

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR

THREAT INFLATION SINCE 9/11

EDITED BY A. TREVOR THRALL
AND JANE K. CRAMER

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American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear

This edited volume addresses the issue of threat inflation in American foreign policy and domestic politics. The Bush administration's aggressive campaign to build public support for an invasion of Iraq reheated fears about the president's ability to manipulate the public, and many charged the administration with "threat inflation," duping the news media and misleading the public into supporting the war under false pretences.

Presenting the latest research, these essays seek to answer the question of why threat inflation occurs and when it will be successful. Simply defined, it is the effort by elites to create concern for a threat that goes beyond the scope and urgency that disinterested analysis would justify. More broadly, the process concerns how elites view threats, the political uses of threat inflation, the politics of threat framing among competing elites, and how the public interprets and perceives threats via the news media.

The war with Iraq gets special attention in this volume, along with the "War on Terror." Although many believe that the Bush administration successfully inflated the Iraq threat, there is not a neat consensus about why this was successful. Through both theoretical contributions and case studies, this book showcases the four major explanations of threat inflation – realism, domestic politics, psychology, and constructivism – and makes them confront one another directly. The result is a richer appreciation of this important dynamic in US politics and foreign policy, present and future.

This book will be of much interest to students of US foreign and national security policy, international security, strategic studies and IR in general.

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Threat inflation since 9/11

**Edited by
A. Trevor Thrall and
Jane K. Cramer**

First published 2009
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009.

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collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

American foreign policy and the politics of fear : threat inflation since 9/11/

edited by A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer.

p. cm.

1. United States—Foreign relations—2001—Psychological aspects.

2. Threats—United States. I. Thrall, A. Trevor. II. Cramer, Jane K.

JZ1480.A959 2009

327.73—dc22

2008046236

ISBN 0-203-87909-0 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 10: 0-415-77768-2 (hbk)

ISBN 10: 0-415-77769-0 (pbk)

ISBN 10: 0-203-87909-0 (ebk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-77768-1 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-77769-8 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-203-87909-2 (ebk)

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Foreword

Stephen Van Evera

Threat inflation is a pervasive feature of international politics and an important cause of international conflict. States have a chronic tendency to exaggerate the aggressiveness and offensive capabilities of other states. As a result states often believe they are less secure than in fact they are. They then take unneeded or counterproductive steps to gain security that they already enjoy. A self-fulfilling prophecy develops: by their belligerent efforts to address imaginary threats, states provoke others to pose real threats to their safety.

States sometimes underestimate the threats they face. For example, at times Britain and France underestimated German power and aggressiveness during the 1930s. The George W. Bush administration underestimated the threat of an al-Qaeda terrorist attack in the U.S. before 9/11 (Van Evera 2006).

But threat inflation is far more common than threat underestimation.

Britain was provoked to war against France in 1756 by false reports that French forces had invaded east of the Alleghenies and were preparing a general invasion of British North America. The resulting Seven Years' War (1756–63) was a vast conflict that saw fighting from North America and the Caribbean to West Africa and South Asia. Its origins lay largely in inflated British fears of aggressive French intentions (Higgonet 1968; Smoke 1977).

A later generation of British leaders were led by similar mistakes to adopt hard-line policies toward Russia, sparking the Crimean War (1854–56). Specifically, the British badly overestimated Russian aggressiveness and Russian capabilities. Frightened by these illusions, Britain used force to contain the expansion of a Russia that was not pursuing expansion, and was too feeble to expand successfully in any case. In the Crimean conflict Britain spent 45,000 British lives to avert a Russian threat that existed largely in the imagination of the British government. (Greenville 1976; Smoke 1977).

Before 1914, Germans widely believed they were surrounded by hostile states that were plotting aggressive war against them, and that Germany could well be destroyed in such a war. This was untrue on both counts. Germany's neighbors did not seek war against Germany; and even if war somehow erupted between Germany and its neighbors, Germany would have easily survived had it played its hand wisely. In the test of World War I, Germany was defeated only because it foolishly provoked Britain to enter the war against it in 1914 by invading Belgium and

France, and then even more foolishly provoked the United States to enter against it in 1917 by attacking American shipping. A Germany under more prudent leadership would have emerged from the war unbeaten or even victorious. And a Germany that sought to avoid war in 1914 would have enjoyed a safe, peaceful and prosperous existence. Over time a peaceful Germany's relative power would have only grown, because Germany's economy was growing faster than other European economies. The threats that fueled German pre-1914 belligerence were illusions (Geiss 1976; Fischer 1975; Mombauer 2002; Moses 1975).

During the interwar years Germans continued to inflate the threats that Germany faced. Germans wrongly believed they were innocent of causing World War I, thinking instead that Britain, France and Russia had conspired to organize the war (Herwig 1991). This misreading of history fueled arguments that Germany lived in a vicious neighborhood and might soon be attacked again. Hitler rode this paranoid climate to power and used it to persuade Germans to follow him into self-ruinous wars of aggression during 1939–1945, launched in the name of gaining security for Germany.

In the 1930s Japan's leaders wrongly believed that Japan faced what they called "ABCD encirclement," an imagined conspiracy by America, Britain, China and the Dutch to subjugate and colonize Japan. This illusion fueled arguments in Japan that Japan had to grow or die, and kindled their decision to launch the Pacific war in 1941.

During 1955–61 Americans vastly exaggerated Soviet military capabilities, first during the "bomber gap" period (1955–57), and then during the "missile gap" (1957–61) Bottome (1971; Cramer 2002). These overestimates sometimes reached remarkable proportions. For example, in late 1959 U.S. intelligence agencies forecast that by 1961–62 the Soviet Union would have 1000–1500 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), compared to less than 100 ICBMs for the U.S. (Bottome 1971: 39–40, 55–56). In fact by September 1961 the Soviets had deployed only four ICBMs – less than one half of one percent of the missiles expected by U.S. intelligence (Kaplan 1983). There was a missile gap, but it lay vastly in favor of the United States.

These overestimates of Soviet bomber and missile building fed Cold War tensions by fueling American military over-building and American fear that Soviet intentions were aggressive. Americans wondered why the Soviets would seek military superiority, if not to bully the west into concessions or to launch aggressive war? Such fears stoked outsized U.S. military programs. This U.S. military over-building in turn provoked the USSR to desperate measures to strengthen its nuclear capability by covertly moving intermediate range missiles to Cuba in 1962. This reckless move triggered the Cuban Missile Crisis, our closest brush with World War III.

The U.S. again exaggerated Soviet military capabilities in the late 1970s and early 1980s. U.S. press commentators widely warned of Soviet nuclear and conventional superiority. But Soviet military superiority was an illusion. Both the Soviets and the U.S. maintained vast secure nuclear deterrents during this period – neither came anywhere near superiority over the other – and NATO conventional

forces could have defeated a Soviet conventional attack in Europe (Salman, Sullivan, and Van Evera 1989; Mearsheimer 1982, 1988; Posen 1984–85, 1988).

The George W. Bush administration famously overestimated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime during the run-up to the 2003 American attack on Iraq. The administration wrongly claimed that Saddam possessed chemical and biological weapons, and maintained an active nuclear program. The administration also wrongly suggested that Saddam was allied with al-Qaeda and shared responsibility for al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack. The American people supported the war largely because it believed these false arguments.

Professional militaries are especially prone to inflate foreign threats. For example, the pre-1914 German military warned that Germany was surrounded by rapacious enemies ready to pounce. In the late 1880s and early 1890s General Alfred von Waldersee's military attaché in Paris "filled his reports with hair raising accounts of the imminence of a French attack." He told Berlin that "the present peaceful exterior is only a thin covering over France, a slight puff of wind and the bayonets are through," although French leaders actually had no belligerent plans (Kitchen 1968: 73). In 1904, the German naval attaché in London so alarmed Berlin with his reports that the Kaiser became persuaded that Britain might attack the next spring – a groundless fear (Steinber 1966). In 1909, former Chief of the General Staff Alfred von Schlieffen wrongly imagined that Germany and Austria–Hungary faced sudden attack by Britain, France, Russia and even Italy, which was then Germany's ally (Ritter 1958 [1978]). In 1911, General Friedrich von Bernhardi, the German army's top publicist, echoed Schlieffen, writing that "France aims solely at crushing Germany by an aggressive war," and that Germany's eastern territories were "menaced" by "Slavonic waves." "Our German nation is beset on all sides" (Bernhardi 1914). And in 1912 Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz wrongly claimed that the Anglo-French Entente "has the character of an offensive alliance" (Fischer 1975).

During the cold war U.S. military commanders often drew alarming pictures of Soviet and Chinese intentions. General Thomas Power, a former commander of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), wrongly forecast in 1964 that Soviet leaders would resort to "all-out military action" if they could not subdue the United States by other means. "They have long prepared for such a contingency" (Power and Arnheim 1965). Former SAC commander General Nathan Twining dubiously divined in 1966 that "the ultimate objectives of China's leaders are certainly the subjugation and communization of all Southeast Asia, the Indonesian area, the Philippines, and Australia" and described a "Hitler-like mentality which now dominates Red China" (Twining 1966). Cold War-era polls showed that U.S. military officers had darker views of Soviet intentions than their civilian counterparts (Holsti 1998/99).

Special interest groups that stand to gain from aggressive foreign policies are another source of threat inflation. The false reports of French aggression that provoked Britain to war against France in 1756 (described earlier) were concocted largely by Governor Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia. Dinwiddie was a principle shareholder in the Ohio Land Company, which stood to profit greatly from British expansion in North America. This private motive likely explains Dinwiddie's

deceit (Higonnet 1968). Likewise, during 1953–54 the United Fruit Company (UFCo) organized a publicity campaign to warn the American public that Guatemala was coming under Soviet influence (Kinzer and Schlesinger 1999). But UFCo's claims were false. The Soviets actually had no significant presence in Guatemala. UFCo's motive doubtless lay in its wish to persuade the U.S. government to oust a leftist Guatemalan government that was threatening UFCo's privileged economic position in Guatemala.

Foreign lobbies will inflate threats if they can mobilize help for their cause by doing so. During the 1940s and 1950s the China Lobby relentlessly exaggerated the threat posed to the U.S. by communism in Asia (Koen 1974). This propaganda nurtured a public climate of fear about Asian communism in the U.S., which in turn helped to foster America's unfortunate decision to prosecute the Vietnam War.

Threat inflation often takes the form of monolith thinking, in which the closeness of ties among unfriendly states, or between neutral and unfriendly states, is exaggerated. Monolith thinking has a double threat-inflating effect. It causes the monolith-thinker to impute the hostility of the more hostile state to the less hostile state; and to assume that the leader-state of the assumed monolith commands the capabilities of its alleged vassals, and so to believe that the leader-state is stronger than in fact it is. Hence, monolith thinking leads states to exaggerate the hostility and capabilities of others.

During the Cold War Americans often fell sway to monolith thinking, wrongly assuming that nationalist/communist Third World movements were Soviet puppets, when in fact they were independent of Soviet control. At various times the U.S. wrongly saw China, Iran, Guatemala, North Vietnam, the Viet Cong of South Vietnam, Nicaragua, and leftists in El Salvador as obedient to Soviet command. In the 1960s U.S. leaders also believed Vietnam's communists were vassals of China, a mistaken notion that crucially supported arguments for American involvement in Vietnam. Soviet cold war-era leaders held similar notions about the capitalist world, wrongly seeing neutral non-communist states as obedient American proxies.

More recently, the George W. Bush administration wrongly argued that Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda were partners, when in fact they were hostile adversaries.

Threat inflation can sometimes prevent war by deterring states that would act more aggressively if they accurately gauged others capabilities or intentions. In the early 1950s Stalin and his successors may have moderated their foreign policies because they wrongly thought the U.S. was gearing up to attack the USSR, and they sought to avoid offering a provocation (Khrushchev 1990).

More often, however, threat inflation raises the risk of war. It leaves states feeling less secure than they would feel if they estimated others intentions and capabilities accurately. As a result states take belligerent measures to secure themselves. Specifically, they may seek bigger borders to gain assets they believe will enhance their power. They may launch aggressive wars to cut neighbors down to size, or to destroy what they believe to be hostile regimes in neighboring states. They may launch preemptive or preventive war to forestall attack by others.

States that feel insecure may also adopt belligerent policies short of war that raise

the risk of war. Such policies include the use of *fait accompli* tactics in diplomacy, the enshrouding of foreign and military policy in dark secrecy, and the pursuit of more intense arms-racing. The first of these policies, *faits accomplis*, can cause war if the state taking the *fait accompli* unwittingly oversteps another state's red line, creating a *casus belli*. The second policy, dark secrecy, can foster war-causing false optimism in others. The third, arms racing, can open windows of opportunity or vulnerability. These windows in turn can tempt states in relative decline to launch preventive war before their situation deteriorates further.

When states are conquered and destroyed, their own threat inflation is often a large part of the cause. Since 1815 great powers have been conquered on eight occasions. On two of these eight occasions the great power was conquered by unprovoked aggressors (France was overrun by Prussia in 1870 and by Nazi Germany in 1940), while on six occasions it was overrun by provoked aggressors. On five of these six occasions the aggressors were provoked by the victim's fantasy-driven defensive bellicosity. Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, Austria-Hungary and Imperial Japan were all destroyed by dangers that they created through their efforts to escape from exaggerated or imaginary threats to their safety. Mussolini's Italy, which provoked its own destruction for non-security reasons, forms the sole exception.

If so, threat inflation is a prime danger to the safety of modern great powers. Their nemesis lies in their own tendency to exaggerate the threats they face, and to respond with counterproductive belligerence. The causes of this syndrome pose a large question for students of international relations, and form the subject of this volume.

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Acknowledgements

Every book represents the efforts and support of a great many people beyond the authors and editors. In addition to the great support from our families and friends, we need to thank the Social Sciences department at the University of Michigan – Dearborn and the Political Science Department at the University of Oregon for providing necessary funding and every form of logistical support. We would also like to thank Sue Peterson for first suggesting the idea for this edited volume and Robert Art for connecting us with Sue Peterson. We would also like to thank the contributors to this volume, all of whom have been extremely pleasant under short deadlines and without whom there would be no book. Finally, we thank Sage Publications, the MIT Press, the National Interest, and John Wiley and Sons for permission to reprint portions of material previously published in their journals.

A. Trevor Thrall
Jane K. Cramer

1 Introduction

Understanding threat inflation

Jane K. Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall

The Bush administration's launching of a global war on terrorism in the wake of 9/11, coupled with its aggressive campaign to build public support for war against Iraq, have brought the term "threat inflation" into popular use. President Bush's ability to stoke public fear about Iraq's connections to Al Qaeda and about its weapons of mass destruction despite the lack of any hard evidence has fueled both public outcry as well as a vigorous debate among academics about why the administration argued with such certainty about Iraq and how its arguments came to dominate debate. The implications of the debate are profound. To the extent that the president can dominate debate about foreign threats, it becomes difficult for the United States to rely on the marketplace of ideas (i.e., the news media and public vetting of foreign policy) to assess accurately the pros and cons of competing arguments about foreign policy and the use of force. In extreme cases, as several scholars have labeled the invasion of Iraq, a president may convince the public to support a war that it would otherwise strenuously oppose.

This volume focuses on the whys and hows of the threat inflation process. Threat inflation, most simply understood, is the attempt by elites to create concern for a threat that goes beyond the scope and urgency that a disinterested analysis would justify. Many scholars, including several in this volume, do not find this definition a perfect one to describe the process. Nonetheless, this view sits at the heart of both public and academic debate over Iraq, and for many it describes the handling of threats since 9/11, thus providing an important baseline definition with which to compare and contrast competing explanations for the same historical cases.

To date scholars have offered a wide range of arguments about why the Bush administration has sought to inflate threats since 9/11 and Iraq in particular. Many observers insist that much of the threat exaggeration since 9/11 has been intentional, politically opportunistic and even self-serving. Others see the administration as sincere, led by long-held ideology to see the post 9/11 world as extremely threatening. Some scholars point the finger at neoconservatives in key positions; arguing that they pressed their worldview on the administration and hijacked the decision-making process regarding Iraq. Others have argued that common psychological short cuts in reasoning biased the threat perception process and most likely significantly account for the widespread misperceptions among administration leaders and their followers. Still others find the threat inflation process likely to be

at root politically motivated, but nonetheless primarily institutionally determined and perhaps even necessary to exaggerate threats to enable bold foreign policy initiatives. Finally, a few scholars have assessed the post 9/11 era and found simply a series of heightened fears, unavoidable intelligence failures, and mistakes in judgment.

With regard to how the threat inflation process actually impacts public opinion change and the policy-making process, scholars are likewise in conflict. Why does threat inflation sometimes succeed when clearly, at many other moments in history, elite attempts to inflate the threat do not succeed? Even in cases where scholars agree threat inflation was successful, as with Iraq, observers disagree about what factors moved the needle. Was Bush's ability to manage the news the critical ingredient, his information dominance as president with respect to Congress, or simply the fact that Congress was unwilling or unable to challenge him so soon after 9/11?

Given the rising interest in the question of threat inflation and the tremendous diversity of competing explanations for recent events, the time is ripe to bring together the different theoretical approaches and make them speak to one another. Too often scholars studying different aspects of threat inflation have not confronted each other's work. Scholars who have studied intelligence failures, psychological misperceptions, intentional elite manipulation of threats, the formation of public opinion and the power of identity have often been analyzing the same historical cases and evidence without explicitly recognizing either the challenges or the synergies from other perspectives. Thus, in these pages, we asked our contributors to do two things. First, we asked them to address specifically the concept of threat inflation as we have defined it here. Second, we asked them to consider the extent to which their understanding of threat inflation is complementary or competitive with other explanations. In short, these essays on threat inflation have been brought together here to begin a more comprehensive discussion of the causes of threat inflation and the factors that contribute to its success or failure in the United States. Our hope is that a robust debate on this topic will shed light on an important period in U.S. foreign policy and prove fruitful for scholars trying to build theories that offer enduring lessons about threat inflation.

Theories of threat inflation

There are four broad theoretical approaches explaining threat inflation: realist, psychological, domestic political and constructivist. Part of what makes it difficult to reconcile these approaches is that they often operate on different levels of analysis and highlight different elements as most crucial to the process. At times, scholars appear to be in near-agreement as to the causes of threat inflation, but slight differences in emphasis or characterization of what the most important causes of threat inflation are lead to major differences in policy prescriptions as to what the cure for threat inflation might be, if a cure is indeed possible. Nonetheless, a complete theory must explain the causal chain outlined in Figure 1.1. The figure provides the simplest possible model of the threat inflation process, in which elites perceive threats, create communication strategies to inflate threats, implement those

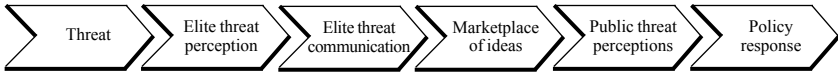


Figure 1.1 A simple model of threat inflation

strategies within the news media, or marketplace of ideas, in an attempt to shape opinions and influence policy, and either succeed or fail to do so.

Looking at the model, a useful way to understand the major differences between the four theoretical approaches is simply to ask in case of each approach: Where does threat inflation begin? Realists begin at the far left of the model, highlighting the uncertainty that elites face in trying to assess threats. Unable to be certain of other's intentions, elites often feel they have little or no choice but to focus on the worst case, and they may even spin threats to the public in order to prepare for the same. Psychological theorists generally start a step further to the right from realists, arguing most often that the key problems arise in the information-processing step as elites fall prey to various cognitive and emotional biases in perception. Some psychological theorists emphasize the fifth step in that they emphasize ways in which the very same cognitive biases lead the public to overreact to certain threats and to be most receptive to elites who emphasize worst case scenarios.

Constructivist perspectives on threat inflation similarly suggest that threat inflation begins with elite threat perception, but argue that elite threat perceptions are not discrete events but are historically and culturally determined, rooted in national identity, norms and values, which in turn reflect collective discursive processes within the society. As with psychological theories, many constructivist theories are also used to explain how public perceptions are determined. Instead of looking at cognitive processes, constructivists aim to understand how and why certain arguments become hegemonic among the public from a social perspective.

Domestic politics explanations of threat inflation primarily focus on the middle two steps of the process, arguing that many elites have institutional, electoral, bureaucratic, personal or material incentives to promote threats and that threat inflation's success or failure rides on the political maneuvering, competition between President and Congress, the influence of interest groups and lobbies, public opinion, and the behavior of the mass media.

Most scholars, regardless of general theoretical approach, acknowledge that threat inflation has multiple and interacting causes. To date, however, there have been few attempts to bring these different perspectives together in a complete explanation of the entire threat inflation process. In this chapter we provide a brief overview of these four types of explanations and how the phenomenon of "threat inflation" has been explored previously.

Realist explanations of threat inflation

Realist scholars emphasize that what appears to be "threat inflation" is really the result of leaders attempting to cope with uncertainty. For realists, overestimations

of threats are the inevitable, regular consequence of insufficient intelligence and the opacity of other states' intentions. (Knorr 1976; Waltz 1979; Walt 1987; Mearsheimer 2001; Tang 2008). Large overestimations of threats are most likely to happen at times of increased uncertainty and perceived high risk such as after a surprise attack because leaders need to constantly analyse ambiguous and incomplete intelligence in real time and pay close attention to worst case analyses as they decide how to respond to possible threats within the international system (e.g. how could a leader ever know for sure that Iraq really did not have weapons of mass destruction somewhere, even with inspections?) (Freedman 2004; Jervis 2006a). Realist analysis emphasizes the primary importance of uncertainty as the root cause of what appears to be "threat inflation."

Realist arguments stress that analyses of threats at all times vary greatly, and what appears to be "threat inflation" is most often a disagreement over the probability or significance of worst case analyses. Realists argue that people can sometimes know with the benefit of hindsight that threats were inflated at a particular time, but for many analysts that does not mean that seemingly extreme estimates were insincere, unreasonable or implausible. Many interpretations of a threat are always possible, so deciding what threat analysis is beyond the range of plausible at a particular time is most often unknowable (Krebs 2005).

Realists who stress disagreements over intelligence as the root cause of what appears to be "threat inflation" often acknowledge other contributing factors such as understandable and excusable "spinning" of threats for political mobilization purposes (Mearsheimer 2004). This does not mean that leaders are lying or pursuing self-serving domestic political interests. Instead, leaders are primarily rationally coping with international threats that are unknowable and largely unpredictable. Leaders are acting responsibly in an uncertain and anarchic system where states must constantly search for security. It is a tragic reality that leaders' actions and frequent over-reactions often leave them worse off, but this is the result of the usually unavoidable security dilemma (Jervis 1978). Future capabilities and intentions of adversaries can never be known with certainty, and thus "threat inflation" is to be expected as leaders attempt to "play it safe" by anticipating unknowable threats. For many realists, "threat inflation" cannot be "cured." Vigilance by states against possible threats is necessary and hyper-vigilance that can be counter-productive can only be somewhat guarded against through better intelligence collection and analysis.

Psychological explanations of threat inflation

Many scholars believe that there is a significant amount of "threat inflation" that cannot be explained by uncertainty, intelligence failure and rational worst case analysis alone. One approach turns to theories of social and cognitive psychology to explain the central misperceptions of national security threats (Jervis 1976). Based on years of laboratory experiments, psychological theories suggest that people may misperceive national security threats due to common cognitive biases that limit the ability to assess threats rationally (Janis and Mann 1977; Nisbett and

Ross 1980; Janis 1982; Larson 1989; Lebow 1981; Khong 1992; Johnson 1994; Kaufmann 1994; Jervis 2006b).

A common argument with respect to Iraq in line with the psychological perspective generally begins with the observation that people often interpret facts in ways that support their expectations and in ways that support plausible arguments about potential threats even when the facts do not warrant such conclusions. In the case of Iraq, this tendency may have led the Bush administration to assume (and possibly the American public to accept) that Saddam Hussein's uncooperative behavior was hiding his pursuit of nuclear weapons. Since the United States knew he had sought such weapons in the past and expected him to continue doing so, the Bush administration and the U.S. intelligence community may have been unable to read the true underlying situation, leading them to inflate the threat (Jervis 2006b).

Relatedly, psychologists have argued that people do not update their beliefs in response to new information in the manner assumed by rational actor theories. Instead, once people form beliefs they tend to stick with them and use them as guidance for interpreting and understanding the world (Jervis 2006a). Having decided and argued that Iraq was the central front in the war on terror and that terrorism was an existential threat that had to be confronted aggressively, for example, it would be psychologically difficult and even painful for President Bush and his supporters to acknowledge at a later point that Al Qaeda did not represent an existential threat and that the war in Iraq was unnecessary and costly, even if a great deal of factual evidence pointed in that direction. Thus, psychological theories also suggest the potential for threat inflation to persist once it has begun.

The psychological biases that underlie these misperceptions come in two main types: unmotivated biases and motivated biases. Unmotivated biases are thought of as "short cuts in reasoning" and are unconscious, systematic errors, operating at all times or at least often, leading to theoretically predictable and observable divergences from rationality within individuals. In contrast, motivated biases reflect people's attempts to protect their egos, rationalize prior decisions, or prevent cognitive dissonance, and involve affect and emotion, not just cognition. Harder to predict, these biases help to explain how leaders who appear self-serving actually sincerely believe they are not self-serving and are instead acting in the best interest of the nation or cause. Taken together, scholars argue, these two types of biases can lead to a range of misperceptions and beliefs that make threat inflation more likely (Jervis 2006a; Renshon 2006; Gilovich *et al.* 2002).

One of the most famous unmotivated biases with threat inflationary capability is what psychologists call the fundamental attribution error (Kelley and Michela 1980). When one person observes another, the observer tends to attribute the other's actions to their character, nature or deeply held motives. At the same time, the observer tends to reason that her own actions are in response to her situation and to the other's actions, and not due to her own character, motives or nature since these aspects of herself are less "salient" or apparent to her. Thus, an observer is likely to reason that the other is buying arms or behaving threateningly because she is innately hostile and aggressive, while she is buying arms and behaving aggressively because she was provoked by the other and needs to defend herself. This type

of cognitive bias could cause leaders and members of the public to see themselves as significantly less hostile than their adversaries, while blinding them to the ways in which their adversary was provoked by them or by the situation. Such patterns in reasoning could be an important root cause of threat inflation.

Numerous other cognitive shortcuts in reasoning have been identified by scholars and are possibly important to national misperceptions of threats. Studies have shown, for example, that once people become anxious about a threat, they attend more carefully to threat-related information, identify threatening information as more salient than other information, and develop more negative attitudes toward out groups, often leading to an increased willingness to use force (Huddy *et al.* 2005; Gordon and Arian 2001; Eysenck 1992; Hermann *et al.* 1999). With particular relevance to the threat of terrorism, scholars have also long noted that people tend to overestimate the probability of extremely unlikely, yet dreadful, risks such as major terrorist attacks. In an uncertain world, scholars argue, these tendencies make it likely that hawkish arguments will win the day in policy debates and that nations will tend to inflate threats beyond their reasonable proportions (Sunstein 2003; Kahneman and Renshon 2007).

Psychological arguments may complement other lines of inquiry, but should also be considered potential competitors with other explanations of threat inflation. Domestic political arguments, for example, typically suggest that leaders intentionally mislead the public because of their political and material interests. Such an explanation clearly does not rule out the possibility that psychological factors also play a role in threat perception, perhaps compounding the misperception of threat. On the other hand, a contrary psychology based argument might suggest either that unmotivated bias is enough to explain the case without regard to domestic politics or that elites' political and material interests led to motivated biases. In the latter case, the psychological argument would suggest that leaders were acting sincerely rather than in a manipulative way.

Domestic political explanations of threat inflation

Domestic politics arguments begin with two central observations. First, that the electoral, institutional, bureaucratic and even material interests of elites help determine which threats elites will find it useful to inflate. Second, that the process of threat inflation is determined by the array of domestic political institutions and the advantages conferred by these institutions on the elites who occupy certain positions within them, as well as the obstacles those institutions present to anyone seeking to influence the policy process or public opinion.

The domestic politics viewpoint acknowledges that the causes of threat inflation might take the form either of sincere efforts to act in the public interest or manipulative strategies to gain political advantage, increase institutional budgets, or to advance other goals kept hidden from the public and political opposition. For example, many scholars have argued that overselling threats may in fact be a necessary evil. The inertia caused by the separation of powers and the difficulty of working with Congress routinely delays decisions and neutralizes bold policy

initiatives. To generate the political capital needed to mobilize the government, the president must first mobilize an apathetic public that typically pays little attention to foreign affairs. Thus this view finds that the president is essentially forced to make dramatic, even outlandish, arguments about potential threats to accomplish what he or she deems best for the country (Friedman this volume; Lowi 1979; Nye 1984; Kaufmann 2004; Kernell 2007).

Most scholars making domestic political arguments to explain threat inflation, however, identify a range of interests and motivations that point to less seemly reasons for presidents and other elites to hype threats. One set of likely threat inflators would be powerful narrow ideological and military special interests who find overseas expansion or intervention beneficial to their cause or goals in one way or another (Snyder 2003; Mearsheimer and Walt 2007). In looking at the Iraq case, for example, some scholars have pointed to neoconservatives as the root of threat inflation. Neoconservatives in and out of the Bush administration, they argue, had long sought an invasion of Iraq in particular, and more U.S. military engagement in the Middle East in many ways. These leaders likely were primarily interested in better securing Israel, while also presumably believing that these actions would better secure U.S. interests, just at a cost the U.S. public would not accept without threat inflation. These analysts argue that 9/11 merely provided the window of opportunity to take actions these narrow interests desired for other reasons long before 9/11. In this view, the war on terror has merely been mostly a convenient device to sell the Iraq war (and a more aggressive foreign policy overall) to an otherwise recalcitrant public (Lustick 2006; Cramer and Thrall 2005).

Once a threat has been established, wrongly or rightly, there is an incentive for interest groups, corporations, government agencies, and politicians to continue to inflate the threat in order to achieve material, policy, and electoral goals. In the wake of 9/11, scholars argue, interest groups and companies sought to sell themselves as critical to the war on terror, giving them an organizational incentive to make sure that the American public stayed focused on and afraid of the terrorist threat. Federal agencies used 9/11 as a window to advance policy priorities that had been stalled or denied in the past. Likewise, members of Congress, seeking to build favor back in their districts, had incentive to try to funnel abundant terrorism-related monies home to pet projects. In order to reap dividends at home, politicians had an incentive to argue that the government was not doing enough to protect ports, cities, transportation nodes, etc. Aspiring politicians as well could use threat inflation to challenge incumbents as being soft on terrorism, promising to do more and bring home more bacon. This competition leads incumbents and bureaucrats to work hard to attend to the terrorist threat in order to be sure that they could not be criticized by opponents or blamed should something actually happen. Scholars have suggested that such dynamics are unlikely to disappear quickly. While incentives to inflate the threat are numerous and the dividends gained by narrow interests are tangible, no one has such strong incentives to work to deflate threats (Lustick 2006; Mueller 2006; Snyder 2003).

Another theme from the domestic politics literature on threat inflation is the role and contribution of the mass media to public fears. This argument takes several