



Center for Strategic and International Studies

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

1800 K Street, N.W. • Suite 400 • Washington, DC 20006

Phone: 1 (202) 775-3270 • Fax: 1 (202) 457-8746

Web: <http://www.csis.org/burke>

Email: BurkeChair@csis.org

American Strategic, Tactical, and Other Mistakes in Iraq: A Litany of Errors

Anthony H. Cordesman

April 19, 2006

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in these publications should be understood to be solely those of the authors.

Wartime is scarcely the easiest time for demanding self criticism, but the recent exchanges between the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense over the mistakes the US did or did not make in Iraq have highlighted the fact that the US must both admit its mistakes and learn from them to win in Iraq and successfully engage in the “long war.”

The full chronology of what happened in US planning and operations before, during, and immediately after the fight to drive Saddam Hussein from power is still far from clear. It is now much easier to accuse given US leaders than it is to understand what really happened or assign responsibility with credibility.

The following summary analysis does not focus on blame, although it indicates that any such “blame game” should focus on the overall problems in the US national security apparatus and not any individual. It rather attempts to highlight a litany of errors that the US needs to deal with if it is to succeed in the future.

Failures After the Fall of Saddam Hussein

During the invasion and the battles that drove Saddam Hussein from power, the US demonstrated that it could fight the war it planned to fight -- a conventional regional war -- with remarkable efficiency, at low cost, and very quickly. At the same time, too much credence was given to ideologues and true believers, and little attention was paid to the problems that would arise once Saddam fell from power.

Leading neoconservatives in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Office of the Vice President, and some officials in the National Security Council, as well as in several highly politicized “think tanks,” assumed that Iraq would preserve virtually all of its existing government, require little more than the toppling of a dictator, be wealthy enough to carry out its own development, and would not present major internal security problems like ethnic and sectarian conflicts.

This lack of realism was compounded by various Iraqi exile groups that grossly exaggerated the level of Iraqi popular support for a “liberating” invasion and the ease with which Saddam Hussein’s regime could be replaced, and underestimated both the scale of Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian divisions and economic problems.

Many of the key decisions involved were made in ways that bypassed the interagency process within the US government, ignored the warnings of US area and intelligence experts, ignored prior military war and stability planning by the US Central Command (USCENTCOM), and ignored the warnings of policy makers and experts in other key coalition states like the United Kingdom.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense put intense pressure on the US military to plan for the lowest possible level of US military deployment. It assumed it would get access to Turkey for an American invasion from the north that Turkey did not approve, and delayed some deployments because of the political need to avoid appearing precipitous to the UN. At the same time, the leadership of the US military actively resisted planning for, and involvement in, large-scale and enduring stability and nation-building activity, and failed to plan and deploy for the risk of a significant insurgency.

Inaccurate threat estimates that created a false rationale for war. US and British intelligence made major errors in estimating the level of Iraq’s programs to develop weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems. Such errors were in many ways the outgrowth of Iraq’s history

of lies and concealment efforts, but still produced estimates far less accurate than those of UN inspection teams. These errors were compounded by efforts to spin intelligence indicators and analyses to support the private and public case for war. Lesser errors were made in exaggerating the importance of peripheral Iraqi intelligence contacts with terrorist groups, and the role of Ansar al-Islam. The resulting focus on weapons of mass destruction and terrorism seems to have helped lead the US to underestimate the importance of Phase IV or stability operations.

Diplomatic estimates that exaggerated probable international support and the ability to win an allied and UN consensus. The US and Britain initially planned for far more support from their allies and the UN than they received. It was assumed that allies like France and Germany could be persuaded to go along with the US and British position, that UN inspectors would valid US and British concerns regarding Iraqi concealment of weapons of mass destruction, and that they could win the support of the Security Council. In practice, none of these estimates proved correct, and the US and Britain found themselves moving towards war in an unexpectedly adversarial diplomatic position

Over-reliance on exile groups with limited credibility and influence in Iraq. US and British plans to preserve cadres of friendly Ba'ath officials and Iraqi forces proved to be illusory. The exile groups the US dealt with grossly exaggerated their influence and understanding of Iraq, while the exile groups that did have significant influence were largely Shi'ite religious groups with ties to Iran and independent militias. The result was both strong pressure to push secular officials and military out of the political system even if they had no serious ties to Saddam Hussein, and to help polarize Iraq's sectarian and ethnic divisions.

Broader failures in intelligence and analysis of the internal political and economic structure of Iraq: Failures that a leading intelligence expert involved in planning operations in Iraq said were the result of "quiescent US military and Intelligence community leaders who observed the distortion/cherry picking of data that lead to erroneous conclusions and poor planning," but failed to press their case or force the issue.

Inability to accurately assess the nature of Iraqi nationalism, the true level of culture differences, and the scale of Iraq's problems. This failure in strategic assessment included the failure to see the scale of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian differences, its economic weaknesses and problems, the difficulty of modernizing an infrastructure sized more to 16-17 million people rather than the current population of 27-28 million, unrealistic estimates of "oil wealth," the probable hardcore support for the former regime in Sunni areas, secular versus theocratic tensions, the impact of tribalism, the impact of demographics in a society so young and with so many employment problems, and a host of other real-world problems that became US and Coalition problems the moment Coalition forces crossed the border.

Overoptimistic plans for internal Iraqi political and military support. The full details are not yet public, but the US expected more Iraqi military units to be passive or even welcome the Coalition, and at least one leading Iraqi official to openly turn against Saddam Hussein.

The failure to foresee sectarian and ethnic conflict: Somewhat amazingly -- given its problems in Lebanon, Somalia, and the Balkans -- the US did not plan for major tensions and divisions between Arab, Kurd, and other minorities. It did not plan for the contingency of tension and fighting between religious Sunnis, religious Shi'ites, and more secular Iraqis. For all of its talk about Saddam's links to terrorism, it did not plan for attacks and infiltration by Islamist extremists into a post-Saddam Iraq.

Failure to anticipate the threat of insurgency and outside extremist infiltration, in spite of significant intelligence warning, and to deploy elements of US forces capable of dealing with counterinsurgency, civil-military operations, and nation building as US forces advanced and in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the regime. Creating regional commands based on administrative convenience, rather than need, and leaving most of the initial tasks of stability operations and nation building up to improvisation by individual local commanders who had minimal or no expert civilian support.

Rejection of the importance of stability operations and nation building before, during, and immediately after the war. Policymakers and many military commanders sought a quick war without the complications and problems of a prolonged stability or Phase IV effort, and without the commitment and expense of nation building. Many policymakers saw such efforts as both undesirable and unnecessary. US commanders saw them as a “trap” forcing the long-term commitment of US troops that should be avoided if possible.

Shortfalls in US military strength and capability to provide the personnel and skills necessary to secure Iraqi rear areas and urban areas as the Coalition advanced, and to prevent the massive looting of government offices and facilities, military bases, and arms depots as the during and after the fighting. The inability to secure key centers of gravity and rear areas helped create a process of looting that effectively destroyed the existing structure of governance and security.

Planning for premature US military withdrawals from Iraq before the situation was clear or secure, with major reductions initially planned to begin some three months after the fall of Saddam’s regime, rather than planning, training, and equipping for a sustained period of stability operations.

Inability to execute a key feature of the war plan by miscalculating Turkey’s willingness to allow the deployment of US forces and transit through Turkey. A lean US troop deployment in the original war plan could not be executed because Turkey did not allow the basing and transit of either US ground troops or aircraft. A reinforced division had to be omitted from the war plan, and the US lacked the kind of presence that might have occupied and stabilized North Iraq and the Sunni triangle.

Failure to anticipate and prepare for Iraqi expectations after the collapse of Saddam’s regime, and for the fact that many Iraqis would oppose the invasion and see any sustained US and Coalition presence as a hostile occupation.

A failure to plan and execute effective and broadly based information operations before, during, and after the invasion to win the “hearts and minds of Iraqis.” The US did not persuade Iraqis that the Coalition came as liberators that would leave rather than as occupiers who would stay and exploit Iraq, and that the Coalition would provide aid and support to a truly independent government and state. A secondary failure to anticipate and defuse the flood of conspiracy theories certain to follow Coalition military action.

Failure to react to the wartime collapse of Iraqi military, security, and police forces and focus immediately on creating effective Iraqi forces -- a failure that placed a major and avoidable burden on US and other coalition forces and compounded the Iraqi feeling that Iraq had been occupied by hostile forces.

Lack of effective planning for economic aid and reconstruction. While some efforts were made to understand the scale of the economic problems that had developed in Iraq since the early years of the Iran-Iraq War, the US initially operated on the assumption that Iraq was an oil-rich country that could quickly recover with a change in leadership. There was little understanding of just how far short every aspect of Iraq’s infrastructure fell short of current needs, and of the problems that would arise in trying to construct adequate facilities and services. The problems in Iraq’s state industries received only limited attention, particularly the importance of its military industries. Weaknesses in its agricultural sector were also misunderstood. The US did correctly understand many of the limits in its financial sector, but was unprepared to deal with virtually all of the realities of an economy that had effectively become a “command kleptocracy.”

Initial lack of a major aid program for stability operations: Before and during the war, the US planned for two sets of economic problems, neither of which occurred. One was a major attempt to burn Iraq’s oil field, and the second was the risk of a major collapse in the oil for food program. There was no serious plan to provide Iraq with large-scale economic aid once Saddam Hussein was driven from power. The CPA was forced to rush a proposal forward calling for more than \$18 billion worth of aid, plus Iraqi oil for food money and international aid, with no real basis for planning.

Not giving ORHA a meaningful mandate for conflict termination, stability operations, and nation-building effort. The creation of a small cadre of civilians and military in the Office of Reconstruction and Assistance (ORHA), many initially recruited for only three-month tours. ORHA planned to operate in an Iraq where all ministries and functions of government remained intact. It was charged with a largely perfunctory nation building task, given negligible human and financial resources, not allowed meaningful liaison with regional powers, and not integrated with the military command. Effective civil military coordination never took place between ORHA and the US command during or after the war, and its mission was given so little initial priority that it was did not even come to Baghdad until April 21, 2003 -- twelve days after US forces -- on the grounds it did not have suitable security.

It is true that foresight is more difficult than “20-20 hindsight.” Many, if not most, of the factors that led to these failures were, however, brought to the attention of the President, National Security Council, State Department, Department of Defense, and intelligence community in the summer and fall of 2002. No one accurately prophesized all of the future, but many inside and outside government warned what it might be.

The problem was not that the interagency system did not work in providing many key elements of an accurate assessment. The problem was the most senior political and military decision makers ignored what they felt was negative advice. They did so out of a combination of sincere belief, ideological conviction, and political and bureaucratic convenience. However, the cost to the US, its allies, and Iraq has been unacceptably high. Furthermore, they laid the groundwork for many of the problems in creating effective Iraqi forces, and an inclusive political structure that could unite the country.

The end result was that the United States made major strategic mistakes. Its first mistake was its basic rationale for going to war: A threat based on intelligence estimates of Iraqi efforts to create weapons of mass destruction that the US later found did not exist. It seems doubtful that the intelligence community was asked to lie, but it was certainly pressured to provide intelligence to please. The policy community selected the information it wanted to coax and filtered out the information it did not. The system did so much consciously lie to the world as unconsciously lie to itself.

At a grand strategic level, the Bush Administration and the senior leadership of the US military made far more serious mistakes. They assumed that conflict termination would be easy; wished away virtually all of the real world problems in stability operations and nation building; and made massive policy and military errors that created much of the climate of insurgency in Iraq. This US failure to plan for meaningful stability operations and nation building was the mistake that ultimately did the most to help lead to the insurgency in Iraq, but it was only one mistake among many. All serve as a warning that no force can ultimately be more effective than the strategy and grand strategy behind it.

Failures During the Time of the CPA

The US failures in preparing for, and executing the war to drive Saddam Hussein from power almost inevitably laid the ground work for failure during the year that followed. During April 2003 to June 2004, the US made many additional errors.

Failure to create and provide the kind and number of civilian elements in the US government necessary for nation building and stability operations. A lack of core competence in the US government meant the US did not know how to directly plan and administer the aid once the Administration and Congress approved it, and had to turn to contractors who also had no practical experience working in Iraq or with a command economy. They, in turn, were forced to deal with

local contractors, many of whom were corrupt or inept. These problems were particularly serious in USAID, but affecting other parts of the State Department and other civilian agencies, and much of the civilian capability the US did have was not recruited or willing to take risks in the field.

Failure to plan and execute efforts to maintain the process of governance at the local, provincial, and central level; to anticipate the risk the structure of government would collapse and the risk of looting; and to create a plan for restructuring the military, police, and security forces -- all of which needed to be proclaimed and publicized before, during, and immediately after the initial invasion to win the support of Iraqi officials and officers who were not linked to active support of Saddam Hussein and past abuses, and to preserving the core of governance that could lead to the rapid creation of both a legitimate government and security.

Lack of early reaction to the wartime collapse of Iraqi military, security, and police forces and a failure to focus immediately on creating effective Iraqi forces -- a failure that placed a major and avoidable burden on US and other Coalition forces and compounded the Iraqi feeling that Iraq had been occupied by hostile forces.

Formal dissolution of the Iraqi military without making an adequate effort to replace it. It was not until May 2003, roughly two months after the fall of Baghdad, that a 4,000-man US military police effort was authorized for deployment to Baghdad, and it then took time to arrive. No serious effort to rebuild Iraqi police forces took place until June 2004, in spite of mass desertions right after the fighting and the turmoil caused by disbanding the Ba'ath Party and military and security forces.¹

Failing to honestly assess the nature and size of the Iraqi insurgency as it grew and became steadily more dangerous. While the US, CPA, and US command in Iraq did gradually recognize that a military threat was developing, it was initially seen as a small group of Ba'athist former regime loyalists or "bitter enders." It was not until late 2003 that the US began to realize just how serious the insurgency really was, and react to it. It was not until winter that a major planning effort was made to determine how the US should seek to rebuild Iraqi military, security, and police forces capable of dealing with the rising threat, and not until late in 2004 that a critical mass of funds, advisors, equipment, and facilities were really in place.

Many elements of the various militias were left intact, and Iraq was left as an armed society. The CPA did make plans to disband the militias but never gave the effort serious high-level support, and these plans were largely aborted when the CPA was dissolved in June 2004.

Replacing ORHA after the fall of Saddam Hussein with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and suddenly improvising a vast nation-building and stability effort, recruiting and funding such an operation with little time for planning. Then attempting to carry out the resulting mission along heavily ideological lines that attempt to impose American methods and values on Iraq.

Allowing, if not encouraging, the CPA to adopt a "revolutionary" approach to transforming Iraq's economy and society. It initially planned for a situation where the US-led coalition could improve its own values and judgments about the Iraqi people, politics, economy, and social structure for a period of some three years -- rather than to expedite the transfer of sovereignty back to Iraq as quickly as possible. The record is mixed, but the CPA only seems to have decided to expedite the transfer of sovereignty in October 2003, after the insurgency had already become serious, and its choice of June 2004 for doing so was largely arbitrary.

When a decision was taken to create a major aid program, the overall plan for reconstruction and aid was rushed into place, and never was validated with proper plans and surveys. By late 2003, the pressure to find funds for short-term projects designed to bring (or buy) local security had already become acute. Over time, more and more aid money had to be reprogrammed to meet such short-term needs. This often did more to give Iraqis funds and security than the longer-term aid programs, but it further disrupted an already poorly planned and executed formal aid plan.

Placing the CPA and US commands in separate areas, creating large, secure zones that isolated the US effort from Iraqis, and carrying out only limited coordination with other Coalition allies.

The US did not develop a fully coordinated civil-military effort, and initially let a system develop with major differences by region and command.

Inability to deploy the necessary core competence for stability operations and nation building within the US military and government: This failure was compounded by a lack of language and area skills and training on the part of most US military forces, and intelligence capabilities designed to provide the human intelligence (HUMINT), technical collection, analytic capabilities, and “fusion” centers necessary for stability, counterterrorist and counterinsurgency operations.

Staffing the CPA largely with people recruited for short tours, and often chosen on the basis of political and ideological vetting, rather than experience and competence. Civilians were often chosen more on the basis of political vetting than experience and competence. Many were on 3-6 month tours, and permissive rotation policies allowed most who wanted to take an early departure to do so. Most military were deployed on short rotations. There was little effort to establish a stable cadre of experienced personnel who remained in their positions and developed stable relations with the Iraqis.

Failures From June 2004 to the Present

The US slowly improved its efforts in Iraq after the transfer of power back from the Coalition to the interim Iraqi government in June 2004. At the same time, it continued to make a series of serious mistakes:

- *The Coalition and CPA had deprived Iraq of much of its secular leadership when it removed most Ba'athist officials from office.* The end result was to restructure the nature of political power in Iraq along secular and ethnic lines -- divided between an emerging Shi'ite majority, with strong religious ties and links to Iran, separatist Kurdish elements, and Sunnis who now were being pushed towards taking religious rather than secular nationalist positions. While some “national” political leaders did emerge, the end result was to attempt democracy in a nation with few experienced political leaders, emerging political parties divided largely on sectarian and ethnic lines, and no underpinning experience in enforcing human rights and a rule of law. Elections and formal documents like constitutions were confused with a functioning political base that could make democracy work.
- *The sudden end to the Coalition in June 2004 left a partial political vacuum. Then, a focus on elections and the constitution created a schedule where Iraqis had to vote for an interim government, then for a constitution, and hold another election for a permanent government in a little over a year during 2005.* Iraqis were then left with the need to form a new government, create new methods of governance, resolve over 50 issues in the constitution within a nominal period of four months after a government was in place, campaign for 60 days for a new constitutional referendum, and then implement whatever new political system emerged during the course of 2006. This process inevitably further polarized Iraqi politics along sectarian and ethnic lines.
- *The US emphasized elections and politics over governance at every level from the national to the local.* It did not provide strong advisory teams for key ministries, including the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior. It had very small and weakly organized interagency teams at the governorate or provincial level, with tenuous coordination and often with only a token civil presence in the field. It did not organize and man provincial reconstruction teams for Iraq's 18 governorates until 2006, and none were in place as of April 2006 -- more than three years after the war. Little effort was made to deal with local government, leaving the government of key cities up to the political leadership that could take control and which had the militia or police forces to enforce it. This created major problems in Baghdad and helped allow Shi'ite Islamist extremists to take de facto control of Basra.
- *The US and its allies became involved in serious military operations and urban warfare against Sunni insurgents in Western Iraq, but it still continued to underestimate the seriousness of the emerging Sunni insurgency, and the extent it might push Iraq towards division and civil war.* They

continued to treat the insurgents as a relatively small group of activists with a limited base. At the same time, the US was slow to see how serious the rise of Neo-Salafi extremist groups was, or that their strategy included a deliberate effort to divide Iraq and provoke a civil war, rather than simply attack Coalition and allied forces. As a result, it underestimated the seriousness of the Shi'ite reaction, and the creation of Shi'ite militia forces and covert forces designed to attack Sunni targets.

- *US military operations often occurred at a level that resulted in short-term tactical success – sometimes seriously damaging urban areas in the process – but which did not bring lasting security or stability.* It took considerable time for the US to understand that either US or Iraqi forces had to occupy the areas where the insurgents were defeated, and provide aid and security after military action was critical. It took equally long to realize that stability operations required immediate and effective aid, police activity, and an Iraqi government presence.
- *By mid-2004, the US came to recognize that the creation of effective Iraqi forces was critical to creating a secure and stable Iraq, but was slow to staff such an effort, provide the funds required, and see the scale of effort required.* It was not until late 2004 that it provided the resources needed to train the regular military forces, and not until 2005 that it recognized that new Iraqi units would need embedded training teams and partner units to become effective. As late as the end of 2005, it still provided only limited equipment to the Iraqi regular forces. It still did not have credible plans for making them fully independent of a need for support from US air, artillery, and armor, and was slow to see the need to give them independent C4I/BM and IS&R capabilities and a proper mix of sustainment and combat and service support units.
- *The US did not pay proper attention to the emergence of the Ministry of Interior, and some of its key special security units, as Shi'ite, rather than national forces.* The end result was a series of prison abuses, the division of part of Iraq's forces along sectarian lines, and the involvement of at least some Ministry of Interior forces in "death squads" attacking Sunni targets and increasing the risk of civil war. It was not until October 2005 that the US resolved jurisdictional squabbles between State and Defense over who should control the advisory effort for the Ministry of Interior and its forces.
- *These problems were compounded by the relatively low priority given to the development of effective police forces, courts, and a government presence tied to the national government.* The police the Coalition trained and equipped were sometimes corrupt and lacking in leadership, and often too poorly equipped and deployed to operate in areas where insurgents, militias, or hostile political groups were present. A functioning court system was often lacking, and the central government often did little more than make token appearances and give promises it did not keep. While the insurgency was contained to the point where some 85% of attacks occurred in only four provinces (albeit with 42% of the population), violence was endemic in many other areas. Crime was a major factor, and so was the threat to minorities in areas dominated by a given ethnic group. While insurgent violence was a key factor in Baghdad and Mosul, few areas were really secure and in many Shi'ite areas ordinary Shi'ites faced pressure or threats from Shi'ite militias or extremists.
- *By the spring of 2003, the tensions between sects and ethnic groups had already begun to produce a process of ethnic separation and ethnic cleansing that became truly serious in 2004 and 2005, and that the US was slow to respond to.* In mixed cities, the separation was often by neighborhood, with minorities being forced to relocate to areas where they were in the majority. In cities like Kirkuk and Basra, the lines were far clearer. In Kirkuk, the Kurds pushed for ethnic separation. In Basra, Shi'ite puritans attempted to push out other sects and Shi'ites who would not practice their beliefs. The US had no clear policy or instruments for dealing with these problems.
- *The State Department and other civil branches of the US government continued to have serious problems in recruiting and retaining suitable personnel.* Many career foreign service officers would not volunteer and inexperienced contract personnel had to be deployed. While some professionals did serve at considerable personal sacrifice, the USG could not find enough qualified civilians willing to go into the field and partner US military forces. This put additional strains on

the US military, which simply did not have the necessary cadres of civil-military experts, military police, area experts and linguists, etc. Moreover, the combination of security and recruiting problems tended to keep personnel in the green zone around the Embassy, overmanning that area and further undermanning operations in the field.

- *USAID and the contracting officers in the Department of Defense lacked the experience and expertise to plan and manage aid on anything like the scale required.* They also lacked basic competence in managing and planning such an effort.. Vast waste and corruption occurred in the aid effort, most of which was spent outside Iraq. Spending was used as a measure of effectiveness, not impact on the Iraqi economy or meeting Iraqi needs. Many long-term projects did not meet a valid requirement or were executed in ways where it was impossible to sustain them and/or provide security. Serious problems occurred because the US imposed its own methods and standards on an aging, war-worn infrastructure that Iraqis could maintain but not effectively integrate with US equipment and standards.
- *Interagency rivalry and recruiting problems prevented the timely staffing and deployment of provincial reconstruction teams.* The State Department and Defense Department could not agree on some aspects of how to staff and organize the PRTs until April 2006. Major recruiting problems meant that the pool of civilians recruited for the teams often lacked real professional experience, and most teams remained largely unmanned as of end-March 2006.
- *The Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction has found massive accounting abuses and fraud in the most expensive aid effort since the Marshall Plan.* The Congressional Research Service estimates the total cost of aid U.S. aid allocations (all grant assistance) for Iraq appropriated from 2003 to 2006 total \$28.9 billion. It estimates that \$17.6 billion (62%) went for economic and political reconstruction assistance, while \$10.9 billion (38%) was used to aid Iraqi security.ⁱⁱ A higher proportion of Iraqi aid was spent on economic reconstruction of critical infrastructure than in the case of Germany and Japan. Total U.S. assistance to Iraq through March 2006 was already equivalent to total assistance (provided to Germany -- and almost double that provided to Japan -- from 1946-1952. The United States provided Germany with a total of \$29.3 billion in assistance in constant 2005 dollars from 1946-1952 with 60% in economic grants and nearly 30% in economic loans, and the remainder in military aid. Total U.S. assistance to Japan for 1946-1952 was roughly \$15.2 billion in 2005 dollars, of which 77% was grants and 23% was loans.
- *The aid process made some progress, but was seriously crippled by the fact that the US military did not provide security for most projects, and contract security personnel were extremely expensive and often would only operate in limited areas.* Some 25% or more of aid spending went to security, and aid projects tended to be concentrated in safe areas. Efforts to push the security problem down on to contractors compounded the problem.
- *Rather than honestly admit and assess these political, military, economic, and aid problems, the US government tended to systematically exaggerate what were sometimes very real successes, downplay risks and problems, and provide public and media reporting that "spun" the facts to the point where such reporting lost credibility with Iraqis and the US public.* The US seemed unable to develop an effective approach to public diplomacy in Iran and the region, and slowly lost credibility in the US and the rest of the world.
- *These problems were compounded by the misuse of public opinion polls to try to find propaganda arguments, rather than honestly understand the perceptions and needs of the Iraqi people.* From the summer of 2003 on, polls of Iraqis provided serious warnings about anger against the Coalition and distrust of its motives and actions, willingness to support attacks on Coalition forces, divisions within Iraq, and the perceived failure of US efforts to support reconstruction. US officials largely ignored the negative results and cherry picked any favorable results for propaganda and political purposes.

It is important to note that by the spring of 2006, the US finally did have many elements of a potentially successful strategy in place. By that time, however, it was far harder to

even help Iraqis create a government, much less make it operate effectively. The bulk of aid funds had been obligated with few lasting real-world achievements. The drift towards a higher level of civil conflict threatened progress in developing the regular military, and progress in reforming the Ministry of Interior, security forces, and police was delayed by months without an effective government. America had made a long series of strategic, tactical, and operational mistakes from the initial war planning phase in 2002 through early 2006, and the US, its allies, and the Iraqis were paying the price tag.

Looking Towards the Future

The US cannot go back and change its behavior in Iraq, and in many cases it cannot now compensate for past errors. Its best hope is to pursue the strategy it is already pursuing – in spite of risks that at best offer an even chance of limited success. The US can, however, learn two things from this litany

The first is that the US cannot hope to succeed by understating problems and risks, and especially cannot succeed without providing the necessary commitment in terms of time and resources. National security challenges cannot be “spun” into victory. They must be honestly addressed, hard decisions must be taken, and the necessary resources must be provided.

The second is that Iraq has exposed a wide range of faults and shortcomings in the US security apparatus that involve a wide range of departments and both civilians and the US military. If the US is ever to repeat an experience like Iraq, or successfully fight what it now calls the “long war” against terrorism and extremism, it needs ruthless self honesty and objectivity. A list of problems is not a list of solutions, but it is an essential first step in finding them.

ⁱ For many of the problems involved, see Robert M. Perito, “The Coalition Provisional Authority’s Experience with Public Security in Iraq,” Washington, US Institute of Peace, Special Report, 137. April 2005.

ⁱⁱ Nina Serafino, Curt Tarnoff, and Dick K. Nanto, “U.S. Occupation Assistance: Iraq, Germany and Japan Compared,” CRS Report for Congress, RL33331, March 23, 2006.