

## A Very Bad Idea from the Start



**Robert Gallucci**

November 14, 2007

### In Brief

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The United States launched a military operation against Iraq without a compelling reason for doing so. We may have learned a lot from our many mistakes after the end of large unit military operations and the fall of Baghdad, but a larger lesson should be drawn from the decision to invade Iraq in the first place. This was not a good idea badly executed; it was a very bad idea from the start.

Much has been made of the failure of the intelligence community to correctly characterize Iraq’s capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction – chemical, biological and nuclear. And, in fact, the intelligence assessment did mistakenly have Iraq in possession of chemical and biological weapons. But it did not assert that Iraq had nuclear weapons, only that it could build such weapons more quickly than other countries – if it were to acquire the necessary fissile material – because it had done essential research and development before the first Gulf War.

This is not a fine point; it is a fundamental one. The Administration never explained how it presumed biological and chemical weapons threatened the United States or its allies, where Iraq would acquire sufficient fissile material to build a militarily significant nuclear capability, or why the United States’ overwhelming conventional and nuclear forces could not deter Iraq from acting against American interests and its friends in the Middle East.

There were, to be sure, suggestions from the policy community that Iraq was connected to terrorists and even to those responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001. But the intelligence community did not support those claims.

Further, Iraq did not attack anyone in 2003, nor was it about to attack anyone. At best, the United States launched a preventive war without sufficient evidence that America's vital interests would ever be put at risk by Iraq. At best, we were responding to Iraq's flagrant violation of numerous United Nations Security Council Resolutions, without the support of the international community. At best, we miscalculated and over-reached.

At worst, we went to war, invaded a country, and over-threw a government in order to shape the political landscape of a region more to our liking, not to stop aggression or to defend vital interests. Nor was this an intervention launched for humanitarian reasons, to free the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's oppression. This was not an essential part of the argument – at least not before the invasion.

The lesson, then, from our experience in Iraq is that the United States should go to war only when there are compelling reasons to do so, reasons that can be articulated by the government and stand up to the scrutiny of the Congress and the people.

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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.

