

An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or Bridge Too Far?

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This article examines whether the outbreak of an insurgency after the U.S. invasion of Iraq was an avoidable policy failure or whether the structural conditions surrounding the occupation made such an outbreak inevitable. Several U.S. policy mistakes, in particular the deployment of too few troops, a lack of comprehensive political and military planning for the occupation, disbanding the Iraqi military, the failure to establish a government in waiting, and overly aggressive de-Baathification, greatly exacerbated rather than ameliorated the various structural problems. More fundamentally, structure and policy choices interacted at all levels to explain the Iraq failure. The unavoidable conditions that coalition forces encountered in Iraq—a divided society devastated by years of war, sanctions, and misrule—and the political context in the United States made the challenge for successful policy execution difficult. This structure constrained and delimited the options open to U.S. policy makers but, even within those narrow limits, the United States made many bad choices that further diminished the chances of success.

A particularly important series of policy mistakes occurred well in advance of the buildup to war itself. The orientation of the U.S. armed forces away from counterinsurgency, the failure to establish a political settlement before invasion, and other controllable policy choices in the prewar period all led to enormous difficulties during the occupation itself. Thus, by the time of the invasion, these policy choices had become almost like structural constraints and the failures had a snowballing effect, making policy corrections far more difficult.

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The author would like to thank David Edelstein, Michael Eisenstadt, Paul Frandano, Seth Jones, Colin Kahl, Carter Malkasian, Montgomery Meigs, Paul Pillar, Jeremy Shapiro, Brent Sterling, Steve Ward, and Benjamin Valentino for their comments on earlier versions of this article. An anonymous reviewer at *Security Studies* also offered an exceptionally useful critique.

AN AUTOPSY OF THE IRAQ DEBACLE: POLICY FAILURE OR A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

From the north and the south, four hundred thousand NATO troops swept into Iraq in October 2003 and quickly fanned out across the country to establish order. After a few initial battles against the Republican Guard, the troops did not face serious resistance, and they swiftly engulfed Baghdad. As they rolled through Iraq, coalition forces followed a carefully crafted plan that assumed they might be greeted as conquerors, not liberators, and would have to win the goodwill of local Iraqis immediately. Fortunately, the NATO forces were well-trained in counterinsurgency and led by officers who understood that intelligence and political action, not firepower, were the keys to success. The defeated Iraqi army, which initially had been ordered to barracks, was recalled to help secure order in major cities so foreign troops would not appear to be occupiers. These Iraqi troops augmented the large number of foreign troops assigned to policing duties, and together they stopped looting and ensured order in every neighborhood. These forces, working alongside large numbers of Arabic-speaking reconstruction experts from U.S. civilian agencies and international and nongovernmental organizations, promptly restored services, co-opted local leaders, and prevented disorder from snowballing into insurgency.

Politically, the coalition also moved decisively. Iran and Syria joined the “Iraq Contact Group” and agreed to help seal Iraq’s borders against foreign jihadists and arms smuggling. The new Iraqi Provisional Government, which had convened during the summer of 2003 under UN auspices for what pundits dubbed “an Iraqi loya jirga,” quickly took the reins of power. The new government, which represented all of Iraq’s major communities, outlined a clear program for the gradual introduction of elections but simultaneously began the hard work of building an Iraqi judiciary, civil society, and other core elements of democracy. Working with broad-based support from the international community, the new government initiated a program to create jobs and restore electricity, and otherwise worked hard to make life better for ordinary Iraqis. Asked about de-Baathification, the French commander of the Baghdad military sector demurred and noted that “we will only remove a handful of Iraqis from power—no more than would fit on a deck of cards.” Justice for lower-level officials, he said, would have to wait until a fully functioning Iraqi government took control.

This scenario captures the conventional wisdom about what went wrong with the invasion and occupation of Iraq. For many, the main problem was that too little attention was paid to building a broad coalition of U.S. allies and even enemies that might bring critical capabilities to bear. For others, the problem was that the United States did not deploy enough troops and did not prepare for a counterinsurgency. Still others assert that the United States failed to understand Iraq today and so moved too quickly with de-Baathification

and pushed democracy on a society that had only known tyranny. As Larry Diamond, a leading scholar of democratization who also advised U.S. authorities in Iraq, has aptly summarized, “Mistakes were made at virtually every turn.”¹

The implication of these critiques is that, unlike the actual event, an invasion along such lines would have been more likely to succeed in creating an Iraq that was peaceful and fairly democratic. In short, Iraq was an avoidable policy failure. Of course, we will never know, but this essay tries to assess this possibility by also tackling a different but prior question—was such an invasion and successful occupation even possible if the policies related to the occupation’s execution had been right? In other words, were the United States and its allies within and beyond Iraq capable of formulating and implementing a plan for Iraq that could have prevented an insurgency from developing or were the structural conditions simply too biased against success? The answer to this question is not merely a thought exercise. If failure was the result of inadequate planning, then next time policy makers need only focus on avoiding similar policy mistakes. If such mistakes were inevitable, then policy makers should try to avoid similar adventures whenever possible or, in cases where occupations remain necessary, should expect them to be exceptionally difficult.

The failure in Iraq has a thousand fathers.² As a result, definitely tracing causality to one factor or policy is impossible. It is a bit like assessing the cause of a car crash when a drunken teenager gets behind the wheel of a dilapidated car on a bad road in heavy traffic: each factor in itself may be sufficient for the accident. A close look at the Iraq debacle’s early years,

¹ Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 279.

² For my own writing on these issues before and during the early occupation period, see Daniel Byman, “Constructing a Democratic Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities,” *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 47–78; and Daniel Byman, “Building the New Iraq: The Role of Intervening Forces,” *Survival* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 57–71. As these writings show, my own track record is mixed. On the one hand, in retrospect my writings had several deep problems. First, I assumed the initial forces would provide security more comprehensively and the remaining forces would then be quickly employed to prevent small disruptions from snowballing. This was not done, as I describe in this article. Second, I did not anticipate that the U.S. government and U.S. military more broadly did not plan for the occupation and would make several surprising blunders as a result. Third, and in part because of these two mistakes, I greatly underestimated the initial level of forces that would have to be deployed. Fourth, although I did not specify the level of de-Baathification, I did warn about the risks of not de-Baathifying significantly but did not spell out the immediate trade-off involved. Fifth, in the *Survival* essay, part of what I wrote emphasized Iraq’s nonexistent weapons of mass destruction programs. Sixth, I overestimated the size of the Iraqi middle class. On the other hand, my diagnosis of the problems that a post-Saddam Iraq would face appears quite sound. In some detail, I note the possibility of problems such as widespread security fears, chauvinistic elites, poor political leadership, intervening neighboring states, and other issues that did plague a post-Saddam Iraq. I also noted (and emphasized) that the key to most of these problems was a strong U.S. commitment to provide security and that the United States should be prepared for a long (and often difficult and bloody) occupation. My work also stressed the role of Iraqis in taking the lead, internationalizing much of the reconstruction, and the possibility of a backlash if this is not done.

however, suggests that, fundamentally, the United States government violated Sun Tzu's dictum of "Know thy self, know thy enemy." It did this by failing to understand the nature of Iraqi society and how it would likely respond to occupation. But more surprisingly perhaps, the U.S. government seems to have failed to know itself, to understand the limits of America's ability to occupy Iraq competently.

This essay argues that although there were numerous important and avoidable policy mistakes, even if we had made more right decisions than wrong ones a U.S.-led occupation, stabilization, and transformation of Iraq was likely to be an immensely costly, fraught, and deadly exercise. The list of mistakes the United States made is so long, and so many were important, that a strikingly different, and thus unlikely, policy performance would have been necessary to have completely avoided at least some degree of strife—although a better set of decisions would have reduced the likelihood of a full-blown insurgency and its scale. Several U.S. policy mistakes, in particular the deployment of too few troops, a lack of comprehensive political and military planning for the occupation, disbanding the Iraqi military, the failure to establish a government in waiting, and overly aggressive de-Baathification, greatly exacerbated rather than ameliorated the various structural problems. Yet some of these mistaken decisions, if not done, would also have produced potentially dangerous results that could have facilitated unrest—albeit from different actors in Iraq who, under the new policy, found themselves losers in the division of spoils.

But more fundamentally, structure and policy choices interacted at all levels to explain the Iraq failure. The unavoidable conditions that coalition forces encountered in Iraq—a divided society devastated by years of war, sanctions, and misrule—and the political context in the United States made the challenge for successful policy execution difficult. This structure constrained and delimited the options open to U.S. policy makers but, even within those narrow limits, the United States made many bad choices that further diminished the chances of success.

A particularly important series of policy mistakes occurred well in advance of the buildup to war itself. The orientation of the U.S. armed forces away from counterinsurgency, the failure to establish a political settlement before invasion, and other controllable policy choices in the prewar period all led to enormous difficulties during the occupation itself. Thus, by the time of the invasion, these policy choices had become almost like structural constraints and the failures had a snowballing effect, making policy corrections during the early part of the occupation far more difficult.

Taken in the aggregate, these policy and structural mistakes suggest just how difficult success was in Iraq. This essay presents a long list of mistakes and, although this list is somewhat relentless, it highlights the wide range of problems the United States encountered in Iraq and the unlikelihood that any single policy change would have dramatically altered

the outcome in the early months of the occupation. Indeed, many of the problems the United States encountered in Iraq were not fully understood at the time even by the wars critics, suggesting that even had more cautious voices prevailed among the war's proponents, problems still would be numerous.

The emphasis of the essay is on the early days of the occupation, before the insurgency had spread widely and the civil war had assumed its own dynamics. The U.S. failure is thus defined as a lack of success in preventing a large-scale insurgency from developing in the first place or otherwise establishing an Iraq that was peaceful and stable in the early period of the occupation while remaining true to the U.S. aim of democratization. It does not look at the post-2004 period or try to answer the current question of whether Iraq's many problems can be solved today in a way that the United States can eventually emerge victorious. For purposes of this paper, the goal of democratization is taken as a given as this decision profoundly shaped the subsequent occupation. Although democracy promotion is by no means inherently tied to the effort to overthrow Saddam, this paper assumes this goal would be a constant.

This essay begins by offering a brief overview of developments in Iraq through the end of 2003, after which the insurgency became full-blown. In the section "The Inherent Challenges," the essay assesses the inherent challenges to occupying Iraq that would have posed problems even without any implementation mistakes by the occupiers. The section "Policy Mistakes and Their Effects" then details two categories of policy mistakes: failures of preparation and failures in occupation, and explains how these exacerbated the inherent tensions described in the section The Inherent Challenges. This background is then used in the section "Reconsidering Policy Errors: Counterfactuals and Tradeoffs" to present a series of assessments on key issues based in part on counterfactuals, describing what was avoidable, what was inevitable, and what was inherently difficult or would have had costly trade-offs. This essay concludes in the section "Hard-Learned Lessons" by offering policy recommendations for avoiding similar problems in the future.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ONSET OF VIOLENCE IN IRAQ

Baghdad fell to U.S. forces on 9 April 2003, and on 1 May President Bush declared "mission accomplished"—major combat operations were over. But the mopping up operations never really ended: sporadic violence continued with little interruption, and a low-level insurgency quickly began. Moreover, almost immediately after Baghdad fell looting had begun on a massive scale. Yet despite the constancy of unrest, different parts of Iraq reacted in different ways. In the western part of Iraq, sporadic violence broke out that quickly

snowballed into an insurgency. In other parts of Iraq communal violence erupted, with small groups often organized by sect and tribe fighting rivals, including within their own communities.

Opposition from the Start in Western Iraq

In western Iraq, a proto-insurgency developed relatively quickly. In May 2003, cities like Ramadi witnessed regular drive-by shooting attempts at U.S. soldiers, while Fallujah and Hit also suffered regular unrest. Almost immediately, this unrest led to U.S. military responses that fostered more anger. Most notably, on 28 April U.S. soldiers killed 15 Iraqis in Fallujah, and many believed the United States escalated unnecessarily. As June progressed, other low-level attacks by snipers and small bands occurred. The initial violence was chaotic, with apparently little or no centralized direction, particularly in the Sunni areas. By the beginning of the summer of 2003, attacks were still limited, but popular anger in Sunni areas was high.³

The initial mix of resistance came from former government, military, and intelligence officials, along with tribal chiefs, criminals, and businesspeople. In cities and the countryside in Sunni areas, newly born insurgent organizations quickly found recruits and even more sympathizers. Most leaders were part of the ancien régime or had been favored by it, but their actions were not mainly an attempt to restore the old order nor were they planned in advance by Saddam.⁴ Tribe, religious institutions, and relationships forged under the Baath regime, particularly within security organizations or elite military forces, provided nascent organizational networks.

These networks and groups drew on a profound sense of political and economic grievance—a sense that democratization made inevitable, at least to some degree. On a community level, Iraqi Sunnis had to confront the loss of their power. As one Sunni noted, “We were on top of the system. We had dreams. Now we are the losers. We lost our positions, our status, the security of our families, stability. Curse the Americans.”⁵ Many feared the Shia in particular, seeing them as a naturally subordinate community and one that had ties to Iraq’s *bête noire*, Iran. Community and national humiliation, Arab nationalism, and political Islam also motivated some Sunnis. Although these

³ Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (New York: Picador, 2006), 276.

⁴ Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 342; and Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White, “Assessing Iraq’s Sunni Arab Insurgency,” *Military Review* (May–June 2006): 33.

⁵ As quoted in Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 240. See also James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, coauthors, *The Iraq Study Group Report* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 15.

Sunnis often portrayed themselves as Iraqi patriots, the violence initially had little support outside the Sunni community.⁶

As the Baathist and Arab nationalist ideology that Saddam championed became discredited with his fall, Islamism began to grow. Initially, several Sunni imams condemned attacks on U.S. soldiers even as they advanced a rhetorical line critical of the occupation. As one senior sheikh admitted, there was no alternative to the United States with regard to establishing security.⁷ But this caution had limits. The religious leaders wanted the United States to prove it would soon withdraw, and they favored turning Iraq over to Iraqi notables, which to them meant Sunnis.⁸ The Association of Muslim Scholars, a group of Sunni imams that took over many major mosques and shrines in Sunni areas, was for a while the only major institution that was neither part of the U.S.-led occupation authority structure nor linked to the old regime.⁹ Although religious leaders and organizations played a key role in developing the insurgency, religion was used to encapsulate a range of grievances about community and nation.¹⁰ By May 2003, the initial caution of these leaders began to diminish, with some praising those who use violence and all recognizing that the United States was not establishing security. By the summer, many clerics had become resistance figures.¹¹

The would-be insurgents proved remarkably successful at disrupting the coalition effort. In June 2003, U.S. government information indicates coalition forces suffered several hundred attacks, while by November this number was around one thousand.¹² At the same time, U.S. fatalities in hostile incidents went from fifteen in June to fifty-eight in November.¹³ The militants quickly won sympathy for their attacks and successfully intimidated many others in Sunni areas who might otherwise have cooperated with the occupation authorities. Their attacks devastated reconstruction efforts, making it hard for the coalition to restore normalcy to Iraq. Over time, the insurgents had some political success: as Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White note, insurgent actions gave “the Sunnis a strong (if largely negative) voice in determining Iraq’s future.”¹⁴

⁶ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 135, 175–79; and Eisenstadt and White, “Assessing Iraq’s Sunni Arab Insurgency,” 34.

⁷ Nir Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird: The Triumph of the Martyrs in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 41.

⁸ Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird*, 41, 141.

⁹ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 183.

¹⁰ Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 291.

¹¹ Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird*, 42–48.

¹² See <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/images/sigacts-061000.jpg> for information drawn from various U.S. government sources. See also Hoffman, “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq,” 113.

¹³ Brookings Institution, “Iraq Index,” 17 November 2003, accessed at <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index20031117.pdf>

¹⁴ Eisenstadt and White, “Assessing Iraq’s Sunni Arab Insurgency,” 48. For other insurgent accomplishments, particularly with regard to perceptions of the United States and the Iraqi government, see

Foreign jihadists began to enter Iraq almost immediately, though their role in the violence was limited until the end of 2003. They did not engage in a major proportion of the attacks on coalition forces, and even as late as 2006 they probably numbered only slightly more than one thousand in total.¹⁵ However, they did contribute substantially to the growing tension in Iraq and undermined the reconstruction effort. The jihadists' 19 August 2003 bombing of the UN Headquarters in Baghdad led the UN to slash its foreign staff from 650 to 40. On 29 August, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim died, along with 84 others, in a massive car-bomb attack on the Imam Ali shrine that U.S. authorities later attributed to foreign jihadist-led organizations. Al-Hakim was an important moderate Shia leader of Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) who, while critical of the United States, was viewed as willing to cooperate with U.S. authorities. These attacks exacerbated feelings of insecurity, raised fears of sectarian clashes, and made international organizations and U.S. forces far more defensive in their interactions with ordinary Iraqis. Perhaps most importantly, foreign jihadists would turn against any Sunnis who rejected the use of violence. Those who negotiated thus risked losing prestige at least or perhaps even a grisly death.¹⁶

SEIZING THE DAY: THE SHIA STRIVE FOR POWER

In the Shia parts of Iraq, the fall of Saddam's regime led to a much different reaction. Some Shia were jubilant, while others were anxious, but few mourned the passing of the old order and many sought a rapid departure of U.S. forces. For almost all Shia leaders, there was a sense that Baathist Iraq had tried to destroy their community and, as a result, they needed to control the state.¹⁷ For many Shia, they also believed that their demographic state made them entitled to rule and that U.S. rhetoric on democratization tacitly endorsed this. Leadership of this community, however, was now up for grabs. In contrast to Sunni parts of Iraq where former Baathist officials, privileged tribal leaders, and others tied to the old regime held sway, in Shia parts of Iraq, particularly in urban areas, the strongest remaining form of social organization was from clerical networks.¹⁸ These networks initially worked with

Carter Malkasian, "The Role of Perceptions and Political Reform in Counterinsurgency: The Case of Western Iraq, 2004–2005," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 17, no. 3 (September 2006): 377.

¹⁵ Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, 4.

¹⁶ Malkasian, "The Role of Perceptions and Political Reform in Counterinsurgency," 377.

¹⁷ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 138; Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 199; and Joyce N. Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shias* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 48–63.

¹⁸ These networks had three components. The first consisted of a range of groups that went into exile, mostly to Iran, particularly SCIRI, which reentered Iraq when Saddam fell and brought with it perhaps ten thousand fighters. The second group, which had many links to SCIRI, consisted of the traditional religious *hawza* in Najaf in particular. Religious leaders such as Ayatollah Sistani were widely venerated for their learning and piety. A third group was linked to Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr,

U.S. authorities, or at least tolerated them. The most hostile was led by Muqtada al-Sadr, who played a nationalist card within the Shia community, being more critical of Iranian meddling in Iraq (and, by implication groups like SCIRI that had resided in Iran and much of the *hawza*, some of which was of Persian descent) and of the occupying forces from the start. However, he was not immediately anti-American, though by July 2003 he called for expelling U.S. soldiers from Najaf and dissolving the Iraqi Governing Council, which he saw as a U.S. puppet.¹⁹ Perhaps most important, he immediately tried to establish himself as a de facto authority, with his organization providing police, delivering fuel and food, helping the poor, and otherwise stepping into the void created by the lack of a state.²⁰

In contrast to the Sunni areas, Shia violence was often internal and not usually directed against coalition forces. The Shia were far more supportive of the occupation than the Sunnis.²¹ Yet from the first days of the occupation, violence began among the Shia. Muqtada al-Sadr is often blamed for the killing on 10 April of Abdul Majid al-Khoei, the son of a revered but deceased Iraqi Ayatollah. Al-Khoei was widely viewed as having a peaceful agenda and being willing to work with occupation forces. In different Shia neighborhoods in Iraq, authority was in the hands of local leaders, whether tied to the Mahdi Army, its rivals, or various local warlords. Crime became rampant, and for many Iraqis its pervasiveness was far more worrisome than the daily political violence.²² Yet sectarian tension raised its head early. In May 2003, Baghdad alone saw several hundred revenge killings, many of which were Shia on Sunni.²³

Indeed, large parts of both Sunni and Shia Iraq were in essence a failed state, with no government exercising authority. Thus even as coalition forces had to fight a developing insurgency in Sunni areas, they also had to confront a dangerous situation in Shia areas, where political mobilization, internal rivalries, and crime all proved problems. In general, Iraqis rushed to fill the

who was executed by Saddam Hussein's regime in 1999. Al-Sadr had engaged in a widespread social mobilization effort and developed a populist message that resonated among poor Shia, in contrast to the *hawza*, which did not engage directly in mass mobilization. The Ayatollah's son, Muqtada al-Sadr, emerged almost immediately as a major force by tapping into his father's prestige and network. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 54–61; and Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 202. For an excellent work on the question of Shia mobilization after Saddam's fall, see David Patel, "Ayatollahs on the Pareto Frontier: Islam, Identity, and Electoral Coordination in Iraq," (unpublished paper, 2007).

¹⁹ See Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 307. Muqtada al-Sadr initially gave an interview where he urged "I advise Americans to ally with the Shiites, not to oppose them." Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 201. Another relative of Muqtada who Saddam killed had been denied asylum in Iran, whose leaders feared him as a rival and wanted to keep unrest boiling in Iraq. Fouad Ajami, *The Foreigners' Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 92.

²⁰ Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 209.

²¹ Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird*, 65.

²² For crime data in the early days of the occupation, see The Brookings Institution, "Iraq Index: Tracking Security and Reconstruction in Post Saddam Iraq," 10 December 2003, accessed at <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index20031210.pdf>.

²³ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 144.

void by forming new or expanding existing militias. In part this was due to a lack of security, but it was also due to what Andrew Krepinevich has labeled “Iraq’s tradition of rule by those best able to seize power through violent struggle.”²⁴

Even before Saddam fell several Shia groups already had militias, and the collapse of order enabled these to increase in size rapidly. Several of these groups, most notably the Badr Corps, were based in Iran. Badr had close ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. When Saddam fell, Iran sought to work with its proxies to expand its influence and also to try to weaken the U.S. position in Iraq.

As violence grew, perceptions of the U.S. presence changed. The violence created a sense of pervasive insecurity, with the United States standing by helpless or being a party to the conflict. As Anthony Shadid contends, “the all-powerful army imbued with technological prowess had become, first, a callous overseer in a looted capital, then an insensitive occupier in a Muslim land, and now, in the wake of the Ramadan bombings, it was a provocative presence whose visibility only deepened the strife.”²⁵

Looking backward with the full benefit of hindsight, this brief synopsis of the early days of the occupation raises several obvious points about the entire U.S. enterprise in Iraq. First, the violence that began in western Iraq came from a variety of sources and causes, but much of it was linked to nationalism among Sunni Arabs and a broad but vague sense of resentment over their loss of status. Second, the resistance drew on broad anger, but initially it was neither well organized nor particularly large, though it snowballed quickly. Third, the Sunni violence did not occur immediately, and even many elites who would later prove to be firebrands were initially willing to work with American authorities—but their patience was extremely limited, and their conditions for cooperation were often unrealistic. Fourth, the violence in Shia areas was much less anti-American and more limited in general, and more concerned with inter-Shia rivalries. Fifth, all of Iraq suffered from a collapse of the central government and a lack of services. Sixth, sectarian tension in Iraq was clear from the start and was a major source of Sunni grievances, but Iraq was not immediately in a state of sectarian conflict. The subsequent sections will look at the challenges facing Iraq before and during the first months of the occupation with these observations in mind.

THE INHERENT CHALLENGES

Lost in the chorus of criticism over disastrous U.S. decisions in Iraq is the obvious point that the structural problems related to occupying Iraq were

²⁴ Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., “How to Win in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 89.

²⁵ Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 322.

exceptionally challenging, even with more studious planning and considered execution. U.S. policy failures often reinforced or exacerbated these problems, but even if policy makers had proven more able, these problems would have remained difficult to overcome completely.

These challenges can be divided into four generic types: (1) challenges inherent to military occupation; (2) challenges inherent to a post-Saddam Iraq; (3) challenges inherent to democratization in divided societies; and (4) challenges inherent to the United States.

Difficulties Inherent to Occupations

Occupations are usually difficult operations to conduct in the best of circumstances. They typically promote a nationalistic backlash, and they often involve governing countries with weak institutions. They are often especially difficult in divided societies, where internal tension often expresses itself in conflict with intervening forces.

INHERENT NATIONALISTIC BACKLASH

The chance of a nationalistic backlash in Iraq was always considerable. As David Edelstein contends, "The greatest impediment to successful military occupation is the nationalism of the occupied population."²⁶ Nationalism at its lowest form is often manifested as a vague antiforeign sentiment and can involve simply the occupied against the occupier, but it may also involve multiple national groups that long for self-determination. Even more worrisome, military occupation can catalyze nationalism. This in turn may initiate a vicious cycle, with the nationalistic resentment fostering unrest that inhibits successful reconstruction, the failure of which in turn engenders more resentment.²⁷

Given U.S. goals for Iraq, at least a limited backlash from within the Sunni community seemed somewhat inevitable. The strength of the backlash would be likely to correlate with the extent of the changes in society sought²⁸ and, as noted below, the United States sought to transform Iraq politically and economically. Nor did the United States enjoy a key structural benefit that aided successful occupiers in the past. Edelstein contends that a shared external threat between the occupier and the occupied makes an occupation more palatable.²⁹

²⁶ David M. Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2008), 10.

²⁷ Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*, 11–12.

²⁸ Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, xx–xxi.

²⁹ David Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 59–64.

The likelihood of a strong backlash from the Sunnis created several structural conditions that facilitated the insurgency. Most obviously, it created a grievance based on inchoate nationalism that insurgent groups could exploit for recruiting, fundraising, and other support. In addition, it created considerable toleration of insurgent activities, making it more difficult to gather intelligence on them or otherwise disrupt their activities.

GOVERNMENT WITHOUT STRONG INSTITUTIONS

Another common problem with occupations is that the sudden fall of the government can create a free-for-all, with different groups competing to control the state and grab resources.³⁰ This problem facilitates the conditions for an insurgency by giving space in which would-be insurgents can operate.³¹

In addition, the collapse of a government can often foster a surge in criminality. Beyond their human costs, the political effects of crime are considerable. Crime discredits a government and often leads individuals to turn to tribal leaders, religious figures, political bosses, or other local leaders—anyone who can enforce order—simply because daily life without order is intolerable.³² Crime also inhibits reconstruction, fostering grievances based on a lack of services. In addition, many insurgent groups draw on smuggling, extortion, and other criminal activities to build their organizations. When crime is rampant, a sense of insecurity pervades the area, making difficult compromises on other security issues, such as power sharing, far more difficult.

Once local groups are strong, it is difficult to rein them in: their networks for extracting resources are now entrenched, and their leaders now expect a certain level of deference and power. Indeed, one problem U.S. forces faced in western Iraq is that they tried to stop smuggling, an ages-old tradition for area tribes and one that Saddam had allowed local tribes to continue in exchange for loyalty.

Operating in Iraq After Saddam

Beyond these generic difficulties, Iraq posed a difficult environment for building democracy and fostering stability for two primary reasons: the collapse of the state upon Saddam's removal from power, and the regime's use of

³⁰ Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards," 11.

³¹ See in particular James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003); Paul Collier "Rebellion as a Quasi-Criminal Activity," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44 (2000): 839–53; and Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers*, vol. 56, 2004.

³² Barry Posen's arguments flesh out the security dilemma approach to ethnic conflict. Barry Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993). See also David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, "Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict," *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1996); and James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995).

divide-and-rule tactics, which had huge ramifications for the post-Saddam era.

The Failed Post-Saddam State

Even before the invasion, Iraq was in poor shape. Years of war and then sanctions led to a decline of social services, and illiteracy became widespread.³³ Saddam's regime had devastated economic and social institutions, turning them into little more than a tool for maintaining the regime in power.³⁴ Yet for all these faults, the various institutions plodded along.

Several of these failed state-related problems made democratization more difficult. Saddam had pitted Iraq's communities against one another, destroying communal trust. Sanctions impoverished Iraq's middle class, forcing dependence on regime largesse rather than their own independent economic activity. Thus the middle class, which many scholars have observed to be vital in the formation of democracy, was weak.³⁵

Throughout Iraq, government institutions collapsed as the coalition swept through the country, leaving Iraq in essence a failed state. Local government, always weak and dependent on central direction, ceased to exist in many parts of the country. The police were almost nonexistent. Garbage was no longer regularly picked up. The coalition often gave criminals, opportunists, or former Baathist thugs senior positions out of ignorance: in Najaf, the Marines had to arrest the governor they appointed because they discovered he was a criminal.³⁶ Crime became rampant, a striking change from Saddam's brutal era. Even in areas that were not initially insurgent strongholds, "fear prevailed at night" due to crime.³⁷

DIVIDE ET IMPERA

Iraq has always lacked a strong sense of unity. King Faisal lamented in 1932 that "I have to say that it is my belief that there is no Iraqi people inside Iraq. There are only diverse groups with no national sentiments."³⁸ Iraqi nationalism did develop fitfully after Faisal's observation, but to some degree this

³³ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 127–28.

³⁴ Regis W. Matlak, "Inside Saddam's Grip," *National Security Studies Quarterly* (Spring 1999), electronic version.

³⁵ Many scholars have written on this subject. Perhaps the most famous description of the relationship is Barrington Moore's "No bourgeoisie, no democracy." See Barrington Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Beacon Press, 1966), 418.

³⁶ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 118–20, 179.

³⁷ Shadid, *Night Draus Near*, 180; and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 20.

³⁸ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 17.

problem remained over seventy years later. Saddam used truly horrific levels of violence to keep Iraq's Kurdish and Shia communities in line, hardening their identities, creating a sense of victimization, and fostering a desire for revenge. As Fouad Ajami contends, "Saddam Hussein had tamed the place, broken its spirit, turned it into a large prison. He had not resolved the ethnic and sectarian feuds of the country; he had suppressed them."³⁹

More than dividing Iraqi society, Saddam flattened it. His regime deliberately destroyed any independent form of organization in the country. Mosques were allowed to continue, as were tribal associations, as Saddam sought to co-opt and manipulate these to his advantage. Thus tribe, mosque, and the Baath party were the only means of association left during his regime, and when he departed these remained strong forms of organization.⁴⁰

The divided and neutered nature of Iraqi society compounded the problems created when coalition forces toppled the central government. Saddam ruled in part by terror, but also by deliberately turning Iraqis against one another. Although the degree to which Iraqis saw themselves as "Shia" or "Kurds" or "members of the Dulaim tribe" versus being "Iraqis" is hotly debated, there is no question that Saddam's policies deliberately worsened these divisions. Saddam pitted tribes against each other, even creating new ones (or resurrecting weak ones) to ensure that competition remained fierce.⁴¹ Brutal repression of Iraqi Shia and especially Kurds—at times approaching genocidal levels—reinforced the political salience of these identities.⁴² For the decade before the invasion, Iraq's Kurds enjoyed de facto autonomy in the north under U.S. protection, strengthening their separate communal identity.⁴³

So when coalition forces toppled Saddam's regime, the identity of Iraqis was very much in play. As such, Iraq was rife for political competition along identity lines. In addition, the horrors of Saddam's regime created fertile ground for ethnic and sectarian outbidding. Saddam's regime had long quelled any open debate about ethnic and sectarian grievances, but this pent-up emotion exploded in the public consciousness as the regime fell

³⁹ Fouad Ajami, *The Foreigners' Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 51.

⁴⁰ For a review of many of these problems, see Nir Rosen, "Anatomy of a Civil War," *Boston Review* (November/December 2006), accessed at <http://bostonreview.net/BR31.6/rosen.php>.

⁴¹ Dr. Phebe Marr, "Where Is Iraq Headed?" testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 25, 2003. Saddam's regime produced an "official" guide to Iraq's tribes and distributed largesse accordingly. The only tribes listed in the register were those that supported Saddam's regime. International Crisis Group, "War in Iraq: Political Challenges After the Conflict," *Middle East Report* no. 11, March 25, 2003: 6, n. 22.

⁴² Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁴³ David Lawrence, "Iraqi Kurds Enjoy a De Facto State," *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 May 2000, 6. See also Francis J. Ricciardone, "An American Diplomat's Perspectives on Kurds in the Global Arena," remarks made at American University, 17 April 2000. For a broader overview of the Kurds in northern Iraq, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996).

and the victims began to tell their tales.⁴⁴ The discovery of mass graves and the tales of atrocities that poured forth in the open media further hardened the Shia in particular.⁴⁵ Leaders called for revenge, while Sunni elites under Saddam's regime had good reason to fear that losing power could cost their communities, and themselves, everything. Kurdish leaders, meanwhile, faced considerable pressure to declare independence, which was widely popular among ordinary Kurds.

At the same time, media in Iraq grew explosively. By June 2003, Iraq had at least 85 new newspapers, while Arabic-language satellite stations such as *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiyya* were widely received.⁴⁶ In this frenzied and nascent media environment, rumors and conspiracy theories often were accepted uncritically. For example, by summer 2003, rumors that Jews and Israelis were buying up much of Iraq were rampant in Sunni areas.⁴⁷

The coalition's plan to hold elections led to even greater fears within group, as numbers weighed against the Sunnis. Sunni Arabs, suffering from de-Baathification and the disbanding of the military, feared that they would be democratically dispossessed, with elections legitimizing a Shia-dominated government. The Kurds, meanwhile, sought to ensure that any central government would not be able to exercise direct control over Kurdish areas.

Nor was the overall atmosphere of chaos conducive to democratization. Although many elements go into successful democratization, one vital one is the surety of expectations. Losers must know they will not be punished if they lose power. If the state is weak, such guarantees are meaningless as individuals cannot be protected from vigilantes or otherwise trust that they will not be persecuted.⁴⁸

Politically, the coalition tried to solve this problem by working with leaders of different communities to bring them into various provisional governing bodies. For many governing bodies, major communities were to receive representation in rough proportion to their numbers, with factions within each community receiving shares of that group's allocated seats. In essence, the coalition bowed to the reality of Iraq's many divisions and power centers. Predictably, this led to two problems. First, groups quarreled over both the overall size of their community's allocation and their share of what they received. Second, such an allocation reified identities, making them even more politically salient. Third, Sunni elites opted out of the elections, fearing that

⁴⁴ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 132.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 153–54.

⁴⁷ Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird*, 57–59.

⁴⁸ Jack L. Snyder and Robert Jervis, "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Barbara Walter and Jack Snyder, *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 19; and James D. Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict," in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, eds., *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 107–26.

participation would legitimate the community's subordination. In essence the coalition rewarded divisions, making it harder to develop a strong national identity.

Challenges Inherent to Democratization in Divided Societies

New democracies, particularly those in divided societies, typically have a host of problems. In Iraq, the potential for many of these problems to be manifest were clear from the start.⁴⁹

Many of democracy's theoretical advantages may not accrue in societies like Iraq that are divided along racial, ethnic, or religious lines. One potential problem is the numerically larger group's use of elections and other legitimate democratic forms to ensure its dominance—a tyranny of the majority.⁵⁰ Some identities may be “hardened” by past conflicts and tragedies. Individuals identify primarily along one line such as ethnicity, making it difficult for other identities such as class or narrow political interests to create political alliances that cross groups.⁵¹ Democratic elections can exacerbate identity hardening. As Donald Horowitz notes: “By appealing to electorates in ethnic terms, by making ethnic demands on government, and by bolstering the influence of ethnically chauvinist elements within each group, parties that begin by merely mirroring ethnic divisions help to deepen and extend them.”⁵² Not surprisingly, minorities often fight democratization because they fear that majority rule would install in power a permanent elected majority that would never allow the minority a voice in decision making.

Iraq was at risk for these problems. From the start, Sunnis worried that Shiite community, which comprises more than 60 percent of the total population, might use free elections to transform its current exclusion from power to one of total dominance. Sunni Arabs, and perhaps Iraqi Kurds, might oppose a majority-rule based system in fear of this dominance.

In theory, federalism and other arrangements that guarantee minority rights reduce incentives for conflict by giving minority groups and their leaders more power with respect to fundamental concerns such as education,

⁴⁹ For a review of many of these problems, see Byman, “Constructing a Democratic Iraq.”

⁵⁰ For more on this concept, see Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracies,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6. (November/December 1997): 22–43; and Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semiauthoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

⁵¹ See Chaim Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1996): 137; and Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 23–36.

⁵² Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 291. See also Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and National Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 316–20.

taxation, and law and order.⁵³ Yet federalism is not a panacea. Even if many Iraqis would be satisfied, inevitably some leaders and perhaps larger communities would not be content. Although the complaints might be fewer, they can be riskier with regard to stability because a federal system, by design, has a weak central government. When local groups control local government, control their own revenues, and otherwise have their own institutions, they are better able to organize—a key factor that determines their ability to resist the central government should conflict develop.⁵⁴ Federal democracy is especially fragile when outside powers menace a country. The federal regime will probably lack a strong army, as this would be a threat to local communities.⁵⁵ As a result, local groups can mobilize militias against the state or to fight each other. Power-sharing systems that allow local groups to have their own schools and religious institutions also magnify the salience of communal identity, making it harder to create cross-cutting ties or build a shared identity.⁵⁶

The process of democratization itself is also problematic, particularly if institutions are weak, as was the case in Iraq. Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder have found a disturbing correlation between democratizing states and international war. They contend that democratizing states are approximately twice as likely as established democracies or autocracies to engage in war.⁵⁷ In addition, social scientists have found a strong correlation between the transition to democracy and instability.⁵⁸ One reason that democratization unleashes conflict is that elites can easily manipulate democratic freedoms, particularly when democratic institutions are weak.⁵⁹ Moreover, losers in elections may end up dead, not simply removed from office. Fearing a tyranny of a majority, or simply punishment for past abuses, existing elites may try to disrupt or preempt elections. Thus the transition from an interim government to a truly democratic one may be susceptible to increased instability.

⁵³ Federalism is traditionally defined as a political system where each level has one or more areas of supreme jurisdiction. See Steve L. Solnick, "Federalism and State-building," in *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management, and Democracy*, ed. Andrew Reynolds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 174.

⁵⁴ Byman, *Keeping the Peace*, 39.

⁵⁵ See Abraham Ashkenasi, "Socio-Ethnic Conflict and Paramilitary Organization in the Near East," in *Political Violence and Terror: Motifs and Motivations*, ed. Peter H. Merkl (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 314.

⁵⁶ Jack L. Snyder and Robert Jervis, "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Walter and Snyder, *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, 19.

⁵⁷ Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Dangers of War," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 5.

⁵⁸ Daniel C. Esty, Jack A. Goldstone, Ted Robert Gurr, Barbara Harff, Marc Levy, Geoffrey D. Dabelko, Pamela T. Surko, and Alan N. Unger, *State Failure Task Force Report: Phase II Findings* (McLean, VA: Science Applications International Corporation, 1998), 19–22.

⁵⁹ See James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (September 1994): 577–92.

Because of these problems, democratization often founders during the transition. Minority mistrust, dominant group resentment, and the elite exploitation of freedoms all contribute to ethnic tension and, frequently, to ethnic conflict. Conflict is particularly likely when a government is weak—a common problem during any political transition—and cannot deter conflict, suppress radicals, or ensure that political bargains are kept.⁶⁰ Thus when tension is high, democratization is often impractical because it cannot be implemented. Most of the democratization literature focuses on democratization occurring for internal dynamics, but as democratization in Iraq was imposed from the outside, the issues became even more complicated as yet another actor (the United States) with its own interests and constraints entered the political fray. Such challenges often argue for a lengthy democratization process.⁶¹

Moreover, given the centripetal forces of democratization, a certain instability and messiness would have accompanied the best planned and executed operations.

Challenges Inherent to the United States

The United States faced particular difficulties in Iraq from the start because of several deeper problems that would have severe consequences: limited local intelligence, the publicity that attends inevitable military abuses, and limited civilian capacity.⁶²

LIMITED INTELLIGENCE

The U.S. government knew relatively little about Iraq and, despite constant calls for better intelligence, that ignorance was largely inevitable. Saddam's regime had long maintained a tight control on information about the country,

⁶⁰ In essence, this is a "commitment problem" as outlined by James Fearon. He argues that unless a third party can guarantee an agreement, ethnic groups wonder whether they will be exploited in the future. Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict."

⁶¹ Roland Paris, for example, argues that outside peacemakers should first build the institutions necessary for democratization to flourish before they embark on elections and other more visible measures. Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶² A fourth problem is that the premise of the war was quickly exposed to be false: Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction or have significant ties to *al Qaeda*. Regardless of one's views on the validity of prewar intelligence assessments and policy judgments on issues like Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs, the postwar discovery that neither of these premises were true changed the dynamics of the occupation. For many Americans, the stakes of the occupation changed dramatically. What had been a war to stop an aggressive dictator from gaining nuclear weapons and possibly passing them to terrorists became more difficult to justify. Humanitarianism and building democracy were the new buzzwords but, without the strategic foundation, may have lessened the costs many Americans were willing to pay.

prohibiting the flow of information that typically results when diplomats, journalists, businesspeople, scholars, and tourists go to and from a country. Few of the people who wrote on Iraq in the United States, for the government or think tanks, had been to the country or knew its people.⁶³ Yet despite these limits, strategic intelligence on the aftermath of the U.S. invasion proved remarkably prescient: indeed, for purposes of this article, Iraq is in some ways an “intelligence success.” Paul Pillar, who was the National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East and South Asia in 2003, notes that the key judgments of one intelligence estimate produced before the war warned that building a stable and democratic Iraq was a “long, difficult, and probably turbulent” process.⁶⁴

This strategic perspicacity, however, did little to fill a true intelligence gap: knowledge on local leaders, the capabilities of the police, the corruption levels of various ministries, or other information that did not rise to the level of vital importance when Saddam was in power but was crucial for an occupying force that had to operate on a local as well as national level. Even brilliant human intelligence, such as a spy in Saddam’s inner circle, would have done little to solve this problem, as it would have been at the strategic level. Having the tactical intelligence necessary to run Iraqi cities and tribal areas required having a massive on-the-ground presence that was impossible in Saddam’s Iraq.

At least some mistakes in judging the local players were to some degree inevitable as a result of these weaknesses. Most Iraqi clerics saw Muqtada al-Sadr as “an upstart” because he lacked religious credentials, underestimating the legacy of his father’s martyrdom and his own charisma—a misjudgment shared by leading U.S. Arabists.⁶⁵ The CIA judged that the Iraqi police were largely well trained and professional, when in fact they were largely incompetent and brutal hacks: the result was that crime became a problem immediately, while U.S. forces did not dispatch police.⁶⁶

But the problem was deeper than a lack of immediate familiarity with Iraq. Saddam had manipulated religion, ideology, and society itself, and when his regime fell it was difficult for outsiders to anticipate the internal dynamics of the country with any certainty.⁶⁷ As a result, the United States found it harder to prepare for the immediate challenges of occupation. In particular, one of the core challenges of preventing an insurgency from developing

⁶³ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 7.

⁶⁴ Paul Pillar, “The Right Stuff,” *The National Interest* no. 91 (September/October 2007): 53–56.

⁶⁵ Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 206, 215.

⁶⁶ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 84. The CIA did assess, however, that the Iraqi policy and security services would eventually require restructuring if they were to become trusted by the Iraqi people.

⁶⁷ Ajami, *Foreigners’ Gift*, 109.

during an occupation—understanding issues from the point of view of the local population⁶⁸—became far more difficult.

The United States relied heavily on Iraqi exiles both to inform expectations of postwar Iraq and in helping run the country after the defeat of Saddam's conventional forces. In contrast to many U.S. officials, many Iraqi exiles did have a far more intimate knowledge of Iraq and its tensions. But politically they sought intervention, and thus had an interest in playing down difficulties of any occupation.⁶⁹ Exile influence grew, however, in part because the CIA had few assets in Iraq to provide a different perspective.⁷⁰ Yet it would have been strong in any event as the exiles message had a receptive audience in the Bush administration.

WAR IS HELL

Although considerable attention has been focused on how the United States should have prevented abuses at Abu Ghraib prison or the killing of non-combatant Iraqis, it seems likely that the over one hundred thousand U.S. forces would commit some abuses and that this would be captured on film given the prevalence of information technology today. To be clear, no particular incident was inevitable and some, like Abu Ghraib, were mishandled and became far more explosive as a result. However, by historical measures, the U.S. sensitivity to civilian casualties is considerable.⁷¹ Moreover, all wars see depravity, particularly collateral civilian casualties but also human rights abuses. In Iraq, the size of forces, the intensity of the conflict, and the overall level of frustration were bound to produce some abuses. The widespread access to video technology meant that much of what in past wars would have been isolated became available globally. As a result, many isolated provocations, such as a U.S. soldier kicking down a flag with the Mahdi's name on it, were captured on film and widely disseminated as proof of U.S. hostility.⁷²

WEAK CIVILIAN CAPACITY

Although, as noted below, the Bush administration is rightly criticized for poor staffing policies in key agencies related to the Iraq occupation, this

⁶⁸ Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, "Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations," *Military Review* (November-December 2005): 4.

⁶⁹ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 8.

⁷⁰ See *Report to the President of the United States*, The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, 31 March 2005. For an excellent review of this and other Iraq intelligence reports, see Robert Jervis, "Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 1 (February 2006): 3–52. Also see Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 57.

⁷¹ Colin Kahl, "In the Crossfire or the Crosshairs? Norms, Civilian Casualties, and U.S. Conduct in Iraq," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 7–46.

⁷² Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 314.

masks a deeper problem: in many key areas, U.S. civilian agencies had little capacity toward nation building.

Although there is widespread post hoc criticism of the decision to place control of the occupation within the Department of Defense, the State Department in 2003 had at best a limited capacity for planning and administration.⁷³ The State Department suffered several problems in this regard. Most important, it was (and is) a small organization. The U.S. military has 217 times more people than the U.S. Foreign Service, and the Foreign Service has worldwide staffing responsibilities. In 2007, there were fewer than three hundred Foreign Service officers in all of Iraq.⁷⁴ Similarly, USAID has perhaps one thousand career professionals today.⁷⁵

The skill set of these individuals also did not match the needs of occupying Iraq. Arabic speakers were always scarce, and the numbers needed dwarfed those required for traditional diplomatic missions. The State Department also trains its people to conduct diplomacy: local administrators, agronomists, and others with the skill sets needed for nation building were in short supply.⁷⁶ Like the military, the State Department had at best a weak police-training program. In addition, the State Department does not emphasize program management as a career path, and as a result running large staffs or large numbers of contractors is not something many senior State Department officials regularly do.

More resources and aggressive efforts to fill intelligence gaps, bolster civilian agencies, or ensure the military did not engage in human rights abuses could have lessened the various problems. But it is difficult to imagine the situation would get close to the levels that would truly eliminate, as opposed to mitigate, these problems.

POLICY MISTAKES AND THEIR EFFECTS

The United States made a stunning series of mistakes in its occupation of Iraq. Too often, however, attention has focused on mistakes made once the occupation began rather than the disastrous framework for occupation put in place by mistakes in preparation. Both these categories greatly exacerbated the structural challenges that the coalition faced upon entering Iraq.

FAILURES IN PREPARATION

In the leadup to war, the United States made several mistakes that in hindsight were widely criticized as contributing to the subsequent problems in

⁷³ Diamond, for example, criticizes the choice of the Pentagon as the lead agency for Iraq. Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 281.

⁷⁴ "AFSA net: Telling Our Story," 17 October 2007. Email version.

⁷⁵ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 309.

⁷⁶ "AFSA net: Telling Our Story," 17 October 2007. Email version.

Iraq. These include (1) a lack of planning for the postwar phase; (2) an insufficient number of troops; (3) a military not oriented toward occupation and counterinsurgency; and (4) feeble diplomacy. Many of these are well covered and understood, so I do not flesh them out in great detail here despite the magnitude of the problems several created.

1. Lack of Postwar Planning. The U.S. military and civilian leadership did not produce a comprehensive plan for postwar Iraq. Different draft plans and prognostications did appear from the State Department, the CIA, the Army, and the Marines, but they were not integrated into an overall U.S. government plan that became official policy.⁷⁷ The National Security Council did not push planning for contingencies or offer strategic guidance to key agencies and task forces.⁷⁸ In addition, the various plans were not developed at the level of detail that would enable them to be quickly operationalized.

The planning problem was most acute with regard to the military and defense community, which in the end took the lead in the occupation. Rumsfeld and Franks did not issue planning guidance for postwar Iraq. Joint Task Force IV, a planning cell authorized by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was in charge of a postwar plan but never produced one.⁷⁹ As one senior officer involved in planning noted, "I can't judge the quality of the Phase 4 [post-conventional hostilities] plan because I never really saw any."⁸⁰ In hindsight, the lack of planning is stunning given the military's long record of careful (and, some would say endless), contingency planning. CENTCOM initially saw training Iraqis, which turned out to be the hinge of successful counterinsurgency, as a waste. Perhaps more than any of the other problems the United States faced in Iraq, the lack of planning on the military side is surprising, as the military institutionally has an exceptionally strong planning capacity and has an institutional culture that strongly stresses contingency planning.

The lack of planning at the political level was also remarkable. Senior policy makers made optimistic assumptions about a post-Saddam Iraq that inhibited planning for more pessimistic contingencies.⁸¹ From the start, it was never clear how the United States planned to govern Iraq. The Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) was created late in

⁷⁷ As a RAND study found, "It is not the case that no one planned for a post-Saddam Iraq. On the contrary, many agencies and organizations within the U.S. government identified a range of postwar challenges in 2002 and early 2003, before major combat operations commenced, and suggested strategies for addressing them . . . Yet very few if any made it in to the serious planning process for OIF." Nora Bensahel et al., *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), xvii. See also James Fallow, "Blind into Baghdad," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2004, 54.

⁷⁸ Nora Bensahel et al., *After Saddam*, xix.

⁷⁹ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 81; and Nora Bensahel et al., *After Saddam*, 41–52.

⁸⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iraq: Too Uncertain to Call* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2003), 2.

⁸¹ Nora Bensahel et al., *After Saddam*, xviii.

the game in part to fill this void. ORHA, however, was cobbled together only in January 2003, many months after the possibility of war became serious. Planning for conventional operations had thus gone on for over a year, while serious planning for the postwar period was a matter of weeks. ORHA had few resources, no central direction, and no mandate to coordinate with other government agencies.⁸²

Perhaps most importantly, the United States did not make basic decisions about Iraq's political future beyond a vague desire to see Iraq become a democracy. Thus the United States did not engage in an effort similar to the "Bonn process," which set the stage for the future government of Afghanistan before the fall of the Taliban and helped reduce infighting there when U.S.-backed forces gained victory.

In addition to individual incompetence and unduly optimistic assumptions about postwar Iraq, the lack of planning occurred for three reasons. First and most important, planning risked political complications. Key allies such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia might not support efforts to empower Iraq's Shia population via democratic elections. At home, critics of the war might point to contingency plans for additional troop deployments, massive spending on reconstruction, and other costly possibilities as proof that the war would be too expensive or could even lead to disaster. Although in theory planning could be classified, a comprehensive planning effort that involved many individuals throughout the U.S. military and government could have leaked to the media.⁸³ Second, some civilian defense officials believed that a lack of planning would mean that the better organized exile community would have an advantage over potential rivals.⁸⁴ Third, officials in the U.S. administration were divided on what to do with postwar Iraq. Senior officials mostly agreed on the need to eliminate Saddam's regime, but there was disagreement on the type of regime that should come next and on the role the United States should play in midwifing any changes.⁸⁵

The lack of planning exacerbated the structural problems of weak institutions, nationalism, and a failed state. Transitioning from Saddam's Iraq to any alternative was inherently difficult, but neither ORHA nor the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) were ready to take the helm to ensure basic services and provide a plan of governance. Politically, the United States fostered the worst of all expectations, creating a sense that it would initially hand over power and then angering elites and the populace alike by continuing the occupation with no clear plan for Iraqi participation. A decision to postpone a handover, had it been done before the war began rather than after Iraqis

⁸² Chandrasekara, *Imperial Life* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 37–42.

⁸³ See the discussion in Gregory Hooker, *Shaping the Plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005), 9–12.

⁸⁴ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 52.

⁸⁵ Edward Luce, "Lunch with the FT: John Bolton," *Financial Times*, 19 October 2007.

had come to expect an immediate return of sovereignty, would not have allowed Iraqi expectations to grow as high without correction. Moreover, it would not have fostered immediate inter and intragroup leadership struggles, as these would have been decided before the war began, in circumstances that were far more controllable and less susceptible to outbidding and chauvinism. Conversely, more favorable structural conditions would have given the United States more breathing space to make plans after the occupation began.

2. Not Enough Troops. One of the most criticized Bush administration decisions was the use of an invasion force whose total size in Iraq numbered less than one hundred eighty-five thousand troops in May and quickly fell by roughly thirty thousand in the months that followed.⁸⁶ Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld limited the size of the force for several reasons. First, he believed, correctly, that a relatively small force could easily overwhelm Saddam's forces. Second, he did not believe that chaos would ensue and that the United States would have to take over responsibility for public order. In particular, there was an assumption among civilian defense officials that the Iraqis would see themselves as liberated, and thus the resistance to occupation would be minimal.⁸⁷ Vice President Dick Cheney even publicly declared that "we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators."⁸⁸ Rumsfeld micromanaged the force structure, and his antipathy to calls to expand the size of forces was well known. Despite some level of discomfort in the army, CENTCOM commander General Tommy Franks did not allow revisions of the plans to include more troops.⁸⁹ Indeed, when Baghdad fell General Franks halted the flow of additional forces to the theater.

Troop estimates for the Iraq mission often assessed the need for close to half a million troops, in contrast to the two hundred thousand U.S. soldiers who actually invaded Iraq, though these are focused on the post-hostilities phase. For example, a RAND nation-building study and several academic works cite a typical requirement of one security official per five hundred people in the population: for Iraq, a figure that would be around five hundred thousand.⁹⁰ Before the war began, General Shinseki noted the need for a much larger force to occupy Iraq, giving the figure of several hundred thousand, and that was the initial army recommendation.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Brookings Institution, "Iraq Index," 17 November 2003, accessed at <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index20031117.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 285; Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," 65; and Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (Pantheon, 2006).

⁸⁸ Vice President Richard Cheney, *Meet the Press*, 16 March 2003.

⁸⁹ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 40.

⁹⁰ James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Keith Crane, and Beth Cole DeGrasse, *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007), xxvi.

⁹¹ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 284; and Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," 64. In the 1990s, CENTCOM had done an exercise, dubbed "Desert Crossing," which offered some guidance

A lack of sufficient troops can contribute to occupation problems similar to what the United States faced in Iraq. In particular, the lack of troops exacerbated the failed state issues and made it harder to respond to initial surges of violent nationalism. Protecting civilian officials and aid workers, much less ordinary Iraqis, risked overextending the limited forces. Moreover, it provided space in which the insurgents could organize. Nor could the United States protect the Iraqis who worked with the coalition, making them vulnerable to insurgent retaliation.⁹²

3. Military Not Oriented Toward Counterinsurgency. In addition to not deploying enough troops, the U.S. military in 2003 was primarily, perhaps overwhelmingly, oriented toward defeating adversaries in conventional wars. In this it was remarkably successful. The 2003 defeat of Saddam's conventional forces was, indeed, a "cakewalk" as some analysts had predicted.⁹³

Yet even as, or perhaps because, U.S. forces excelled in conventional operations, their counterinsurgency capabilities were weak. U.S. doctrine on counterinsurgency was underdeveloped, not having been revised for almost 20 years before the war began.⁹⁴ Training and education programs on counterinsurgency in the U.S. military were also poor.⁹⁵ For years, peacekeeping operations had drawn considerable criticism, and President Bush even campaigned against such operations as a proper military mission.

Not surprisingly, U.S. Army forces deployed in Iraq were strong on armored and mechanized forces but weak on civil affairs and human intelligence. The result, as one U.S. officer put it in a blistering postinvasion critique, was that "America's generals have failed to prepare our armed forces for war and advise civilian authorities on the application of force to achieve the aims of policy."⁹⁶ Foreign military training programs, a key part of counterinsurgency, were also weak.

None of these problems were inevitable. In contrast to weak civilian capacity, the military's size and budgets were considerable, and it was possible, though difficult, to reorient the military toward counterinsurgency. Indeed, in 2005–2007 the United States fundamentally changed its approach in Iraq to embrace many of the tenets of counterinsurgency.⁹⁷ Education, training, and doctrine all caught up to the need for this capability. Such a shift, however, occurred only after the insurgency was well underway and the inadequacy of

on troop numbers and suggested that extremely large numbers were necessary. Accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB207/index.htm>.

⁹² Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 289.

⁹³ See Ken Adelman, "Cakewalk in Iraq," *Washington Post*, 13 February 2002, A27.

⁹⁴ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*; and Colin Kahl, "COIN of the Realm," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2007).

⁹⁵ Aylwin-Foster, "Changing the Army," 9.

⁹⁶ Paul Yingling, "A Failure in Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal*, accessed at <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>.

⁹⁷ Kahl, "COIN of the Realm."

the existing approach was clear. In addition, training programs, particularly for police, remained weak.⁹⁸

Yet the military not being oriented toward counterinsurgency is an important caveat toward the more common criticism that not enough troops were deployed. Having an additional two hundred thousand troops who were not oriented toward counterinsurgency would only have proved marginally useful.

4. Weak Diplomacy. Many critics of the war have focused on the Bush administration's failure to secure a UN Security Council resolution specifically authorizing the invasion. In so doing, the argument goes, the United States deprived itself of the troops and expertise of its allies as well as additional funds for reconstructions. In addition, a more international coalition could have dispelled fears of an occupation by increasing the legitimacy of the coalition regime.⁹⁹

The United States also rejected turning over political authority to the United Nations after the occupation began. This deprived the United States of potential expertise and also increased the perception that the United States was an occupier.¹⁰⁰ As a result, they argue, some of the initial insurgent energy focused more on ending the U.S. occupation, when it might have been directed into Iraqi politics.¹⁰¹

In addition to the international dimension, neighbors play a key role in military occupations with regard to the likelihood of conflict. As a RAND study found, "It is, therefore, practically impossible to put a broken state back together if its neighbors are committed to frustrating that effort."¹⁰² Although the United States had the open or de facto support of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, it did not have the support of Syria and Iran. In different ways, Iran and Syria contributed to U.S. problems. The Iraq Study Group found that Iran actively meddled in Iraq, helping arm and organize militants. Syria was deliberately passive with regard to smuggling, gunrunning, terrorist recruitment, and other problems emanating from its territory.¹⁰³ Both powers worsened the problem of weak authority in Iraq by helping local groups gain arms.

Turkey was also a loss. Before the invasion, the U.S. military had planned to launch part of the invasion force from Turkish soil. In addition, the

⁹⁸ For work on policing in general as a counterinsurgency instrument, see William Rosenau, "Little Soldiers: Police, Policing, and Counterinsurgency," (unpublished paper, 2007). For specifics on Iraq, see Bruce Hoffman, "Testimony Before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives, 11 September 2006.

⁹⁹ Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards," 72.

¹⁰⁰ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 291; and Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, xxxv.

¹⁰¹ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 303.

¹⁰² Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, xiii.

¹⁰³ Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, 28–29.

presence of Turkey in the coalition had political benefits, bringing in a large and powerful Muslim (albeit secular) nation. The failure to bring Turkey into the coalition forced the United States to divert its forces and, in the end, to deploy fewer troops as part of the initial invasion force, though the Fourth Infantry Division, which was slated to enter Iraq from Turkey, did enter Iraq from the south and took responsibility for part of the north.

Failures of Occupation

In addition to not properly laying the groundwork for a successful occupation before the war began, once in power in Iraq the United States made a number of policy choices that in hindsight many criticized as fostering an insurgency. These include: (1) disbanding the Iraqi army; (2) de-Baathifying Iraq's government; (3) failing to stop the initial looting; (4) vacillating on Iraq's political status; (5) pushing for rapid democratization and economic transformation; (6) moving slowly on reconstruction; and (7) hiring inexperienced or highly ideological staff.

1. Disbanding the Iraqi Army. One of the most criticized U.S. decisions was the disbandment of the Iraqi Army and intelligence services. Paul Bremer saw disbanding the army as a way to demonstrate to Iraqis, particularly the Shiites and Kurds, that Saddam's regime was gone once and for all.¹⁰⁴ In addition, Walt Slocombe, a CPA official in charge of security issues, saw the army as having dissolved itself and feared that calling Iraqi forces to garrison would cause them to be discontented with their quarters.¹⁰⁵

Disbanding the army caused several problems. One of the biggest was simply releasing disgruntled officers who could offer leadership for a nascent insurgency as well as large numbers of armed young men who could fill the ranks. On paper at least, the initial dissolution decision involved perhaps four hundred thousand people directly, and indirectly well over a million given that many soldiers helped support large families. The soldiers had military training and knew where large caches of weapons were located. Indeed, the CIA even warned Bremer that "You're going to drive fifty thousand Baathists underground before nightfall."¹⁰⁶ In Fallujah, one of the earliest cities where resistance began, many insurgent recruits were "unemployed, most often former military or security servicemen."¹⁰⁷ The blow was particularly severe to many Sunni elites who were in the leadership positions of the army and

¹⁰⁴ Interview with L. Paul Bremer III, PBS Frontline, accessed at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/yeariniraq/interviews/bremer.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," 74; and Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 75. For a defense of the disbandment decision, see L. Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (Threshold Editions, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 71.

¹⁰⁷ Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird*, 142.

security services.¹⁰⁸ One reporter found that professional military officers were the “backbone” of the insurgency.¹⁰⁹

The psychological effect was also considerable. As Allawi notes, “The Iraqi army had played an almost mystical role in the narrative of modern Iraqi history.”¹¹⁰ The army was considered a national symbol and was widely respected in Iraq. Disbanding the army was seen as a blow to national pride.

Had the regular army been in ranks, it could have been used to provide local security or engage in public works. The army would have also helped counteract insurgents from the security services, Republican Guards, or other Saddam loyalists, both with its own forces and by offering considerable intelligence to coalition forces. Perhaps most important, retaining the army would have sent Sunnis a message that in one key institution their influence would remain considerable.

2. De-Baathification. Saddam Hussein had used the Baath Party as the core of his apparatus for ruling Iraq, and its most senior leadership was implicated in his many crimes. Although the uppermost leaders would inevitably be removed, U.S. authorities outlawed the Baath Party entirely, and perhaps thirty thousand Baathists lost their jobs in the Iraqi government.¹¹¹ Bremer initiated de-Baathification despite concerns that this would fuel the insurgency raised by the CIA as well as his predecessor, General Garner.¹¹² As with disbanding the army, part of the goal of de-Baathification was to send a signal to Iraqis that the old order was finished.

The consequences were particularly profound in the Sunni community, increasing support for an insurgency among elites and exacerbating the failed state problems. Many prominent Sunni leaders were also prominent Baathists: by firing senior Baathists, many important voices in the Sunni community were also excluded from legitimate political power.¹¹³ In addition, they began to fear that they would be the target of reprisals by the new, American-backed government. De-Baathification also had an immediate effect on reconstruction efforts. Many senior Iraqi technocrats were also Baath Party members, and their removal paralyzed many government services.¹¹⁴

3. Failure to Stop Looting and Recognize the Incipient Insurgency. After U.S. forces defeated Saddam’s forces, there was little effort to stop the looting that followed. As Anthony Cordesman argues, “We neither anticipated the

¹⁰⁸ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 155–58.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Michael Ware, PBS Frontline, accessed at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/insurgency/interviews/ware.html>.

¹¹⁰ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 155. For a similar argument, see Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 181. For a review of the Iraqi army during Saddam’s regime, see Andrew Parasiliti and Sinan Antoon, “Friends in Need, Foes to Heed: The Iraqi Military in Politics,” *Middle East Policy* 7, no. 4 (October 2000): 130–40.

¹¹¹ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 146–50.

¹¹² Interview with General Jay Garner, PBS Frontline, accessed at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/yeariniraq/interviews/garner.html>.

¹¹³ Malkasian, “The Role of Perceptions and Political Reform in Counterinsurgency,” 372.

¹¹⁴ Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, 21.

mission or had the troops.”¹¹⁵ The chaos proved devastating to the overall occupation, severely setting back reconstruction and efforts to administer Iraq. Much of Iraq’s infrastructure—building materials, computers, and other goods—was simply stolen and sold on the black market.¹¹⁶

The United States should have expected chaos to follow the removal of a government. One nongovernmental organization (NGO) official noted, “Anyone who has witnessed the fall of a regime while another force is coming in on a temporary basis knows that looting is standard procedure.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, several important U.S. government-linked prewar studies, particularly the Future of Iraq Project and a CIA projection, warned about the risk of civil disorder, as did expert testimony from Iraq experts, NGO officials, and reports from various think tanks. This Future of Iraq study also noted the psychological importance of restoring electricity and other basic services.¹¹⁸ In addition to setting back reconstruction, the looting also empowered local militias. When the regime fell, perhaps two hundred fifty thousand tons of weapons were never accounted for, transforming Iraq into an exceptionally well-armed community.¹¹⁹

The psychological blow was perhaps the most massive. Iraqis believed that Americans would quickly restore the country to prosperity.¹²⁰ The looting discredited the occupying authority and its Iraqi allies, making them more an object of ridicule than of fear. As one Iraqi noted, “Is it believable that America, the greatest nation on earth, can’t bring order to a small spot on the map? We cannot believe it.”¹²¹

The failure to stop the looting was in part difficult due to a lack of sufficient troops—the relatively small number of coalition forces could not assume the role of local police without being stretched extremely thin. But even in areas where coalition forces were stronger, they did not see themselves as having a mandate for police work. As one officer later remarked, “I can remember quite clearly, I was on a street corner in Baghdad, smoking a cigar, watching some guys carry a sofa by—and it never occurred to me that I was going to be the guy to go get that sofa back.”¹²² This is in part a

¹¹⁵ Interview with Anthony Cordesman, PBS Frontline, accessed at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/yeariniraq/interviews/cordesman.html>.

¹¹⁶ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 116.

¹¹⁷ As quoted in Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” 63.

¹¹⁸ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 282–83; and Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” 68. On the Future of Iraq Project, see materials available at the National Security Archive, accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB163/index.htm>.

¹¹⁹ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 140. The figure may be much harder, with the figure possibly being more than twice that high. As one official noted, “Fundamentally, the entire country was one big ammo dump.” Adam Schreck, “Looted Weapons Stockpiles,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 2007, A4.

¹²⁰ Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 295.

¹²¹ As quoted in Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 251. For the psychological effect of the looting on the U.S. image, see also Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 287.

¹²² Ricks, *Fiasco*, 152.

planning failure, as units were not anticipating having this be their mission. It also reflects the military's institutional avoidance of the counterinsurgency mission.

Just as the United States failed to recognize the importance of the looting, the military leadership also proved reluctant to recognize that an insurgency was developing and redirect forces to fight it more effectively.¹²³ Civilian leaders encouraged this stubbornness. Colin Kahl contends, "When faced with a growing Sunni insurgency in Iraq, the immediate response of Pentagon officials and the U.S. military was denial."¹²⁴ In the field, the response was quicker, with some commanders recognizing the reality on the growing insurgency. However, Secretary Rumsfeld and other senior administration officials regularly rejected criticism that not enough troops were deployed,¹²⁵ even though far more would be necessary for policing missions using traditional measures of force sizing.

Many of the initial tactics the military used to combat the insurgents proved counterproductive and were later viewed as going against traditional counterinsurgency principles of minimizing the use of force and trying to win over the population. Some U.S. units relied on firepower and the heavy use of force to solve problems, not recognizing that this often backfires when fighting insurgents because it alienates the broader population.¹²⁶ Forces raided homes and made many arrests, often indiscriminately. Many Iraqis believed that the Americans were engaging in collective punishment, and the arrests of elderly Iraqis increased a feeling of humiliation. As one U.S. Army Colonel remarked in 2004, "If I were treated like this, I'd be a terrorist!"¹²⁷ As so often happens, the incipient insurgency became more widespread when the aggressive response angered many locals and turned them against Americans and the Iraqis who helped them.¹²⁸

Not surprisingly, the United States missed the "golden hour" that typically follows a military victory. As a RAND study found, "The appearance of an intervening force normally produces a combination of shock and relief in the local population. Resistance is unorganized, spoilers unsure of their future. The situation is highly malleable."¹²⁹ As a result, the violence took on aspects of path dependency, where the failure to stop initial problems snowballed into even more difficult challenges.

¹²³ Bruce Hoffman, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," RAND Occasional Paper, June 2004, 1–2.

¹²⁴ Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird*, 72. Kahl, "COIN of the Realm."

¹²⁵ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 288.

¹²⁶ Kahl, "COIN of the Realm."

¹²⁷ As quoted in Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, "Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations," *Military Review* (November–December 2005): 3.

¹²⁸ Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 264–73; and Ricks, *Fiasco*, 185.

¹²⁹ Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, xxiv.

4. Vacillation on Political Plans. The United States compounded its problems with advance planning by switching its approach on Iraqi sovereignty and other key issues in a bewildering and seemingly whimsical manner. Indeed, this vacillation contributed to many of the problems above.

ORHA's initial plan was to transfer sovereignty quickly to various Iraqi leaders who, it hoped, represented key components of Iraqi society. The sudden and surprising decision of the CPA to delay the elections and the transfer of sovereignty, however, threw this approach into chaos. Bremer decided to delay elections in part because he feared that popular elections would lead to the elevation of leaders who did not support women's rights, favor the separation of mosque and state, and otherwise endorse liberal values.¹³⁰ But CPA's planning did not match its ambitions. One CPA official described the CPA as "pasting feathers together, hoping for a duck."¹³¹ The decision to occupy Iraq, delay the transfer of sovereignty, and hold off on elections angered several important figures and reduced the credibility of U.S. claims that it would transfer sovereignty to Iraq eventually and end the occupation.¹³²

In general, the United States vacillated on how much authority to give the Iraqis, and advisory groups were created but then ignored. The announcement of the CPA on 22 May was a signal that the United States was reversing course and formally seeking to occupy and run Iraq. As Diamond contends, "We never listened carefully to the Iraqi people, or to the figures in the country that they respected."¹³³ Once again, the United States raised expectations only to dash them. Indeed, Diamond relates one CPA official angrily declaring that "We have a problem . . . the Governing Council is issuing orders and the ministers are starting to execute them."¹³⁴

During this time, dissent and opposition were neither repressed nor soothed. Sadr, for example, was excluded from the political system and U.S. forces at times tried to arrest him and attack his forces. Yet at other times the United States hesitated to confront him militarily, even after his supporters murdered a leader of a rival, and more pro-U.S., group.¹³⁵ Nor could U.S. officials decide how much to reach out to Sunni leaders.

Thus in the end the United States ended up with the worst of all worlds. It had discredited those who collaborated with the United States and inflamed

¹³⁰ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 186.

¹³¹ As quoted in Ricks, *Fiasco*, 204.

¹³² Edelstein finds that "Credible guarantees of independent, indigenous rule reduce the likelihood of costly resistance from the occupied population and may minimize domestic opposition to the occupation, and thereby make a long and successful occupation possible." Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards," 65.

¹³³ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 291.

¹³⁴ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 300. This switch from a rapid transfer to delaying elections was not the end of U.S. vacillation. Because the interim governments were seen as unrepresentative and weak, demands for democracy grew quickly, leading to criticism and pressure from the White House to speed up the effort. In the end, the CPA rushed elections.

¹³⁵ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 295.

nationalism yet not put in place a system that would build institutions for the long-term. One U.S. general even argued that the CPA was the insurgency's "greatest asset."¹³⁶

With neither the military forces nor the civilian authorities prepared for an occupation, it is not surprising that civil-military coordination was disastrous. ORHA, for example, was supposed to be "out of a job" by fulfilling its mission within ninety days, while CENTCOM did not even plan for ORHA to enter the country until 120 days into the occupation.¹³⁷ These problems in the field were made worse in Washington. The interagency process was not effective in planning for Iraq or in the early days of the occupation.¹³⁸ If anything, civil-military problems grew under the CPA. The creation of the CPA led to two chains of command, one military and one civilian, and the efforts of the two were seldom integrated. The CPA, however, controlled the Iraqi security forces on paper, so there was no clear division of labor. The two staffs did not communicate well, and Bremer's personal relationship with Lieutenant General Sanchez and CENTCOM's leadership was poor.¹³⁹ As the CPA's lack of capacity became clear, the military began to respond on its own—further decreasing the CPA's credibility with Iraqis.¹⁴⁰ The result was a mix of competition, resentment, and chaos, all of which caused additional problems for coalition authorities.

5. Pushing Too Hard on Political and Economic Transformation. Ironically, while no planning had gone into the CPA's creation and actions, its goals were exceptionally ambitious: establishing peace and stability in Iraq, installing a market economy, and creating a democracy there.¹⁴¹ Politically, the United States wanted Iraq to shed decades of tyranny under Saddam and other, less brutal, despots and become a full-fledged democracy. Economically, the United States wanted Iraq to leave behind the centralized economy of Baathist Iraq (and its rampant cronyism) and put in place a market democracy.

With the plans for democratic elections, however, a predictable set of dynamics related to "voting to violence" occurred.¹⁴² In particular, various Iraqi leaders seized on ethnic and sectarian themes, fanning the flames of resentment as part of their effort to position themselves to gain power. The political space afforded under the new policies proved particularly important. Shia and Sunni leaders of all sorts—former Baathists, members of the *hawza*,

¹³⁶ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 210.

¹³⁷ Bensahel, "What Went Wrong with Iraqi Reconstruction," 461.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 470.

¹³⁹ On the necessity of civil-military coordination under unified leadership, see Bruce Hoffman and Jennifer Morrison Taw, *A Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992), 6–30. For this problem in Iraq, see F. J. Bing West, "American Military Performance in Iraq," *Military Review* (September–October 2006): 3.

¹⁴⁰ Bensahel, "What Went Wrong with Iraqi Reconstruction," 465.

¹⁴¹ See Coalition Provisional Authority, *Vision for Iraq*, 11 July 2003.

¹⁴² For an analysis of such problems, see Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*.

tribal leaders, populists, and others—all took advantage of their sudden rights of speech and assembly to organize, often against the CPA. These leaders immediately criticized the CPA and Iraqis who worked with it, delegitimizing the new regime.

A related problem was the CPA's refusal to work with several of the non-democratic, but nevertheless important, power brokers in Iraqi society. For example, the CPA refused to pay off cooperative tribal authorities or support the efforts of military officials to gain their support. One former intelligence official notes that "The standard answer we got from Bremer's people was that the tribes are a vestige of the past, that they have no place in the new democratic Iraq."¹⁴³

Efforts to promote economic changes also had many negative consequences. The Iran-Iraq war, over a decade of sanctions, and then the devastation of the second war all had delivered grievous blows to Iraq's economy. Many Iraqis depended on the regime for jobs and handouts, either directly or indirectly. Privatization efforts made it harder to restore stability.¹⁴⁴

Economic reform stalled in part because the political context was not settled. Most immediately, the lack of law and order led to massive theft and no true property rights, making it impossible for the private sector to become an engine of growth. Privatization efforts immediately ran into sovereignty concerns. How much should be privatized and at what pace—did Iraqis get to decide this, or did Americans?¹⁴⁵ The uncertainty about this issue led to many delays, and foreign investors were understandably hesitant to move forward without this key issue being resolved.

6. Moving Too Slowly on Reconstruction. This lack of political planning was made worse by at best limited preparation for Iraq's reconstruction. Even as the United States dreamed big for Iraq's economic future, it moved slowly on rebuilding the war and sanctions-ravaged country. The United States underestimated the amount Iraq's reconstruction would cost and assumed Iraq's oil revenues would pay for a large share.¹⁴⁶ Even once the extent of the damage was clear, officials did not engage in a massive rebuilding effort.

A successful reconstruction effort would have taken years, and the lack of a rapid reconstruction bewildered, and then angered, many Iraqis. The reporter Anthony Shadid recounts one Iraqi woman asking "how a country as powerful as America could not distribute gas or electricity, or provide security or work."¹⁴⁷ Ironically, the Iraqis shared the same assumptions as U.S.

¹⁴³ Joe Klein, "Saddam's Revenge," *Time*, 18 September 2005.

¹⁴⁴ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 110–16.

¹⁴⁵ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 105.

¹⁴⁶ For example, Andrew Natsios, the head of USAID, suggested in April 2003 that the total cost of reconstruction for the U.S. taxpayer would only be \$1.7 billion. ABC News Nightline, "Project Iraq," 23 April 2003. Text of interview accessed at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/temp/natsios042303.html>.

¹⁴⁷ Shadid, *Night Draws Near*, 177.

officials—that reconstruction would be easy and low cost—but this assumption made them bitter when reconstruction failed to materialize.

7. Poor U.S. Staffing. Part of the explanation for the many poor decisions and weak implementation was that the civilian institutions set up to administer Iraq were cobbled together with unclear mandates and poor staffing. Fundamentally, poor staffing came about because there had been no planning to staff an occupation authority in the run-up to the war. ORHA initially had few staff members and even fewer Arabic speakers. Many of the staff lacked area and functional expertise, and few were willing to stay in Iraq beyond a short tour. Yet even given the limited lead-up time, the CPA did not draw on much of the expertise it could have. Most CPA staff had never worked outside the United States before.¹⁴⁸ Restoring Baghdad's stock exchange was left in the hands of a 24-year-old.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps most troubling, loyalty to the Republican Party appeared to trump competence in staffing decisions. Some applicants were even asked for their views on abortion.¹⁵⁰ The initial staffing was also relatively small in size. The United States had three officials working to privatize Iraq's factories, in contrast to Germany, which had eight thousand people working on this problem during unification.¹⁵¹

On the military side, area knowledge was also lacking. In addition, units rotated in and out of key areas—Fallujah, for example, had five different units responsible for it in the first year of the occupation—which prevented units from getting to know local players.¹⁵²

Even as the occupation began, the United States faced intelligence difficulties on the staffing end. The CIA mission was small, with rapid turnover and few officers who knew Arabic.¹⁵³ Even when the CIA effort grew to its largest in the world, the CIA did not effectively penetrate the insurgency.¹⁵⁴ The United States also was not able to differentiate among the different anti-U.S. voices. Ahmad Kubeisi, a Sunni nationalistic leader tied to various insurgent groups, had long counseled against anti-U.S. violence but was declared *persona non grata* by U.S. authorities when he was out of the country.¹⁵⁵

The creation of a large “Green Zone,” a part of central Baghdad that formerly housed many senior Baathist regime officials and the Republican Palace, one of Saddam's key domiciles, worsened this issue. Dubbed “the Emerald City” as a way of denoting its distance from reality, coalition officials

¹⁴⁸ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 16.

¹⁴⁹ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 102; and Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 289.

¹⁵⁰ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life*, 91.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁵² Ricks, *Fiasco*, 124–42.

¹⁵³ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 179.

¹⁵⁴ Bruce Hoffman, “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006): 110.

¹⁵⁵ Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird*, 67.

became cut off from the daily realities of Iraq, and few civilians regularly ventured outside the protected area.

Such poor staffing was not completely inevitable, as the United States did have many personnel who had significant nation-building experience.¹⁵⁶ Yet there were few Americans with experience in Iraq itself. Nevertheless, the small size of the State Department and limited civilian capacity as a whole made staffing problems of some sort likely.

RECONSIDERING POLICY ERRORS: COUNTERFACTUALS AND TRADEOFFS

The above list of errors of planning and execution is daunting—but is it fair to say that these errors are why the United States failed to stop an insurgency from developing in Iraq? To complicate matters further, it is important to discuss counterfactuals: in some cases, the alternative to a mistake may have been another mistake. All the above difficulties need to be considered with the overall structural problems in mind. Some of them were inevitable, while others involved painful tradeoffs. This section examines these tradeoffs, explaining how they should affect our judgment of whether a policy mistake occurred (and, in some cases, noting that the tradeoffs were minor and the policy was truly flawed).

WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE ANCIEN REGIME?

In hindsight, both de-Baathification and the disbanding of the army were clearly mistakes. Garner opposed disbanding the army, and the CIA Station Chief in Baghdad also warned against it. The U.S. military also wanted to keep the army.¹⁵⁷ Even the State Department's "Future of Iraq" group identified it as necessary for public order. Some of the army had clearly disbanded on its own, but calling it back to garrison would have satisfied both the psychological issue and taken many young men off the streets. In addition, it would have given an instant Iraqi face to many necessary policing and reconstruction efforts. Indeed, ORHA was planning to reconstitute the Iraqi Army in part for these reasons.

Yet here there is at least some tension with democratization. The Arab world is littered with democratic projects gone awry because military strongmen have seized power, and the Future of Iraq group saw the need for significant purges in the military leadership.¹⁵⁸ However, the most senior

¹⁵⁶ James Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, iii. The authors further note that six of the seven interventions were in Muslim societies. See *ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁵⁷ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 159–64.

¹⁵⁸ Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," 57.

leadership of the army could have been decapitated without disbanding the rest of the forces, avoiding the coup problem in the near-term.¹⁵⁹

A lack of de-Baathification would also be somewhat problematic. The Baath Party was a thoroughly repressive institution. Its most senior ranks, in particular, were brutal thugs, cronies of Saddam, or both. A lesser de-Baathification effort would have sent a signal in particular to Iraq's Shia population that the new government was not committed to dramatically changing the political order. Keeping many of the old elite in positions of authority would have proven a natural challenge to the emerging leadership, many of which had lost family members at the hands of the Baath. Thus it is possible that a failure to de-Baathify would have increased tension with Iraq's Shia leadership. However, in hindsight the degree of de-Baathification seems excessive even with this caveat: it is possible to remove senior officials without firing schoolteachers, engineers, and other lower-level party members.

NO GOOD DESIGN FOR GOVERNANCE

While the coalition's vacillation on whether to transfer sovereignty and hold elections was the worst of all worlds, it is important to recognize that both a delayed transfer or a more rapid one carried risks. As the Iraq experience in 2003 showed, delaying the transfer of sovereignty risked exacerbating the already fierce nationalistic backlash, proving to skeptics that the United States did not intend to allow Iraqis to govern themselves. Perhaps most worrisome, this backlash might have spread even earlier and more extensively to Iraq's Shia population had it been further delayed. Shia leaders from Ayatollah Sistani on down pushed for democratization, in part because they correctly understood that majority rule meant they would dominate Iraq. Sistani reacted sharply to various decisions to hold off elections, and he was an important voice for moderation. Pushing elections back might have angered other important Shia moderates. In addition, elections were important as a political symbol outside Iraq (including in the United States): the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq transformed the justification of the war from security to humanitarianism, and the image of Iraqis voting after decades of tyranny was a powerful symbol of the rightness of the cause.

Yet earlier elections were also a dangerous choice. The institutions ready to promote successful democratization—the rule of law, independent courts, strong civil society institutions, and so on—were not (and still are not) in place in Iraq. Democratization in such circumstances risks polarizing society and contributing to violence. The lack of security in particular was a problem,

¹⁵⁹ James T. Quinlivan argues that coup proofing depends in part on countering organization and dissatisfaction at the most senior ranks. See "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 131–65.

as security remains the foundation on which democracy is built. As Diamond contends, “You cannot get to Jefferson and Madison without going through Thomas Hobbes.”

Politically, the coalition’s effort to balance Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian groups reinforced the existing divisions within Iraq and led to fights over the perceived spoils. But imagine the alternative. Although Iraqis’ identities in 2003 were not as hardened as they would become after years of strife, ethnic cleansing, and civil wars, they were not completely unformed. The Kurds in particular had a strong identity, reinforced by a distinct language and years of oppression under Saddam. To a lesser degree so did the Shia, with their distinct religious tradition and constant discrimination creating some sectarian sentiment.¹⁶⁰ Tribal identity, always strong, also grew in some ways under Saddam. Failing to recognize these identities would have led existing groups to push even harder against the imposed system.

Politically, it is not clear what magical solution would have squared the circle in Iraq. As Allawi contends, “Whatever the policies were that the Coalition chose to pursue would have been met with the same degree of suspicion and hostility by the Sunni Arabs—short of a return to the status quo ante.”¹⁶¹ Accommodating the Sunnis, however, would have posed its own problems. As Diamond contends about Bremer, “If he went too far in accommodating the Sunnis and incorporating the Baathists, he risked losing the Shiites and the Kurds.”¹⁶² Moreover, it is likely that the Sunnis would have turned to violence regardless of the timing of the elections. Any political solution faced a fundamental challenge: the Sunnis ability to assert themselves at the polls was much weaker than their ability to assert themselves militarily.

The length of the occupation is also a difficult question, even in hindsight. The Future of Iraq group warned that the military occupation should be brief.¹⁶³ And clearly, perceptions that the United States planned to occupy Iraq indefinitely increased support for the insurgency early on. But a short occupation would not have solved the security problem or laid the groundwork for strong institutions. A CIA study before the war found that tensions and rivalries in Iraq were so deep that a quick transfer of sovereignty would lead to chaos.¹⁶⁴

Yet even with all these tradeoffs, the utter lack of a plan made a difficult situation disastrous. In particular, the United States managed to find the worst of all positions, angering those who sought a quick transfer of sovereignty while not taking the time to build proper institutions or reassure key Iraqi communities.

¹⁶⁰ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*.

¹⁶¹ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 177.

¹⁶² Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 297.

¹⁶³ Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” 58.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 58. Pillar, “The Right Stuff,” 53–56.

DEMOCRATIC DILEMMAS AT HOME

Two of the most daunting problems the United States faced involved the lack of sufficient troops and the absence of prewar planning. Both of these decisions, however, carried with them profound implications for domestic politics in the United States.

General Shinseki's famous testimony that "several hundred thousand soldiers"¹⁶⁵ were needed to occupy Iraq meant, if accepted, that U.S. plans for the invasion had to be fundamentally redrawn, with large numbers of reservists being called up as part of the overall effort—a far more politically and economically costly effort. At the outset of the war, total active duty U.S. Army and Marine forces numbered less than seven hundred thousand troops: for the numbers that Shinseki sought or the canonical five hundred thousand troops, it would have been necessary to mobilize the reserves and the National Guard completely before the war began. Rumsfeld, however, even rejected limited call-ups of reserve military police.¹⁶⁶

Planning posed political problems as well. Journalist James Fallows found that war proponents in the administration believed "that postwar planning was an impediment to war."¹⁶⁷ War proponents feared, perhaps with justification in some cases, that criticism of plans for postwar Iraq was a way of opposing the war in general.¹⁶⁸ The result, however, was that calls to carefully review the number of troops or the long-term U.S. objectives on feasibility grounds were brushed aside. In general, the problem was not just that planning was poor but that there was no means for the system to correct this: concerns that deficiencies would derail the effort to gain support for the war meant that the normal military and bureaucratic planning system became dysfunctional.¹⁶⁹

The U.S. goal of democratizing Iraq as well as stability made the task far more difficult for occupying authorities.¹⁷⁰ In hindsight, and even at the time of the invasion, many voices claim that Iraq was never ready to be democratic. Regardless of the merit of this argument, it is difficult to imagine the United States deciding to impose another tyranny on Iraq given the political and diplomatic dimensions of going to war in the first place. Nor is it clear that there was an alternative to democratization. The RAND study that calls for emphasizing security over democratization also notes that "representative institutions based on universal suffrage usually offer the only viable basis for reconstituting state authority."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ General Eric K. Shinseki, Chief of Staff United States Army, speaking on the Posture of the United States Army, on 25 February 2003 to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, 108th Cong., 1st sess.

¹⁶⁶ Diamond, *Squandered Victory*, 286.

¹⁶⁷ Fallows, "Blind into Baghdad," 58.

¹⁶⁸ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 66.

¹⁶⁹ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 169.

¹⁷⁰ One RAND study argues that peace, not democracy, should be "the prime objective of any nation-building operation." Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, xxiii.

¹⁷¹ Dobbins et al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*, xxxiv.

Clearly, however, U.S. political leaders had some wiggle room on the questions of troops and resources. The decision to go to war had strong congressional support and was politically popular. President Bush enjoyed near-record approval ratings. James Dobbins notes that “the United States went into Iraq with a higher level of domestic support for war than at almost anytime in its history.”¹⁷² Some units were slated to be deployed in early plans but were scotched by Rumsfeld. Years into what seemed like a disastrous war, the Bush administration has been able to sustain considerable funding and high troop levels. Support for the decision to go to war could have fallen had the president sought to employ large numbers of the reserve and National Guard (or even expand the force), commit in advance to a long-term presence, plus up the diplomatic and reconstruction side of the house, and prepare to spend hundreds of billions of dollars in advance. How much of a fall, however, is an open question, and the margins seem large enough that the administration could have pushed for far more troops and resources and still been able to go to war.

Similarly, it is too glib to blame the lack of planning as a political inevitability. The United States, particularly the U.S. military, can and does often plan well. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States created a School of Military Government in order to prepare for the occupation of Japan and Germany.¹⁷³ The U.S. military regularly engages in detailed contingency planning for a variety of events. Plans could have leaked, and they could have provided ammunition to those who criticized the war as too expensive or risky, but again the political support was strong enough to withstand this challenge.

RIGHTSIZING THE TROOPS

One of the most common postwar criticisms is that the Bush administration did not deploy enough troops to secure Iraq, a criticism that is hard to counter in hindsight. A large number of troops also allows for flexibility and makes security problems both less likely and easier to overcome. Policing, necessary to stop crime, reassure communities, and gather intelligence on would-be insurgents is extremely manpower intensive. The lack of such manpower made policing almost impossible. In addition, if violence unexpectedly surged in one area, additional troops would be available without having to remove troops from another area that was not fully secured. As a result of the lack of sufficient troops, one of the classic tenets of counterinsurgency—to build

¹⁷² James Dobbins, “Who Lost Iraq?” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 5 (September/October 2007): 63.

¹⁷³ Fallows, “Blind into Baghdad,” 56.

secure areas and not relinquish them until the population is solidly behind a capable government—was impossible to fulfill.¹⁷⁴

But more troops were by no means cost-free. In addition to the political costs discussed above, more troops would have increased the sense of occupation from the start, proving that the United States did not intend to transfer sovereignty in Iraq quickly and leave. Giving existing warplans and political assumptions, getting more troops to Iraq during the “golden hour” would have proven a particular challenge. Saddam’s regime fell suddenly, and surging more than a hundred thousand troops to Iraq at that point would have gone beyond the capacity of local ports and airfields. More could have been sent to the region before the fall (and certainly more could have been sent after the fall), but there is no guarantee that these would have been deployed at the right time and place, particularly as they could not base from Turkey.

INSURGENCIES VERSUS PROTO-INSURGENCIES

Unrest began almost as soon after Saddam’s regime fell. Although this unrest was not part of a deliberate plan by Saddam,¹⁷⁵ it nonetheless involved a number of leaders from among the former regime working in conjunction with tribal authorities and local Islamists. Yet despite the considerable dissatisfaction in Sunni areas, the initial violence was limited, and the would-be insurgents disorganized. Many who later turned against the occupation initially counseled caution. Had the United States deployed many troops to troubled areas, co-opted local tribes as it began to do in 2006, worked to reassure the Sunnis about their place in Iraq, and otherwise aggressively tried to reverse the unrest it is quite possible that the unrest would not amount to more than disgruntled banditry.

Yet all of the above steps were difficult in 2003. U.S. and other coalition troops were already spread thin, and there was no plan to deploy them to hold troubled areas. Initially, U.S. plans for transforming Iraq’s economy and political structure required undermining the tribes, a traditional force that is not harmonious with market capitalism or Western models of democracy. Nor could the Sunnis have been appeased easily without risking anger among the Shia and Kurds. Perhaps most important, the political will to halt an insurgency before it becomes fully developed is exceptionally difficult to summon. It is often the casualties and chaos that force the hand of policy makers: prophylactic intervention is the exception, not the rule.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ For a review of this approach in U.S. doctrine, see The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁷⁵ See Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and Williamson Murray, “Saddam’s Delusions: A View from the Inside,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2006).

¹⁷⁶ For more on the distinction between insurgents and proto-insurgents, see Daniel Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (April 2008): 165–200.

HOW MUCH DID INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT MATTER?

One of the most criticized decisions in Iraq was the failure to secure a robust international coalition and the appropriate UN resolutions—a criticism often made in the context of attacks on the Bush administration's penchant for unilateralism. A closer look, however, suggests that this issue was of marginal importance in the growth of the insurgencies.

On a military and financial level, it is hard to imagine that additional international support would have tipped the balance in favor of coalition forces. British forces already were fully with America. Other NATO allies were already deployed in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo, straining their forces. And, indeed, as a backdoor favor to the United States several stepped up their presence to free up more American forces for Iraq: a clear benefit for the Iraq effort, as the U.S. forces were better trained, equipped, and had unity of command. Given the political sentiment in these countries, it is hard to conceive that more than a few thousand additional NATO forces would have ended up in Iraq. Similarly, their willingness to provide financial assistance might have led to a few programs being funded, but not the hundreds of billions truly needed for Iraq.

But coalitions offer more than troops. One argument in favor of coalitions is that they reduce the sense of occupation: a coalition can more credibly promise to withdraw from conquered territory than a single power. The benefits of coalition legitimacy, however, were diminished in the eyes of the opposition, particularly the religious members. The Islamists saw themselves as hostage to Christian powers, making the addition of France, Germany, or other potential allies from Western countries less useful. In addition, as Edelstein points out, legitimacy is usually determined by the quality of an occupation in providing security and stability, not simply with regard to whether or not an occupation is multilateral.¹⁷⁷

Turkey represents a possible exception to this generalization—but Ankara's role had nothing to do with legitimacy. The absence of Turkey from the coalition led to a shift in the nature of the initial military thrust into Iraq and also made it harder for coalition troops to spread out and secure all Sunni areas because some forces were delayed. As such, it inhibited the potential to stop the looting and ensure that the problems during the "golden hour" were solved before they snowballed. The failure to plan for looting and give appropriate orders, however, diminished the importance of this mistake.¹⁷⁸

Another possible exception on the issue of diplomacy is Iraq's neighbors, particularly Syria and Iraq. With government connivance, foreign jihadists often transited Syria, and some Iraqi insurgents used Syria as a haven.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards," 71.

¹⁷⁸ West, "American Military Performance in Iraq," 4.

¹⁷⁹ Baker and Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, 28–29.

Although the extent of the Syrian regime's complicity in this is debated, in the end its contribution to the insurgency's development was real but limited. Iran's involvement in Iraq was much more direct and massive, but Iran at times urged its proxies to cooperate with the U.S.-backed political system even as it armed and financed them, correctly recognizing that the ballot box was a way to power for its supporters. An International Crisis Group report of 2005 found that while Iran was at times trying to create limited unrest, nevertheless "Iran appears to have acted with considerable restraint toward its neighbour, refraining from exploiting opportunities to further destabilise the situation."¹⁸⁰

If Syria and Iran were truly on board as opposed to hostile or passive, this would have helped stabilize the situation somewhat. Yet in 2003 expecting such support would have required dramatic changes in policy. The Bush administration had branded Iran part of the "Axis of Evil," and there was regularly talk of a "Phase III" in the "War on Terror," with Iran and Syria being next. Yet even putting aside the Bush administration's bellicose attitude, the deployment of over one hundred eighty-five thousand American troops on these country's borders after years of hostility was a clear threat. This threat, however, could have been used as an opportunity. Iran in particular was willing to reach out to the United States at this time but was rebuffed.¹⁸¹ Yet even assuming cooperation, many of the initial factors that sparked the insurgency in Sunni areas, particularly the loss of status for the local leaders and community, were not linked to foreign meddling.

HARD-LEARNED LESSONS

With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that establishing stability and democracy in Iraq was not impossible but that it was surely an uphill climb. Poor decisions before and during the occupation, such as a lack of planning, extreme de-Baathification, and disbanding the military made the climb much steeper. Yet it would be simplistic, and probably mistaken, to say that a single policy change here and there would have made the outcome in Iraq vastly different. Several alternative policies would have produced different problems (though, in my judgment, often lesser ones), while others would have involved considerable political costs, perhaps beyond what U.S. political leaders were willing to pay.

Some of the trickiest issues involve civilian capacity and the military's orientation toward counterinsurgency and other occupation-related duties. In both cases these are truly variables—in the sense that we can imagine a U.S. government that was better at these things. In the past, the United States has

¹⁸⁰ International Crisis Group, "Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?" 21 March 2005, 24.

¹⁸¹ Barbara Slavin, *Bosom Friends, Bitter Enemies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 175–208.

had significant civilian capacity for nation building, but it often took many years and massive resources to develop. During the 1990s, the military conducted peace operations in Somalia and the Balkans, learning many lessons in the process. Moreover, by 2006 the U.S. military in Iraq had embarked on a true counterinsurgency strategy—one that, had it begun in 2003, might have made a world of difference. But in both cases it is difficult to imagine the military and (especially) civilian institutions turning on a dime in 2003 and developing a capacity where none had existed, especially without very strong pressure from the top. Such pressure, however, depended on leaders who both anticipated problems in Iraq and were willing to pay the costs of addressing those problems up front. In addition, Rumsfeld's emphasis on transformation rejected many of the aspects that are part of a force oriented toward counterinsurgency.

So can America get it right the next time, or is the only prudent course avoiding military occupations altogether, even in times of true crises? The Iraqi experience suggests that effective military occupation following wars of choice is not theoretically impossible, but that the United States government and military exhibit many features that in practice make serious errors in such an enterprise likely. This is troubling, as historically military occupation is not always avoidable despite their many difficulties because overwhelming U.S. national interests may be involved.

One obvious point, but one worth repeating, is that military forces must be prepared for the onset of an insurgency in any such operation. The current generation of U.S. military professionals seems to have already taken this lesson on board as a result of the Iraq experience. Of course, their predecessors originally took this lesson from the Vietnam experience, but over time decided that the deeper lesson was that being unprepared for the unpalatable counterinsurgency mission made it less likely that they would be asked to carry it out. As many current "war on terrorism" challenges are tied to insurgencies around the world, it is likely that counterinsurgency will remain a core military mission even after U.S. troops withdraw from Iraq.¹⁸²

The United States also needs to build into its planning that it will make mistakes and misjudge the opposition in ways that cannot be anticipated. This implies that building an excessive number of forces (relative to the plan requirements) is prudent and will help put out unanticipated fires before they spread. In addition, making worst-case scenarios with regard to popular support and cooperation, the difficulty of reconstruction, problems with regard to power-sharing, and other challenges is often appropriate. At the very least, contingency planning to cover a wide range of possible problems is necessary.

¹⁸² Daniel Byman, "Allies in the War on Terrorism," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 5 (October 2006): 781.

Trickier is the issue of civilian capacity. Having well-trained intelligence personnel, administrators, and aid personnel deployable abroad is essential, and the United States would need large numbers of them for any such operation. If the United States intends (or expects) to continue with nation-building operations, it will urgently need a mechanism for generating such people over the long-term. Also necessary is developing a capacity to train and build local police forces—something that different U.S. bureaucracies have historically shunned.

In addition to these policy lessons, the Iraq experience sheds light on the relationship between structural constraints and policy choices. When ORHA, CPA, and CENTCOM officials set up shop in liberated Baghdad, many of their policy options were severely constrained. Iraq was a torn society, and U.S. intelligence on local affairs was limited. Yet perhaps even more constraining was the impact of various prewar policy choices. The overall size of the forces was set and difficult to increase quickly, and equally important, their orientation away from counterinsurgency and toward conventional war was long established through training, education, and weapons-systems choices. By then, indeed, the United States had to go to war with “the army you have.” Similarly, civilian capacity was not developed, there was no diplomatic or political settlement, and indeed no plan for governing Iraq.

U.S. officials proceeded to play a bad hand poorly, but it is important to remember that the hand was bad from the start. For a robust occupation capacity, a high degree of political leadership is required. Leaders will have to deploy many troops causing considerable pain among constituents, be prepared to sustain their policies despite considerable casualties and high financial costs, engage in diplomacy that may involve concessions on other issues, and otherwise try to head off potential problems before they manifest: an exceptional challenge. This will prove particularly difficult in wars of choice, where garnering political support for military action is harder. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Iraq debacle, gaining political support is likely to prove even more difficult.¹⁸³

Democratization compounds the political support dilemmas. It is hard to imagine the American people today supporting a war of choice to establish tyranny, albeit a gentler one than Saddam, in another country. Yet the experience in Iraq suggests that the scale of U.S. democratization ambitions increased the military and political challenges for the United States in other areas. Putting in a new, slightly less bloody, dictator in Iraq would have proven far easier on the ground, as all the existing structures of governance could have been employed with few modifications. But sustaining a robust U.S. presence would have proven harder if the United States abandoned its democratic principles and established a dictatorial government in Iraq.

¹⁸³ John Mueller, “The Iraq Syndrome,” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2005).

These problems all decline, though do not go away, if the war is forced on the United States. Few Americans questioned the need to go to war in Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks, and many U.S. allies clamored to join us, despite U.S. reluctance to complicate the military operation there. Although the war there has suffered many recent setbacks, politicians are typically calling for escalation rather than retrenchment. Summoning the staying power will still prove hard, but the options for the type of government to be supported are likely to broaden, and resources are likely to be more forthcoming. The potential costs of the war do not need to be undersold, as the necessity of the operation is clearer to all. When survival is not at stake, however, maintaining political support is far harder and requires events on the ground to go more smoothly.

Yet in the end it is hard to avoid the conclusion that occupations should be avoided whenever possible. Even had the United States made better policy choices, Iraq still would have been an exceptionally difficult nut to crack. Although presumably we have learned from Iraq, and our military forces in particular are far more skilled at counterinsurgency today, many of the problems we faced in Iraq—lack of local knowledge, incipient nationalism, the risk of neighbors meddling, and uncertainties about the political and economic system we plan to impose, among others—would be likely in other occupations as well.

Nor should we assume that we have truly learned Sun Tzu's dictum. Over five years after the insurgency began we have taken relatively few measures to change our institutional capabilities (particularly outside the military) and to understand the structural, as well as policy, mistakes America is prone to make. Only then will we truly know both our adversaries and ourselves.