

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Now that the war is officially over and most U.S. forces have withdrawn, what are the most important takeaways?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, 4:32 PM

This month marks the ninth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Regardless of your views on the wisdom of that decision, it's fair to say that the results were not what most Americans expected. Now that the war is officially over and most U.S. forces have withdrawn, what lessons should Americans (and others) draw from the experience? There are many lessons that one might learn, of course, but here are my Top 10 Lessons from the Iraq War.

Lesson #1: The United States lost. The first and most important lesson of Iraq war is that we didn't win in any meaningful sense of that term. The alleged purpose of the war was eliminating Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, but it turns out he didn't have any. Oops. Then the rationale shifted to creating a pro-American democracy, but Iraq today is at best a quasi-democracy and far from pro-American. The destruction of Iraq improved Iran's position in the Persian Gulf — which is hardly something the United States intended — and the costs of the war (easily exceeding \$1 trillion dollars) are much larger than U.S. leaders anticipated or promised. The war was also a giant distraction, which diverted the Bush administration from other priorities (e.g., Afghanistan) and made the United States much less popular around the world.

This lesson is important because supporters of the war are already marketing a revisionist version. In this counternarrative, the 2007 surge was a huge success (it wasn't, because it failed to produce political reconciliation) and Iraq is now on the road to stable and prosperous democracy. And the costs weren't really that bad. Another variant of this myth is the idea that President George W. Bush and Gen. David Petraeus had "won" the war by 2008, but President Obama then lost it by getting out early. This view ignores the fact that the Bush administration negotiated the 2008 Status of Forces agreement that set the timetable for U.S. withdrawal, and Obama couldn't stay in Iraq once the Iraqi government made it clear it wanted us out.

The danger of this false narrative is obvious: If Americans come to see the war as a success — which it clearly wasn't — they may continue to listen to the advice of its advocates and be more inclined to repeat similar mistakes in the future.

Lesson #2: It's not that hard to hijack the United States into a war. The United States is still a very powerful country, and the short-term costs of military action are relatively low in most cases. As a result, wars of choice (or even "wars of whim") are possible. The Iraq war reminds us that if the executive branch is united around the idea of war, normal checks and balances — including media scrutiny — tend to break down.

The remarkable thing about the Iraq war is how few people it took to engineer. It wasn't promoted by the U.S. military, the CIA, the State Department, or oil companies. Instead, the main architects were a group of

well-connected neoconservatives, who began openly lobbying for war during the Clinton administration. They failed to persuade President Bill Clinton, and they were unable to convince Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney to opt for war until after 9/11. But at that point the stars aligned, and Bush and Cheney became convinced that invading Iraq would launch a far-reaching regional transformation, usher in a wave of pro-American democracies, and solve the terrorism problem.

As the *New York Times*' Thomas Friedman told *Ha'aretz* in **May 2003**: "Iraq was the war neoconservatives wanted... the war the neoconservatives marketed.... I could give you the names of 25 people (all of whom are at this moment within a five-block radius of this office [in Washington]) who, if you had exiled them to a desert island a year and half ago, the Iraq war would not have happened."

Lesson #3: The United States gets in big trouble when the "marketplace of ideas" breaks down and when the public and our leadership do not have an open debate about what to do.

Given the stakes involved, it is remarkable how little serious debate there actually was about the decision to invade. This was a bipartisan failure, as both conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats all tended to jump onboard the bandwagon to war. And mainstream media organizations became **cheerleaders rather than critics**. Even within the halls of government, individuals who questioned the wisdom of the invasion or raised doubts about the specific plans were soon marginalized. As a result, not only did the United States make a bone-headed decision, but the Bush administration went into Iraq unprepared for the subsequent occupation.

Lesson #4: The secularism and middle-class character of Iraqi society was overrated. Before the war, advocates argued that democracy would be easy to install in Iraq because it had a highly literate population and a robust middle class, and because sectarianism was minimal. Of course, the people who said things like this apparently knew nothing about Iraq itself and even less about the difficulty of building democracy in a country like Iraq. This failure is especially striking insofar as Iraq's turbulent pre-Saddam history was hardly a secret. But a realistic view of Iraq clashed with the neocons' effort to sell the war, so they sold a fairy tale version instead.

Lesson #5: Don't listen to ambitious exiles. The case for war was strengthened by misleading testimony from various Iraqi exiles, who had an obvious interest in persuading Washington to carry them to power. Unfortunately, U.S. leaders were unaware of Machiavelli's prescient warnings about the danger of trusting the testimony of self-interested foreigners. As he wrote in his *Discourses*:

"How vain the faith and promises of men who are exiles from their country. Such is their extreme desire to return to their homes that they naturally believe many things that are not true, and add many others on purpose, so that with what they really believe and what they say they believe, they will fill you with hopes to that degree that if you attempt to act upon them, you will incur a fruitless expense or engage in an undertaking that will involve you in ruin."

Two words: Ahmed Chalabi.

Lesson #6: It's very hard to improvise an occupation.

As the Army's **official history** of the occupation notes dryly: "conditions in Iraq proved to be wildly out of sync with prewar assumptions." Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Co. assumed that standing up a new Iraqi government would be quick work and that the light U.S. force would head home almost immediately. But when conditions deteriorated, U.S. leaders — both civilian and military — were extremely slow to realize that they faced a wholly different situation. And, as *FP* colleague Thomas Ricks **has documented**, once the U.S. military found itself facing a genuine insurgency, it took *years* before it began to adjust its tactics and strategy in a serious way. We tend to think of the U.S. military as a highly intelligent fighting force — after all, we've got all those intelligence services, think tanks, in-house analysis operations, war colleges, etc. — yet this case reminds us that the defense establishment is also big and unwieldy organization that doesn't improvise quickly.

Lesson #7: Don't be surprised when adversaries act to defend their own interests, and in ways we won't like.

This lesson seems obvious: Adversaries will pursue their own interests. But the architects of the Iraq war seem to have blindly assumed that other interested parties would simply roll over and cooperate with us after a little bit of "shock and awe." Instead, various actors took steps to defend their own interests or to take advantage of the evolving situation, often in ways that confounded U.S. efforts. Thus, Sunnis in Iraq took up arms to resist the loss of power, wealth, and status that the collapse of the Ba'athist regime entailed. Syria and Iran took various measures to strengthen anti-U.S. forces inside Iraq, in order to bog us down and bleed us. Al Qaeda also tried to exploit the post-invasion power-vacuum to go after U.S. forces and advance its own agenda.

Americans had every reason to be upset by these various responses, because they helped thwart our aims. But we should hardly have been *surprised* when these various forces did what they could to resist us. What else would you expect?

Lesson #8: Counterinsurgency warfare is ugly and inevitably leads to war crimes, atrocities, or other forms of abuse.

Another lesson from Iraq (and Afghanistan) is that local identities remain quite powerful and foreign occupations almost always trigger resistance, especially in cultures with a history of heavy-handed foreign interference. Accordingly, occupying powers are likely to face armed insurgencies, which in turn means organizing a counterinsurgency campaign. Unfortunately, such campaigns are extremely hard to control, because decisive victories will be elusive, progress is usually slow, and the occupation force will have distinguishing friend from foe within the local population. And that means that sometimes our forces will go over the line, as they did in Haditha or Abu Ghraib. No matter how much we emphasize "hearts and minds," there will inevitably be abuses that undermine our efforts. So when you order up an invasion or decide to occupy another country, be aware that you are opening Pandora's Box.

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 undertakings 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. Moreover, 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 a smart approach. Which leads to Lesson #10.

Lesson #10: Rethink U.S. grand strategy, not just tactics or methods.

Because it is not clear if *any* U.S. approach would have succeeded *at an acceptable cost*, the real lesson of Iraq is not to do stupid things like this again.

The U.S. military has many virtues, but it is not good at running other countries. And it is not likely to get much better at it with practice. We have a capital-intensive army that places a premium on firepower, and we are a country whose own unusual, melting-pot history has made us less sensitive to the enduring power of nationalism, ethnicity, and other local forces.

Furthermore, because the United States is basically incredibly secure, it is impossible to sustain public support for long and grinding wars of occupation. Once it becomes clear that we face a lengthy and messy struggle, the American people quite properly begin to ask why we are pouring billions of dollars and thousands of lives into some strategic backwater. And they are right.

So my last lesson is that we shouldn't spend too much time trying to figure out how to do this sort of thing better, because we're never going to do it well and it will rarely be vital to our overall security. Instead, we ought to work harder on developing an approach to the world that minimizes the risk of getting ourselves into this kind of war again.

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