



Lessons From Iraq We Haven't All Heard Before

By: Benjamin Friedman – March 21, 2013

Because you read stuff like this, you are probably all for learning and reflection about war, but bored to tears by the Lessons of Iraq, especially when they come in a media-driven festival of official reflection centered, for no good reason, on an anniversary. You likely agree that invading Iraq was a mistake, that the Bush Administration sold the war dishonestly, and that more pre-war media skepticism about smoking guns and nexuses would have been useful. If you do not agree with that, you probably never will. So here are some less tired takeaways from the war that might still be usefully debated.

1. Power is perilous. The U.S. invasion of Iraq demonstrates Thucydides famous line: the strong do what they will, and the weak endure what they must. Iraq's problem, especially, was more that it was weak than that it was the great danger the Bush administration saw. Among the nations the United States labeled as threats, Iraq was the easiest to conquer. It lacked nuclear weapons to deter us. American troops were stationed nearby and more were easily added. Of course, it took more than that to cause war, but ease was a necessary condition. There's a reason no one cares about Bolivian designs on Japanese islands.

The war did prove far more expensive than administration officials predicted. But although they low-balled estimates to maximize support for invasion, they also miscalculated. The costs—human and financial—ultimately endangered Bush's reelection and lost the Republicans their Congressional majority. It took a lot of failure, but democracy ultimately provided a Kantian check. A true accounting might have prevented Bush from starting it. It surely would have awoken more Democratic opposition and improved debate.

[See a collection of political cartoons on Congress.]

Decision-making in democracies works poorly when a policy's cost seems low. We do not debate drone strikes in Somalia like we debated health care reform for the same reason you think less about buying a song on iTunes than about buying a car. High costs endanger politicians' reelection and threaten other programs they defend. Part of the problem is uncertainty, which is not fixable. But there are ways to make war's known costs more politically important. One partial remedy is to prevent deficits from funding wars—Congress could require they are paid for annually with an offset or tax.

2. Unity is overrated. The fear and presidential support drummed up by the 9/11 attacks also facilitated the war. They quieted the already-withered Congressional willingness to use its war powers and Democrats' tendency to bash Bush's proposals.

U.S. leaders always complain about division and partisanship and worry that we are losing faith in government. But the trouble with the Iraq war was the opposite. There

was excessive trust and insufficient willingness to bicker about politics beyond the water's edge.

[See a collection of political cartoons on defense spending.]

The media will not save us, by the way. The fourth estate is essentially myth. Especially in national security, where most key information comes from the government, reporters depend on government sources. Journalists are better watchdogs when consensus is lacking. They thrive on division and debate, which generate leaks and news. Media gives power checking power a bigger microphone, but cannot do much checking alone.

3. Planning isn't power. After the U.S. occupation of Iraq became a bloody mess, Washington's preferred culprit was shoddy planning. Analysts blamed pre-war U.S. errors: the atrophy of military counterinsurgency capability, deficiencies in interagency coordination, the administration's failures in pre-war planning, and the resulting bad decisions by the Coalition Provisional Authority.

That theory got a boost from the surge—at least the heroic ballad version that attributes declining violence in Iraq solely to the wisdom of U.S. military commanders and ignores the pacifying attributes of the civil war itself. The result was a tragic overconfidence that the U.S. government, having addressed the problems Iraq revealed, could master counterinsurgency everywhere, even Afghanistan.

[Read the U.S. News Debate: 10 Years Later, Was the Iraq War Worth It?]

A paper I co-wrote five years ago attacked that take, arguing that even perfect U.S. plans and organizational charts wouldn't have stopped violent conflict in Iraq once Saddam fell. People forget that states like Iraq are coercive because they are weak and prone to dissolution. Iraqis had irreconcilable plans, and U.S. diplomats and soldiers, whatever their wisdom and foresight, lacked the power to resolve those conflicts or call the shots, at least not without recourse to mass violence that Americans would not tolerate. Plans cannot create the power to implement them.

4. Counterinsurgency doctrine is a PR gloss. U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine markets war by making it seem like a clean extension of social welfare rather than a messy application of organized violence. As articulated by the counterinsurgency gurus that Fred Kaplan profiles in his latest book, especially General David Petraeus, the doctrine's main tenet is that outside powers can help governments defeat insurgencies by expanding state services to win their people's loyalty—heart and minds—and strip the insurgency of support. So counterinsurgency is state-building, the monopolization of violence.

[Read the U.S. News Debate: Did the U.S. Withdraw from Iraq Too Soon?]

That emphasis gives short shrift to coercion and accommodation. As Paul Staniland explains, state-building traditionally employs mass violence and accommodation with enemies. What the U.S. military did in Iraq, even especially under Petraeus, was closer to those models than the doctrine. Joint Special Operations Command ran a large-scale targeted killing program against insurgent leaders. Our Iraqi allies killed off rivals, tortured others, and resettled large portions of the population. The U.S. authorities helped the Kurds maintain autonomy in Iraq's north. Bags of U.S. cash helped turn Sunni insurgents into U.S. allies, though not supporters of the central government. Iraq shows that counterinsurgency, far from being synonymous with state-

building, can actually involve state-breaking. The doctrine makes even less sense in Afghanistan where experience with central governance is limited.

One reason that counterinsurgency practice and doctrine differ is that doctrine is for domestic sales. As in Vietnam, Americans get the story they want to hear: that the war is not so much war as it is the extension of liberal progressive values by a technocratic elite.