

The New Face of War

By Arthur S. Obermayer

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In Brief

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The conflict in Iraq is the new face of war. The last protracted U.S. war where there were clearly demarked battle lines with uniformed soldiers separating the two sides was the Korean War, over a half century ago. Since then, it has been difficult to distinguish friend from foe, and victory has become more elusive. Today, the U.S. has the most sophisticated and strongest military might in the world, but that alone is not enough to prevail. The conflict in Iraq is only the most recent example of this trend, and it provides important lessons for American policy makers and the public to consider.

Conflict today is “asymmetric,” encompassing terrorism, insurgency, and guerilla activities as the most effective reaction to an army that is overpowering on the battlefield. Individuals with limited resources can wreak havoc in almost any place of their choosing. They don’t usually represent a country and can live anywhere while easily communicating with each other by mobile phone and the Internet. The enemy works and lives in the same places as innocent people. Even our “smart bombs” are not smart enough to target them based on their state of mind. Instead, we end up destroying property and infrastructure and killing many innocent civilians. Until we reassess what we have accomplished on the battlefield and learn that twenty-first century warfare has a different goal, all of our victories will be illusionary.

Americans are disturbed and frustrated with the tactics used by the enemy, who are wiser than we are prepared to admit. Our adversaries seek to protect themselves, but also to win the hearts and minds of people. Collective punishment for the acts of a few creates fear and hatred among the impacted communities. When their way of life is destroyed and friends and family killed, they view the remote and callous Americans as causing wanton devastation. When the horrors of it are immediately seen on the TV screen, new enemies are

created, not only in the country attacked, but also in the rest of the world. This is especially true among those people who feel cultural or religious bonds with those who are being attacked.

Recent history has repeatedly demonstrated this failure. One of Osama bin Laden's goals was to encourage a military response from us that would generate more support for al Qaeda, and he succeeded. Initially, Hamas and Hezbollah gained strength by providing impoverished Arab village residents with free essential social services. Israel's military incursions produced the intended destruction, but also encouraged a large number of new converts who were enraged by what the Israelis had done and were fearful for the lives and well-being of their families and friends. Hezbollah and Hamas offered them a way of resisting, and when the fighting had ended, provided major funding for reconstruction at the grassroots level.

Our experience in Iraq has many parallels. Defeat of Saddam Hussein by our military was rapid, but we made lots of mistakes and were unable to win the peace because we were unable to address human needs on the grassroots level. When neither the U.S. military nor the Iraqi government were able to control violence, people looked to private sectarian militias to provide security and protection.

The lesson we must learn, then, is that conflict in the twenty-first century is broader than "war" and the tools at our disposal must be broader than the U.S. military. There are no quick fixes for us, but there are obvious places to start.

The U.S. used to have a very positive image in the world. Under the Marshall Plan after World War II, we provided aid and support to help reconstruct a devastated Europe and generated friendship and respect from the people of Europe and their governments. When Europe became self-sufficient, we provided food, health care, economic aid and technical support to third world countries, but primarily to keep them away from Soviet influence. Foreign aid was a significant component of our national budget until 1982, when our government decided to discontinue almost all of it, except for assistance to Israel and Egypt. Now, our foreign aid props up friendly governments and supports U.S. contractors, who frequently do not speak the local language or understand their culture and values; who often take jobs away from indigenous workers; who associate primarily with other Americans; and who create disgruntlement among natives by frequenting the finest restaurants and hotels that the local people cannot afford. Too often, the ugly Americans' presence is resented rather than appreciated by the people in need.

For most people in the world, their overriding desire is to have a better life for themselves and their families. Who runs the country, whether it is a democracy or not, is of lesser consequence as long as they feel safe and secure, live well according to their standards, have a sense of accomplishment, maintain good health and enjoy life. Our message to the people of the world should be that we want to help them reach these goals. Indeed, we have done some things well. Our aid to tsunami victims in Sumatra and Sri Lanka, as well as earthquake victims in Pakistan, demonstrated the best that America can provide. Many non-governmental organizations are highly regarded in other parts of the world, and the U.S. Peace Corps has had a large positive overseas impact for a small expenditures of funds.

Indeed, a much-enlarged Peace Corps may be the appropriate agency to begin rebuilding America's moral authority abroad while unifying Americans at home. Most Americans would like to see us regain the



admiration and respect of the rest of the world. This kind of program would naturally generate political support from liberals, but it is also a direction that would appeal to many on the religious right. Recently, the head of the Christian Coalition resigned because the organization was focusing too much on gay marriage and abortion, and not enough on poverty, suffering and health needs of people throughout the world. Furthermore, many young Americans today are seeking ways in which they can improve the world, and would like to feel that their commitment could make a difference.

The potential lessons of the Iraq experience are many, but what this war tells us about the evolution of conflict is clear: war has changed and the instruments we need to insure American security have changed too. The war on terror must recognize and address the conditions that produce more terrorists. America must recommit to individual human security and become an agent for a better life throughout the world. That was the genius of the Marshall Plan in Europe, and it is a lesson for today as well.



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What is IRAQ: Lessons Learned?

Five years into the Iraq war, Americans are left groping for answers. Are we safer? Can America's image be repaired? What are the lasting implications for our Constitution? Historians will spend decades examining this conflict, its causes, its conduct, and its consequences, but those left to grapple with the immediate policy implications must do so without the benefit of the perspective that time can often provide. What lessons should we draw from Iraq today so that we, as a nation, learn from this painful experience? Iraq: Lessons Learned is an initiative to begin answering those questions. The American Security Project asked some of the nation's best minds—military, policy, academic, political, business, religious, media and community—to ponder this question and provide insights from which we can all benefit.

