

Iraq War Planners Ignored Powerful Historic Lessons



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In Brief

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In the first military exercise this nation undertook—putting down the Whisky Rebellion in Western Pennsylvania in 1794—Alexander Hamilton advised President Washington that, although there were few insurgents, the federal government should send a massive force of 13,000 men. He argued that, “Whenever the government appears in arms, it ought to appear like Hercules.” This “Hamilton Doctrine,” which preceded the “Powell Doctrine” by two centuries, was invoked by Washington at the time and the insurrection melted away. Neither President Bush nor Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld similarly invoked the Powell Doctrine, and we have seen the consequences.

In Iraq, the U.S. also failed on a second count—to implement a comprehensive political strategy. The coalition was a pale version of the one assembled to fight the first Iraq War: no Middle Eastern or Muslim nations, few European nations, and no financial support from anyone else. And our leaders failed to forge an effective political strategy to shore up support among key communities in Iraq. An effective outreach strategy in Iraq, backed up by considerably greater numbers of troops to protect Iraqis and their economic infrastructure, could have improved chances for success and held down the number of American and Iraqi casualties.

Generals George C. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower recognized during World War II that winning a modern war depends not only on massive force but also on the application of considerable political and diplomatic skills—building and holding together a strong international coalition and working closely with in-country groups after the war to establish a solid and durable peace. These profound understandings were crucial to success in the greatest war in American history. Planning for the Iraq War ignored these powerful historic lessons.

Less bravado, better planning, more troops, an effective alliance and a sounder strategy for garnering domestic allies in Iraq to forge a stable peace would have significantly improved U.S. prospects.

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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.

