

# Fateful choice on Iraq army bypassed debate

By Michael R. Gordon  
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**BAGHDAD:** When President George W. Bush convened a meeting of his National Security Council on May 22, 2003, his special envoy in Iraq made a statement that caught many of the participants by surprise. In a video presentation from Baghdad, L. Paul Bremer III informed the president and his aides that he was about to issue an order formally dissolving Iraq's army.

The decree was issued the next day.

The broad outlines of the decision are now widely known, defended by proponents as necessary to ensure that Saddam Hussein's influence did not outlive his ouster from power.

But with the fifth anniversary of the start of the war approaching, some participants have provided in interviews their first detailed, on-the-record accounts of a decision that is widely seen as one of the most momentous and contentious of the war, assailed by critics as all but ensuring that American forces would face a growing insurgency led by embittered Sunnis who led much of the army.

The account that emerges from those interviews, and from access to previously unpublished documents, makes clear that Bremer's decree reversed an earlier plan — one that would have relied on the Iraqi military to help secure and rebuild the country, and had been approved at a White House meeting that Bush convened just 10 weeks earlier.

The interviews show that while Bush endorsed Bremer's plan in the May 22 meeting, the decision was made without thorough consultations within government, and without the counsel of the secretary of state or the senior American commander in Iraq, said the commander, Lieutenant General David D. McKiernan. The decree by Bremer, who is known as Jerry, prompted bitter infighting within the government and the military, with recriminations continuing to this day.

Colin Powell, the secretary of state and a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he was never asked for advice, and was in Paris when the May 22 meeting was held.

Powell, who views the decree as a major blunder, later asked Condoleezza Rice, who was serving as Bush's national security adviser, for an explanation.

"I talked to Rice and said, 'Condi, what happened?' " he recalled. "And her reaction was: 'I was surprised too, but it is a decision that has been made and the president is standing behind Jerry's decision. Jerry is the guy on the ground.' And there was no further debate about it."

When Bush convened his top national security aides before the March 2003 invasion, he was presented with a clear American plan on what to do with the Iraqi armed forces. American commanders and Jay Garner, the retired lieutenant general who served as the first American administrator in Iraq, planned to use the Iraqi military to help protect the country and as a national reconstruction force.

The plan was outlined in a PowerPoint presentation that Douglas Feith, a senior aide to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, gave at a National Security Council meeting that Bush convened on March 12, eight days before the invasion began. Republican Guard units, the forces deemed most loyal to Saddam, were to be disarmed, detained and dismantled.

But the rest of the army would be retained. Three to five of the divisions would be used to form the "nucleus" of a new Iraqi Army, according to a copy of the slide, which was obtained by The New York Times. Other Iraqi troops would be used as a reconstruction force to rebuild the nation.

The presentation also carried a caution about the risks of dismissing the army in the early months of an American occupation in a nation racked by high unemployment: "Cannot immediately demobilize 250K-300K personnel and put on the street."

Colonel John Agoglia, who served as a war planner for General Tommy Franks at the United States Central Command, said the idea of using the Iraqi Army had long been an element of the invasion strategy.

"Before the campaign started we already had it as a premise of our planning," said Agoglia, who serves as the director of the Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute of the army. "Starting in June 2002 we conducted targeted psychological operations using pamphlet drops, broadcasts and all sort of means to get the message to the regular army troops that they should surrender or desert and that if they did we would bring them back as part of a new Iraq without Saddam."

Once the war got under way and many members of the Iraqi Army began to desert their posts, a different vision on how to proceed began to emerge at the Defense Department.

After Bremer was chosen in early May 2003 to replace Garner as the civilian administrator in Iraq, he and his senior aide, Walter Slocombe, began to consult in Washington with senior Defense Department officials on how to build a new Iraq. The officials were working on a decree to rid the government of thousands of Baathists, members of Saddam's party, that Bremer planned to issue after he arrived in Iraq. Feith said the idea of issuing an order formally dissolving the army came from Bremer.

"Bremer's original idea was a professional, downsized military," Feith said. "It would not have an internal security mission or be a major factor in domestic politics. Bremer and his colleagues were thinking of how to create a military that would be suitable for a free and secure country. They were not thinking of using large numbers of Iraqis right away to play an immediate role in dealing with an insurgency, which had not yet fully developed."

Bremer said he did not recall who first proposed the decree dissolving the Iraqi Army. But he acknowledged that he and Slocombe favored the move.

A draft proclamation to dissolve Saddam-era institutions, including the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and all the organizations that reported to it, was sent to Rumsfeld on May 9, said Bremer, who added that Rumsfeld later approved the decree in a telephone conversation. ( Rumsfeld declined to be interviewed.) When Bremer left for Iraq the next day, a separate memo was sent to senior Defense Department officials, as well as Franks and Garner, along with a cover memo.

"It is desirable that my arrival in Iraq be marked by clear, public and decisive steps," Bremer wrote in the memo. "These should reinforce our overall policy messages and reassure Iraqis that we are determined to extirpate Saddamism."

### Conflicting Views

Though Bremer was the senior civilian official in Iraq, McKiernan, the senior American military commander at the time, had a very different view on how to raise a new Iraqi military.

American commanders had hoped that Iraqi units would stay in their deployment areas and surrender en masse instead of running away. While Bremer argued that desertions meant that the Iraqi Army had disbanded, McKiernan believed it could be re-established by recalling the soldiers as well as some generals and senior officers who commanded them.

"We knew they had either gone home or come out of uniform," said McKiernan, who was in charge of the land forces during the invasion and was recently chosen to lead the NATO force in Afghanistan. "The idea was to bring in the Iraqi soldiers and their officers, put them on a roster and sort out the bad guys as we went."

At the Central Command, Lieutenant General John Abizaid, who served as the deputy commander, had a similar view. He told associates that Arab armies were traditionally large to keep angry young men off the street and under the supervision of the government. For Abizaid, a three-division force was a good starting point, but he wanted to expand the force to as close to 10 divisions as possible.

As Bremer and Slocombe began to prepare their decree, one important question raised by the Pentagon was whether McKiernan was on board. Slocombe assigned the task of determining McKiernan's position to Colonel Greg Gardner, an army officer on his staff who has since retired from the military.

Bremer's headquarters was in the Green Zone in central Baghdad, while McKiernan's was at a base near the Baghdad airport several miles away. Gardner said that there were problems with telephone communications but that he finally reached a member of McKiernan's staff who told him that the general accepted the decree.

"I got the impression that Lieutenant General McKiernan was not all that keen about the course of action," Gardner said, "but was clearly told that he did endorse the draft." Gardner added that he could not recall the name of the staff officer he spoke with.

McKiernan, however, asserted that he neither reviewed nor backed the decree. "I never saw that order and never concurred," he said. "That is absolutely false."

Lieutenant General J. D. Thurman, who serves as the army's chief operations officer and was the top operations officer for McKiernan at the time, had a similar recollection. "We did not get a chance to make a comment," he said in an e-mail message. "Not sure they wanted to hear what we had to say."

### Rapid Acceptance

As it came time to issue the decree, the scene shifted to Washington. In a May 22 note to Bush, Bremer discussed his impressions of Iraq and alluded to the impending order to dismantle the Iraqi Army in general terms, saying he intended to dissolve "Saddam's military and intelligence structures."

"I was trying to give him a sense of what it felt like out there," Bremer recalled in an interview. "So the purpose of the letter was not to say, here is a list of action items that need your approval. The purpose was to give him a sense of what we were up to, how it felt, how people reacted and how it felt to travel around."

That same day, Bremer, through a videoconference, was part of a National Security Council meeting held in the White House Situation Room, and said that he was planning to issue the decree disbanding the army. Bush seemed satisfied, and no officials spoke up to object, according to Bremer and other participants.

"I don't remember any particular response from that meeting," Bremer said. "If there had been an objection, I would have made note of it then."

Some participants in the session asserted, however, that though the Defense Department leadership may have known in advance of the proposed order, they did not. Bremer's handling of the issue appeared intended, they asserted, to keep much of the government in the dark until the last minute.

"Anyone who is experienced in the ways of Washington knows the difference between an open, transparent policy process and slamming something through the system," said Franklin Miller, the senior director for Defense Policy and Arms Control, who played an important role on the National Security Council in overseeing plans for the postwar phase. "The most portentous decision of the occupation was carried out stealthily and without giving the president's principal advisers an opportunity to consider it and give the president their views."

Bremer insisted that he was not trying to avoid scrutiny. As a diplomat, he said, he was trained to report through proper channels, and in the summer of 2003 they led to the Defense Department, which had been given the lead for postwar policy by Bush.

"I had clear instruction from the president to report through Rumsfeld," Bremer said. "I was following the chain of command established by the president. It was not my responsibility to do inter-agency coordination."

There is a similar dispute over the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. A memo from Feith's office to Slocombe notes that the joint staff, which serves as a secretariat for the Joint Chiefs, provided comments on a draft of the decree to abolish the Iraqi Army. But the disbanding of the army came as a surprise to the officers working on Iraqi reconstruction issues.

Richard Myers, the retired Air Force general who served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs at the time, said the issue was never debated by the chiefs. "I don't recall having a robust debate about this issue, and I would have recalled this," Myers said in an interview.

## Recriminations

The May 23 decree did not put an end to the behind-the-scenes debate. Several weeks later, in a meeting with Bremer and Agoglia, Slocombe outlined a plan to methodically build a new Iraqi military. There would be three divisions over two years — some 40,000 troops. The force would be focused on external threats. No officers who had served at the rank of colonel and above in the former army would be recruited.

Agoglia, who was serving in Baghdad as a representative for the Central Command, recalled in an interview that he was taken aback by the small scale of the force. The American military was facing an array of security problems in Iraq, and Central Command planners, he said, wanted to recall three divisions every 90 days until the force reached a projected strength of 9 or 10 divisions.

"Does General Franks know this?" Agoglia said he demanded. Slocombe responded that the approach he had presented had been approved by the secretary of defense, according to Agoglia. Agoglia said he uttered an expletive and was asked by Bremer to leave the room. He promptly called Abizaid's office to complain that the civilians' plan would produce too little, too late.

( Bremer and Slocombe said they did not recall such an episode. Abizaid, who is now retired from the military, declined to comment for this article.)

Bremer said that over the ensuing months efforts were made to accelerate the training and fielding of the Iraqi military. But critics complained that much of the damage was done.

In a Sept. 6, 2007, Op-Ed article in The New York Times, Bremer defended this initial decree. "The disappearance of Saddam Hussein's old army rendered irrelevant any prewar plans to use that army," he wrote. He said there had been agreement "that recalling the army would be a political disaster because to the vast majority of Iraqis it was a symbol of the old Baathist-led Sunni ascendancy."

Powell offered a different view.

"The troops might have been gone, but the army was not gone," he said. There was a structure there. There were units. There was an infrastructure." He said the plan had been to "get rid of the officers who were Saddamites, and rebuild it from a structure that existed, not from ground zero all brand new."