

Rebalancing Our National Power



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In Brief

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Extracting lessons from the war in Iraq is a difficult task. As Henry Kissinger has reminded us, history teaches by analogy and not by maxim. The study of Iraq will not yield any universally applicable lessons for the next President. In war and crisis management, context was, is, and always will be king.

To compound the problem, the war in Iraq is not over. Compare the hopeless summer of 2006 with the much brighter fall of 2007 in Iraq. Has the Surge strategy put in motion qualitative, permanent improvements, or is it just a bright interlude before another violent storm? We don't know the answer to that question – and many others – about the outcome of the conflict. In all likelihood, regardless of who is elected President in 2008, Iraq and Afghanistan will be major issues past the 2012 election.

To contemplate preliminary lessons, we should consider the phases of the war in Iraq that have been completed. Although many participants have not yet given their accounts, we can make tentative judgments about the planning phase, the conventional attack, and our initial efforts at restoring stability to Iraq.

Much ink has been spilled on the foibles of our planning process. Many journalists and scholars have pointed out that we had a good battle plan but inadequate plans for the “day after.” While the forces on-hand were adequate for combat, they were inadequate for stability operations and not at all prepared for the insurgency that their numerical weakness and subsequent policy errors helped to create.

While the entire U.S. policy leadership had agreed in March 2003 that we had to find the Iraq equivalent of a Karzai and “put an Iraqi face” on the endeavor, we abandoned that effort in favor of a formal occupation. Despite valiant civil and military efforts, that formal occupation poured gasoline on the fires of insurgency.

Moreover, since 2003, while Iraq has been “Job One” for the Bush administration, it took four years to give its commanders the manpower and to develop the operational charter they needed to make meaningful progress. The Bush team has compounded those errors by funding the war through deficit spending.

All of this is spilt milk, some of which has been sopped up by the skill and determination of General David Petraeus, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and their team in Iraq. We should not, however, be complacent. The early phases of the war in Iraq have exposed numerous decision-system or organizational problems that the next President will ignore at his or her peril.

First, we need an interagency planning and decision mechanism for complex contingencies. Military plans should follow national plans, not vice versa. We also need new methods of deploying the Interagency to the field so that we can have unity of effort in executing national policy in the complex contingencies that are inevitable over the next decade.

Second, civil and military agencies must be better prepared for stability operations. The State Department has been given the lead for reconstruction and stabilization, but has not been adequately manned or funded for the job. Indeed, the overall organizational and fiscal weaknesses of State and USAID have become a critical impediment to U.S. policy in all of its dimensions. We have to rebalance our national power.

In a similar vein, while our diplomats must become more “expeditionary,” our military must learn to think more in terms of the dynamics of irregular warfare, where victory doesn’t come after a “Thunder Run” or a battlefield surrender. In 2005, the leadership of the Department of Defense put preparation for stability operations on a par with a preparation for combat. State, Defense and USAID have also made considerable efforts to learn about the political and military aspects of insurgency. The next President and Secretary of Defense must follow through on these important efforts.

Third, in Iraq and other aspects of the war on terrorism, the United States has been hobbled by its inability to craft coherent messages and to explain its policies. We need to get better at public information, information operations, and public diplomacy. That effort cannot start at the State Department; it must begin in the White House. The President and his senior staff must coordinate our message and enhance the soft power of the United States.

Finally, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan offer contrasting lessons in legitimacy. As our weak coalition in Iraq devolves into an Iraqi-American duet, the war in Afghanistan with its higher level of legitimacy has become NATO’s war with over half of the fighting being done by U.S. allies. Unlike the war in Iraq, there are almost no calls to end our support to Afghanistan, an ally that has only been supported by the United States but never occupied by it. The lesson here is simple: while it may be necessary to go it alone, the price for doing so is high and may well become greater over time. The only thing worse than fighting with allies, is fighting without them.



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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.

