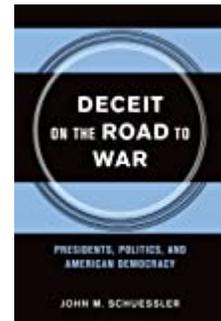




John M. Schuessler. *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. 192 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5359-5.



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Thirteen years after President George W. Bush led the United States to war against Iraq, Americans are still suffering from buyers' remorse. During the 2016 presidential campaign, candidates were pressed about the decade-old invasion more than about most other pressing foreign policy challenges. Academics, too, remain obsessed with the decision to invade, as seen in a continuing stream of literature on the topic. The Library of Congress subject heading, "Iraq War, 2003-2011" Causes now lists some 150 titles.

The newest book to revisit the question of Bush's honesty in making the case for war is *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics and American Democracy*, by John M. Schuessler, a political scientist and associate professor at the Air War College. A thoughtful, patiently argued, and lucidly written tract, it examines the role of presidential deception in the Iraq War, World War II, and the Vietnam War. Based almost entirely on the published research of others, its contents will be familiar to scholars of these wars and probably to many readers of popular history.

Yet Schuessler does not purport to be unearthing new information. He admits that his method "involves critically analyzing the secondary literature and supplement-

ing with primary sources whenever the need arises" and he does just that (pp. 24-25). His purpose, rather, is to wade into a debate among political scientists: Are democracies less likely to start wars than dictatorships because they're constrained by public opinion and other checks on executive power? Schuessler's final answer is a bit murky but it seems to amount to, not as much as we like to think.

Schuessler begins with the conventional wisdom among political scientists that democracies, unlike dictatorships or other nondemocratic regimes, face institutional constraints in going to war. In the United States, presidents must sustain support from other branches of government, rival parties, the public, and the press. In practice, however, presidents resort to deception in advocating war, short-circuiting the ostensibly open debate by withholding, distorting, or exaggerating information. Schuessler is careful in his reasoning and not inclined to polemics, and so he stops short of claiming that democratic institutions and procedures provide *no* deterrent to unilateral executive war-making action. "It would be going too far to say that the marketplace of ideas poses no constraint on the ability of leaders to manufacture consent for war," he concedes (p. 6). Yet he wants us to think twice before fancying that democratic leaders are

as hindered as the theory would suppose.

Presidents escape the normal constraints on going to war, Schuessler says, through deception. Plucked from context, this word sounds ominous, as if Schuessler is going to recite a litany of shopworn conspiracy theories or conjure up the specter of sinister leaders deliberately lying to take peace-loving citizens to war for nefarious purposes. But Schuessler is much more sophisticated than that. He even concedes that some cases of deception in the service of military intervention—such as Franklin Roosevelt’s shiftiness in the run-up to World War II—are justified. He also notes that leaders may believe the claims they present to the public, even if in retrospect those claims appear to us distorted or false.

Schuessler defines “deception” broadly. For him, the concept includes not just lying but also the withholding of information and even garden-variety political spin. Oddly, however, Schuessler says that while “the deception campaigns featured in this book are characterized by a great deal of spinning and concealment but little outright lying,” he nonetheless believes that “the cumulative effect is no less misleading” (p. 10). This claim is open to question. Naked lying, though arguably permissible in certain circumstances, violates democratic norms in ways that spin does not. The challenge of political advocacy is to argue persuasively for a policy while staying within the bounds of defensibly truthful claims.

Schuessler’s weakest case study is his first: the case of Franklin Roosevelt trying to increase support for intervention against Nazi Germany. On the one hand, Schuessler is correct that Roosevelt resorted at times to deception. Schuessler recounts, for example, the famous September 1941 case of the *USS Greer*, fired upon in the North Atlantic by a German submarine while the United States was still officially neutral. Although the navy told Roosevelt that the Germans may not have known the nationality of the *Greer*, the president told the public it was an unmistakable act of German aggression, and he leveraged the incident to revise the Neutrality Laws that were constraining American action. In another instance, Roosevelt told a campaign rally in 1940 that he would not send American boys to fight in foreign wars, conspicuously omitting his usual caveat, “except in case of attack” (p. 40). (As he impishly told his speechwriter Sam Rosenman, “If we’re attacked, it’s no longer a foreign war.”)[1]

While Roosevelt certainly sought pretexts to adopt a more aggressive posture toward Germany and Japan, it’s hard to agree with Schuessler’s conclusion, as articulated by the title of chapter 2, that Roosevelt was “shift-

ing blame to the Axis.” The concept of “blame-shifting,” which Schuessler also invokes in his chapter on Vietnam, proves problematic. Were Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan blameless for World War II? To be sure, Schuessler does not endorse the extreme views of the politician Pat Buchanan or the novelist Nicholson Baker, who hold we should not have intervened in the war at all.[2] But he does say that Roosevelt “manufactured events” in order to hasten war (p. 3). There is a world of difference, however, between tactically hyping incidents like the *Greer* attack and “shifting blame,” which implies that blame properly resides with the United States as opposed to Germany.

At times Schuessler’s evidence undercuts his arguments. For example, Schuessler quotes from the Fireside Chat that Roosevelt delivered after the Nazis overran France in June 1940: “If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the Continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Austral-Asia, and the high seas. And they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere. It is no exaggeration to say that all of us in all the Americas would be living at the point of a gun—a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military” (p. 29). But this statement is really the opposite of deception. Roosevelt was being candid about the threat that German aggression posed to the United States and about the need to ramp up American opposition.

Similarly, after the 1941 *Greer* attack, Roosevelt told the public, “When you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him,” analogizing the Nazi submarines to rattlesnakes (p. 45). Roosevelt fudged the details of a particular incident, but in that speech he was again being forthright about his conviction that Germany constituted a mortal threat. This makes it hard to agree with Schuessler’s larger argument that Roosevelt misled Americans about his willingness to go to war.

Describing US involvement in Vietnam, Schuessler has an easier time showing that deception was used to circumvent constraints on presidential power, with damaging results. Lyndon Johnson and his aides faced a dilemma. Johnson did not want to let the North Vietnamese communists take over South Vietnam—an outcome he believed would hurt him politically at home and might (though this has always been fiercely debated) have negative repercussions in the region and for America’s influence as a world power. But Johnson also did not want to declare a major military undertaking in remote

Indochina. So he and other administration figures exaggerated and dissembled. Publicly, they mischaracterized both the events of the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, which gave Johnson the congressional authorization he needed, and subsequent events like the February 1965 Viet Cong attack at Pleiku, which provided a pretext for escalation that year (p. 85). Schuessler also demonstrates other forms of presidential deception, such as when the administration deliberately obscured the shift from America's supplementary role in Vietnam to one of active ground combat.

A complicating factor here, Schuessler concedes, is that Johnson faced little dissent on his war policy in 1964 and 1965. He operated in what Schuessler calls a "permissive but fragile" public opinion environment (p. 65). Notable opposition came from columnists such as Walter Lippmann, some powerful politicians, and even a few administration officials. But the early escalatory steps, such as the American air strikes that followed Pleiku, enjoyed robust public backing. It is hard to know whether the deceptions boosted support for the escalation, or whether that support encouraged Johnson's democracy theory suggests it should—in thinking his policies were sound. Perhaps both were the case. Complicating things further, public and congressional support for the war plummeted as it dragged on and the death toll rose. Schuessler's book does not take up the constraints on presidential war-making once a conflict is underway, but the mounting antiwar sentiment toward the end of Johnson's presidency suggests that ultimately the institutions of democracy are not powerless to restrain a strong executive. Of course, the late-blooming antiwar opinion provides no comfort to the thousands who died, but it does speak to Schuessler's concern about the ability of democratic institutions to rein in executive-led war-making.

The final case Schuessler examines is that of the Iraq War. He reminds us of several crucial points that confound the simple conclusion that the Bush administration lied America into war. For one thing, Bush, even more than Johnson, "faced a relatively permissive domestic political environment," with immense support for action against Saddam Hussein visible immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (p. 93): "Clearly, the public was ready to draw a connection between Iraq and the war on terror well before the Bush administration explicitly cultivated it" (p. 103). Schuessler also argues convincingly that public and congressional support for intervention was strong "because of the widespread expectation that victory over Iraq would come cheaply and easily" (p. 93). The recent experiences of freedom's

triumph in Eastern Europe and the successful Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan interventions led most people to believe that the costs of an invasion would be minor. This logic seems to have encouraged some Democrats, including several potential presidential aspirants, to approve Bush's request for a congressional authorization to force Saddam Hussein to readmit the weapons inspectors he had illegally evicted in 1998. The most important of these Democrats was Representative Dick Gephardt of Missouri, the House minority leader, who scuttled a bipartisan bill that would have given Bush a much more limited authorization than he sought. Here, political opportunism, and not deception, appears to have been key.

Yet even with the wind at his back, Bush clearly engaged in a form of deception that Schuessler calls "overselling." Schuessler grants that Bush and his top aides may well have believed the faulty intelligence on which they decided to invade Iraq, especially since after 9/11 they were disposed to trust evidence that might otherwise have struck them as shaky. "We acted," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld explained in 2003, "because we saw the existing evidence in a new light through the prism of our experience on 9/11" (p. 96). Vice President Dick Cheney similarly said that even a 1 percent chance of terrorists gaining weapons of mass destruction now had to be treated as a certainty (p. 97). Nonetheless, Schuessler reviews (following books like David Corn and Michael Isikoff's 2007 *Hubris*) the concerted campaign of pro-war rhetoric that made cloudy intelligence seem clear-cut and uncertain threats seem imminent.

Although his Iraq chapter is generally strong, Schuessler makes a few dubious claims. Like many before him, he blames the "neoconservatives" within the administration for urging war, even though none of the most powerful enthusiasts for war—either Bush nor Cheney nor Rumsfeld—was considered a neocon beforehand. He also understates the opposition to war. Contrary to popular recollections, pundits galore argued against war in every possible medium, and reporters cited weapons experts and intelligence officials to cast doubt on various administration claims. Leading Democrats such as Senators Ted Kennedy and Robert Byrd vocally opposed intervention, and others, such as Senator Hillary Clinton, supported Bush's authorization bill only provisionally. It would be more accurate to say that the Democrats were divided than to claim, as Schuessler does, that Congress "largely abdicated its oversight role" (p. 113). Relatedly, the core problem was not that the marketplace of ideas failed, in Schuessler's terms, but rather that the wrong ideas won. Indeed, Schuessler highlights the in-

sightful argument of Chaim Kaufmann of Lehigh University, who found that the public supported war because, among other reasons, "the shock surrounding the 9/11 attacks meant that the public was more receptive to threat inflation than it otherwise might have been" (p. 21). That insight, unfortunately, isn't fully integrated into Schuessler's larger analysis.

How, then, do we assess Schuessler's pointed challenge to the theory that democratic institutions constrain their presidents from going to war? He certainly achieves his goal of undermining any simple faith in democracy to prevent ill-advised wars. But beyond that it's hard to say. For all the careful argumentation and helpful thinking in *Deceit on the Road to War*, it doesn't yield any larger, generalizable claims. For one thing, the book comprises only three case studies, all from one single democracy—probably not enough to build a theory on. For another, the book does not take up cases where the institutions of democracy *did* constrain presidents from going to war, such as President Barack Obama's retreat from bombing Syria in September 2013 in the face of ample hostility. Without such examples, Schuessler is open to the charge of selection bias. Schuessler also omits any war-making decisions of nondemocracies. As a result, we can't render the comparative judgments that are at the heart of Schuessler's argument.

One final omission: Schuessler never explains why presidential "deception" in going to war is substantially different from "deception" in advocating for other poli-

cies. If, like Schuessler, we define deception to include the selective release of information and even ordinary spin, then we can easily think of lots of times when presidents used "deception" in selling health care plans or in pushing economic legislation. For deception in this sense—exaggeration and blame shifting, advocacy and partiality, hype and spin—is an intrinsic part of democratic discourse. "No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other," Hannah Arendt wrote in her 1967 essay, "Truth and Politics." We don't expect, she explained, that the political realm will adhere to the same standards of truth-telling as the courtroom, the newsroom, or the seminar room. Which is to say, maybe the answer to Schuessler's question can be framed this way: Of course presidents deceive. When influential voices oppose a president's goals in sufficient numbers or with enough passion, he'll be called out on it. But if we're largely in agreement with his purposes, chances are we'll let it pass.

Notes

[1]. David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016), 233.

[2]. Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* (New York: Crown Books, 2008); and Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

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