

INTRODUCTION

The Failures of Dealing with “How”

I WAS IN Kabul on December 1, 2009, when President Barack Obama told the world that 30,000 additional U.S. troops would be headed to Afghanistan in 2010, on top of the nearly 20,000 he had already added since he came to office in January 2009. I had not been in the city since I had left the Pentagon in April 2004. Traffic was heavier now; some construction was taking place; more shops were open. But the city was an armed camp, with checkpoints throughout the city center, coupled with “red zones” and “green zones.” For the first time ever I was told to wear body armor and a Kevlar helmet.

When I heard the president’s words, it struck me that neither his decision to commit more Americans to war nor the deterioration manifest before my eyes need have happened. As the preponderant weight of criticism has it, this time accurately, the war in Afghanistan was a victim of the war in Iraq. I am absolutely convinced that the United States would have realized its objectives of permanently ridding Afghanistan of al Qaeda and the Taliban and laying a solid foundation for a functioning pro-Western Afghan government far more quickly and successfully had the U.S. government’s preoccupation with Iraq not led it to ignore Afghanistan. Senior U.S. policymakers simply bit off more than they could chew when they opted for nearly simultaneous military action to overthrow Iraq’s Saddam Hussein. Bound up in their own visions of policies that would shape the future of the entire Middle East, they paid far too little attention to the demands and challenges of implementing

those policies. The result was a war in Iraq that lasted far longer, and achieved far more modest results, than the policy dreamers anticipated, and a war in Afghanistan lasting longer still, with results that are likely to be even more modest.

There are many reasons why analysts, observers, and pundits of all kinds have paid less attention to these practicalities of implementation—be they practicalities concerned with the many facets of military matters or those of postconflict reconstruction and development—despite the fact that they were the keys to success or failure in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Practicalities involve details, and details are not sexy. Details are not for heroes and visionaries. They are gladly left to the career bureaucrats and their specialist bosses, who, it is presumed, will take care of all issues that arise in the course of carrying out policies.

This attitude pervades the Washington policy community and its adjuncts throughout the United States. It may be tolerable for ongoing standard-procedure governmental activities, although that is by no means clear at a time when the civil service is both aging and, for a variety of reasons, not attracting as many of the best and brightest as it once did. But such an attitude is disastrous in the context of conducting an American occupation overseas, an undertaking for which standard operating procedures do not exist and cannot be readily or confidently borrowed from earlier experiences.

This attitude is compounded by an institutional deficit the government suffers. It is not strictly true, as many have claimed, that the United States has never had the equivalent of a colonial office. It once did: the Bureau of Insular Affairs. Created after the Spanish-American War by Secretary of War Elihu Root, this agency was modeled on earlier experiences in controlling and occupying Indian territories. But, concentrated on managing the Philippine Islands, it never became the functional equivalent of the British Colonial Office, a large and long-lived institution organized to provide governance in its widest sense to many far-flung possessions. The bureau was never a cabinet-level office and was never fully integrated into the War Department. Indeed, after a series of congressional hearings, the Bureau of Insular Affairs was ensconced within the Department of the Interior. That is partly why, when years later the U.S. military came to organizing the postwar occupations of Germany and Japan, former bureau cadres had virtually no

role. Neither did staff from the Canal Zone Authority, the only other occupational institution the U.S. government has ever created outside the military.

Those post-World War II occupations, in turn, were temporary affairs managed by the U.S. military. And just as the uniformed services have managed to forget every insurgency they have ever fought, they forgot every occupation experience the country has ever had—including, remarkably, the one that was going on in Bosnia even as the George W. Bush administration launched the military action in Afghanistan and then, less than eighteen months later, attacked Iraq. The loss of any institutional memory of what was required to manage an occupied nation, coupled with almost complete obliviousness to its loss, severely undermined postwar hopes and objectives.

I say “almost” oblivious for a reason. The U.S. government did not engage, anywhere in any of its various departments and agencies, in extensive planning for a post-Taliban Afghanistan. There was no time, and not much incentive, to do so. Policy was focused on obviating the threat of another attack on the American homeland from al Qaeda’s sanctuary in Afghanistan. The assumption was that the international community would pick up the pieces after the Taliban regime was displaced. That is why the administration never appointed a viceroy, as it did in Iraq. Instead, a *loya jirga* of Afghan notables elected Hamid Karzai, a prominent Afghan, to the presidency and, as had been assumed, the United Nations played a leading role in efforts to rebuild Afghanistan, as did a multiplicity of nongovernmental organizations.

With regard to Iraq, however, the government did have time for postconflict planning. Known in the military as Phase IV, the level of planning for the postcombat phase of operations was modest because senior Defense Department officials assumed there would be no extensive or protracted occupation of Iraq. The State Department undertook a broader effort to plan, but, as is widely known, the Defense Department rejected State’s nuts-and-bolts approach. One reason was, again, the administration’s reigning assumption that the United States would not be in Iraq long enough to require detailed plans. But an almost magical corollary to this assumption also was at play: if one did not plan for a contingency that one did not *wish* to happen, it thereby *could* not happen.

It is for this reason, incidentally, that some former Bush administration Defense Department figures have since blamed the disastrous decision to engage in a protracted occupation of Iraq on Secretary of State Colin Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage. Proof of their supposed guilt is the fact that the State Department attempted to plan. But the blame is neither accurate nor fair. The great and tragic irony of the Iraq War is that *no* agency or department of the U.S. government wanted a protracted occupation of Iraq, a point that is proved by the fact that none sought any additional funding to implement one. But an occupation happened anyway (I will come to why as my tale unfolds).

A second, equally compelling reason that the Defense Department rejected State’s planning effort for Iraq was that the two agencies were in a turf war and consequently responded to each other in knee-jerk fashion. As had been true in virtually all administrations going back to the late 1940s, almost anything that State proposed was immediately rejected at some level of Defense (usually not the secretary’s level) simply because the idea was State’s. And State reciprocated in kind. Just as so many policy wonks at Defense considered the State people “soft,” “wimps,” or worse, State Department people were certain that the Defense people were “wild men” or “cowboys.” And because the movement toward war focused on high policy and was concentrated in the White House and Defense Department, the details that were critical to implementing whatever policy ultimately won the day drew minimal attention, not least because responsibility for those details lay in different places—mostly in the State Department and the lower ranks of the uniformed military.

The same problem in a slightly different form also came to afflict the effort in Afghanistan. Although the United States never saw itself as occupying Afghanistan, Washington nevertheless presumed itself to be the leader of the international effort to rebuild Afghanistan. Yet its capability to do so proved to be no greater in that country than it was in Iraq, again because so little attention was paid to implementation.

I learned this, as they say, the hard way. In the summer of 2002 I was asked to serve as civilian coordinator for Defense Department activities in Afghanistan, in addition to my duties as comptroller and chief financial officer at the Pentagon. My role was to serve as the department’s interagency and international focal point for nonmilitary matters in

Afghanistan. As such, I sat on interagency committees; worked on projects with my counterparts at other agencies, especially with those at State and Treasury; and sought and obtained foreign funding and material support for U.S. military operations in the country.

It was an unusual assignment for a comptroller, but an educational one. My very appointment confirmed to me the degree to which Afghanistan had been relegated to a lower priority for the administration. Had that not been the case, surely an assistant secretary in the Policy Office, if not the under secretary for policy himself, would have been assigned—and quickly grabbed—the task.

That the United States managed to bring any positive changes to Iraqi and Afghan society is testimony to the dedication of the many individuals, both in uniform and in civilian clothes, who faced down seemingly insuperable obstacles in a foreign culture. But for several years in both cases, and especially in Afghanistan, there was no functional system of governance in Washington to support them. And the reason is that, in the absence of standard government procedures and institutions to implement policy, no one understood the importance of devising such procedures beforehand. No one in a position high enough to matter appreciated the institutional design function of leadership. So absorbed were policymakers with the “why” and “what” questions of policy direction, no one bothered with the “how” questions of policy implementation.

I was fortunate to have gained enough experience with both the policymaking and policy implementation sides of the government function to have had an intuition of the problem fairly early on. I had previously served in various government policy positions in the Reagan administration, culminating in two years as deputy under secretary of defense for planning and resources. Now, as comptroller, I was thrust into an implementer’s role. As someone who had spent half his professional life in the world of policy and the other half in the world of programs and budgets, I saw unfold before my eyes, to my regret, strong evidence that the twain still do not meet. This book is therefore an attempt to explain specifically why the system did not work for Afghanistan in the early 2000s—and may fail again when the latest military action finally comes to an end.