

No More Iraqs



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In Brief

“...looking forward to the next administration, it is too early to know, but not too early to hope, that a new President will ensure that ‘No More Iraqs’ means policy based on pragmatism and professionalism, rather than ideology and wishful thinking.”

- James N. Miller, Jr.

Although the final chapter on the Iraq War has not been written, it is already clear that one of the preeminent lessons will echo that of the Vietnam War; that is “No More Iraqs.” This bumper sticker maxim, however, will have widely divergent interpretations. Some will probably be right, several will certainly be wrong, and for some it is simply too soon to tell.

The list of valid “No More Iraqs” lessons is the longest and the one that should be carried in the pockets of all would-be policymakers. It begins with the need for effective pre-war planning, with an underscored notation that questionable single-source intelligence should never again be accepted. Nor should operational planning exclude the State Department and other civilian agencies with essential expertise. Nor should U.S. leaders show disdain for key allies and then expect them to send troops to a war they believe ill-advised. And never again should the Secretary of Defense minimize the forces allocated to an operation based on an unproven theory of military transformation.

With respect to the conduct of the war, and in particular its initial several years, the list continues with “No More Iraqs” warning that no future Secretary of Defense should direct occupying forces not to intervene while looting and mayhem tilt a country toward chaos. Nor should the occupied state’s remaining instruments of order and governance (the Iraqi Army and the Ba’ath party) be disbanded without any replacement in sight. Nor should unwelcome assessments of the situation on the ground be dismissed or down-played, thereby inhibiting rather than spurring, necessary strategic adaptation as insurgency and civil war erupt. Individuals must not be selected for critical overseas positions based on party loyalty

as opposed to professional competence. And never again should the Congress take a pass on conducting real oversight of a war.

In contrast with these pieces of distilled wisdom, are three inappropriate “No More Iraqs” lessons that are already gaining unfortunate currency. First, some suggest that the United States should avoid promoting democracy abroad and should instead practice a foreign policy narrowly focused on vital American interests and in particular protecting the U.S. homeland. However, a foreign policy that does not account for American values as well as interests will not be sustainable domestically or internationally. Thus, the question is not whether, but how, the United States should attempt to foster democracy abroad. Creating democracy by invading another country is at best a costly last-resort long shot. On the other hand, judiciously supporting indigenous democratic governments and movements is more likely to be sustainable and to succeed over the longer term.

Second and related, some will suggest that the U.S. military should focus solely on fighting and winning the nation’s wars and once again reject missions that look suspiciously like “nation building.” However, given that protecting American interests requires helping struggling nations provide security and good governance for their people, the U.S. military must prepare for the missions it is likely to be asked to perform. And that will involve complex counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions and a diverse array of stability operations much more often than the Desert Storm-type wars that some would prefer to fight.

Third and most broadly, to some “No More Iraqs” will mean no more wars of choice. Unfortunately, because terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and the potential for genocidal violence will remain key parts of the strategic landscape, the United States will find occasions when it is necessary, and indeed just, to use military force, as it did, for example, in Afghanistan, against Iraq in the limited strikes of Desert Fox, and in Kosovo. The United States cannot and should not intervene at the drop of a hat, but it must be prepared to employ its military in order to protect American strategic interests when other tools of statecraft simply won’t work.

It is too soon to tell whether the Bush administration will translate “No More Iraqs” into “Don’t attack Iran,” as so many of its critics do. Public statements by some officials, including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, suggest that the costs and risks are recognized. But the possibility of U.S. attacks on Iran is likely to remain on the table for the remainder of President Bush’s term of office no matter what the intelligence estimates say.

Finally, looking forward to the next administration, it is too early to know, but not too early to hope, that a new President will ensure that “No More Iraqs” means policy based on pragmatism and professionalism, rather than ideology and wishful thinking. If a new team can just remember this last lesson – even if it forgets or misplaces the others – then it already stands a better chance of negotiating the treacherous shoals ahead in the formulation and execution of American foreign policy.



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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.

