

Too Little, Too Late: Societal Transformation on a 'Shoestring' is no Strategy

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In Brief

“Listening to advice from a broad array of military and civilian experts in deciding on troop numbers, being flexible in adjusting plans after the first shot is fired, and building the necessary political will to sustain the operation are all axioms learned early-on by even the most junior force planner. Collectively they comprise the most significant lesson *re-learned* from our undertaking in Iraq.”

- Lt. Gen. Daniel Christman

America's Iraq venture is likely to be the most influential event shaping U.S. diplomatic and military strategy for the first half of this century. Like other tectonic events of the 20th century—the two World Wars, Korea, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam—analysts will divine multiple meanings from our Iraq experience and draw conclusions that will impact, for better or worse, U.S. international conduct through ensuing decades. Like these earlier events, Iraq will be analyzed through multiple prisms, shedding light on every element of national decision making and national power.

My focus, however, is on the achievement of strategic goals and the classic dilemma of aligning ends with means. It borrows from a trenchant column by David Ignatius of the Washington Post, and is most simply stated as follows: “Don't attempt a wholesale transformation of another society unless you have the troops and political will to impose it.”

Few Iraq issues have been more openly debated than the sufficiency of Army and Marine force structure for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). The bottom line however is increasingly clear: national decision makers, including senior military commanders, negligently failed to plan for adequate force levels, particularly for the so-called “Phase IV” of OIF—the post-combat phase that would stabilize and rebuild a fractured Iraqi society and economy.

What Phase IV planning was done was performed late, with little interagency coordination, and with pathetically few troops to execute what, by any reasonable assessment, was a monumental undertaking. The lack of sufficient ground forces precluded adequate border security, the seizure and destruction of Saddam's munitions stockpiles, and the defeat of countless insurgent groups that mushroomed in the waning days of the active combat phase.

The unwillingness of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and President Bush to consider adjustments to the overall force structure in Iraq looms as one of the most significant mistakes—and lessons learned—of the entire Iraq tragedy. As Ignatius cautioned, we faced nothing less than the “wholesale transformation” of an ancient society, and it was intellectual hubris to think we could accomplish this task with the forces allocated.

But wholesale transformations take more than troops; they also take time. And the time given to forces of a democracy bent on societal change abroad is a direct function of the ability of national command authorities to marshal political will. In this dimension as well—the building of political consensus and public support which are essential underpinnings of “will” in a democracy—the Administration that took us to war in Iraq leaves behind a sad trail of vital lessons.

Americans are quintessentially a “five minute” culture. Marshalling and sustaining public support for any national undertaking is a Herculean task, made even more challenging by a 24-hour news cycle that demands clarity of purpose and consistent, credible articulation of strategy and long-term goals. Done properly, Americans will follow leaders who ask for their support. Our successes in the Cold War, in space, and in desegregation, stand out as 20th century examples of successes made possible by building and sustaining domestic political will.

Engaging in a long-term struggle against an extremist ideology will be the most significant challenge for our country in the decades ahead. Simply stated, we must be far more adept as a nation in reaching out to the media and using information in ways that build national consensus and international legitimacy. Iraq has hardly been the model for future national leaders bent on building the “will” for a vital international undertaking. Indeed, Operation Iraqi Freedom illustrates tragically how “will” can evaporate if national leaders view such ventures through narrow unilateral, partisan, and ideological filters.

National security planners have always faced a resource challenge in drafting workable constructs for overseas operations. Regardless of perceived national priorities, there are rarely sufficient resources to satisfy on-scene commanders. For this reason, the most fundamental rule that guides planners is to align “troops-to-task” and to follow national strategic guidance in overall force allocations.

Listening to advice from a broad array of military and civilian experts in deciding on troop numbers, being flexible in adjusting plans after the first shot is fired, and building the necessary political will to sustain the operation are all axioms learned early-on by even the most junior force planner. Collectively they comprise the most significant lesson *re-learned* from our undertaking in Iraq.



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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.

