations in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq (2002–2003): Insider accounts two decades on

The aim of the article is to provide an insider's account of the US-French dispute in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. By analysing data from 11 qualitative interviews with US senior officials, the article attempts to make an assessment of the state of US-French relations before the 2003 Iraq Crisis; analyses the rationale behind and development of the dispute, and finally tries to evaluate whether the confrontation has left a mark on bilateral relations two decades on. The central hypothesis tested in this study is that despite the magnitude of the crisis, it has not impacted the overall trajectory of the US-French relationship.

The respondents to this study include senior U.S. foreign policy advisors and policy-makers from the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of State who have been directly involved in the preparations to the war in the years 2001–2003.

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Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie relacji bezpośrednich uczestników sporu amerykańsko-francuskiego toczącego się w okresie poprzedzającym amerykańską inwazję na Irak w 2003 roku. Analizując dane z jedenastu wywiadów jakościowych, przeprowadzonych z amerykańskimi urzędnikami wysokiego szczebla, podjęto w artykule próbę oceny stanu stosunków amerykańsko-francuskich przed kryzysem w Iraku w 2003 roku oraz omówiono główne przesłanki i rozwój sporu. W artykule dokonano próby oceny, czy głośna międzynarodowa konfrontacja między amerykańskimi i francuskimi decydentami odcisnęła długofalowe piętno na stosunkach dwustronnych. Rozpoznanie dowodzi, że pomimo skali kryzysu nie miał on wpływu na ogólną trajektorię stosunków amerykańsko-francuskich.

Uczestnikami badania byli doradcy wysokiego szczebla ds. polityki zagranicznej USA oraz decydenci z Departamentu Obrony USA i Departamentu Stanu USA, którzy zostali bezpośrednio zaangażowani w przygotowania do amerykańskiej inwazji na Irak w latach 2001–2003.

1. Introduction

As we mark the 20th anniversary of the decision of George W. Bush's administration to invade Iraq (2003), both scholars and practitioners should take the opportunity to revisit the lessons learned from one of the most consequential foreign policy blunders by the United States (US). The decision to go to war was derived from all kinds of failures, which significantly impacted the US's credibility on the world stage: a failure of intelligence, a failure to debate existing options and a failure to obtain a United Nations (UN) resolution greenlighting the invasion. The most visible aspect, however, of the international crisis over the US decision to invade Iraq was the confrontation that took place between France and the US in the winter and early spring of 2003. As argued by Bozo and Parmentier, France's opposition to the US intervention and its active engagement at the UN Security Council initiated the most profound crisis between the two countries since General de Gaulle decided to withdraw France from NATO's integrated structure in 1966¹. This was because France took on the role of the leader of a group of countries (which included Germany and Russia), viciously opposing the invasion and became a 'de facto' face of the international effort to curtail US plans in Iraq.

Although there are numerous academic publications on French–American relations during the Iraqi crisis², as well as written testimonies

- 1 F. Bozo, G. Parmentier, *France and the United States: Waiting for Regime Change*, „Survival” 2007, vol. 49 issue 1, pp. 181–197, DOI: 10.1080/00396330701254651.
- 2 J. Mathy, *French-American relations and the war in Iraq: Anything new, or business as usual?*, „Contemporary French and Francophone Studies” 2004, vol. 8, issue 4, pp. 415–424, DOI: 10.1080/10260210410001733414; T. Tardy, *France and the US: The Inevitable Clash?*, „International Journal” 2004, vol. 59, issue 1, pp. 105–126, DOI: 10.1177/002070200405900105; S. Serfaty, *Terms of estrangement: French–American relations in perspective*, „Survival” 2005, vol. 47, issue 3, pp. 73–92, DOI: 10.1080/00396330500248011; F. Bozo, G. Parmentier, *France and the United States*; D. Mahncke, *The United States, Germany and France: Balancing transatlantic relations*, „The British Journal of Politics and International Relations” 2007, vol. 11, issue 1, pp. 79–93. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-856x.2008.00356.x; F. Bozo, *A History of the Iraq crisis. France, the United States and Iraq, 1991–2003*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, New York 2016.

of individuals who directly participated in the events³, this article enriches the literature with 11 in-depth qualitative elite interviews conducted by the author in Washington, DC and online in the spring of 2019⁴. The respondents to this study include senior US foreign policy advisers and policymakers from the US Department of Defense (Pentagon) and the US Department of State who were directly involved in the preparations for the war in the years 2001–2003 and worked with their French counterparts in trying to dissolve the bilateral disagreement during those two years. The two decades that have since passed, and the general sense in Washington, DC that the war in Iraq was a strategic mistake, allow for a much more frank and critical discussion with those directly involved in the decision-making process. It also creates better grounds for testing whether the 2003 international crisis has left a permanent mark on US–French relations.

The aim of the article is thus to provide an American insider's account of the US–French dispute in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. By analysing data from qualitative interviews with senior US officials, as well as primary and secondary sources, the article: a) attempts to make an assessment of the state of US–French relations before the 2003 Iraq Crisis; b) analyses the rationale behind and the development of the dispute; and finally, c) tries to judge whether the confrontation has left a mark on bilateral relations two decades on. The central hypothesis tested in this study is that despite the magnitude of the dispute, the crisis has not

3 G. W. Bush, *Decision points*, Crown Publishers, New York 2010; J. Chirac, *Chaque pas doit être un but. Mémoires 1*, NiL, Paris 2009; D. Cheney, L. Cheney, *In my time: A personal & political memoir*, Threshold Editions, New York 2011; S. McClellan, *What happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's culture of deception*, Public Affairs, New York 2008 – to name a few.

4 The 11 interviews were conducted from April to June 2019 in Washington, DC (9) and online (2). Ten were conducted with former US Department of State and US Department of Defense officials based in Washington, DC; one was conducted with a senior US think-tank representative. The paper is a result of the project 'Managing Crisis through Collaborative Public Diplomacy' supported by the NAWA – Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (Poland), on the basis of decision no. PPN/BEK/2018/1/00045 which financed a five-month visiting researcher stay at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy in Los Angeles (February–June 2019).

impacted the overall trajectory of the US–French relationship, which can be best characterised as a difficult, yet indispensable, partnership.

2. Methods and Limitations

As the Iraq crisis has been described as ‘the best-documented international episode since the end of the Cold War’⁵, the article is based on the rich primary and secondary sources available. It adds, however, new insights derived from the qualitative method of elite interviewing. The rationale of an elite interview is to ‘acquire information and context that only that person can provide about some event or process’⁶. For the research purpose the author selected – via ‘snowball sampling’ – a group of US senior foreign and security policymakers who, in the years 2001–2003, worked directly with the US Secretary of Defence – Donald Rumsfeld – and the US Secretary of State – Colin Powell. As such, these senior officials represented the two key foreign policy fractions in the first Bush administration – the neoconservatives (neocons) and the realists⁷. The neocons, working mainly in the cabinet of Vice President Dick Cheney and in the US Department of Defense led by Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, promoted a unilateral assertion of hegemony and were sceptical of US membership of multilateral organisations. They would also be the group that later endorsed the idea of a preventive war with Iraq⁸. The realists on the other hand – mostly positioned within the US Department of State under the leadership of Secretary Colin Powell – advocated for a multilateral approach to US foreign policy and opposed the use of the military as a first option⁹.

5 F. Bozo, *A History of the Iraq crisis*.

6 J. L. Hochschild, *Conducting intensive interviews and elite interviews*, National Science Foundation, Cambridge MA 2009.

7 B. C. Schmidt, M. C. Williams, *The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq war: neoconservatives versus realists*, „Security Studies” 2008, vol. 17, issue 2, pp. 191–220.

8 J. Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The history of Bush’s war cabinet*, Penguin Books, New York 2004.

9 C. J. Dolan, D. B. Cohen, *The war about the war: Iraq and the politics of national security advising in the G. W. Bush administration’s first term*, „Politics & Policy” 2006, issue 34, pp. 30–64, DOI: 10.1111/j.1747-1346.2006.00003.x; S. McClellan, *What happened*.

In the interviewing process, and beyond, the author has made all possible efforts to guarantee the universality of the insights collected. This included, first and foremost, assuring consistency when conducting all the interviews¹⁰. The interviews were semi-structured: each interviewee was asked the same set of questions, presented in the same order, with time provided for free-flowing discussion, allowing new ideas to be brought up during the interview. In this way, the goal of reaching a point of saturation and repetition of information from the respondents could be successfully accomplished.

There are two types of limitations to this study which must be addressed. Firstly, this article does not attempt to make a detailed analysis of everything that happened in US–French relations in the run-up to the war, as such publications are abundant and would require a separate monograph. Second, the article focuses exclusively on the US state officials' point of view and perspective on the war over time and does not include the input of French state officials or other actors involved.

3. Data Analysis

3.1. US–French relations in the run-up to the Iraq crisis (1990–2001)

The history of US–French relations is complex, but rather than being consistently difficult, it is better defined as cyclical with phases of both alienation and rapprochement¹¹. The most important episodes of early relations include the crucial 18th-century support of France for the American colonies during the Revolutionary War; the US's purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803; and the US's challenging of France's colonial ambitions in Africa and Asia in the late 19th century¹². The more modern phase of relations begins, however, with World War II, where the US played a leading role in liberating France (1944) and defeating Germany

10 *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*, eds N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA: 2003; *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*, eds N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA 2003.

11 F. Costigliola, *France and the United States: The cold alliance since World War II*, Twayne Publishers New York 1992.

12 C. G. Cogan, *Oldest allies, guarded friends: The United States and France since 1940*, Praeger, Westport, CT 1994.

(1945)¹³. After the war, the two countries became even closer allies, with the US often appreciating France's support in its efforts to contain the Soviet Union (such as during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962). France also played a critical stabilising role as the main architect of the United Europe project – an idea envisioned and strongly supported by the Truman administration after World War II¹⁴. Despite relations consistently becoming sour after 1945, with the most spectacular crisis ending in France withdrawing from NATO military structures in 1966, during the Cold War, the French continued to be one of America's more reliable partners¹⁵.

With the end of the Cold War, the US and France had the opportunity to redefine their relationship based on shared values and interests. Initially, this led to a period of even closer cooperation, particularly on issues such as the Gulf War in 1991 and the Dayton Accords that ended the war in Bosnia in 1995. The bilateral relations under the Clinton administration (1993–2001) were generally marked by a spirit of cooperation – including French military engagement in Somalia (1993–1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999) – and, in return, recognition by the US of the important role that France plays in international affairs¹⁶.

The election of George W. Bush in 2001 significantly changed the dynamics of the bilateral relationship. On the one hand, the new administration – under the heavy influence of the neoconservatives – went through a process of re-thinking of the role of allies in foreign policy. Instead of a policy of consultation and consensus-building, the Bush administration insisted on a unilateral approach which preferred bypassing multilateral venues such as the UN, and instead assembled 'coalitions of the willing', composed of states least critical of US foreign policy¹⁷. Such

13 P. Melandri, *The troubled friendship: France and the United States, 1945–1989*, [in:] *No end to alliance: The United States and Western Europe, past, present and future*, eds G. Lundestad, St Martin's Press, New York 1998, pp. 112–133.

14 S. Serfaty, *Terms of estrangement*.

15 F. Bozo, G. Parmentier, *France and the United States*.

16 J. W. Davidson, *America's allies and war: Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2011, pp. 75–103.

17 K. McHugh, *Bush, Blair, and the war in Iraq: alliance politics and the limits of influence*, „Political Science Quarterly” 2010, vol. 125, issue 3, pp. 465–491, DOI: 10.1002/j.1538-165X.2010.tb00682.x.

an approach alienated first and foremost two European allies – France and Germany. On the other hand, however, France, under the leadership of President Jacques Chirac and based on both domestic and regional considerations, chose a confrontational path vis-à-vis the new American president, quickly highlighting the differences in the approach of both countries regarding climate change, development policy or trade (Interview, 31 May 2019). The reasons for the growing confrontational approach from France were multi-fold. On the one hand, by 2001 there was a clear divergence between France and the US over the very nature of the international system. The French grew more and more uncomfortable with the visible unilateral tendencies in US foreign policy and advocated for a more ‘multipolar’ world. On the other hand, Jacques Chirac curated a new vision for Europe (*Europe-puissance*) that would serve as a counterweight to the US in a rebalanced transatlantic alliance¹⁸.

One of the first more consequential encounters between the two leaders took place on 14–15 June 2001 in Gothenburg, Sweden at the US–EU summit, when the French president directly attacked George W. Bush over his administration’s abrupt withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol a few months before¹⁹. As one senior Department of State official present at the meeting recollected:

We [the US] might indeed have been too abrupt to pull out from the Kyoto Agreement, but there was no reason for [President] Chirac to make that the centrepiece of a generalised attack on Bush at the summit. I remember thinking, this is unnecessary because Bush was not at that time ignoring the EU. It proved very costly for the French later on as it confirmed to Bush that the Euroscepticism of some of his advisers had merit (Interview, 19 June 2019).

Despite the obvious lack of chemistry between the two presidents, Jacques Chirac was supportive of the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan, launched in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda. In fact, as confirmed by numerous respondents to the study (Interview, 24 April 2019; Interview, 28 May 2019; Interview, 30 May 2019a; Interview, 19 June 2019),

18 F. Bozo, *A History of the Iraq crisis*, p. 7.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

following 9/11, France and French society showed unprecedented solidarity with the US. Despite remaining outside of NATO's military structure in late 2001, France decided to nevertheless support the US invasion of Afghanistan by joining both the International Security Assistance (carried out by NATO on a UN mandate) and 'Operation Enduring Freedom' (under US command)²⁰. As recalled by one senior US Department of Defense official:

In late 2001 and early 2002, I remember there not being any kind of deep tensions between the United States and France. Maybe aside from their [France's] desire to join us in attacking Afghanistan, which we were hesitant about as their [French] forces were not operationally prepared for at first (Interview, 30 May 2019a).

The interviews have confirmed the overall sense among the US foreign-policy establishment that the US and France were – since the American Revolution – usually on the same side of the history (Interview, 24 April 2019; Interview, 30 May 2019a; Interview, 30 May 2019b). As described by one senior Department of State official:

In the US we do not have a recollection of France as having played much of an adverse role in American history. Even the 1966 withdrawal from NATO and opposition to Vietnam is seen as a cranky exception in our relations (Interview, 30 May 2019b).

The respondents also pointed out the similarities in foreign and security policy culture between France and the US. This included first and foremost thinking about oneself as an exceptionalist player on the international scene (Interview, 24 April 2019; Interview, 29 May 2019a) and possessing a capable military (Interview, 1 May 2019; Interview, 29 May 2019; Interview, 30 May 2019a; Interview, 30 May 2019b). At the same time, officials did acknowledge the differences in the foreign policy decision-making structures, which often led to misunderstandings between the two countries. As pointed out by one of the senior Department of State officials: 'When dealing with the French we had to remember that unlike some

20 Ibid., pp. 83–89.

European countries, France had a bureaucratic structure and the French government debated their policies. They had an interagency framework and it was important to them' (Interview, 29 May 2019a).

3.2. The US–French fallout around the invasion of Iraq (2002–2003)

Soon after the successful takeover of Kabul, the attention of the Bush administration, particularly Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, turned to the 'unfinished job' in Iraq²¹. Starting with the 2002 State of the Union address on 29 January, the Bush administration began to unveil three arguments, which were to justify the US going to war. First was the self-defence argument, which talked about the alleged existence in Iraq of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the fear that these weapons would be used against the US²². Second was the international law enforcement argument, which referred to the need to implement the numerous UN resolutions on Iraq and punish the Iraqi regime for noncompliance, which included obstructing the UN WMD inspections²³. Last, but not least, was the ideological argument: as pointed out in Press Secretary Scott McClellan's account, the Bush administration was driven by an 'ambitious and idealistic post-9/11 vision of transforming the Middle East through the spread of freedom'²⁴.

21 According to some of the officials interviewed for this study, the idea to invade Iraq developed within the Bush junior presidential cabinet prior to the 9/11 attacks and by the end of 2001 was largely 'precooked' (Interview, 29 May 2019; Interview, 30 May 2019b). When explaining the 'unfinished job' argument, the respondent referred to the 'job' which had not been completed by US President George H. W. Bush senior in the early 1990s. This included not toppling Saddam Hussein after his 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and not responding more forcefully to the unsuccessful 1993 assassination attempt orchestrated by the Iraqi Intelligence Service against – the then already former – US President George H. W. Bush senior.

22 N. Ritchie, P. Rogers, *The political road to war with Iraq: Bush, 9/11, and the drive to overthrow Saddam*, Routledge, New York 2007; R. B. Miller, *Justifications of the Iraq war examined*, „Ethics & International Affairs” 2008, vol. 22, issue 1, pp. 43–67, DOI: 10.1111/j.1747-7093.2008.00129.x.

23 K. Coe, *Television news, public opinion, and the Iraq war*, „Communication Research” 2013, vol. 40, issue 4, pp. 486–505, DOI: 10.1177/0093650212438916; B. Bahador, J. Moses, W. L. Youmans, *Rhetoric and recollection: recounting the George W. Bush administration's case for war in Iraq*, „Presidential Studies Quarterly” 2018, vol. 48, issue 1, pp. 4–26. DOI: 10.1111/psq.12412.

24 S. McClellan, *What happened*, p. 129.

The abrupt interest of the Bush administration in solving the Iraqi questions by any means, contributed to the cooling of the Franco–American relationship in the early months of 2002, ending the unanimity proclaimed by both states after 9/11. The fallout would later only accelerate with Chirac again winning the presidential elections in May 2002. The fact that the incumbent French president had won against the far-right National Front Jean-Marie Le Pen, only strengthened Chirac's determination to oppose the theory of 'a clash of civilisations'²⁵, which the Bush administration seemed to be embracing²⁶. At the same time, however, the new government in France led by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and assisted by Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin presented itself as pro-American and fully aware of the dangers posed by Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. In fact, already prior to 9/11 France was a key partner of the US in dealing with the Hussein regime. As recalled by one respondent to the study, the French were indispensable in maintaining the 'no fly zones' in northern Iraq after the Gulf War of 1991 and helped with the deliveries of humanitarian aid to the Kurds through the UN system (Interview, 28 May 2019).

For these reasons, the French did not at first openly oppose an invasion. In fact, when George W. Bush, at the insistence of US Secretary of State Colin Powell, decided to ask the UN for a multilateral endorsement of military intervention in Iraq, France worked closely with the US to write a Security Council resolution²⁷. Interviewees indeed confirmed that France was instrumental in assuring unanimous support by overcoming Syria's opposition, and convincing China and Russia to come on board (Interview, 28 May 2019; Interview, 30 May 2019b). The UN Security Council Resolution 1441 of 8 November 2002 declared that Iraq was in 'material breach of its obligations' (including previous Resolution 687 from 1991) and

25 The clash of civilizations is a theory proposed by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington in 1993 in an article titled "The Clash of Civilizations?" The theory suggests that the primary source of global conflict in the post-Cold War world would not be based on ideological or economic factors, but rather on cultural and religious differences between civilisations – particularly between the post-Christian, Western civilisation and Islam; S. P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1993.

26 F. Bozo, *A history of the Iraq Crisis*, p. 109.

27 S. Serfaty, *Terms of estrangement*, p. 83.

offered Iraq 'a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations'²⁸. The resolution set up an enhanced inspection regime and ordered Iraq to submit – within 30 days – 'a currently accurate, full, and complete declaration of all aspects of its (WMD) programmes'.

As recalled by the respondents to this study there was understanding among the French political establishment that – in the case of continued defiance by the Iraqis about meeting their international obligations – the 2002 UN resolution would allow the US to obtain its formal *casus belli* (Interview, 30 May 2019b). US diplomats working closely with the French government confirmed there was even a sense of possible French participation in such an invasion. As described by one senior official from the US Department of State:

My recollection is that the US–French dialogue of the time was moving on two parallel tracks – political and diplomatic. At my diplomatic level, we were engaged in a serious conversation with the French military and French senior diplomats about how, in fact, they might help us in Iraq. They were really interested in what we were doing, really interested in what it would be like. They never gave me a commitment that they would join us though (Interview, 29 May 2019a).

But as French hesitance continued throughout the autumn of 2002, the Bush administration made two serious political mistakes, which set relations on a collision trajectory. First, in November 2002 at the Prague NATO summit, George W. Bush managed to alienate the Germans and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, thus providing France with a strong anti-Bush ally²⁹. Second, the US administration underestimated the growing anti-war sentiment in Europe, projecting the vocal European support for the invasion of Afghanistan onto the invasion of Iraq. The reality on the ground was, however, quite different. By mid-2002 the public opposition to an intervention in Iraq reached 75% in France, 69% in Germany,

28 Resolution 1441 (2002) adopted by the Security Council at its 4644th meeting, on 8 November 2002 United Nations [online], 2002 [accessed: 15 VIII 2022]: <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/478123>>.

29 S. Serfaty, *Terms of estrangement*, p. 84.

and 51% in the United Kingdom (UK)³⁰. As recollected by some respondents, the public opposition to the war on the European continent was at a level never seen in the US (Interview, 27 May 2019; Interview, 31 May 2019). The mass anti-war protests in turn enabled President Jacques Chirac to insist that when opposing the invasion of Iraq, he was, in fact, speaking on behalf of all (Western) Europeans. The protests also had one more unanticipated consequence for the Bush administration. By January 2003, the UK (whose prime minister, Tony Blair, had promised a year earlier to support an invasion of Iraq) had witnessed the largest anti-war protests in its history, with over 2 million people taking part³¹. Moreover, only 2% of the UK population felt that a war in Iraq would make the world a safer place³². In such circumstances, Tony Blair, facing considerable danger of losing his prime ministership, demanded a second UN resolution with a clear authorisation for war³³. This gave France – one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council – an opportunity to express a firm ‘non’ to the invasion³⁴.

Starting in 2003 – to the dismay of many American diplomats – both France and Germany began to build an anti-war coalition within the UN. The arguments for the opposition evolved around the scarcity of evidence regarding the existence of a WMD programme operating in Iraq, resulting from the new UN inspections on the ground (Interview, 28 May 2019; Interview, 29 May 2019a; Interview, 30 May 2019a). As expressed by one

30 *America's image further erodes, Europeans want weaker ties*, PEW Research Survey Reports, PEW Research Center, [online], 2003 [accessed: 15 VIII 2022]: <<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=175>>.

31 C. Nineham, *The people V. Tony Blair: Politics, the media and the anti-war movement*, John Hunt Publishing, London 2013.

32 A. Campbell, *The Blair years: extracts from the Alastair Campbell diaries*, Knopf, New York 2007, p. 660.

33 C. Bluth, *The British road to war: Blair, Bush and the decision to invade Iraq*, „International Affairs” 2004, vol. 80, issue 5, pp. 871–892. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2346.2004.00423.x; M. E. Henke, *Tony Blair's gamble: The Middle East peace process and British participation in the Iraq 2003 campaign*, „The British Journal of Politics and International Relations” 2018, vol. 20, issue 4, pp. 773–789, DOI: 10.1177/1369148118784708.

34 D. Styan, *Jacques Chirac's 'non': France, Iraq and the United Nations, 1991–2003*, „Modern & Contemporary France” 2004, vol. 2, issue 3, pp. 371–385.

senior US diplomat: 'We had a major disagreement with our French counterparts regarding what David Kay [the UN Chief Weapons Inspector] was finding. Were the mostly chemical elements on the OPCW [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons] list? Were they really dangerous?' (Interview, 28 May 2019).

The interviews confirmed widespread and general outrage among the US officials regarding France's behaviour – even among those who claimed to be somewhat sympathetic towards the French arguments. First, there was a feeling at the time that the French behaviour was actually emboldening the Iraqi regime. As recalled by one of the senior US Department of Defense officials:

In the Pentagon we felt that France was actually reinforcing Saddam Hussein's confidence that he could get away with his charade. And that made it more likely that we had to go in and more likely that his forces would fight that much more fiercely because they would have international support on their side (Interview, 30 May 2019a).

Second, the US administration was upset by the fact that France – as perceived in Washington, DC – was betraying its alliance with the Americans. As one senior State Department official recalls: 'There was a sense that the French and Germans had solicited Putin and had asked Putin to side with them against us. That is something you should never do to your allies' (Interview, 19 June 2019). The diplomats were also furious about the number of African countries on the Security Council that the French were able to convince to oppose the second UN resolution (Interview, 28 May 2019). Last, but not least, it was felt that the French were actually searching for a public confrontation with the US, as expressed particularly by the behaviour of French Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin. As recalled by one respondent: 'I don't like saying their [French] arguments were too tough, because on the merits of the issue, they were right. But the arguments were presented in such a way as to sharpen a sense of confrontation with us' (Interview, 19 June 2019).

According to several respondents, one dimension of US–French relations worth recollecting was the active role played by US Secretary of State Colin Powell. General Powell was the key figure given the responsibility by the White House of convincing France to support

the second UN resolution on Iraq. As recalled by his close associate from the Department of State:

The argument that Colin Powell was making to the French is that we wanted to sound ferocious to Saddam Hussein to get him to give up whatever weapons he had left. This would in turn allow overturning an invasion. And we [the Department of State] absolutely could not get our French colleagues to believe that this would be the case (Interview, 28 May 2019).

Ironically, it was Powell's testimony to the UN Security Council on 5 February 2003 that marked a decisive moment in undermining US credibility among their French counterparts³⁵. As later revealed in a report published by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence³⁶, the Secretary of State insisted that his claims were based on hard intelligence, when in fact they were partly fabricated or based on unsolid evidence. As one senior diplomat working in the UN at the time put it: 'Frankly, today I think that our work in the UN, even the WMD pretext was just window dressing our preparations of the invasion' (Interview, 30 May 2019b).

As the US findings did not add up, France threatened to veto the second resolution altogether, refusing to endorse, let alone join a US pre-emptive attack on Iraq³⁷. This in turn forced the US, UK, and Spain to withdraw the subsequent National Security Council amendment that would have authorised the use of force against Iraq. In that sense, as noted by one senior diplomat:

The French pulled the rug from under the feet of Colin Powell with [President] Jacques Chirac de facto allying himself with Secretary Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney. And on the day I heard the news

35 *Colin Powell's UN speech: a decisive moment in undermining US credibility*, The Guardian [online], 2021, October 18th [accessed: 15 VIII 2022]: <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/oct/18/colin-powell-un-security-council-iraq>>.

36 *Report on the U.S. intelligence community's pre-war intelligence assessments on Iraq*, United States Select Senate Committee on Intelligence [online], 2004, July 9th [accessed: 15 VIII 2022]: <<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-108srpt301/pdf/CRPT-108srpt301.pdf>>.

37 M. Danner, *The secret way to war*, „The New York Review of Books”, 2005, 9 June, p. 73.

about the withdrawal of the resolution, I brought my staff in and I said – ‘we’re going to go to war’ (Interview, 29 May 2019).

So, why did the French make such an orchestrated effort to build an international coalition to oppose the attack on Iraq, especially as they had no warm feelings towards Saddam Hussein’s regime? Some interviewees argued that from the onset France made a strategic calculation that any invasion would ‘stir up a hornet’s nest’, destabilising the entire situation in the Middle East – the consequences of which would be felt first and foremost by Europe (Interview, 1 May 2019; Interview, 29 May 2019; Interview, 30 May 2019a). As one respondent recalled, the French strategic argument was that ‘we [Americans] had no idea what we were really getting into and that regime change was going to be much more complicated there than we thought’ (Interview, 31 May 2019). A close collaborator of Colin Powell went so far as to say: ‘Frankly, I think President Chirac thought we lost our minds’ (Interview, 27 May 2019). Others spoke about France’s commitment to the UN system and its belief that the Security Council remained the only enabling organisation for the use of force to address international conflicts (Interview, 29 May 2019; Interview, 31 May 2019). A few respondents argued that France and Germany had a larger political agenda. According to this argument, both French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder wanted to establish their independence from the US and were using the situation to weaken the US’s role in Europe (Interview, 24 April 2019; Interview, 30 May 2019a). As one senior diplomat framed it: ‘They [French] wanted to strengthen Europe at the expense of the United States, which I think was their mistake in retrospect’ (Interview, 19 June 2019). In addition, commercial interests were mentioned. As argued by one senior US official from the Pentagon, France did not want Saddam Hussein to be removed as he owed France a significant amount of money (Interview, 27 May 2019).

From the perspective of two decades later, there seems to be, however, much more appreciation and understanding among US officials of the French stance of the time. As argued by one respondent:

The French diplomats were much more reflective and cool headed than we were. The French ambassador to the UN (Jean-David Levitte) told me several times – you have enough authority in the first resolution

to attack. Don't submit a second resolution. Don't force us to have to decide this one again. But the inference I got from a couple of conversations that I had with Ambassador Levitte was that if we didn't put France on the spot, they might have acquiesced in what we did (Interview, 30 May 2019b).

Such suggestions at the lower level were directly contradicted by the public behaviour of the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin, who – as interviews confirmed over and over again – was characterised by a very arrogant and confrontational style (Interview, 27 May 2019; Interview, 28 May 2019; Interview, 30 May 2019b).

Nevertheless, some respondents openly admitted that France had every reason to oppose the resolution. As one senior diplomat recalls:

The French completely did not accept that Saddam [Hussein] was responsible for 9/11, which was the whole reason we were getting into Iraq. We didn't believe it either – we knew that that was not the case, that it was a made-up story' (Interview, 28 May 2019).

3.3. US retaliation and US–French reconciliation

The French opposition to the second UN resolution caused an unprecedented outburst of anger in the US directed against France. On the one hand, there were a number of hostile but largely symbolic gestures, such as Congressman Bob Ney demanding the renaming of 'French fries' to 'freedom fries' at the Capitol cafeteria or American restauranters publicly pouring bottles of French wine down the drain³⁸. On the other hand, the US Department of Defense was determined to undertake concrete retaliatory steps against the French. As recalled by one senior official working at the time in the Pentagon:

Many of us in the building, including the Secretary [of defense], were not impressed by how the French were putting our troops in danger by emboldening Iraq and Saddam Hussein to hold firm on his posture. So, part of our strategy was to pressure the French to back off on this by reducing our military relationships (Interview, 30 May 2019a).

38 F. Bozo, G. Parmentier, *France and the United States*, p. 181.

As explained, the Pentagon was convinced that the French Ministry of Defence perceived the US–French bilateral military cooperation as very beneficial to its work. The rationale behind limiting this cooperation was the hope that the French military would weigh in within the French interagency and encourage a change of policy in Paris. None of the respondents were, however, able to confirm whether such an approach actually worked.

What the interviews did confirm, however, was the existence of a serious interagency disagreement within the US itself, with the Department of State and some individuals at the National Security Council strongly opposing any retaliatory measures against France (Interview, 27 May 2019; Interview, 28 May 2019; Interview, 29 May 2019a). As one senior US diplomat described the situation: ‘The State Department realised that we were going to have to play for the long term here. France was not going away and would remain an important ally for the United States’ (Interview, 29 May 2019a). Unable to terminate military agreements without the Department of State’s formal consent, the Pentagon took an approach of simply allowing the existing bilateral agreements with France to expire (Interview, 30 May 2019a). As respondents recall, the US Department of Defense – at the direct request of Secretary Rumsfeld – also called off a number of joint military exercises, as well as cancelling both high-level meetings between chiefs of staff of both countries and regular contact at the level of defence attachés (Interview, 28 May 2019). Moreover, in December 2003, as the US began the rebuilding of Iraq, the Pentagon decided to bar war opponents, including France, Germany, Russia and Canada, from bidding on \$18.6 billion in prime contracts for Iraq’s reconstruction³⁹.

Throughout most of 2003, the Department of State was thus trying to limit the damage inflicted on the bilateral relationship by the Iraqi debacle. As recalled by respondents this included: Colin Powell talking the Senate out of taking more forceful actions against France (Interview, 27 May 2019) or Department of State officials working with the French ambassador to the US to salvage existing bilateral cooperation programmes (Interview, 28 May 2019). Worth noticing, however, was the fact that apart

39 C. A. Robbins, N. King Jr., T. Sims, *The difficulty of mending fences; U. S. plan to limit war’s opponents in reconstruction sets obstacle to overall peace efforts*, „The Wall Street Journal”, 2003, December 11th.

from publicly protesting against the retaliatory measure, France did not undertake any actions against the US. When asked about the reasons for such restrained behaviour on the part of the French, the US officials either attributed it to Colin Powell's enormous efforts in bridging the divide throughout 2003 (Interview, 28 May 2019; Interview, 19 June 2019) or the fact that in France the fallout with the US was not as politically inflated as it was in the US (Interview, 24 April 2019).

All in all, despite the outbursts of Francophobia in the US, US–French cooperation on other matters never stopped – even at the height of the crisis. As underlined by one senior Department of State official: 'I think we slowly got back into a conversation about things that we could talk about, such as counterterrorism or France's engagement in Africa, which for the French were enormously important' (Interview, 29 May 2019a). The respondents attributed an important role played in the reconciliation process to the two ambassadors appointed by both countries – French Ambassador Jean-David Levitte in Washington, DC and American Ambassador Howard H. Leach in Paris. Both worked hard in trying to not only explain the respective positions of both governments, but also conducted a 'charm campaign', which included numerous public diplomacy activities to ease the tensions (Interview, 24 April 2019; Interview, 27 May 2019; Interview, 28 May 2019; Interview, 29 May 2019a; Interview, 30 May 2019b; Interview, 19 June 2019).

By 2004, both US and French policymakers began to realise that a prolonged crisis between them was benefiting no one. On the one hand, the Bush administration had to acknowledge that stabilising and rebuilding Iraq without European support (especially of France and Germany) would be a difficult task⁴⁰ and thus slowly began to turn once again towards multilateralism and its allies. This process was facilitated by the waning influence of neoconservatives such as Vice President Cheney and Secretary Rumsfeld whose handling of the Iraqi occupation proved to be disastrous⁴¹. With that, the earlier rhetoric about 'old' and 'new' Europe was abandoned by the administration and dialogue with France reopened. As a symbolic gesture – after being re-elected in 2004 – George W. Bush chose Brussels

40 F. Bozo, G. Parmentier, *France and the United States*.

41 S. A. Bonn, *Mass deception, moral panic and the US war on Iraq*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 2010.

in Belgium as his first international trip. By placing the 2005 visit within both the EU and NATO institutional contexts, the American president signalled a renewed interest in strengthening the transatlantic alliance and US relations with the European Union including with France⁴².

Meanwhile, the French leaders also began to realise that it was impossible to sustain a united Europe with Paris and Washington clashing openly. As Bozo and Parmentier underline, 'a transatlantic chasm inevitably opened a parallel divide in Europe: a number of European countries, not least the new members, would choose Washington over Paris if forced to take sides'⁴³. With the larger framework of American foreign policy changing, reconciliation slowly became conceivable for Paris. Gestures such as sending French special forces to Afghanistan in the summer of 2003 (formally announced only a year later), or President Chirac agreeing to erase almost all of Iraqi debt towards France, marked a turning point in the relationship⁴⁴. To the extent that by early 2006, the Washington Post's David Ignatius was able to write that 'France may well have become "Bush's new ally"'⁴⁵.

There was general agreement among the respondents that by the time Nicolas Sarkozy was elected President of France in 2007, most of the divides between the two countries were bridged (Interview, 28 May 2019; Interview, 29 May 2019a; Interview, 30 May 2019b). With the historical decision to rejoin the military structures of NATO in 2009, the new French president wanted not only to increase France's influence on the world stage and but also improve its relations with its NATO allies, particularly the US⁴⁶. As commented by one of the top US diplomats who was stationed in France at the time: 'When I got to Paris in 2008, I cannot remember literally anyone mentioning the Iraqi incident or that period. I think it is now in the realm of historians. It has not had any staying power in the French consciousness' (Interview, 24 April 2019). Has the episode in US–French relations changed how the Americans perceive France? Again, as another senior State Department official commented: 'Today [2019], 90% of people in the United States believe that

42 S. Serfaty, *Terms of estrangement*, p. 86.

43 F. Bozo, G. Parmentier, *France and the United States*, p. 184.

44 F. Bozo, *A history of the Iraq crisis*, p. 302.

45 D. Ignatius, *Bush's new ally: France*, „The Washington Post”, 2006, February 1st.

46 D. Mahncke, *The United States, Germany and France*.

the Iraq War was a mistake and France – at the time – may have analysed this better than we did' (Interview, 29 May 2019a).

Some, however, challenged the notion that the Iraqi crisis between US and France had no long-term consequences for the relationship. As a senior official from the Pentagon suggested:

The invasion caused many in France to question the value of the transatlantic relationship. It empowered those in France who are eager to knock down American influence in Europe, and we still feel that today. I think it's evidenced to a certain degree in the French phrase 'strategic autonomy' for their efforts to create a greater European defence capability (Interview, 30 May 2019a).

All in all, however, respondents agreed that over the two decades since the Iraqi invasion, the importance of France as a US key military partner has significantly increased (Interview, 29 May 2019a; Interview, 30 May 2019a; Interview, 31 May 2019).

4. Summary of Findings

By analysing the recollections and perceptions of 11 former senior US officials from the US Department of State and the US Department of Defense who, under the first Bush administration (2000–2004), directly witnessed the fallout between the US and France around the 2003 war in Iraq, a number of findings stand out:

- First, the fallout was driven not by irreconcilable ideological differences between the US and France or the disagreement on the nature of the Iraqi regime. A few US officials went as far as to suggest that some in the French administration were even willing to ponder its state's participation in the invasion. At a minimum, however, the French opposition in the UN could have been softened. This scenario was never realised simply because the US was not able to present credible evidence, which could serve as a *casus belli*. According to most respondents, however, had the US not requested a second UN resolution, the fallout with France would most probably not have been as dramatic.
- Second, the interviews confirmed widespread and general outrage among US officials regarding France's vetoing of the second UN resolution.

This proved true even among those who had been somewhat sympathetic to the French arguments. The reaction resulted primarily from the feeling that French actions emboldened the Iraqi regime but also of a sense of betrayal by France, its longstanding ally.

- Third, the interviews confirmed the existence of a serious inter-agency disagreement within the US administration in the second part of 2003, with the US Department of Defense advocating for retaliatory measures against France, while the US Department of State strongly opposed such a policy. Well into 2004, the Department of Defense was trying to limit military-to-military cooperation with France to a minimum, while the Department of State took an orchestrated effort to minimise the damage.

- Last, but not least, despite the political drama, practically all the respondents agreed that the dispute over Iraq was not a turning point in US–French relations. As confirmed by the interviews – over the two decades which have passed since 2003 – France has become an even more important military ally of the US and remains a consistent partner in the UN Security Council and other international forums.

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