

Debunking the Conventional Wisdom on Iraq



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April 2, 2008

In Brief

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Conventional wisdom inside the Beltway holds that success could have been achieved in Iraq at a reasonable cost with more troops, better planning, and more cooperation among U.S. government agencies. The policy recommendations that flow from these lessons aim to reform the national security bureaucracy so that we will get it right the next time. But this view is wrong and dangerous. The Iraq debacle shows that we need a different national security strategy, not merely 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 risk repeating our mistake. Deposing Saddam Hussein was relatively simple, but creating a new state to rule Iraq was beyond our grasp. Maybe the United States can improve its ability to manage occupations, but the principal lesson Iraq teaches is to avoid them.

Conventional wisdom now says that the failures and errors in judgment 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 Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) would not have pursued de-Baathification so aggressively, and it would not have let the Iraqi Army collapse.

The planning for the occupation failed, the story goes, because government was uncoordinated and individual agencies were unprepared for unconventional war. Hence, various Washington think tanks have proposed to reform the national security bureaucracy.

These proposals rely, not only on faulty premises about Iraq, but also on undue faith in what the U.S. government can achieve through planning and coordination.

The fact is, planning for the war was both plentiful and reasonably prescient. The problem was the Bush administration's unwillingness to use the plans. 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. No amount of bureaucratic re-jiggering can make the president listen to the right people. The lesson here 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 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 the power to establish a new political order. The trick is not having the right plans; it is having the power to implement them. Americans never had that in Iraq; the power to conquer foreign countries is not the power to run them. There was not then and is not now an American plan sufficient to solve Iraq's fundamental problem—the lack of popular support within Iraqi society for an equitable division of power.

Another reason Americans have struggled in Iraq is that nation-building is at odds with our national character. Whatever else changed after September 11, America remains unprepared for long-term military occupations. Neither the State Department nor the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—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. 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 lessons drawn from the war in Iraq should include caution about the limits of our power. The fetish for planning and reordering the national security establishment might produce some worthwhile changes, but if it makes it easier to wage wars to remake foreign societies, we will have learned nothing at all.

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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.

