A HOOVER INSTITUTION ESSAY

What Was and What Might Have Been

THE THREATS AND WARS IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

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I hope this perspective by a participant and observer of some of the key decisions made at the start of what came to be called the Global War on Terror can be useful to historians seeking to understand the thinking of decision makers at the time and evaluate the decisions they made.

More important, I hope that veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq will find it useful to be invited, as it were, to yet another inside view of deliberations that affected their lives and the lives of their comrades and families. Those wars were a burden for all Defense Department military and civilian personnel who deployed to those combat theaters and for their families. Even families whose loved ones returned home safely endured agonizing months worrying about actions in dangerous places thousands of miles away, while the rest of the country was able largely to go about its normal business thanks to the protection provided by those brave men and women.

It is impossible to overstate how lucky we are as a country to have had so many who were willing to put duty above safety and comfort. One must fervently hope, despite our current divisions, that the same spirit of American patriotism will come to the fore should it be needed again, as history regrettably suggests it will.

Introduction

The recent American capitulation in Afghanistan has invited the question of whether the war on terrorism was a failure. Afghanistan, after all, was where the war was launched—where it achieved its stunning early success and has now witnessed its most deplorable failure. And this failure opens the prospect of renewed terrorist attacks at a time when we need to focus on the rising threat from the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Twenty-one years ago, following the 9/11 massacre of nearly three thousand Americans, President George W. Bush declared a war on terror to prevent the future horrors that our enemies promised. He acknowledged that this would be "a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen." Vice President Dick Cheney called it a "generational struggle." Both of them emphasized that "victory" had to be measured by things that would *not*

happen—repeated attacks by global terrorists on the United States, potentially even worse than 9/11 if implemented with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Beyond the catastrophic human toll, they warned, such attacks could terrorize the country and disrupt fundamental aspects of our way of life.

The antiterrorism effort may by now have become a victim of its own success. In the absence of significant additional terrorist attacks, many Americans deplore our involvement in what seem like "endless wars." Lost to view are the consequences of failing to sustain—at now drastically reduced costs—those efforts that helped keep us safe from mass terror for twenty years. That is the result of a failure of leadership by our three most recent presidents, who were clear about the frustrations of engagement but obscured the potentially disastrous implications of retreat.

The attacks of 9/11 followed more than two decades of recurring lower-level terrorist attacks against the United States. But the world looked different on the night of September 11, 2001. Inaction, or only very limited action, was no longer an option, illustrating what historian and former State Department official Robert Kagan described in a powerful essay about the Afghanistan war: "We live history forward, in the chaos of onrushing events, without a clear guide." But then, as he adds, "We judge history backward, smugly armed with the knowledge of what did happen and uninterested in what might have happened."[1]

President Bush had the authority and the weighty responsibility to direct a response. He made it clear that retaliation—i.e., "delivering justice" to the perpetrators of the crime—was an essential but not a sufficient response. Nor was deterrence a possible strategic goal when dealing with enemies who yearned for martyrdom.

Bush resolved that our entire response—to include law enforcement, diplomacy, financial controls, and military action—must focus most of all on prevention. That approach was widely applauded at the time.

Passing judgment on past historical decisions is certainly part of the responsibility of historians. But this requires examining what other courses might have been followed, and what results those actions might have produced. It requires making judgments about the unknown—or engaging in "counterfactual history"—something that historians are much less eager to do but is an unavoidable burden of decision makers. As historian Niall Ferguson observes in the introduction to *Virtual History*, a fascinating collection of counterfactual essays by himself and other prominent historians, "This hostility to counterfactual arguments has been and remains surprisingly widespread among professional historians."[2]

Twenty years ago, it was widely expected that there would be further attacks on the scale of 9/11—or worse. Harvard professor Graham Allison, writing in 2004, offered as his "own considered judgment that on the current path, a *nuclear terrorist attack* on America in the

decade ahead is more likely than not" (emphasis mine).[3] Had that atrocity occurred, not only would Bush have been asking himself what he had failed to do, but many others would have insisted that he should have been more relentless in pursuing terrorists and anyone or any state that supported them.

Launching the War on Terror

On September 15, five days after the attacks, with the country still in a state of shock and fearful of more attacks to come, President Bush called together his National Security Council at Camp David to discuss the Global War on Terror that he had declared after the 9/11 attacks. What should and could America do against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and its worldwide operations, and against the broader enemy that Bush had identified since the attacks—regimes that harbored terrorists and fostered the dangerous spread of Middle East radicalism from which al-Qaeda and global terrorism drew? Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked me to join him for that historic meeting.

Unsurprisingly, as we now know, Bush asked himself after 9/11 what he might have done to prevent that catastrophe. We also know now that the government failures that the 9/11 Commission later identified were not in the Bush White House but within the giant federal bureaucracy, particularly in the lack of information sharing between and within two of its largest components, the FBI and the CIA. Even Bush critic and former White House terrorism "czar" Richard Clarke admitted to the commission that if all of his policy advice "had been accepted immediately and turned into action, [it] would not have prevented 9/11."[4]

Whatever doubts or questions might have been going through the president's mind about how this tragedy might have been prevented, he didn't waste time, as aviators like to say, "trying to land the plane by looking in the rearview mirror." On the contrary, he was resolute and determined and focused on what needed to be done going forward.

At Camp David that day, the president decided that our first military response would be in Afghanistan; we would deal with the larger threat of state-supported terrorists—possibly in possession of biological, chemical, radiological, or nuclear weapons and capabilities—at a time of our own choosing.

The president had to consider two dangers. The immediate danger was that anti-US terrorists would now be flush with new recruits and new sources of funding, and emboldened by their stunning "success." That could produce many more attacks that could terrorize the country and fundamentally change the way we live. Or a more catastrophic attack might involve chemical, biological, or radiological weapons that could kill hundreds of thousands of people, or even millions, and even render important parts of the country uninhabitable.

In considering military action against the Taliban in Afghanistan, if it refused to hand over Osama bin Laden—which seemed likely since they claimed there was no proof of his responsibility for the 9/11 attacks—the president needed a military plan for Afghanistan that would "square the circle" of two conflicting military imperatives: urgency and effectiveness.

First, it had to be decisive, not a "pinprick" (like Clinton's 1993 overnight attack on the largely empty headquarters of the Iraqi Intelligence Service). And it had to be more than Operation Infinite Reach, the 1998 cruise missile strike against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in retaliation for the terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania—a response that General Hugh Shelton, then near the end of his term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), regarded as a waste of expensive ordnance to blow up "jungle gym" terrorist training structures.

And second, it had to be done quickly to prevent or disrupt the follow-on terrorist attacks that seemed likely to be coming, to restore the morale and confidence of the American people, and to dampen the growing enthusiasm among the extremists for more such "victories."

I had no idea what military options General Shelton was going to present that day to Bush. My recollection is that there were four options, three for Afghanistan and one for Iraq. Rumsfeld must have known what was coming in Shelton's briefing, or at least had a premonition, because he introduced Shelton by emphasizing the haste with which his briefing had of necessity been prepared, describing it as merely some "preliminary ideas to begin the discussions."

In presenting military options for dealing with the Taliban threat in Afghanistan, General Shelton acknowledged at the beginning that there were few strategic targets left in that country after twenty years of war with the former Soviet Union and then a bloody civil war. I considered the options he presented as little more than an updated repeat of the 1998 response. Indeed, the chairman's first option was a cruise missile strike, virtually identical to that earlier action. Bush knew enough about that history to be averse to a repeat performance. We need to "unleash holy hell," he said; "We're not just going to pound sand."

Shelton's second Afghanistan option supplemented the cruise missile strikes with heavy bombing by US-based B-52 bombers and other manned aircraft, including from aircraft carriers. As Rumsfeld later observed, "It looked like pounding sand a little harder."

The third Afghanistan option added a raid by US Special Forces, described as "boots on the ground," but with no clarity about what such a raid would accomplish other than demonstrating the long reach of the US military and a willingness to take risks. It reminded some of the daring but unsuccessful Special Forces raid in Vietnam on a suspected POW prison at Son Tay that turned out to have been emptied before the US rescuers arrived.

As Rumsfeld pointed out in his memoirs, even if there had been good targets for conventional American ground forces to attack, it would take considerable time to deploy a large force to that remote, landlocked country. Bush appeared to wince (as I recall) when Shelton stated that a buildup of conventional ground troops could take months. (The 9/11 Commission later reported that Bush found the early presentations on military options "disappointing," and that US Central Command [CENTCOM] commander General Franks had acknowledged they had no plan "on the shelf" for Afghanistan.)

Secretary of State Colin Powell discussed the largely sympathetic reactions he was getting from foreign leaders and stressed the importance of bringing Pakistan on board, by persuasion if possible or by threats if necessary. He suggested that the Taliban be confronted with an ultimatum to hand over Bin Laden or else face military action, a suggestion that met with general approval.

The consensus at that Camp David discussion, as at previous discussions since 9/11, was that we couldn't defeat the terrorists if we stayed on defense—we also needed an offense. But we needed an offense that produced a decisive effect. The president made it clear that he wanted better military options, and he needed them quickly. It was also becoming clear that his initial focus was on Afghanistan.

CIA director George Tenet's report that day was more concerned with policy, specifically the potential for covert action, than with intelligence. His presentation of the links that CIA operatives had developed with Northern Alliance leaders in Afghanistan made an impression on everyone, including quite evidently the president. I was impressed as well but recall thinking that he may have been overstating what covert action could achieve on its own without active military support.

Earlier that summer, during the review of the Department of Defense (DoD) budget, army vice chief of staff General Jack Keane had persuaded me that Army Special Forces had dramatically improved their ability to call in effective air strikes in the ten years since Operation Desert Storm, when I had observed their limited ability to do so. So I noted for the group assembled at Camp David that any American action in Afghanistan should take advantage of this improved ability of our Special Forces to direct conventional air strikes.

A week after the Camp David meeting, Director Tenet arranged a briefing for Rumsfeld with the CIA station chief in Pakistan, who managed agency operations in Afghanistan. Tenet's man in Pakistan argued that even in the absence of significant strategic targets, bombing could create divisions between the Taliban and al-Qaeda through a gradually escalating campaign that would somehow signal US resolve.

That briefing increased my concern that we might be heading into an ineffective bombing campaign. Gradually escalating a series of ineffective military actions struck me as unlikely

to convince the Taliban to accept our demands. I decided this might be an appropriate time to put on paper the point about Special Forces that I had made at Camp David. So I sent a memo to Rumsfeld that suggested using them to guide heavy bombers from the United States to provide air support for Afghan Northern Alliance forces, with whom some brave CIA personnel had already established contact.

In the intense weeks that followed, everyone pulled together with exceptional speed and teamwork to come up with what the president was demanding. The internal Pentagon deliberations are detailed in *War and Decision*, Douglas Feith's comprehensive (and largely overlooked) history based on declassified materials, including his own notes of those discussions.[5]

With careful planning by the Air Force, Special Operations Command, the JCS, and CENTCOM, along with some questioning and policy guidance from the civilian side, an innovative war plan for Afghanistan emerged. The use of Special Forces in the role of forward air controllers had a dramatic impact. (They were the "horse soldiers" of Doug Stanton's book of the same name and the film *12 Strong* based on it.[6]) Barely two months after 9/11, the Taliban had been evicted from Kabul, and on December 9 they were ousted from their main base in Kandahar.

Weighing the Policy Alternatives

Assessing whether an intervention was "worth it" can be done honestly only by asking what alternative courses of action might have produced—the counterfactual case. Thus, even for historians there is no escaping the need to make predictions about an unclear and unknowable future.

Nevertheless, it seems unquestionable that the American people were safer once the Taliban government was ousted from Afghanistan. That rugged land had provided sanctuary and space for al-Qaeda to train and organize the murder of thousands of innocent people. That was the mission for which President Bush sent Americans to fight in that distant and unforgiving land, and it was the purpose for which 2,977 gave their lives.

We did not go to Afghanistan to create a Switzerland in the Himalayas. We went to prevent a repeat of the 9/11 attacks—or perhaps an even worse attack using anthrax or some other biological or chemical weapon. In fact, in Kandahar we found an al-Qaeda laboratory that had apparently been working on poisons and possibly anthrax. The bipartisan Robb-Silberman Commission, which reviewed US intelligence capabilities for dealing with weapons of mass destruction, later reported that al-Qaeda's biological program was more advanced than previously believed, particularly with regard to a biological agent that the commission identified only as "Agent X" (to protect classified information). This program involved several sites in Afghanistan, two of which were operated by individuals

with special training. Documents were also found indicating that al-Qaeda had considered acquiring a variety of other biological agents.

Contrary to the expectation twenty years ago that the attacks of 9/11 would be followed by one or more similar terrorist attacks, this threat never materialized. It is impossible to assess how much defeating the Taliban contributed to that result. But clearly, doing so not only deprived al-Qaeda of its operational sanctuary, it also motivated many other countries, including some who were not our friends, to cooperate in attacking terrorist networks. It lent energy to the efforts of our own civilian agencies, who saw that other Americans were risking their lives in the effort to keep the country safe.

After 9/11, what alternative was there to going into Afghanistan? Could the president have simply ignored the Taliban–al-Qaeda connection? The seriousness we showed in Afghanistan was an essential part of a campaign that prevented specific attacks that we know were in states of preparation, and probably others as well. That came at a cost, both the human cost and the less tangible but nonetheless damaging stimulus it has given to the isolationist instincts of Americans, at a time when we can ill afford them. Today we face an adversary more powerful in many ways than we've ever confronted before and with means—both cybernetic and economic—to reach across the two great oceans that in the past have seemed like giant moats shielding us from the rest of the world's troubles. We've also, more recently, paid a high price in American credibility and reputation by abandoning Afghanistan to Taliban rule and leaving behind so many people who risked their lives and their families' lives to work with us.

But when President Bush gave his first address to Congress and the nation nine days after 9/11, he made it clear that we were facing a long war. And he defined the enemy as a network, not a single organization:

> Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.

The war, he explained, would involve more than military operations and would not have a distinct or early end. He announced a strategy to drive the terrorists onto the defensive; it would

> [involve] far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. . . . We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. . . . Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.[7]

That speech struck a responsive chord among a shocked and terrified people. When asked after that speech whether they expected the war that Bush announced to be long or short, 92 percent of Americans polled answered "long"—compared to the 51 percent who gave that answer to a similar question about a war with Japan following its attack on Pearl Harbor.

Upon leaving office, Bush reminded the country again:

> While our Nation is safer than it was seven years ago, the gravest threat to our people remains another terrorist attack. Our enemies are patient, and determined to strike again. . . . We must resist complacency. We must keep our resolve. And we must never let down our guard.[8]

How might we have done better? Did we put too much effort into "nation building" missions? That is a complicated question. But it would hardly have been prudent to pack up and leave after enabling the Northern Alliance forces to defeat the Taliban, when more than half the country shares a Pashtun identity with the Taliban. Nor was Bosnia a realistic model for a peacekeeping or stabilization effort, as some critics suggested at the time. Afghanistan is so much larger than Bosnia, with forbidding deserts and mountains that dwarf those of the Balkans.

No doubt we should have begun building the Afghan army sooner and more quickly. We felt constrained by a mandate from the second Bonn Conference to limit it to a size that the country could sustain financially on its own. At that time, when we were spending (according to DoD calculations) $107,000 annually for each deployed US soldier, and just $1,800 for each Afghan, restricting the size of the Afghan security forces based on what that extremely poor country could afford was creating an imbalance between our militaries. This delay in building up the Afghan army, so that it could have assumed a larger portion of the mission at an earlier stage, might have saved American lives and also helped to sustain US domestic support.

In 2006, President Bush recognized that we had kept the Afghan army too small, and he directed an increase in US force levels to train and equip the Afghans—at the same time that he was also anticipating the Surge in Iraq.

Critics of the Iraq War are quick to blame that war for the failure in Afghanistan, even though by many measures conditions in Afghanistan were relatively good through 2005, two years after the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Military historians can debate that connection for years to come—but surging an additional seventy thousand American troops in the Obama years proved not to be the answer, particularly when it was announced at the outset that the increase would be only temporary. (Announcing that time limit in the same West Point speech where Obama announced the Afghanistan surge itself was certainly an invitation to our enemies to wait us out. But it's not clear how the outcome would have been

different if the commitment to the increase had been open-ended, which could also have been seen by enemies, including Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence [ISI], as unsustainable.)

As Michael O'Hanlon and I once wrote, clearing guerillas out of Afghanistan's mountains is comparable in difficulty to clearing them out of remote jungles in Colombia.[9] (The US Plan Colombia initiative had been relatively successful by focusing on stabilizing the principal urban areas, and a similar approach might have produced a better result in Afghanistan.[10])

President Bush was substantially correct when he later observed that "the primary cause of the trouble in Afghanistan did not originate there or, as some suggested, in Iraq. It came from Pakistan."[11] However, we don't understand why Pakistan's ISI decided at that time to step up support for the Taliban. Perhaps they calculated that we were too distracted by Iraq to notice. But a former commander of US and coalition forces during that period once told me that he believed instead that the ISI interpreted NATO's assuming responsibility for Afghanistan as a sign that the US itself was not committed to the mission. Regardless, I do believe that part of the reason conditions in Afghanistan worsened when they did was because the close cooperation between Lieutenant General David Barno and Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad was not continued by their immediate successors.

In any case, the single most important policy change that could have produced a better outcome in Afghanistan would have been a concerted strategy to convince Pakistan to stop that support. Although every US administration seems to have recognized that problem, none seems to have been able to come up with a strategy to deal with it.

Initially, it must be acknowledged, Pakistan made significant efforts against al-Qaeda personnel in that country, including the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who was captured in Pakistan in March 2003. Other senior al-Qaeda leaders who were captured in Pakistan included Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi, a senior al-Qaeda trainer; Abu Zubaydah, a senior al-Qaeda leader, captured in March 2002; Ramzi Bin al-Shibh, 9/11 plot accomplice, captured in September 2002; Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, connected with the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, captured in July 2004; and Abu Faraj al-Libi, al-Qaeda number-three leader, captured in May 2005.

So there was understandable reluctance to confront Pakistan during that period. In addition, as long as the US had a large force in Afghanistan, we were dependent on Pakistan to deliver logistic support to our troops.

But the discovery in 2011 that Osama bin Laden had been hiding there for years, virtually within a stone's throw of a Pakistani military school, should have generated enough outrage to end our toleration of Pakistan's damaging relationship with our Taliban enemies. Even then, it must be admitted there were no easy options, but we should at least have found a way to demand that Pakistan hand over or arrest the leaders of the Afghan Taliban, known

as the Quetta Shura, who had relocated to the city of Quetta in southwest Pakistan after the fall of Kabul.

Historians will have difficulty explaining why President Trump and President Biden—in one of the few instances when the two men agreed on anything—were both in such a hurry to surrender to the Taliban's principal demand and agree to withdraw all American troops by a certain date. Once it had already been agreed—initially by the Trump administration with the Taliban at Doha, Qatar—to give the Taliban effectively everything that it wanted, there was no reason not at least to insist on a cease-fire for the time needed to make the US withdrawal less chaotic and humiliating, and, most importantly, less disastrous for the people who had been helping us and their families.

Instead, it was the Taliban who demanded concessions, which the US accepted on behalf of an Afghan government that had been excluded from the negotiations. Specifically, the Trump administration committed to the release of five thousand hard-core Taliban prisoners who had been captured by Afghan security forces and were in Afghan custody. When President Ashraf Ghani resisted releasing the last four hundred, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo flew to Kabul to threaten a suspension of US financial assistance if this last, most dangerous group wasn't released, effectively contributing four hundred of the hardest of the Taliban hard core to 2021's killing spree.

As happens too often when American negotiators rush to meet their own self-imposed deadlines, rather than patiently holding out for reasonable concessions, the Trump agreement with the Taliban made matters worse with a secret annex. Congressional testimony by Trump's Pentagon leadership gives the impression, which military sources have confirmed to me, that this annex committed the US not to attack the Taliban as long as the Taliban didn't attack Americans or non-Afghan members of the coalition. In short, even prior to the American withdrawal, the Afghan security forces could no longer expect the air support that they had been trained to expect when confronting Taliban attacks. This restriction on US operations continued under the Biden administration.

Although that annex was kept secret from the American public and the Afghan government itself, it was no secret to the Taliban. Nor could it have taken long for the Afghan security forces to notice that their calls for air support were no longer being answered. Small wonder, then, after the US had effectively made the Afghan security forces "fair game," that the Afghan army collapsed in the face of the Taliban offensive that started at the beginning of 2021's spring "fighting season." All the more shameful was that senior American officials accused the Afghans of cowardice because so many of them stopped fighting when it became evident that the US had pulled the rug out from under them.

The US side claimed that its withdrawal was "conditions based" and not "calendar based," but the only adjustment Biden requested was to delay the withdrawal until the end

of August. That may actually have made matters worse, since with the agreement's secret annex still in effect, it gave the Taliban a full fighting season to attack the Afghan security forces while the US withheld air support. Predictably, that produced the rout that made summer 2021 such a disaster.

The collapse of the Afghan army did not prove, as some claim, that the strategy itself had failed. It only demonstrated that the strategy depended on continued American air support. That support could have been sustained, but President Trump and President Biden both decided to end it.

Terrorism as a Global Threat: The Danger from Iraq

Before the National Security Council (NSC) meeting at Camp David, an earlier National Security Council meeting on September 13 had addressed the question of whether the War on Terror needed to go beyond al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Rumsfeld had attended that earlier NSC meeting, bringing Douglas Feith (under secretary of defense for policy) as his "plus one." As deputy secretary, I had urgent budget responsibilities that day, examining needed changes to the DoD budget in light of the radically new situation. So I was pleased that Feith accompanied Rumsfeld. I also knew that Feith was an excellent notetaker.

According to Feith's notes of that September 13 meeting, national security advisor Dr. Condoleezza Rice opened it by introducing the concept that had been emerging in recent discussions. The terrorists were a network, and this was a broad war, not a single event. "We're not just going to do something once," she announced.

Throughout that NSC discussion, Bush focused on the follow-on effects of military action. Terrorism could become a bigger problem, he warned, if we went with a "one-shot wonder." He asked General Shelton about Taliban air defenses, and Rumsfeld noted that Afghanistan lacked valuable terrorist infrastructure targets; Bin Laden's assets were not buildings but *people*.

Looking beyond Bin Laden and Afghanistan, Rumsfeld raised the issue of Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a threat to the region and to the United States. Regarding Iraq, the president said that any US military action there would have to do more than just make a statement.[12] He wanted to know what serious military action against Iraq would require and what it would cost. Shelton had noted that CENTCOM had some prepackaged strike options for Iraqi targets. Bush asked Shelton whether we could do the Afghanistan and Iraq missions at the same time. "Yes," Shelton reportedly answered.

Later that day I attended a meeting of the Deputies Committee to work on the options paper the NSC staff had prepared for the September 15 Camp David meeting. Option 1 was

to attack only al-Qaeda targets, on the unlikely premise that the Taliban leaders would agree to our demands. Option 2 would involve attacks on the Taliban as well as al-Qaeda, in the event the Taliban would not cooperate. The NSC staff also included an Option 3: to attack al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and also take action "to eliminate the Iraq threat." It seemed to me that we needed to think about entire courses of action, not just options. I suggested drafting a new paper, keeping in mind the president's key point that the principal purpose of US military action was not to punish those behind 9/11 but to stop whoever might launch the next 9/11.

Thus, the question of Iraq was already very much on the minds of the president and his advisors when the National Security Council convened at Camp David on September 15.

As already noted, I was privileged to join Rumsfeld at Camp David for that historic meeting. When I arrived that morning, Rumsfeld pulled me aside to point out that Saddam was the only world leader who had openly gloated about the 9/11 attacks—something that neither Iran's Ali Khamenei nor North Korea's Kim Jong-il nor even the Taliban's Mullah Omar had done. "The United States reaps the thorns its rulers have planted in the world," Saddam declared in an "Open Letter to the American People" on September 12. Americans should "feel the pain they have inflicted on other peoples of the world, so that when they suffer, they will find the right solution and the right path."[13]

Throughout the 1990s, concern had been steadily growing within the national security community about possible terrorist use of unconventional weapons. The 1995 sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo cult had highlighted this danger. (That attack, reportedly, had also provided inspiration to al-Qaeda's planners.) Defense Secretary William Cohen had won enthusiastic praise from the Clinton White House for his television appearance dramatizing the threat posed by Iraq's biological agents, using a bag of sugar to illustrate the deadly effect of even a small amount of anthrax. The danger of bioterrorism had been highlighted a few months before 9/11 by the bipartisan Hart-Rudman Commission on Homeland Security. When Rumsfeld and I had met with Senators Hart and Rudman that summer, they had insisted that the US needed to take the threat of bioterrorism more seriously. (It's hard to remember that those were days when bipartisanship was not a rarity, at least not on matters of national security.) Also that year, a simulation exercise by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security called "Dark Winter" vividly exposed our vulnerability to a biological attack.

Back in 1998, I had served on the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat, chaired by Rumsfeld. An important focus of that work was the potential for an alternative mode of delivering chemical, biological, or possibly even nuclear weapons through a terrorist network, one that could be hard to identify and impossible to deter. The 1993 bombing attack on the World Trade Center—fortunately, largely unsuccessful—had featured in that discussion. Rumsfeld showed me an intelligence report that the man now suspected of

being the mastermind of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, appeared to be the uncle of Ramzi Yousef, mastermind of the 1993 attack.

Rumsfeld urged me to speak up about Iraq in the meeting that day.

At Camp David that morning, when Rumsfeld's turn to speak came, he argued that the terrorist threat drew on a broad range of support. He emphasized a point he had been making in internal DoD discussions—that the source of the terrorist threat extended far beyond Afghanistan. And he cited approvingly the president's Oval Office statement of two days before: "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." This, Rumsfeld believed, set an important new declaratory policy and would be a crucial element of our strategy to prevent additional attacks.

He then turned to me and asked me to talk about Iraq.

I pointed out Saddam's deep hatred of the United States. (There was no need to remind that group of the attempted assassination of the president's father on a visit to Kuwait in 1993, nor did I want to make that personal reference.) My most important point concerned Saddam's defiance of multiple UN Security Council resolutions, which included obstructing the inspections meant to ensure the end of his chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs, eventually forcing the inspectors' withdrawal in 1998. We knew that Saddam had come close to developing nuclear weapons in the past and that he had used chemical weapons extensively, not only in the war with Iran but also against his own population. The CIA was regularly reporting on his programs to develop other catastrophic weapons.

Iraqi forces were then firing almost weekly at the US and British aircraft that were enforcing UN resolutions to protect the endangered Iraqi opponents of Saddam's dictatorship, attacks that threatened US pilots. Iraq was still under severe sanctions, designed to force renewed cooperation with weapons inspections. But international support for the sanctions was crumbling, and, in any case, they were producing no results.

Everyone at that meeting understood the potentially catastrophic nexus between terrorists and biological weapons. Also well known was Saddam's past support for terrorists such as Abu Nidal and Abu Abbas. And UN inspectors had been concerned about Iraq's apparent work on anthrax and possibly even more dangerous biological weapons. The danger could not be shrugged off.

Secretary of State Powell made his view very clear: "Afghanistan needs to be the main focus." He warned that taking on Iraq would make it hard, if not impossible, to assemble an international coalition. Rumsfeld countered bluntly that "a coalition that is unwilling to take on Iraq is not a coalition worth having."

That afternoon, after a lunch break, the president asked each of the principals to state their position. Having told Dr. Rice that she should give him her recommendation privately, he turned first to Secretary Powell. Powell repeated his point from the morning that the coalition would fracture if we tried to include Iraq; I don't recall Rumsfeld repeating his earlier rebuttal. White House chief of staff Andy Card said that the American people expected us to go to war in Afghanistan, *not* Iraq.

Vice President Dick Cheney spoke last. He said it was important to deal eventually with the threat posed by Iraq, but not until we had an effective plan for taking down the Taliban and denying al-Qaeda a safe haven in Afghanistan. He also endorsed my point from that morning about the potential importance of Special Forces for targeting conventional air strikes.

Cheney's conclusion seemed correct. However, it was unfortunately clear that the Afghanistan military options briefed that morning would not meet the president's requirement for effectiveness. I remained concerned that General Shelton's Afghanistan options were too weak to have any impact on the Taliban. They would produce the opposite effect from what was needed for the morale boost that the country—and the world—needed and the discouragement the president wanted to deliver to the terrorists.

That evening, I joined an informal side conversation over coffee with President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and Scooter Libby, the vice president's chief of staff. None of us had confidence that the Taliban could be coerced to comply by the limited bombing campaigns that had been described that morning. Clearly, I said, more thought was needed. The president responded, as I recall, that the JCS option for Iraq wasn't "very imaginative either."

While he was focused on acting against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan first, it was also clear from that comment and the previous days' discussions that Bush was also thinking about the ongoing threat posed by Saddam. And he was right about General Shelton's Iraq option: it was basically a warmed-over version of Operation Desert Fox, Clinton's limited response to the withdrawal of UN weapons inspectors from Iraq. So I agreed with Bush's criticism, noting that Shelton's Iraq option was basically no different from the earlier, unsuccessful attempt to force Saddam to accept the return of the UN weapons inspectors. I said if it did become necessary at some point to compel Saddam to change his behavior, we should not repeat Desert Fox.

Instead, I suggested a different approach. If the president decided that defending America required not just action against al-Qaeda and Afghanistan but also ending the threat posed by Saddam's continued defiance—a conviction I shared—we didn't need to threaten a full-scale invasion to take Baghdad. We could consider instead liberating the mostly Shia Arabs of southern Iraq, as we were already protecting the autonomous Kurdish zone in the north. Such an effort would not require a full-scale military invasion.

As I pointed out, the main population centers of the Euphrates valley were within a few hundred miles of the Saudi-Kuwait border, across open desert. In the process, we would be depriving Saddam of half of his oil production—and the other half was already under Kurdish control. Bush then replied (as I recall distinctly): "Well, that's imaginative. Why didn't you bring it up in the meeting?" My reply was that I didn't want to challenge the chairman of the JCS in such a setting, without having previously consulted with Rumsfeld.

As the 9/11 Commission later reported, at a subsequent NSC meeting on September 17, which I did not attend, President Bush directed the Defense Department to develop plans "to include possibly occupying Iraqi oil fields" to deal with Saddam if he "acted against US interests." As with virtually any alternative course of military action, my suggested option had both pros and cons, and in time, the more limited option faded from the president's focus.

Had Bush come to consider that option seriously, the most serious objection to that course of action would probably have been the danger that Saddam might resort to chemical or biological weapons if he felt cornered. That was a danger that the CIA had warned against and the US military had prepared for with chemical protective gear and anthrax vaccinations for the entire force.

As CENTCOM commander General Tommy Franks recalls in his memoirs, his "concern about Iraq was heightened by the terrorist anthrax mailings of that fall" that had "immediately called to mind Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program. As late as January 1999," he recalled, "after the UN inspectors were thrown out of Iraq—the United Nations was reporting that Saddam could be in possession of thousands of liters of weaponized anthrax. It was a thought that didn't help me sleep at night."[14]

Where Have All the Stockpiles Gone?

Over the next year and a half, the Iraq issue engendered extensive military planning as well as public debate and diplomatic efforts, including Secretary Powell's presentation of CIA evidence at the UN. During those months, the administration built a multinational coalition and secured a bipartisan vote in Congress approving a threat to use force. The UN Security Council passed its seventeenth resolution condemning Saddam but failed to pass an additional one with stronger language that implied the use of force.

In the spring of 2003, coalition forces under American military leadership skillfully removed Saddam from power, achieving a remarkable degree of surprise for an attack that had been advertised for months. Saddam may well have been expecting to see a repeat of the Kuwait campaign of 1991—a massive buildup of ground forces and an extensive bombing campaign, prior to any invasion. He might also have felt reassured when France and Russia blocked the stronger UN resolution. The "light footprint" attack had important advantages. As just one important example, Polish Special Forces were able to take control

of a large oil platform that had been rigged with explosives without incident—i.e., without triggering a blast that would have created a giant oil spill in the northern Persian Gulf. The surprise that was achieved also prevented possible ballistic missile attacks on Saudi Arabia or Israel, which had caused so many problems twelve years earlier. And it substantially reduced the likelihood of any use of chemical weapons against our forces, which we then feared.

In making the case for war in Iraq, the administration had highlighted the CIA's prewar assessments of Saddam's programs to develop weapons of mass destruction, as well as the CIA's view that he would use such weapons if we invaded. This case had been based heavily on official UN reports finding that Saddam had not destroyed his older stockpiles of chemical weapons. Our forces had accordingly prepared for chemical and anthrax attacks. Many of Saddam's generals apparently expected to see such attacks once US forces approached Baghdad.

As it turned out, we now know there was no use of chemical weapons against our troops. Indeed, no stockpiles of post-1991 weapons were found following the coalition invasion. To me this came as a welcome surprise, but it produced a public relations disaster; the resulting uproar obscured some very significant findings. We did learn that Saddam had preserved his WMD programs, intending to revive them once the threat of international inspections had collapsed. We also learned that his program retained the capacity to rapidly produce chemical and biological weapons (BW)—an especially significant threat in the hands of a terrorist group. BW was something extremely difficult for inspectors to detect in anything like the time needed to do anything about it. The United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspection team had failed to find Saddam's BW program for five years—and then only by chance when Saddam's son-in-law Hussein Kamel defected to Jordan and divulged its existence.

David Kay, the first head of the Iraq Survey Group, the investigative team that eventually concluded there were no modern stockpiles of WMD, reported early on that they had found a "clandestine network of laboratories and safe houses within the Iraqi Intelligence Service" that successfully hid equipment and research materials on chemical and biological weapons from United Nations inspectors in the early months of 2003. Saddam's most dangerous possession was not existing stockpiles but the capability and the individuals with the technical knowledge to create new ones. Under a regime that Kay said "was totally corrupt, individuals were out for their own protection, and in a world where we know others are seeking WMD, the likelihood at some point in the future of a seller and a buyer meeting up would have made that a far more dangerous country."[15] Or, as General Franks expressed it in words a Texan would use, "What we had discovered was the equivalent of a disassembled pistol, lying on a table beside neatly arranged trays of bullets."[16]

President Bush had a clear understanding of the danger posed by Saddam's WMD intentions. He later wrote: "Had Saddam followed through on his intention to revive his

WMD programs . . . the world would likely have witnessed a nuclear arms race between Iraq and Iran, and Saddam could have turned to Sunni terrorist groups like al-Qaeda—a marriage of convenience, not ideology—as surrogates in an attempt to match Iran's use of Shia terrorist groups like Hezbollah." The probability of biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists would have increased. "Instead," Bush wrote, "as a result of our actions in Iraq, one of America's most committed and dangerous enemies stopped threatening us forever. The most volatile region in the world lost one of its greatest sources of violence and mayhem."[17]

Bush might also have added that Libya's Muammar Gaddafi would have been part of that nuclear arms race if Saddam had stayed in power and that Saddam's malign influence would have been added to the witch's brew that is now Syria, in ways that would have made a terrible situation even worse. He might quite possibly have intervened in Bahrain during the Arab Spring, and we know from 1994 that he never gave up his ambitions to conquer Kuwait and perhaps countries beyond.

I believe that Americans and the world are safer, and the Iraqi people are freer and more secure, even despite the terrible violence that still plagues the country, because Iraq is no longer under Saddam Hussein's brutal tyranny. But I also believe that the cost of restoring order and improving governance in Iraq was higher than it had to be because of decisions made, to use Robert Kagan's words again, "in the chaos of onrushing events."[18]

Searching for a Counterinsurgency Strategy

Near the top of the list of things that might have been done differently was the delay by the US military to develop a counterinsurgency strategy. Eventually, in January 2007, President Bush ordered a highly successful counterinsurgency surge, a strategy that produced a dramatic improvement in Iraq before he left office, but not before politics in the United States had turned dramatically against that effort and eventually brought the war back to the point of failure. One of the most important counterfactuals that historians should consider is what might have been the outcome if an effective counterstrategy—one pointed to by the US Army's own history of General Abrams's counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam—had been prepared and deployed three or four years earlier.

Just a few months after the invasion, CENTCOM commander General John Abizaid publicly warned about a growing insurgency in Iraq. But counterinsurgency was not something policy makers or military planners wanted to hear about.

A retired marine colonel named Gary Anderson published an article in the *Washington Post* on April 2, 2003, one week before Saddam's statue was pulled down in Baghdad.[19] A friend recommended it to me, saying that Anderson understood exactly how the Baathists thought. The article predicted the coming insurgency and provided sound advice about

how to fight it. Impressed, I arranged for Anderson to go to Iraq as a consultant, where he barely got a hearing. The civilian leadership in Baghdad told him, "You're talking Vietnam. *This is not Vietnam*."

That experience was repeated some months later when the Joint Staff finally agreed, in early 2004, to send a mission to evaluate the training and organization of Iraqi Security Forces. I persuaded Anderson and Bing West (another remarkable Marine Corps veteran) to join the mission, led by Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry. Unfortunately, Eikenberry focused narrowly on Iraqi force training and ignored the related issues of CENTCOM's strategy, so West and Anderson were unable to get that mission to address the issue of counterinsurgency.

Two other civilians, Gary Schmitt and Tom Donnelly, were encouraged by Scooter Libby to write an article for the *Washington Post* that also advocated developing and executing a successful counterinsurgency strategy.[20] And throughout much of 2003 and early 2004, Libby and I tried with little success to get the Joint Staff to provide a "troop to task" estimate of the requirements for Iraqi Security Forces to conduct effective counterinsurgency operations.

Out of frustration, I finally asked for an estimate for one single province—Diyala, on the Iranian border, with a population of roughly 1.5 million people of mixed ethnicities and religious affiliations. This, I was told, would be wasting the time of a busy staff in Iraq who had more important work to do. I got the picture. Our Baghdad headquarters had little notion of how to organize Iraqi forces for counterinsurgency, and probably even less situational awareness about more remote parts of the country that might have been stabilized through an earlier effort.

Libby and I were especially concerned that the current military strategy favored handing off the entire Iraq effort to the "new Iraqi army," which was still too small. Worse, that force had been trained and organized during its first year solely for the mission of external defense, not internal security. This, we feared, was a formula for "retreat and defeat," designed to get US forces out of Iraq at the price of a catastrophic failure. We consulted two knowledgeable strategists: retired army vice chief of staff General Jack Keane, one of the earliest proponents of an Iraqi surge; and Colonel Derek Harvey, the intelligence officer who was one of Keane's principal sources of information. They warned in stark terms that the US strategy in Iraq was failing.

Harvey had spent fourteen months in Iraq integrating all the available information about the insurgency: background information on its members and leaders, maps of their networks and safe houses, and transit routes of foreign fighters through official Syrian checkpoints to join the insurgency, often as suicidal murderers. Harvey's evidence depicted an industrial-strength insurgency—many times larger than what Washington was officially being told. Even more important, Harvey concluded that the insurgency was not a reaction to the presence of

US troops, meaning that the insurgency was not going to fade away with a US withdrawal. Rather, he reported that the main driver was an organized effort to reestablish the domination of Iraq by Saddam's still-powerful security apparatus, which had now gone largely underground while its leadership sheltered in Damascus.

This would be an unwelcome message in many military and policy circles, but General Keane and Colonel Harvey were more than ready to present it. They possessed not only deep expertise but also the considerable moral courage needed to go against prevailing opinions. Harvey had a strong professional concern that the information being provided to Washington from the field was poorly researched and dangerously misleading. Keane felt an almost personal sense of responsibility for the way the US Army, during his term as vice chief, had allowed CENTCOM to hand responsibility for Iraq to an inadequately staffed and poorly led military headquarters in Baghdad. Keane also gave great credit to Libby, saying later that "without Libby's relentless early efforts, I'm not sure the White House would have admitted failure and changed the military strategy." Vice President Cheney has spoken similarly of his former chief of staff, saying that Libby had the "enormous courage to walk into a crowded interagency meeting and say that you are all wrong," as Libby had repeatedly done.[21] Unfortunately, Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald's unjust pursuit of Libby for allegedly misleading a criminal leak investigation, when Fitzgerald and deputy attorney general James Comey already knew that Secretary Powell's deputy was the leaker, removed from action one of the most influential early advocates for changing our failing Iraq strategy.

In the fall of 2004, General Keane and I arranged for Colonel Harvey to make a presentation to the Defense Policy Board. Harvey began his presentation by saying, "The insurgents in Iraq believe they are winning the war, and the evidence that I will present indicates they are right. The US in Iraq is facing the most formidable insurgency the West has ever faced."

The insurgents, Harvey explained, were led by many of Saddam Hussein's former leaders. In addition, al-Qaeda (led in Iraq by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi) had joined the effort in increasing numbers, funded by almost unlimited resources: literally billions of former-regime dollars, held mainly in Syrian banks (as well as banks in Jordan and Austria); large supplies of arms and ammunition; and tens of thousands of former members of Saddam's brutal intelligence and security forces. Impressed, the Policy Board recommended a separate briefing for Rumsfeld, which he listened to. But as Keane later related, nothing changed in the policy landscape.

Not long afterward, I started sending Rumsfeld memos, complete with maps, showing how a counterinsurgency "inkblot" strategy might progress from the more secure provinces eventually to Baghdad. Rumsfeld appeared interested, but again nothing changed. After my own experience, I could easily imagine the level of resistance he might be receiving to this idea from the field.

Fortunately, President Bush had the persistence, the vision, and the boldness to take the unusual and risky step of changing strategy and commanders in the middle of a war. The resulting surge, led by General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, produced dramatic results in what must be considered record time. Unfortunately, that was not soon enough to undo the damage, including the fatal political damage, of the first four postinvasion years.

An Iraqi Army That Wasn't Right for the Task

The strategic misconception was compounded by a decision by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to dissolve the Iraqi army and replace it with a force that was much too small, and oriented exclusively to external defense—the wrong mission when the fight was with an insurgency. The new army would be only twelve thousand men in the first year and actually be prohibited from involvement in internal security.

As Feith documents, before the war, the NSC had recommended—and President Bush had concurred—that the Iraqi army of several hundred thousand troops should be re-formed rather than disbanded.[22] If nothing else, it could be used for basic manpower-intensive missions, such as guarding the streets and highways and the enormous arms caches scattered throughout the country. According to CIA reports before the invasion, some Iraqi commanders had promised that entire divisions were prepared to defect. Rumsfeld, ever the skeptic, warned that whatever Iraqi commanders might be hinting to CIA informants, "You can be sure they are saying something very different to Saddam."[23] Rumsfeld was right: in the end, no significant units defected. But tens of thousands of poorly paid and largely Shia conscripts literally walked home.

The CPA was not wrong to judge that the Iraqi army, or much of it, was viewed by Iraqis as an instrument of Saddam's oppression. However, whenever the opportunity presented itself to enlist in the new army, hundreds of Iraqis lined up—perhaps out of patriotism, perhaps only to receive a paycheck. This was a wasted resource. These men should have been recruited into a larger army that could perform the much-needed task of internal security. Instead, the new army being built by the CPA was too small, too focused on mechanized operations, and—worst of all—limited to the mission of external defense.

In addition, the CIA had wrongly assessed that the Iraqi police were respected by the public and could help to keep order after the combat ended. They resisted all objections that, in a police state as brutal as Iraq, the police are rarely perceived as friends of the citizenry. As a result, our military planned on using them to maintain order. This mistaken planning assumption contributed to the disorder in the aftermath of the invasion.

So too did Saddam's amnesty for criminal (but not political) prisoners the previous October. It is not clear what Saddam's purpose was with this uncharacteristically generous gesture.

Some Iraqis I've spoken to believe it was done deliberately as a sort of desert counterpart to Stalin's "scorched earth" strategy that deprived Hitler's legions of shelter from the Russian winter by burning all the houses in the Wehrmacht's path.

Whatever the case, that amnesty must have contributed to the looting that followed the regime's collapse. And some of that looting was deliberate, as I discovered on a visit to the Iraqi Foreign Ministry in July 2003. I was initially a bit skeptical of claims by a former Iraqi diplomat and his coalition-appointed Romanian advisor who escorted me and kept insisting that the looting of ministry files had entailed systematic removal of incriminating documents. But when we got to the library on the top floor, we found an entire shelf of Arabic translations of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which surely could have fetched some cash in the Baghdad market if the looters had been profit oriented.

In June 2004, I was sent to Baghdad to meet with the incoming interim prime minister, Ayad Allawi, to discuss plans for the Iraqi Security Forces after the transfer of sovereignty. I was accompanied by David Petraeus, whose remarkable work I had previously observed up close in Mosul. Now a lieutenant general, he was in charge of training the new security forces. When Allawi recommended that the National Guard should be made part of the new Iraqi army, Petraeus quietly cautioned me that CPA policy still precluded using the army for internal defense.

That was quite astonishing. Rumsfeld had signed an instruction six months earlier implementing the one principal recommendation of the Eikenberry mission: putting CENTCOM in charge of all Iraqi Security Force policy, organization, and training. Apparently, CENTCOM had not yet taken advantage of the broader authority that Rumsfeld had instructed it to assume.

When I replied, "General, we just changed the policy," Petraeus gave me a big smile in return. But this was a change that should have come immediately after the old army had been dissolved. In the end, it took many months, and the help of the interim Iraqi prime minister, to force a much-needed change in military policy.

Why Should an American Govern Iraq?

We paid a heavy price for the prolonged delay in reorganizing the Iraqi forces to take part in fighting the insurgency. The delay allowed the insurgents more time and scope for promoting intercommunal violence and ethnic hatred, encouraging Shia and Sunni forces to form their own militias and retaliate against each other.

Had Prime Minister Allawi been installed a year earlier, I doubt that he would have tolerated this delay. And there were other reasons for wanting to have an Iraqi prime minister much sooner. This delay, too, had more to do with bureaucratic dynamics than reasons of policy.

For nearly a year before the invasion, there was a protracted policy debate over whether to create an American-led occupation regime or move quickly to an Iraqi government. This critical decision about governance became a bureaucratic football—delayed repeatedly by a variety of procedural stratagems by participants who deliberately wanted to postpone any decision.

Most damaging of these stratagems were the repeated delays by the State Department to organize meetings of Iraqi "externals." If done earlier, such conferences would have given us a better idea of the leadership potential of important individuals. They could also have provided insights into Iraqi views about the effects in Iraq of different systems of representative government that might have avoided the electoral list system of voting, which accentuated Iraq's sectarian divisions and contributed to corruption. Ironically, the State Department's own "Future of Iraq Project" had an excellent paper on the subject by Kanan Makiya, but ironically it was ignored by the State Department itself.

Makiya was one of those individuals labeled an "external," a term invented to conveniently denigrate Kurds along with exiles. Unlike Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, the Kurds were not exiles but actually lived and governed in Iraq. The commonly voiced contention that only people who had stayed and suffered under Saddam would have political credibility in a new Iraq—as the late Peter Rodman of Rumsfeld's staff explained in an insightful memo—was as nonsensical as saying that Charles de Gaulle or Queen Wilhelmina lacked credibility in France or the Netherlands because they hadn't stayed and suffered under Hitler's occupation.[24] In the end, most of the credible leaders in Iraq today are former "externals." And the most prominent exception, the Shia extremist Muqtada al-Sadr, although he is a man who can't be ignored, hardly makes a case for preferring "internals."

Admittedly, post-Saddam governance was an extremely sensitive subject as long as Saddam remained the internationally recognized president of Iraq, but the issue should have been considered more thoroughly long before the invasion. In the end it was resolved by President Bush with a compromise on the eve of the invasion, a decision that was then reversed two months later by the CPA, creating what was initially intended to be a multiyear occupation government. The same officials at State and the CIA who showed no reluctance to name an exile—Hamid Karzai—as president of Afghanistan adamantly opposed doing something similar in Iraq, where any number of capable Iraqis—including Allawi himself—could have filled the position.

The end result was an unnecessarily lengthy occupation regime that was strongly criticized by important Iraqi leaders, including the country's most influential religious leader, Ali al-Sistani. They viewed that as breaking an American promise that this would be a liberation and *not* an occupation, a term that immediately evoked, particularly in Iraq and the surrounding region, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

It's hard to explain that staunch resistance to establishing an Iraqi government at the outset—or at least announcing a process for choosing one, perhaps a process similar to the Bonn Conference for Afghanistan. I can only explain it by reference to the almost obsessive dislike at State and the CIA for Ahmed Chalabi. Chalabi was indeed a plausible figure to lead a government, but he was wrongly assumed to be Rumsfeld's choice for the position. Neither Rumsfeld nor I were unhappy with the interim choice of Allawi, and certainly the president wasn't. But the US paid an unnecessarily high price for delaying that decision.

What Might We Wish to Have Known Earlier?

It is a commonly heard question: "Knowing what we know now, would you have authorized the invasion of Iraq?" The question seems reasonable enough, but it ignores the important point that, even today, we have no knowledge of how things would have turned out had we made different decisions. However, there is much that we do know.

We know that the Iraq Survey Group, headed by Charles Duelfer (David Kay's successor), reported that Saddam still possessed WMD capabilities and ambitions that would likely have come to fruition after sanctions were lifted. At that point, Iraq would likely have entered into an arms race with Iran to produce a nuclear capability.

It seems clear now that Powell's presentation to the UN should have emphasized Iraq's hidden *capabilities* for developing WMD rather than relying on unproven claims about stockpiles; he might also have broadened the discussion to say more about Saddam's internationally condemned atrocities, including the genocidal campaign against the Marsh Arabs and their centuries-old culture, which was being driven to the edge of extinction.

With the usual precision of 20/20 hindsight, we also know that many mistakes made following the invasion might have been avoidable. Some of them prolonged the violence and increased the costs:

- We misunderstood and underestimated the insurgency, including the role played by former regime institutions (such as the Fedayeen Saddam; the terrorist training camps for foreign fighters; the Ghafiqi project of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, which did R&D on roadside bombs; and the exploitation of Islam as an instrument of control and mobilization through Saddam's "Faith Campaign").

- We initially pursued a military strategy that ignored the counterinsurgency lessons that General Abrams had demonstrated toward the end of the Vietnam War.

- We abandoned prewar plans to rebuild a sizable Iraqi army and created instead a new army that was not fit for addressing the principal threat facing us and the Iraqis.

- We should have had more debate about the creation of an occupation regime in a country we claimed to have liberated, instead of delaying consideration of a new leadership for the country and a process for selecting those leaders.

- President Obama should not have mocked Senator John McCain for his expressed willingness to stay as long as necessary. The Obama administration should not have used the undoubted success of the surge to declare Iraq prematurely a "success," as he and then vice president Biden did, and walk away from Iraq. With great effort, that "success" has partially been recovered, but Iraq is still important less as a threat than as a potential stabilizing force in a volatile region.

Walking Away from a More Stable Iraq

Despite the many missteps after the initial successful invasion, by 2011 Iraq had been stabilized sufficiently to allow the Obama administration to call it a success. It was wishful thinking, however, to claim that the assistance of US troops was no longer needed to sustain that success.

On October 21, 2010, after US and Iraqi negotiators had failed to agree on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that would permit a reduced presence of US noncombat forces beyond 2010 as trainers and advisors, President Obama informed Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki by video teleconference that the negotiations were over and all US military forces would be gone by the end of that year.

There is much finger-pointing over who was responsible for that failure. Obama was clearly not unhappy with that outcome, which left him free to fulfill his political promise to withdraw US troops from Iraq and, as he believed, to end an "endless war." As an anonymous Obama senior official told Michael Gordon, the remarkable chronicler of the Iraq experience, "It was clear that keeping 10,000 troops in Iraq was going to be enormously difficult for the Iraqis and would require a significant effort on our part to jam it through when *we, in fact, were not eager to have 10,000 troops in Iraq*" (emphasis mine).[25]

Other fingers point at Iraqi prime minister Maliki, with some justification based on Maliki's subsequent behavior. No doubt the prime minister may have been happy to have the Americans out of the way to give him a free hand to crack down on his largely Sunni opponents (as he did after we left), whom he always suspected of having close ties with the former Saddamists whom he hated passionately.

But Maliki also knew that the size of the force the Americans were willing to commit had been whittled down from what American generals were saying was the bare minimum to provide the training and advisory functions that were needed, to one that could do little more than protect itself. Even worse, for an Iraqi politician who had to deal with

one of the Arab world's few real parliaments (thanks, ironically, to the US overthrow of Saddam), the Americans were insisting on a public approval by the parliament. That form of approval had been finessed two years previously by a parliamentary maneuver when the Bush administration negotiated an initial strategic framework agreement. In the eyes of Obama critics and Maliki defenders, the Americans were offering too little and demanding too much political exposure in return.

As an outside observer of those negotiations, I couldn't help thinking that Maliki's willingness to take the risks contained in that American demand must have been seriously diminished by his experience during the previous year and a half, when the new American administration sought to "reset" relations with Syria's Bashar al-Assad. The Obama administration continued that initiative despite a series of horrendous suicide truck bombs that rocked Baghdad in late 2009. Maliki accused Damascus of sheltering the masterminds behind those attacks, demanded their extradition, and recalled his ambassador from Syria. The Obama administration conspicuously refused then to support Maliki, in sharp contrast to the support he had received two years earlier when he sent his army to Basra to confront Muqtada al-Sadr.

What neither side could have foreseen in October 2010 was that six months later the most violent chapter of the Arab Spring would convulse Syria. Without an American military presence, Iraqi skies became a highway for Iranian deliveries of supplies to Assad's butchers, as well as a possible route that Israeli planes might traverse to attack Iran. Worse than that, the cauldron of Syria itself became a place where a group calling itself the Islamic State, led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi graduate of the Saddam University for Islamic Studies, was able to organize and mount a violent attack from there against Iraq itself.

Withdrawing from Iraq did not end the threat of terrorism. The space we left was filled by a new entity, ISIS, which emerged in Syria and proceeded to attack Iraq's people and government. Fortunately, President Obama eventually decided to send forces back into Iraq—without requiring the legalistic SOFA agreement that his administration had insisted on previously—and fortunately, the Iraqis were willing to work with us to defeat ISIS.

Where Do We Stand Now?

With the return to power of the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies in Afghanistan, the risk of large-scale terrorism has now increased. Afghanistan may once again serve as a sanctuary where global terrorists can plot and train and organize. And we confront a broader challenge as well, which comes from a trio of antidemocratic regimes: China, Russia, and Iran, each of which fears demands for democracy from their own populations and would accordingly like to see it fail in the United States. In addition, each, for differing reasons, would like to see an end to the American dominance of the Persian Gulf.

The Taliban is undeniably a proxy of Pakistan—or, more precisely, of the Pakistani ISI. And with Pakistan increasingly dependent on China for protection from India, the American defeat in Afghanistan must be seen as a win for China. Far from being able to shift our attention from Middle East terrorism and "pivot" to East Asia and China, we may have revitalized a terrorist threat from Afghanistan that will once again force us to focus on Southwest Asia. Largely unnoticed by Washington commentators and policy makers, China inaugurated a "March West" strategy following Obama's pivot to the Pacific. The PRC is now likely to incorporate Afghanistan into that strategy.

As the war against Saddam's aggressive tyranny increasingly fades into the distance, the war within Iraq has been revived and expanded during the ISIS occupation. Iraq is even more important than Afghanistan in what is often called the "great-power competition." American interests would be well served—and perhaps best served—by an independent Iraq, whereas China would like to see Iraq increasingly dominated by China's proxy, Iran, giving the PRC an opening to become the dominant power in the Persian Gulf.

The Persian Gulf has not lost its strategic importance just because the United States is now self-sufficient in energy. That huge source of energy remains critically important to both our friends and our enemies in East Asia. The US cannot afford to shrug at the possibility of PRC domination of Gulf energy resources, which would expose South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan to possible energy blackmail while giving China more freedom to pursue its global ambitions.

As a counterweight to China's dominance, an independent Iraq aligns with American interests. If it is not an American ally, or even a "friend," Iraq should now be treated as a valued neutral. In that respect, Iraq has gone from being a threat to being an opportunity. US policy needs to find ways to support Iraq's hard-won freedom and independence at a prudent cost.

Tiring of the War on Terror

Unfortunately, when President Bush's successors pledged to abandon "endless wars," they conveyed the impression it would cost as much in lives and treasure to stay in Afghanistan as it had cost the US since the inception of our military engagement there. But if we leave a fight and the enemy continues to make war on us, we haven't ended the war. We've merely abandoned the fight.

How different it might be today if each of those three presidents had explained clearly to the American people that our mission in Afghanistan had been successful far beyond any reasonable expectations in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. It had helped to keep Americans safe by evicting the Taliban from their sanctuary, which was part of a broader counterterrorism strategy. They should have noted that the major burden was now shifting

to the Afghans themselves. In the last year of US troop presence, more than four thousand Afghan soldiers and police personnel were killed in combat. But the Afghan government and forces depended on American air support, which we could have continued to provide at a relatively moderate cost in dollars and risking few American lives. When that support began to vanish, many Afghans saw the need to accommodate to the coming Taliban victory and thought about their own and their families' futures.

All wars are terrible. No one can welcome endless war, but short wars are often worse. The American Civil War and the two world wars were comparatively short. In barely fourteen months, the United States lost 110,000 dead in World War I (with a population then of less than 100 million). In World War II, more than 400,000 Americans died. The armistice ending the combat in Korea came after barely three years, but at least twice as many Americans were killed in those three years as in the entire twenty years in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.

Around the time of the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 massacre that killed nearly 3,000 Americans, some thoughtless comparisons were made between that number and the roughly 15,000 American military and supporting contractors who were killed in the two wars. That would be like comparing the much larger number of more than 36,000 who died in Korea to the handful who might have been killed in the initial North Korean invasion. President Truman didn't order MacArthur to intervene in Korea to avenge American deaths, nor would anyone think to compare the number of American deaths at Pearl Harbor with the 100,000 who died in the war against Japan, much less the 300,000 who died in the war with Germany (and Hitler hadn't even attacked us on December 7, 1941, although he did declare war on us two days later).

To be fair, the costs to our country of the two recent wars include not only the American and allied deaths (to include Afghan and Iraqi losses, which too often go unmentioned), but other large human and financial costs, as well as one big intangible—the revival of isolationism and the damage to American will and credibility that the country has suffered. However, the other side of this grim balance sheet must include something that is not only intangible but in fact unknowable: namely, the damage prevented by the concerted attack on terrorists and their state supporters that President Bush launched, to "wage war against the terrorists," unlike "any we had fought in the past."[26]

When a clear victory—like one marked, for example, with a surrender agreement on a US battleship—is not achievable, and the likely costs of abandoning the fight are high, American political and military leaders need to adjust their strategy and focus instead on reducing the cost to the United States of what may be a prolonged effort—particularly the human cost—as much as prudently possible while shifting the burden to allies whose interests may be more directly engaged.

Bush has never received adequate credit for the basic insight that after 9/11, terrorism could no longer be viewed primarily as a crime to be prosecuted. Instead, he had the responsibility to protect the country from further attacks. Had Allison's prediction come to pass—of "a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead"—Bush would surely have been blamed for tolerating global terrorists. As it is, he is blamed instead for "overreaching," for worrying supposedly unnecessarily about the possibility that hostile governments might share biological, chemical, and radiological or even nuclear weapons capabilities with the world's most dangerous terrorist groups. The current global pandemic has dramatized how dangerous biological agents could have been, or might still become, in terrorist hands.

A Concluding Word of Thanks

Having attended many military funerals and spent many hours with both wounded veterans and Gold Star families, I could never presume to tell them that any cause was worth their sacrifice. I know that President Bush felt those losses in a deeply personal way. By the end of his presidency, he had sent almost five thousand condolence letters, writing to every Gold Star family who had lost a loved one under his leadership. I know he would agree that our country owes a debt to those families whose sacrifices were part of an effort that has kept our country safe from large-scale terrorism for much longer than anyone dared to hope twenty years ago.

It is impossible to spend multiple years living close to decisions about life and death without having more than a few regrets about things done or not done.

I have paid enough visits to military hospitals and attended enough funerals and meetings of Gold Star families to know and regret the price that individuals and their loved ones paid for keeping our country safe, much safer than we expected twenty years ago.

Even for those families whose loved ones returned unharmed, the months of anxious waiting exacted a painful price. It was not made easier by the awareness that most of the country was happily going about its business without fear of a terrorist attack thanks in no small measure to the sacrifice that these families and their loved ones were making.

I regret also that we never adequately acknowledged the sacrifices that the Iraqis and Afghans themselves were making to fight the insurgents. They should have been included when publishing statistics about the coalition, particularly coalition casualties.

There were plausible reasons for not doing so, including the difficulty of confirming Iraqi and Afghan numbers with anything like the precision of our own, but we should at least have published estimates to give some idea of what those partners were doing to preserve the freedom from tyranny that we had enabled them to achieve. When estimates of their casualties range from two to more than three times our own, the American people deserve to know—and should have known—that the people we were fighting to protect were sharing the burden.

There is also much to be thankful for. I am thankful for President Bush's vision of what was needed to prevent additional terrorist catastrophes and for his recognition that weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists would be far more dangerous than hijacked airplanes. I am also grateful that he had the fortitude to recognize that his Iraq strategy was failing and the courage to make a bold decision to embark on a new course, one that delivered a remarkable degree of success by the time he left office. Unfortunately, that came too late to turn around the negative public judgment about the war and its consequences that affect us to this day.

No president can ever find it easy even to tacitly acknowledge a mistake, so I have to add that I am thankful that President Obama sent a small but invaluable American force to counter the threat from ISIS, without insisting on the earlier legalistic demand for a SOFA agreement. I hope his former vice president remembers that experience and will not walk away from Iraq as he has just abandoned Afghanistan.

Most of all, I am grateful for the tens of thousands of Department of Defense personnel—military and civilian—with whom I had the privilege to work in those difficult years and who served our country with such courage and determination. The resilience of those who have returned with grievous wounds, and the support they receive from their families and their communities and from some wonderful volunteer organizations, is also something to marvel at. They make up a community that has its arms open to all Americans who want to support our returning veterans, and it is a privilege to be able to be part of that community whether through financial support or, even better, as a volunteer.

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Synopsis

In the wake of American withdrawal from Afghanistan, it has become possible to evaluate more holistically the causes, implementation, and effects of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This essay looks back twenty years to the disaster of 9/11 to consider not only the pressures and risks that policy makers faced when making those wars' momentous decisions, but also the alternative, counterfactual choices that might have produced better outcomes sooner.

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