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## *Learning the Right Lessons from Iraq*

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### Executive Summary

Foreign policy experts and policy analysts are misreading the lessons of Iraq. The emerging conventional wisdom holds that success could have been achieved in Iraq with more troops, more cooperation among U.S. government agencies, and better counterinsurgency doctrine. To analysts who share these views, Iraq is not an example of what not to do but of how not to do it. Their policy proposals aim to reform the national security bureaucracy so that we will get it right the next time.

The near-consensus view is wrong and dangerous. What Iraq demonstrates is a need for a new national security strategy, not better tactics and tools to serve the current one. By insisting that Iraq was ours to remake were it not for the Bush administration's mismanagement, we ignore the limits on our power that the war exposes and in the process risk repeating our mistake.

The popular contention that the Bush administration's failures and errors in judgment can be attributed to poor planning is also false. There was ample planning for the war, but it conflicted with the Bush administration's expectations. To the extent that planning failed, therefore, the lesson to draw is not that the United States national security establishment needs better planning, but that it needs better leaders. That problem is solved by elections, not bureaucratic tinkering.

The military gives us the power to conquer foreign countries, but not the power to run them. Because there are few good reasons to take on missions meant to resuscitate failed governments, terrorism notwithstanding, the most important lesson from the war in Iraq should be a newfound appreciation for the limits of our power.

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## **Introduction**

There is a strange consensus developing among American foreign policy experts about the war in Iraq. Most agree that the war will not have been worthwhile, whatever precarious success American forces can still achieve. Despite that failure, foreign policy experts in both parties mostly agree that with better planning, more troops, better counterinsurgency doctrine, and more cooperation among U.S. government agencies, Iraq could have been stabilized.<sup>1</sup> The experts fear, however, that Iraq will sour Americans on future interventions—that an “Iraq syndrome” will prevent the United States from embarking on future state-building missions.<sup>2</sup> To most experts, this syndrome would be dangerous. For even if Iraq is lost, the consensus view says, the war on terrorism will require the United States to repair failed states, lest they spawn terrorism.

To analysts who share these views, Iraq is not an example of what not to do but of how not to do it. It is an experiment that teaches Americans lessons about how to manage foreign populations. Based in part on these lessons, Washington is reforming the national security bureaucracy to make it a better servant of a strategy that requires military occupations, state-building, and counterinsurgency operations—what the military calls reconstruction and stabilization.<sup>3</sup>

To that end, the president and Congress recently agreed to expand the size of our ground forces in the hope that our next intervention will not fall short of troops. Think tanks across the ideological spectrum busy themselves with plans to improve the coordination of national security agencies for the next occupation and to prepare diplomats, soldiers, and bureaucrats to staff it.<sup>4</sup> A new state-building office in the State Department draws up plans for ordering various failed or unruly states.<sup>5</sup> An array of defense experts offer advice on counterinsurgency doctrine and insist that the military services embrace it.<sup>6</sup> The services say that they already have done so. Next time,

American leaders are saying, we will have a national security bureaucracy capable of implementing our policies; next time, in other words, we will get it right.

The consensus is wrong and dangerous. What Iraq demonstrates is a need for a new national security strategy, not better tactics and tools to serve the current one. By insisting that there was a right way to remake Iraq, we ignore the limits on our power that the enterprise has exposed and we risk repeating our mistake. Deposing Saddam Hussein was relatively simple. Creating a new state to rule Iraq was nearly impossible, at least at a reasonable cost. What prevents stability in Iraq is not American policy but the absence of a political solution to the communal and sectarian divisions there. Our invasion exposed those rifts but their repair is beyond our power. Maybe the United States can improve its ability to manage occupations, but the principal lesson Iraq teaches is to avoid them. Not all state-building missions pose the challenges Iraq does, but most of these missions are extremely costly, most of them fail, and most of them corrode American power.

This paper shows that the conventional explanations for why we have failed to achieve our stated aims in Iraq nearly five years after the war began—poor governmental planning and coordination in preparing for the occupation, too few troops, and misconceived counterinsurgency doctrine—cannot explain the persistent violence in Iraq. We also discuss why there are limits to what planning, coordination, and counterinsurgency doctrine can accomplish in war. We conclude by noting that because there are few good reasons to take on missions meant to resuscitate failed governments, terrorism notwithstanding, we should not much lament these limits on American power.

## **The Size of the Occupation Force**

Perhaps the most common complaint about the American occupation of Iraq is

that it was undermanned. The idea is that the U.S. military stripped Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime of its monopoly on force in Iraq but failed to fill the resulting power vacuum, on account of a lack of troops and willingness to police the country. The result was anarchy. Iraq's tribes and factions within its various ethnic groups armed themselves and became pseudo governments. Some attacked American troops, and some attacked each other. Disputes broke out over real estate, and the prospect of being manhandled by rival militias brought still more insecurity, defensive arming and attacks meant to serve as self-defense. Beset by violence, the state collapsed, and the idea of a unified, multi-ethnic country faded.

To avoid these outcomes, experts say, the United States should have sent a far larger occupation force than the 150,000 it had in Iraq when Baghdad fell. A better plan would have two or three times that number, at a ratio of 20 security personnel per 1,000 of the population. Those figures come from a series of studies published by the RAND Corporation, which arrived at a rule-of-thumb for force ratios needed to maintain order based on a historical survey of past occupation efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Those ratios are consistent with Central Command's OPLAN 1003-98, the pre-2002 contingency plan for war with Iraq, which called for 380,000 troops, and the now famous suggestion from Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki that "something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers" would have to occupy Iraq.<sup>8</sup> One army brief on reconstruction issues took account of the army's experience in Bosnia and Kosovo and estimated that a comparable mission in Iraq would require approximately 470,000 troops.<sup>9</sup> President Bush's National Security Council appears to have come up with the highest number. A memo drafted in February 2003 suggested that, if historical precedent were followed, 500,000 troops would be needed to stabilize and rebuild Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

The idea that high troop levels were essential to success in Iraq and other stability operations has an obvious policy implication:

build a bigger army and Marine Corps. To that end, the president last year announced a plan to expand the army by 65,000 soldiers and the Marines by 27,000 over five years.<sup>11</sup> The expansion plan has the support of majorities in both parties and is slated to become law with the passage of the 2008 Defense Authorization Bill.<sup>12</sup> The expansion will take three to five years to implement. Given this timeframe, it is justified less by Iraq than by the notion that fighting terrorism will require other occupation and state-building missions that require large numbers of American ground forces.

The idea that more troops could have saved Iraq from violent discord is flawed on several accounts. First, as David Hendrickson and Robert Tucker argue in a paper prepared for the U.S. Army War College, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for the United States to keep several hundred thousand troops in Iraq for long.<sup>13</sup> Although the United States could have mustered a force level of 400,000-500,000 troops temporarily, normal rotation schedules would have required the troops to return home after being deployed a year or less. The nation would then have lacked enough replacement forces to maintain even close to the 130,000 it kept on hand for most of the occupation of Iraq, unless it wanted to either prevent troops from rotating home or rely heavily on National Guard and Reserve units, both politically dicey propositions likely to damage morale. The more troops sent in initially, the fewer can remain indefinitely. In a conflict that lasts three or five years, in a large country like Iraq, the United States cannot maintain a ratio of one soldier or marine for every 50 civilians, even with a significantly larger military.<sup>14</sup>

The second and more fundamental problem with the idea that more boots on the ground would have prevented Iraq's insurgency is that the way troops are employed matters more than their number.<sup>15</sup> History holds examples of small numbers of troops pacifying large populations and large numbers of troops failing to pacify small populations.<sup>16</sup> The 20 troops per 1,000 civilians ratio for policing populations abroad is drawn in

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part from cases such as Bosnia, where the sides accepted the settlement that the troops enforced. There were no insurgents, unlike in Iraq. The difference is between enforcing peace and making it.

Another theory of the insurgency says that its cause was not disorder but disagreements among Iraq's factions about the governance of Iraq and opposition to the presence of an occupying force. Far from preventing violence, the presence of American troops might have provoked it. It is not as if the insurgency grew in regions where troops were absent and peace broke out where they were present. Something closer to the opposite appears to have occurred. The Iraqi insurgents themselves often point to the presence of foreign occupiers as the principal motivation for their violence.<sup>17</sup> If 130,000 American troops had little idea how to win the loyalty of Iraq's Sunnis, there is little reason to believe that another 200,000 would have done much better.

## Disbanding the Army and De-Baathification

Beyond the too-few-troops argument, most critics of the Bush administration's conduct of the occupation point to two other key decisions—disbanding the army and de-Baathification—as crucial missteps that empowered the insurgency. These decisions, made at the start of L. Paul Bremer's tenure as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, deprived Iraq of managers it needed to run its ministries and government-controlled factories and the security personnel it needed to help the Americans keep order. More importantly, the orders angered and impoverished Sunni elites and soldiers—many of whom made particularly skilled insurgents.

These two decisions did not conform to the original war plans. During the buildup to war, the U.S. military anticipated that Iraqi forces would be kept relatively intact. Gen. John Abizaid, who would take over at Central Command (CENTCOM) in the summer of 2003, recommended that a substantial Iraqi

army be established, including three interim divisions to “take over internal security functions as quickly as possible.” Although Paul Wolfowitz expressed concern, he ultimately endorsed Abizaid's proposal, which was consistent with White House plans.<sup>18</sup>

War planners also debated what to do with the Baath Party. The State Department and CIA, according to *Washington Post* reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran, advocated de-Saddamification—“purging two classes of Baathists: those who had committed crimes and those at the very top of the command structure.”<sup>19</sup> The Department of Defense favored a broader purge that would have prohibited rank-and-file members from holding senior government positions. The National Security Council attempted to broker a compromise whereby only the highest ranks of the Baath party, about 1 percent of its total members, would be removed from office. But Ahmed Chalabi and other Iraqi National Congress officials “argued passionately that a wholesale purge of the Baath Party was necessary to demonstrate America's commitment to a new political order in Iraq.”<sup>20</sup>

Bremer ultimately adopted the position of Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress. Under secretary of defense for policy Douglas Feith's office drafted a one-and-a-half-page executive order, later shown to Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld (but not Rice or Powell). Jay Garner, the outgoing head of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance that was being replaced by Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority, first saw it on May 13. He was aghast. The order was “too hard, too harsh,” he told Bremer. Garner insisted that they take the draft to Rumsfeld. Bremer refused, and issued Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 1, “De-Baathification of Iraq Society,” on May 16, 2003. The order purged as many as 85,000 party members from the Iraqi government.<sup>21</sup>

One week later, on May 23, Bremer enacted CPA Order Number 2, “Dissolution of Entities.” This act formally abolished several groups, including “the Iraqi armed forces, which accounted for 385,000 people; the

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staff of the Ministry of the Interior, which amounted to a surprisingly high 285,000 people . . . and the presidential security units, a force of some 50,000.”<sup>22</sup>

However unwise they now appear, both orders were responses to the demands of Iraq’s majority, not American whims.<sup>23</sup> The United States wanted to avoid the appearance of reconstituting a Sunni regime in a country filled with ethnic tension and where Shia and Kurds constituted 80 percent of the population. Former Bremer aide Dan Senor explained that “if we hadn’t [moved against the Baath Party], there may have been severe retribution against the Sunnis. And the Shia and Kurds might not have cooperated with us. Those symbolic steps were very important early on.”<sup>24</sup> Had the CPA adopted a different course, retaining the army and allowing senior Baathists to remain in power, we might have seen a less severe Sunni insurgency and a quicker and more powerful Shi’ite insurgency.

Nor is it clear that a reconstituted army would have been an effective fighting force. Training and motivation in Saddam’s army was uneven at best, and there is little evidence that a reconstituted army would have been of much use in pacifying internal unrest.<sup>25</sup> The afflictions that have plagued the new Iraqi army—the absence of nationalism to rally diverse troops around, low morale, and disorganization—would likely have hindered the old.

It may be that these decisions were crucial to our subsequent failures in Iraq. A more plausible theory, however, says that the Iraqi state was in disrepair before the American invasion and was held together only by the terror of the dictator that we removed. Saddam’s removal created a competition for power that was likely to be settled by arms, whatever subsequent decisions the occupying authorities made about the army and the Baath. It is not the argument here that those decisions were wise or that they did not aid in the rise of the Sunni insurgency. The point is that those decisions were not necessary conditions for the insurgency to get its legs,

given the broad support it enjoyed, especially among Iraq’s Sunni population.

## The Poor Planning Fallacy

Conventional wisdom says that the failures and errors in judgment just mentioned, as well as many others, can be attributed to poor planning. Better plans would have meant a larger invasion force, which would have prevented central authority in Iraq from unraveling. If it had been operating from better plans, the CPA would not have pursued de-Baathification so aggressively, and it would not have let the Iraqi army collapse. It therefore would not have had to rush to stand up a new army and police force in 2003, forces that were wholly unprepared to fight. And if success in Iraq did call for the training of Iraqi troops, a better plan would not have immediately assigned their training to overwhelmed National Guardsmen but to personnel in the regular army and Marine Corps.

Adequate preparation would have helped in other ways. The CPA staff would have been larger and more competent (it was initially staffed by inexperienced Republican Party loyalists). The Bush administration would have asked for more funds to rebuild Iraq’s infrastructure, and the CPA would have spent them more carefully. With better foresight, the CPA would not have wasted time trying to privatize Iraq’s economy overnight rather than getting it on its feet. Had they adhered to plans, the CPA would not have formed the Iraqi Governing Council, a group of 25 appointed leaders who helped Bremer rule Iraq prior to nationwide elections. The council not only underrepresented Sunnis but reportedly used what resources it controlled for patronage and theft, discrediting the government and driving Iraqis into the arms of militias.<sup>26</sup>

One popular explanation for why the planning for the occupation failed, the story goes, is that the government was uncoordinated and that individual agencies were incapable of working together; some go so far as

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to claim that the entire interagency process is broken.<sup>27</sup> Had the Department of Defense listened to the Central Intelligence Agency and State Department, it would have prepared ORHA, CPA, and CENTCOM for certain contingencies and avoided those errors. Had the National Security Council done its job, coordination would have been forced on the agencies.

To many analysts, the lessons of these failures are clear: improve the American national security bureaucracy's ability to plan, and restructure it to heighten coordination. In Washington, calls for fixing the interagency process to manage stability operations are practically chanted. Top military officers and civilian officials, including former chairman of the Joint Chiefs Peter Pace and current secretary of defense Robert Gates, endorse interagency reform.<sup>28</sup> Think tanks have produced various papers in the last three years that propose changes to the national security bureaucracy to structure the interaction of senior national security officials in Washington, facilitate planning in the relevant organizations, and ensure cooperation in the field. The State Department has established the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) and given it the lead in future state-building missions.<sup>29</sup>

The most prominent proposals come from the Center for Strategic and International Studies' *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols* project.<sup>30</sup> The idea is that parochial behavior in federal agencies and the military services is bad. Goldwater-Nichols, legislation that brought joint planning and operations to the Pentagon in 1986, should become the model for the rest of the national security bureaucracy.

CSIS's report suggests establishing planning offices in the civilian agencies involved in stabilization operations. It calls for annual exercises in which officials practice coordination and proposes a joint national security career path, modeled on the military's, which temporarily places civilians in other agencies.<sup>31</sup>

The report also calls for a deputy assistant for interagency strategies on the National

Security Council, and a new office beneath this official to coordinate ongoing interagency activities. It recommends biannual guidance from the president to organize these affairs, and a Quadrennial National Security Review to guide the national security bureaucracy just as the Quadrennial Defense Review supposedly guides the Pentagon.<sup>32</sup>

These proposals are offered as responses to failures in Iraq. They are needed, their advocates say, to improve our performance in the war against terrorists, which will entail continued counterinsurgency and stability operations.<sup>33</sup> Some of the suggestions are reasonable. However, they rely not only on faulty premises about Iraq, but also on undue faith in planning and coordination.

**Why Better Planning and Coordination  
Wouldn't Have Saved Iraq**

The first problem with the logic that better planning would have saved Iraq is that the planning for the war was both plentiful and reasonably prescient. The problem was the willingness to use the plans. The story is well-documented by James Fallows' *Blind into Baghdad*, Thomas Ricks' *Fiasco*, Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, and Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack*. To the extent that planning failed, it was because of the Bush administration's expectations about the war and what was needed to sell it. The administration did not entertain plans for a prolonged occupation, and it saw exercises that envisioned one as efforts to undermine the case for war. The right conclusion is not that the United States national security establishment needs better planning, but that it needs better leaders. That problem is solved by elections, not bureaucratic tinkering.

Preparation for the war began around Thanksgiving 2001, when President Bush asked Gen. Tommy Franks, CENTCOM, to refresh the plan for the invasion of Iraq. Plans for what came after the invasion were far less organized, with scarcely connected efforts within the National Security Council, the U.S. Agency for International Development, State, and various parts of the Department of

Defense. ORHA chief Jay Garner intended to hand power to a sovereign Iraqi government within 90 days of the invasion, but he was quickly replaced by Bremer, who had a far more ambitious agenda. With the White House's blessing, the CPA decided to transform Iraq into a stable democracy complete with Western political freedoms and a market economy. The idea of a swift exit and transfer of power disappeared.<sup>34</sup>

Once the Bush administration embarked on this course, it might have relied on any number of reports, including thousands of pages of documents on countless aspects of postwar stabilization and reconstruction issues that had been prepared prior to the war.<sup>35</sup> Most notable was the State Department's Future of Iraq Project, a large panel of Iraqi exiles, U.S. diplomats, academics, and other specialists convened to examine the potential problems of and prospects for postwar Iraq.

Critics of the project correctly note that it did not produce a precise reconstruction plan.<sup>36</sup> What it produced was the nearly 1,000-page long Future of Iraq Study. Although it was not a step-by-step-guide to stabilizing Iraq, the report foresaw a number of problems that would need to be taken up over the course of the postwar stabilizations operations. Based on this and other work, done both inside and outside of the government, the Bush administration, according to James Dobbins, "should have anticipated that when the old regime collapsed, there would be a period of disorder, a vacuum of power. . . . They should have anticipated extremist elements would seek to fill this vacuum of power."<sup>37</sup>

The problem with the Future of Iraq Project was less that it could not be implemented than that it was ignored, like all other plans that foresaw a complex occupation. The reason it was ignored was that the Bush administration assigned the task of managing the occupation to the Department of Defense, whose leaders did not want one. The State Department launched the Future of Iraq Project because of a belief that a war would require a prolonged effort to rebuild a functional state. The Office of the Secretary of

Defense and Secretary Rumsfeld, like many in the administration, were adverse to state-building and wanted the army out of Iraq in months, come hell or high water.<sup>38</sup> In February 2003, Rumsfeld predicted that the war "could last six days, six weeks. I doubt six months."<sup>39</sup>

Given the secretary's preferences, it is not surprising that OSD ignored its rivals when the president gave it control of postwar planning in January 2003. Pentagon officials, for instance, were told not to attend CIA war-games, which explored the possibility of violent political conflict and chaos after Saddam's fall.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Rumsfeld, apparently following orders from Vice President Cheney, forced Jay Garner to prevent Thomas Warrick, who had headed the Future of Iraq Project, from joining ORHA in Kuwait.<sup>41</sup>

The CIA prepared two different estimates pertaining to post-war conditions, one warning about what American occupation forces were likely to encounter in Iraq, the other pertaining to developments in the region. Both of those estimates proved to be prescient, in that they anticipated that the ethnic and sectarian tensions in Iraq would make it difficult to establish a liberal democracy there that would then serve as a model for the region. But when Paul Pillar, at the time the national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia, put those estimates to the president and his senior advisers, one of the officials told Pillar: "You just don't see the possibilities; you are too negative."<sup>42</sup> "It was clear," Pillar explained, "that the Bush administration would frown on or ignore analysis that called into question a decision to go to war and welcome analysis that supported such a decision."<sup>43</sup>

Certainly the Pentagon's occupation plan required a great deal of wishful thinking. For example, the Pentagon, and presumably the president, believed that resistance would be light and that a new liberal Iraqi leader could be implanted without the need for a long-term military presence. Notions about Iraqi unity were equally fanciful. Indeed, the Bush administration and its supporters went out of their

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way to denigrate the idea that sectarian strife was likely in Iraq should Saddam Hussein lose power. In congressional testimony prior to the start of the war, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz explained that the Pentagon's postwar requirements might seem low relative to competing estimates offered by Eric Shinseki and Ret. Army General Anthony Zinni, the former head of CENTCOM, because "there's been none of the record in Iraq of ethnic militias fighting one another."<sup>44</sup> *Weekly Standard* editor Bill Kristol dismissed the notion "that the Shi'a can't get along with the Sunni and the Shi'a in Iraq just want to establish some kind of Islamic fundamentalist regime. There's almost no evidence of that at all."<sup>45</sup> Along similar lines, Richard Perle, appearing on the Fox News program *Hannity and Colmes*, told viewers "I don't believe you will get civil war. . . . There are differences, to be sure, among these groups, but it's not like Bosnia. It's not as if they have been destroying each other for many years. They haven't, and I don't believe that they will."<sup>46</sup>

Insufficient planning did not create these happy thoughts or make the president accept them. Accurate information about the likely postwar situation was available—it was either discarded or ignored. Ideology, combined with a healthy dose of wishful thinking and analytical bias, trumped expertise.

Of course, it's the president's job to settle these disputes and embrace the correct policy before the time to act on them arrives. Bush and his national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, failed in this regard, allowing plans for a short occupation with few ambitions to dominate until the occupation began, and then settling on a longer occupation for which they had not prepared. The president's failure to referee his subordinates, however, is not a structural deficiency in the U.S. government but a managerial deficiency in the Bush administration. No amount of bureaucratic rejiggering can make the president listen to the right people.

### **Planning Is Not Power**

The more important problem with the idea that planning could have saved Iraq is that it

implies that proper organizational charts and meetings can stabilize broken countries and make order where there is none. This confuses a process with a policy, a bureaucratic mechanism with power. Planning solves engineering problems. Upgrading electrical grids, extending modern sewerage, and rebuilding schools and hospitals—these things are easily planned. The management of foreign societies is another matter altogether.

It is impossible to label the post-invasion civil strife in Iraq as inevitable or to claim that things could not have gone better. But even the wisest American leader, armed with the best plans, would have struggled to implant a liberal order in which the Iraqi people would easily cooperate with one another in a democratic state. There was not then and is not now a plan sufficient to solve Iraq's fundamental problem—the lack of popular support within Iraqi society for an equitable division of power. People perceive that there is a lot at stake, and many are willing to fight to achieve their goals.

As Aaron Wildavsky noted long ago, in government, planning is basically a synonym for politics.<sup>47</sup> That is, planning aims to control future government decisions. But plans over some government activity are the province of all who have power over it, meaning that there are lots of planners and a lot of plans, most incompatible. When you build a house, there is one set of plans. When you build a nation, there are hundreds. And that is just in your government. The trick in politics is not having the right plans; it is having the power to implement them. And in societies our military occupies, the power of the United States is severely circumscribed.<sup>48</sup> The problem in Iraq, seen in this light, is that even if the United States government had aligned its own plans, various factions had other plans, mostly competing. And their conception of their interest so differed from America's and each others' that there was no unity to be had.

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power, but the latter is elusive. Even suppressing political violence is far easier, and requires far less control, than convincing people to form a government and obey its laws. The functioning of a modern state requires the participation of millions of people who show up for work, pay taxes, and so on. People do these things because they believe in a national idea that organizes the state or because they are coerced. In attempting to build foreign nations, the United States is unable to impose a national idea and our liberalism, thankfully, limits our willingness to run foreign states through sheer terror.

If the United States occupies a country where the national identity is intact and simply assists in the management of its institutions and in security, state-building may succeed. But success requires the cooperation of the subject population or a goodly portion of it. That is not something that we can create through planning.

There is good evidence that the sectarian differences in Iraq meant that such cooperation was not salvageable after the American invasion. As noted above, it appears that Iraq was held together—but barely—by Saddam Hussein’s brutal police-state tactics. Beneath that penumbra of state terror were irreconcilable ambitions among Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds and various groups therein. These differences were likely to produce civil war in the absence of their forced suppression.

Note that this was the logic George H. W. Bush and Dick Cheney cited as the reason they did not overthrow Saddam Hussein after ejecting Iraq from Kuwait in 1991.<sup>49</sup> Note also that the Future of Iraq Project, often mentioned as a guide to preventing Iraq’s implosion, actually shows why it was likely. Whatever their wisdom, the papers lacked an outline of a political settlement among the Iraqis, something that has also eluded the various Iraqi governments.

The Bush administration sought ambitious goals in Iraq—democracy and capitalism—but even more modest objectives, such as creating stability and a functional state amid warring people, are usually beyond our capacity.

Foreign troops still police Kosovo’s ethnic groups, and only physical separation keeps them at peace where the troops are not. Proponents of state-building like Condoleezza Rice point to the post-World War II occupations of Germany and Japan as examples to emulate.<sup>50</sup> But those occupations relied on conditions the U.S. military could not recreate in Iraq: wars that shattered the fighting spirit of the people, unified polities, and effective bureaucratic institutions that are capable of restoration.

### **Coordination Is Illiberal**

Seeing U.S. government agencies fighting and ignoring the wisdom others have offered, Washington’s response these days is to prescribe coordination. But this assumes that the planners want the same thing. They do not. Divergent plans are the product of divergent preferences, which result from divided power. A wish that agencies always march to the same strategy ignores the fact the agencies should and do have different goals, interests, and perspectives.<sup>51</sup>

The attempt to replicate Goldwater-Nichols across national security agencies is based on the idea that the highest end of government is unity of effort—what the military calls jointness—and that division and argument are the enemies of good policy. But jointness is meant to achieve victory in battle, not wise policy in government. Intergovernmental contention, even within the executive branch, is no accident. Unity, we should not forget, was anathema to the authors of the Constitution, who mistrusted concentrations of power—even in foreign affairs—and organized a government to bicker and muddle through.

Liberal government makes organizations and the laws and regulations that govern them to serve various ends, some competing. Our government is divided because it is the arena where the society’s competing ends contend.<sup>52</sup> Bureaucratic disagreements help leaders appreciate trade-offs and make wise choices.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the Bush administration did achieve jointness in its plans for the occupation—unifying decisionmaking in the Department of

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Defense—and because of the views of the president and his appointees, the prevailing plans were the most unrealistic ones. The problem was not too little unity but too much.

## **The Counterinsurgency Dodge**

Another prominent explanation for the failure in Iraq is that the military, the army in particular, forgot how to fight insurgencies. As in Vietnam, the U.S. military initially treated the insurgency as a conventional foe and used offensive, high-intensity operations, rather than population defense, intelligence-gathering, and politicking to combat it. The main lesson that many army officers drew from Vietnam was the bureaucratically convenient notion that politicians should not be allowed to limit wars. After the war, the army was eager to forget counterinsurgency doctrine and mostly did. The Marine Corps maintained a greater commitment to small wars, but it too has kept conventional conflict as its first priority.

This aversion to counterinsurgency brought failure in Iraq, the logic goes. The army's disdain for occupation duties explains why General Franks paid so little attention to so-called Phase IV operations. The notion that such duties are not a military job explains not only the reluctance to reestablish order after Saddam fell, but the failure to secure weapons depots—which supposedly contained the *casus belli*, chemical and biological ordnance—allowing insurgents to take all the guns and ammunition they could haul.

The same problem prevented the army from reacting skillfully to the insurgency. Once the escalation of violence in 2003 forced the army to admit that there was a popular Sunni revolt rather than a few terrorists and dead-ender Baathists, the reaction was predictable. Although tactics varied by unit, the army essentially treated the insurgency like a conventional military foe. This approach amounted to sending out patrols, sparking firefights where American advantages in firepower would obtain, and conducting sweeps to net bad guys,

who could then be interrogated for intelligence.<sup>54</sup> The result was that in the summer and fall of 2003, the U.S. military crowded tens of thousands of captives, many innocent, into prisons such as Abu Ghraib to be interrogated, often harshly. Most were subsequently released. This pattern angered the Sunni population, driving it further into insurgent arms. Moreover, having avoided preparation for counterinsurgency, the ground services were deficient in the human assets needed to conduct it: officers with expertise in such wars, Arabic speakers, military police interrogators, and intelligence officers schooled in the art of gathering information from men rather than machines.

Responding to these failures, several recent reforms aim to improve American counterinsurgency doctrine and capabilities. In December 2005, the Pentagon directed the services to make stability operations a priority on par with conventional war.<sup>55</sup> Every service, even the navy, which is only marginally involved in stability operations, now heralds its commitment to these missions. The army and Marine Corps released a new joint counterinsurgency manual in December 2006.<sup>56</sup>

Other proposals aim to improve the integration of civilians into counterinsurgency and stability operations. *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols*, for instance, and several other reports suggest that Congress create a reserve corps of civilians capable of leaving their jobs and being deployed to help with state-building.<sup>57</sup> Kurt Campbell and Michael O'Hanlon recommend the creation of “a quickly deployable” corps of “Diplomatic Special Forces” with a “capability large enough to coordinate an effort in a country the size of Iraq or Afghanistan or even Congo.”<sup>58</sup> The Iraq Study Group proposes that Congress legislate to allow agencies to force civilians to serve these missions.<sup>59</sup> The Defense Science Board endorses Joint Interagency Coordination Groups, where civilians are integrated into combatant commands.<sup>60</sup> President Bush endorsed these ideas in the 2007 State of the Union address, calling for the creation of a “Civilian Reserve Corps.”<sup>61</sup>

These changes will probably improve the U.S. performance in counterinsurgency operations (COIN). If the military focuses on popu-

lation protection, it will be less likely to use the kind of excessive force that alienates people and empowers insurgencies. Equally important is the COIN manual's focus on political institutions and political reconciliation as the key measure of success. But the manual's recognition of this problem merely points to the limits of COIN doctrine. Outside authorities often lack the power to solve the political problems that cause insurgencies, whatever their strategy. In Iraq, the problem is a disagreement about the distribution of power between Iraq's groups. Overthrowing a regime dominated by the Sunni and replacing it with democracy meant empowering Shiites, so insofar as Americans stood for democracy they were likely to face a Sunni revolt. The problem is one of mathematics more than American doctrine. Without a competent central state that the various Iraqi groups believed in, counterinsurgency tactics could not assure the survival of a unified Iraq.

One reason to doubt that Americans can ever excel at counterinsurgency is that many insurgencies present a foreign occupier with nearly insurmountable hurdles. Unfamiliar with local custom and language, Americans have no independent ability to ferret out insurgents. For intelligence, Americans rely on foreign allies and civilian collaborators whom insurgents threaten with death. Unable to make comparable threats, the American occupier can only bribe, but what bribe can outbid the life the insurgent preserves? The population will therefore often serve the insurgency out of fear even if it does not believe in its cause—and it often does. If the occupying force sits on a town, it may suppress the insurgency, but fighters will slip away or hide. The locals will likely assume that someday the occupiers are leaving and that insurgents will again control the streets. The population is therefore unlikely to provide intelligence even where they still have useful intelligence to give.<sup>62</sup>

A response to this difficulty is to flood the country with troops, protect citizens, win their allegiance and crush the insurgency with the intelligence that is provided. As discussed, in large countries, there will probably not be

enough troops to go around. A less manpower-intensive solution is to form alliances with local strongmen who might otherwise be insurgents or aid them, as we see in Iraq's Anbar province, where U.S. forces allied with Sunni tribesmen against Al Qaeda-oriented militias, and in Afghanistan, where Americans try to split warlords off from the Taliban. This solution depends on having a common interest with some powerful local actors. Such common interests will not always exist or may be too shallow to last.

This is not to say that U.S. troops cannot acquire useful intelligence from foreign populations—we gather plenty every day—or that Americans can never suppress a foreign insurgency like Iraq's. Nor is it true that American military occupations will never be worthwhile. Some insurgencies—those less entrenched in their surroundings—are relatively easy for an occupier to destroy. Still, there is no logical reason—no law of politics—that makes even the most powerful insurgencies impossible to suppress.

The problem with counterinsurgency warfare is not that its theory of victory is illogical. If you understand the culture, if you avoid counterproductive violence, if you integrate civilians and make reconstruction operations a reward for cooperation, if you train the local forces well, if you pick your allies wisely, if you protect enough civilians and win their loyalty and more, you might succeed. But even avoiding a few of these ifs is too much competence to expect of foreign powers. That is why insurgencies in the last century generally lasted for decades and why the track record of democratic powers pacifying uprisings in foreign lands is abysmal.<sup>63</sup>

## The Empire Strikes Out

Another reason Americans will struggle to master counterinsurgency doctrine is that it requires a foreign policy at odds with our national character. Reading through the proposals for rapidly deployable bureaucrats to help run failing states, one usually searches

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in vain for the pages where the author justifies the creation of an empire and a colonial service to run it.<sup>64</sup> Whatever else changed after September 11, America remains culturally unprepared for imperialism. We are ill-suited for stabilizing disorderly states and achieving success in protracted foreign wars.

A wealth of resources and a dearth of labor created an American military that has traditionally sought to replace labor with capital, and to avoid casualties through firepower and stand-off weapons. Geography left Americans with a poor understanding of the nations we might occupy. We also dislike mixing politics and war, which creates a tendency to view war as apolitical and its makers as immaculate technicians, unsullied by the politics they serve. Americans tend to see war as a substitute for diplomacy, not its occasional agent.<sup>65</sup> This approach to war may have its origins in America's uniquely pure liberalism. Americans dislike limited, non-ideological wars. We want our wars to be conclusive, the ends clear, the cause righteous, and the force decisive. We favor offense over defense, for it is more decisive. These conditions were spelled out in the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, Caspar Weinberger and Colin Powell's formula intended to help avoid future Vietnams. The doctrine, articulated in the 1980s, called on leaders to prepare overwhelming force, generate strong national support, define clear objectives, and have a plan for leaving, before using the military.

These features of the American approach to war militate against success in counterinsurgency and state building.<sup>66</sup> Our parochialism leaves us ignorant of the language and cultures of populations that counterinsurgency campaigns force us to woo. Technology and firepower have little utility in such operations, which are manpower intensive. The insistence on a rigid dichotomy between politics and war and aversion to the limited use of force are destructive to these especially political campaigns, where force should be tightly controlled by civilians. The protracted, defensive nature of these wars muddies the public's sense of purpose.<sup>67</sup> The pressure to use harsh tactics to generate intelligence offends our moral sense.

Whatever direction it receives from current appointees, our military—with its rotation schedules, discomfort with subordination to diplomats and preference for firepower and high technology weapons—will struggle to overcome difficulties with stability operations. Neither the State Department nor the U.S. Agency for International Development (US-AID), technically part of State, is built to administer an empire. The department's budget is tiny because its aim is to relate to foreign nations, not to run them.

National security organizations are formed by decades of budgets and decisions. Their organizational politics may be unfavorable to a current conception about what American security requires. But these politics reflect more lasting national interests, namely a disinclination to subjugate foreign peoples and lose unnecessary wars. That disinclination is not simply accidental but rather derives from the lessons of history that Americans have institutionalized. Americans have historically looked askance at the small wars European powers fought to maintain their imperial holdings, viewing those actions as illiberal and unjust. Misadventures like Vietnam are the exceptions that make the rule. It is no accident that U.S. national security organizations are not designed for occupation duties. When it comes to nation building, brokering civil and ethnic conflict, and waging counterinsurgency, we are our own worst enemy, and that is a sign of our lingering common sense.

The final reason that Americans will not master counterinsurgency and state-building is that we do not have to. Winning small wars has never been essential to American security. That remains the case today. In fact, the attempt to establish control of hostile societies is a source of insecurity.

Today both political parties seem to agree that the war on terrorism requires an empire. Even though they avoid the term, they embrace the same neoimperial logic with different twists. The common claim is that terrorists organize and train in places where government authority is limited, like the Taliban's Afghanistan. To prevent this outcome, the conven-



tional wisdom goes, the United States needs the ability to prop up authority abroad or to resurrect it from chaos. That requires boots on the ground, civilians to help run foreign governments, and flexible plans for occupation duties in various cultures and climes. A related idea says that finding terrorists requires intelligence, which in turn requires winning hearts and minds, and therefore the United States has to find a way to win the entire Muslim world's allegiance to defeat terrorism. We must wage, in effect, a "global counterinsurgency."<sup>68</sup>

These ideas conflate counterterrorism with counterinsurgency, burdening a task we can accomplish with one we cannot. Counterterrorism is best accomplished by police, intelligence operatives, and special operations forces. We can hunt and capture or kill the small minority of jihadists who seek to attack Americans (themselves a small minority of the violent Islamists) but we need not establish control over foreign states in order to do so. Nor do Americans need popular support abroad to get the intelligence needed to hunt terrorists. Other governments that we ally with do. For example, the snatch-and-grab operations that netted Ramzi bin al-Shibh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed relied on timely intelligence and cooperation with Pakistani officials.<sup>69</sup> They were not part of a wider campaign to reshape the political and social order in Rawalpindi or Karachi, respectively.

Boots on the ground are needed in rare cases like Afghanistan to root out terrorist sanctuaries, but, in general, military occupations undermine counterterrorism efforts. They produce rage and resistance that creates enemies and validates the jihadist propaganda that America is at war with Islam.<sup>70</sup> Occupations convert extremists who would otherwise concern themselves with resisting their own governments into international terrorists interested in killing Americans.

## Conclusion

History is awash in failed states, but only a handful have posed a serious problem for

American security.<sup>71</sup> A few civil wars have given impetus to jihadism, but it does not follow that the United States should join those conflicts, even in the Middle East. The principal interest the United States has in lawless states is to prevent a government from taking power that will give refuge to terrorists aiming to attack our country. The states where such concerns are valid are few. Afghanistan and Iraq are exceptions, not the harbingers of a new reality. American actions since September 11 should deter governments who might be tempted to make common cause with anti-American terrorists. Preventing terrorists from gaining sanctuary in weak states does not require that we reinvent our state. We can accomplish the same goals at considerably lower cost through combinations of local allies, intelligence, air strikes, ground raids, and threat of retaliation.

The best way to promote American security is restraint—a wise and masterly inactivity in the face of most foreign disorder. We should resurrect the notion that the best way to spread democracy is to model it. Our ideology sells itself, especially when it is not introduced at gunpoint or during a lecture to the natives instructing them on how they ought to run their country. Likewise, in the long term, unplanned free trade and the wealth it brings may do more to promote stability abroad than the most careful planning. The assertion of raw U.S. power in foreign countries tends to unify our enemies and weaken our ideological allies.

The lessons drawn from the war in Iraq should include caution about the limits of our power in remaking states. Iraq should not become a laboratory to perfect the process of doing so. The fetish for planning, interagency cooperation and counterinsurgency might produce some worthwhile changes in our national security establishment, but it also might grease our slide into an imperial era foolishly foisted on Americans in the name of security. Learning the right lessons from our experience in Iraq should convince Americans that preserving our power sometimes requires restraining it.

**Learning the right lessons from our experience in Iraq should convince Americans that preserving our power sometimes requires restraining it.**

## Notes

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6. For a review of this literature, see Colin H. Kahl, "COIN of the Realm," *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2007): 169-76.
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8. Michael R. Gordon and Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 26; Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), p. 97; and Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War, Library Edition* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 194. Gen. Shinseki quoted in Eric Schmitt, "Army Chief Raises Estimate of G.I.'s Needed in Postwar Iraq," *New York Times*, February 25, 2003.
9. Ricks, p. 79. See also "Post-Saddam Iraq: The War Game," National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 4, 2006, [www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB207/index.htm](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB207/index.htm).
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11. The increase is measured by the difference from the amount recommended by the Defense Department in its Quadrennial Defense Review, not the actual number of troops in uniform. Since supplemental appropriations passed in recent years to fund the wars allow the army and marines to maintain forces over end-strength by about 30,000 troops, one could say that the increase is really closer to 60,000. The FY 2007 defense authorization bill, passed prior to the president's plan, allowed troop levels above the QDR figures, meaning that the expansion is already underway. Another facet of the plan shifts

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13. David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, "Revisions in Need of Revising: What went Wrong in the Iraq War," Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, December 2005, p. 9.

14. Some analysts who claim that a larger force may have prevented insurgency in Iraq recognize this problem and note that a high force level at the outset of the occupation is what mattered. The idea is that a larger American force could have tamped down violence among Iraqis while the government transitioned to the post-Saddam era. According to this view, a reformed Iraqi military and police force would have prevented anarchy from breaking out as the large American force withdrew. See especially Pollack. This view puts undue faith in the ability of Americans to solve Iraqi political divisions and in standing up or resurrecting an Iraqi army. The reason this faith is misguided is discussed below.

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16. Jackson points to various flaws in the methodology that leads to the 20 troops per thousand benchmark.

17. Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 121–23.

18. Ricks, pp. 154–55; and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), p. 74.

19. Chandrasekaran, p. 69.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71; and Ricks, p. 160. Defenders of the order, including Bremer himself, often argue that the Iraqi army "disbanded itself." This argument, though obviously self-serving, is mostly true. On Bremer's view, see Peter Slevin, "Wrong Turn at a Postwar Crossroads? Decision to Disband Iraqi Army Cost U.S. Time and Credibility," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2003.

22. Ricks, p. 162.

23. Sam Rosenfeld and Matthew Yglesias, "The Incompetence Dodge," *The American Prospect*, October 20, 2005.

24. Quoted in Richard Lowry, "What Went Wrong?" *National Review*, October 25, 2004. This is probably true despite the fact that not all Sunnis were members of the Baath Party or employed in the military.

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26. See, especially, Chandrasekaran.

27. See, for example, Bensahel, pp. 453–73; Nora Bensahel and Anne M. Moisan, "Repairing the Interagency Process," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 44, (January 2007), pp. 106–108; Rathmell, pp. 1013–38; and Kenneth R. Dahl, "New Security for New Threats: The Case for Reforming the Interagency Process," presented at the 21st Century Defense Initiative, Foreign Policy Studies, Brookings Institution, July 2007, [www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2007/07defense\\_dahl/dahl20070731.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2007/07defense_dahl/dahl20070731.pdf).

28. Robert Gates, Senate Armed Services Defense Secretary nomination, *Congressional Quarterly*, December 5, 2006. See also Jim Garamone, "Pace Urges Interagency Cooperation in Government," Armed Forces Press Service, August 8, 2007.

29. S/CRS leaders have suggested that their office might have been able to salvage the U.S. mission in Iraq. See Justin Logan and Christopher Preble, "Failed States and Flawed Logic: The Case against a Standing Nation-Building Office," Cato Policy Analysis no. 560, January 11, 2006, pp. 22–23.

30. Murdock et al., *Phase 1–3 Reports*.

31. Murdock et al., *Phase 1 Report*, pp. 51–59.

32. Murdock et al., *Phase 1 Report*, p. 10.

33. "To meet the national security challenges of the future," writes Gen. Peter Chiarelli, senior military adviser to the secretary of defense, "we must create the capacity to engage in the full range of military and interagency operations, and we must embrace the concept of nation-building, not just rhetorically, but entirely." Peter W. Chiarelli, with Stephen Smith, "Learning from Our Modern Wars: The Imperative of Preparing for a Dangerous Future," *Military Review* (September/October 2007): 2–15.

34. L. Paul Bremer III, "The Road Ahead in Iraq—and How to Navigate It," *New York Times*, July 13, 2003.



35. See, for example, Conrad C. Crane and W. Andrew Terrill, "Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario," Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, February 2003.
36. See Seth G. Jones et al., "Establishing Law and Order after Conflict," RAND Corporation, 2005, p. xvii; and David Kay's comments in Gordon and Trainor, p. 159.
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