

The war in Iraq: Five years later

Sunday, March 16, 2008

In April 2003, just after American troops secured Baghdad, Iraqis looted the Iraqi national museum. American soldiers nearby made no effort to stop them, much less provide a guard. We either did not have enough soldiers to protect the museum, or we did not care enough to try.

This failure was simply a "matter of priorities," according to General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld thought it was a "stretch" to attribute the theft and destruction of priceless Mesopotamian artifacts to "any defect in the war plan."

Our government knew how to destroy but not how to build. We had toppled a regime, and in coming months we would dismantle Saddam Hussein's bureaucracy and disband his army. But we did so with absolutely no understanding of how to build a liberal democracy, or even a stable, rights-regarding government with broad popular support.

Such a government requires a prosperous economy, a secure society and sufficient cultural unity to allow everyday interaction among different ethnic groups in workplaces, schools, hospitals, the army and the police. Protecting the symbols of a common and proud heritage is Democracy Building 101 - at least for anyone who understood anything about Iraqi history and culture.

Americans are still living with the aftermath of this ignorance, and we will be for decades to come. In 2003 and 2004, experts debated whether it would take one year or three to rebuild Iraq. Now we debate whether it will take 10 to 15 years or whether it can be done at all.

Those broken and stolen statues from the museum are the enduring symbols of what has gone so wrong. They were easy to smash, so hard to repair.

- Anne-Marie Slaughter, the dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton.

What matters most now is not how we entered Iraq, but how we leave it. If we leave behind an Iraq more stable and less threatening to its neighbors than the one we toppled, I think the intelligence community's (and my own) mistakes about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the Bush administration's exaggerations of that threat and its baseless insistence on links between Iraq and Al Qaeda will all lose their edge - even though they will not, and should not, be forgotten. If we leave behind a raging civil

war in which the Iraqi people are incomprehensibly worse off than they had been under Saddam and the Middle East more threatened by the chaos spilling over from Iraq than they ever were by the dictator's arms, then no one will care how well-intentioned our motives. For that reason, what I most wish I had understood before the invasion was the reckless arrogance of the Bush administration. I had inklings of it to be sure, and warned of the inadequacy of some of what I saw. But I did not realize that as skillfully, cautiously and patiently as George H. W. Bush's administration had handled its Iraq war, that was how clumsy, careless and rash George W. Bush's administration would treat its own.

- Kenneth M. Pollack, a former director of Gulf affairs at the National Security Council and a fellow at the Brookings Institution.

The mantra of the anti-war left - "Bush lied, people died" - so dominates the debate about the run-up to the Iraq war that it has obscured real issues that deserve examination. After all, for those of us who supported the war, rebutting arguments about weapons of mass destruction has become reflexive. We point to all the UN Security Council resolutions, the International Atomic Energy Agency statements, the CIA analyses, the Silberman-Robb report, the Senate Intelligence Committee findings - if we were wrong, we were in good and honest company.

But what about the mistaken assumptions that remain unexamined? Looking back, I felt secure in the knowledge that all who yearn for freedom, once free, would use it well. I was wrong. There is no freedom gene, no inner guide that understands the virtues of civil society, of secret ballots, of political parties. And it turns out that living under Saddam's tyranny for decades conditioned Iraqis to accept unearned leadership, to embrace sect and tribe over ideas, and to tolerate unbridled corruption.

Some have used Iraq's political immaturity as further proof the war was wrong, as if somehow those less politically evolved don't merit freedoms they are ill equipped to make use of. We would be better served to understand how the free world can foster appreciation of the building blocks of civil society in order to help other victims of tyranny when it is their turn.

- Danielle Pletka, vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

After defeating the Taliban dictatorship in Afghanistan and replacing it with a fledgling democracy, the Bush administration turned its attention to the risk that Saddam's Iraq was thought to pose to a nation still reeling from the attacks of 9/11.

I shared the administration's belief that Iraq not only possessed the capacity to produce weapons of mass destruction, it also had a hidden stockpile of them. Responsible for two wars with more than a million dead, involved for decades with terrorist groups, routinely rewarding suicide bombers with cash, unwilling to document the disposition of chemical and biological weapons (some of which he had actually used), Saddam forced

the question: Should we leave him in place and hope for the best, or destroy his regime in a lightning strike and thereby end the risk that he might collaborate with terrorists to enable an attack even more devastating than 9/11?

The right decision was made, and Baghdad fell in 21 days with few casualties on either side. Twenty-five million Iraqis had been liberated and the menace of Saddam's monstrous regime eliminated.

Then the trouble began. Rather than turn Iraq over to Iraqis to begin the daunting process of nation building, a group including Secretary of State Colin Powell; the national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice; and the director of central intelligence, George Tenet - with Bush's approval - reversed a plan to do that.

Instead, we blundered into an ill-conceived occupation that would facilitate a deadly insurgency from which we, and the Iraqis, are only now emerging. With misplaced confidence that we knew better than the Iraqis, we sent an American to govern Iraq. L. Paul Bremer underestimated the task, but did his best to make a foolish policy work. I had badly underestimated the administration's capacity to mess things up.

I did not believe the American-led coalition could prudently leave Iraq the day Baghdad fell. Coalition troops were essential to support a new Iraqi government. But I was astonished (and dismayed) that we did not turn to well-established and broadly representative opponents of Saddam's regime to assume the responsibilities of an interim government while preparing for elections. Our troops could have remained, under the terms of a transparently negotiated agreement, to help the people of Iraq build their own society, something we didn't know how to do and should never have tried. After five years of terrible losses, they may now be getting that chance.

- Richard Perle, an assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

From the moment the Bush administration took office, I argued against its apparent preference for high-tech, small-footprint wars, which continued a decade of movement in that direction by senior military leaders and civilian experts. In 2002, I questioned the common triumphalism about American operations in Afghanistan, and particularly the notion of applying the "Afghanistan model" of low-manpower, high-precision operations in Iraq. I supported the 2003 invasion despite misgivings about how it would be executed, and those misgivings proved accurate.

However, the most surprising phenomenon of the war has been the transformation of the United States military into the most discriminate and effective counterinsurgency force the world has ever seen, skillfully blending the most advanced technology with human interactions between soldiers and the Iraqi people. Precision-guided weapons allowed our soldiers and Marines to minimize collateral damage while using our advantages in firepower to the full.

Once we pushed most of our combat forces into close interactions with the Iraqi people, the information they obtained ensured that the targets they hit were the right ones. Above all, the compassion and concern our soldiers have consistently shown to civilians and even to defeated and captured enemies have turned the tide of Iraqi opinion.

Within a year, our forces went from imminent defeat to creating the prospect of success, using a great deal of firepower, killing and capturing many enemies, but binding the local population to us at the same time. The intellectual framework came from Generals David Petraeus and Ray Odierno and their advisers. But the deep understanding, skill and compassion that made it work came from service members and the many civilians who put their lives at risk for the benefit of their country and Iraq.

- Frederick Kagan, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

In fairness to the Bush administration, I did not expect that we would discover no meaningful activity in rebuilding Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and no Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda. I also never predicted, after the insurgency began, that the extremists in Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia would so alienate Sunnis and tribes in western Iraq that a combination of the "surge, win and hold" military tactics, American-led nation-building efforts that focused on local and provincial needs, and the cease-fire declared by Moqtada al-Sadr could create today's new opportunity for "victory."

In balance, however, the most serious surprise was that what appeared to be the American A-Team in national security ignored years of planning and months of interagency activity before the war, and the United States had no meaningful plan for stability operations and nation building after the defeat of Saddam's armed forces.

Relying on sectarian exiles with strong ties to Iran, disbanding the security forces and starting the process of de-Baathification were all obvious disasters, as were the creation of closed-list national elections and the failure to quickly hold local and provincial elections.

It was even more of a surprise to watch the Bush administration fail, from 2003 to 2006, to come to grips with creating effective counterinsurgency programs, focused aid and development efforts, political accommodation and effective Iraqi forces. As a Republican, I would never have believed that Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld would waste so many opportunities and so much of America's reputation that they would rival Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy for the worst wartime national security team in United States history.

- Anthony D. Cordesman, a fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Fifteen months before the 9/11 attacks, the bipartisan National Commission on Terrorism, on which I served as chairman, reported to the president and the American people that we faced a new and terrible threat: the nexus between states that supported

terrorism and killers who wanted to murder Americans by the thousands and were prepared to die doing it.

For decades, American administrations from both parties had designated Saddam's Iraq a terrorist state. He supported Palestinian terrorists. He had developed, and used, weapons of mass destruction against his own citizens. He had contemptuously refused to comply with 17 Security Council resolutions demanding he come clean on those programs.

Our soldiers were magnificent in liberating Iraq. But after arriving in the country, I saw that the American government was not adequately prepared to deal with the growing security threats. Looting raged unchecked in major cities. By late 2003, as the insurgency and terrorism grew, it became clear that the coalition also lacked an effective counterinsurgency strategy.

Our troops on the ground were valiant and selfless, but prewar planning provided for fewer than half the number of troops that independent studies suggested would be needed in Iraq. And we did not have a plan to provide the most basic function of any government - security for the population. Terrorists, insurgents, criminals and the Iraqi people got the impression that the coalition would not, or could not, protect civilians.

I should have pushed sooner for a more effective military strategy, because from 2004 to the end of 2007, Al Qaeda took advantage of this gap, using indiscriminate killings that provoked Shiite militias to respond in kind. The vicious spiral was finally reversed by the change in strategy the president put in place a year ago.

- L. Paul Bremer III, former presidential envoy to Iraq.

My greatest surprise was the failure on the part of Congress to assert itself before the executive branch. That failure assured continued problems for the military in the face of a secretary of defense who proved incompetent at fighting war.

Had Congress defended the welfare of our armed forces by challenging the concentration of power in the hands of the president, the vice president and the secretary of defense, our army and Marine Corps would not be in the difficult position we find them in today.

The Republican-dominated Congress failed us by refusing to hold the necessary hearings and investigations the army desperately needed.

Without hearings, the army could not advance its case for increasing the number of troops and rearming the force. The result is an army and Marine Corps on the ropes, acres and acres of broken equipment, and tour lengths of 15 months because we have too few troops for the tasks at hand.

- Paul D. Eaton, a retired U.S. Army major general who was in charge of training the Iraqi military from 2003 to 2004 and who is an adviser to the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton.