



## Iraqi Lessons: What we can learn from our mistakes

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We are where we are in Iraq, and it's not a comfortable place. We are where we are in Iraq because mistakes were made both in planning and executing the war there. If we could do it all over again, what would we do differently?

We'd want to start with better intelligence - not just about whether Saddam Hussein had warehouses full of anthrax and nerve gas, but also about the state of the Iraqi nation after decades of abuse by a brutal dictator who privileged the Sunni minority, oppressed the Shia, and attempted to wipe the Kurds off the map.

It would have been helpful had the Pentagon, at the end of the Cold War, focused on the future. Instead of continuing to prepare for a war with the Soviet Union, additional special-operations forces might have been trained to battle insurgents and

terrorists. Strategists could have foreseen that toppling a despotic regime would not be the hardest phase of future engagements. Preventing carnage and chaos while new institutions of government were pieced together would be where the road gets icy.

When the assault on Saddam was launched, Iraqis - representing an Iraqi government-in-exile - should have been riding the lead tanks into Baghdad. American spokesmen would have noted how pleased they were to be helping these brave patriots liberate their land.

An Iraqi leader would have taken charge immediately. He would have understood that we expected him to make democratic reforms over time. But we'd have comprehended that martial law might be necessary while he was eradicating, with our assistance, the vestiges of Saddam's

regime and preventing foreign terrorists from establishing bases in his country.

What if we couldn't identify such an individual - the kind of leader Hamid Karzai has been in Afghanistan? Then we should have delayed the invasion until we did. Trusting that such an individual would emerge was too risky.

The Iraqi army would not have been disbanded by an American consul. Rather, the new Iraqi leader would have purged the (mostly Sunni) officer corps of Saddam loyalists and Baathists while the (mostly Shia) rank-and-file would have been summoned back to their posts. There they would have received their paychecks from new commanders (both Sunni and Shia).

We would have worked with the Iraqi military to stem the growth of militias and prevent an insurgency from organizing. But if such forces did develop despite our best efforts, President Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld would have been candid about what military history tells us: Insurgencies are seldom defeated quickly.

Syrian and Iranian intervention in Iraq would have brought not just denunciations but consequences unpleasant enough to make the meddling stop.

Inside Iraq, stabilization would have preceded reconstruction. Tribal leaders would have been told: Money, jobs and development will flow your way - once your corner of

Iraq is stable. But if we can't achieve that here, we'll go elsewhere. And if terrorists set up shop in your area, everyone will suffer.

I know: It's easy to see clearly in hindsight, simple to win battles on paper. And no one - no politician, no general, no diplomat - can be expected to make correct decisions 100 percent of the time. Fifty-one percent is generally sufficient to produce a positive trend line.

But it's also true that the trend lines in Iraq have not been positive. Unflinching "post-action reviews" are required to bring about change and adaptation, the development of new and better strategies in pursuit of realistic goals. One can only hope that exercises such as the one I've dabbled in above are taking place in the National Security Council, the Pentagon, the State Department and the CIA.

Encouragingly, a new effort is being made - finally -- to secure and stabilize Baghdad. The Iraqi capital has more than a quarter of Iraq's population and is the most ethnically and religiously diverse area of the country. If this effort succeeds - and no resource should be spared to ensure that it does - it could begin to turn the situation around. Iraq may never look like Switzerland. But is it too much to expect that it should be neither the playground of a gangster nor a base for terrorists?

Yes, Americans have soured on this war. But most Americans, I suspect, don't want to "cut and run" - neither do they want to merely "stay

the course." What they want is what they thought they had: a military and intelligence machine capable of defeating America's enemies, who-

ever they are, wherever they are. That is not a mission impossible. But it will require learning from mistakes.

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