

## Informed Decisions: Process Before Policy

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### In Brief

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How we draw lessons from the experience in Iraq is important, and itself reflects on the lessons of the Iraq experience. The substantive issues raised by the war—ranging from the utility of military force to principles of counterinsurgency, prospects for democratization, trends in Middle Eastern politics, and much else—are so numerous and complex that it is difficult to avoid drawing wrong lessons along with the right ones. In any future situation in which one might hope to apply the lessons learned painfully in Iraq, it will be essential to assess that situation carefully to identify how it may differ from, as well as resemble, Iraq. The process of assessment must consider all the relevant variables that can affect U.S. interests, all the possible ways of pursuing U.S. objectives and the pros and cons of each way, and all the things that could go wrong, as well as their likelihood of going wrong.

The implication of this is not that we should prejudge the results of any one assessment. Instead, it is to ensure that such assessments are made and that they are fully applied to, and reflected in, decisions on foreign policy.

That brings us to the most egregious shortcoming exhibited in the Iraq episode, one that underlay the entire ill-fated expedition and thus underlay so many other specific problems and potential lessons to be learned:

There was no process that used the resources and perspectives in the executive branch of the government (and tapped available expertise outside government) to consider whether or not to launch the war.

It is not that there was a defective process—there was no process. There was no meeting, no options paper, and no other forum in which basic considerations and arguments about

whether or not to invade Iraq were ever examined. There was much discussion inside the executive branch aimed at selling the decision to invade, and some also at implementing the decision, but not at making the decision in the first place.

At least that is what we know based on the record to date, including the first draft of history that journalists have written. If there were any discussions aimed at making the decision, they were confined to the most impenetrable private conversations of the president, vice president, and conceivably a few others. For future historians who will write subsequent drafts, the most astounding thing about this momentous initiative—launching America’s first major offensive war in over a century—will be that the Bush administration took it without ever first examining systematically whether it was a good idea.

The absence of any process for vetting the war decision meant that a host of important considerations were never brought to bear on that decision. Especially important among those considerations were the many challenges and ramifications of trying to pacify, reconstruct, and politically transform Iraq. The absence of a process meant that even when parts of the bureaucracy had insights and input to offer, there usually was no audience for those inputs. And it meant that with no clear line between pre- and post-decision phases of the lead-up to war, the line between professional responsibility and insubordination also got blurred. Offering candid, even if unsolicited, advice to decision-makers is appropriate behavior before a decision is made; saluting and pursuing the mission is most appropriate after the fact.

The absence of a policy process within the administration was part of a larger deficiency, involving Congress, the press, and the public, in failing to examine carefully and critically everything that should have been examined before endorsing the war. What passed for a debate was largely confined to the administration’s selling points of weapons of mass destruction and terrorist links, with huge unfilled gaps in logic between premises contained in the sales campaign and any conclusion that an invasion was advisable. There are other lessons to be learned from the deficiencies in that debate, although some of what transpired reflects inherent weaknesses of a democracy making foreign policy. But the starting point for the deficiencies that followed was the absence of debate within the administration itself.

So the single biggest lesson of Iraq is: have a policymaking process. Before making a major foreign policy decision, much less selling it to the public or implementing it, engage every relevant department and agency in a thorough examination of all of the national interests at stake, and all of the ways in which different possible courses of action will affect those interests.

The executive branch is no stranger to such processes. Although each new administration tweaks the inter-departmental machinery for making national security policy, there are well-established procedures for reviewing and debating policy options as part of preparing an issue for decision by the president, even though those procedures were conspicuously absent in the case of Iraq. The question is not one of thinking up new procedures but rather of willingness to use them consistently.

There is no good way for outsiders to enforce such consistency, beyond asking tough questions about how decisions were made. Each president gets the policymaking procedures that he or she wants. It is future presidents, therefore, who need to absorb this particular lesson. Absorption may depend on those future



presidents realizing that pursuit of even the most principled objectives may have flaws, and that even bureaucracies—annoying as they sometimes seem—may have something useful to say in pointing out both flaws and opportunities.

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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.

