# *Top 10 Lessons of the Iraq War*

Now that the war is officially over and most U.S. forces have withdrawn, what are the most important takeaways?

**BY STEPHEN M. WALT** | MARCH 20, 2012



*Lesson #9: Better "planning" may not be the answer.*

There is little question that the invasion of Iraq was abysmally planned, and the post-war occupation was badly bungled. It is therefore unsurprising that U.S. leaders (and academics) want to learn from these mistakes so as to perform better in the future. This goal is

understandable and even laudable, but it does not necessarily follow that better pre-war planning would have produced a better result.

For starters, there were extensive pre-war plans for occupying and rebuilding Iraq; the problem was that key decisionmakers (e.g., Rumsfeld) simply ignored them. So planning alone isn't the answer if politicians ignore the plans. It's also worth noting that had Americans been told about the real price tag of the invasion -- i.e., that we would have to send a lot more troops and stay there longer -- they would never have supported the invasion in the first place.

But more importantly, better plans don't guarantee success, because trying to do "statebuilding" in a deeply divided society is an immense challenge, and opportunities to screw it up are legion. As Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace concluded from **their study** of past attempts of "nation-building," "few national understakings are as complex, costly, and time-consuming as reconstructing the governing institutions of foreign societies."
For example, having more troops on the ground might have prevented the collapse of order, but the U.S. army could not have kept a sufficiently large force (350,000 or more) in Iraq for very long. Morever, an even larger U.S. presence might have increased Iraqi resentment and produced an insurgency anyway. Similarly, critics now believe the decision to disband the Iraqi army and launch an extensive de-Bathification process was a mistake, but trying to keep the army intact and leaving former Bathists in charge might easily have triggered a Shi'ite uprising instead. Lastly, state-building in countries that we don't understand is inherently uncertain, because it is impossible to know ex$_{ante}$ which potential leaders are reliable or competent or how politics will evolve once the population starts participating directly. We won't know enough to play "kingmaker," and we are likely to end up having to prop up leaders whose agendas are different from ours.

In short, as Benjamin Friedman, Harvey Sapolsky, and Christopher Preble **argue here**, better tools or tactics are probably not enough to make ambitious nation-building programs are smart approach. Which leads to Lesson #10.