

Strategic Insight

Supreme Command and Strategic Purpose in Iraq

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At a time when the talk of war against Iraq is so casually bandied about in the United States, Elliot A. Cohen's book, *Supreme Command*, is timely and essential reading for supporters and opponents of that war. Cohen studies four great statesmen—Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill, and David Ben Gurion. One of his major conclusions is that they succeeded in their role because they immersed themselves in the conduct of war; they mastered their military briefs as thoroughly as they did their civilian ones; and they demanded and expected from their military subordinates a candor as bruising as it was necessary. While the study of those leaders is significant for the current and future generations of leaders, it is equally important to examine how President George W. Bush conducts himself in the seemingly definite war against Iraq. He has the benefit of Cohen's sage observations, since he is reported to have read *Supreme Command*.

If Cohen's book establishes one thing, it is that the top civilian leadership must be highly proactive, and remain wholly involved in every step of a military operation, quizzing the military leaders about the nature and scope of actions taken. All four great statesmen of his study did just that, and did it exceedingly well. The author consistently and persuasively rejects what he calls the "normal" theory of civil-military relations, which states that after making decision to take military actions—a sole prerogative of civilian leadership—the latter should let the military run the campaign, which is supposedly the forte of military leaders. None of the statesmen studied in Cohen's book lived by the "normal" theory of civil-military relations. "All of them drove their generals to distraction, eliciting a curious mixture of rage and affection as they did so."

In the most important chapter of his study, "Leadership Without Genius," Cohen raises an interesting point about President Lyndon B. Johnson and his conduct of the Vietnam War. He notes, "Johnson and [his secretary of defense Robert] McNamara operated from a false strategic concept—a 'theory of victory' that rested on radically inadequate understanding of the opponents and, for that matter, of their own society." The author faults the civilian leadership for failing to ask hard questions to military leaders about the basic direction of the war, about its related "strategic choices;" and the military brass for remaining equally unclear about how to attain victory. Elaborating on the role of Johnson's military advisers, Cohen writes, "That they supported the war we know. That they favored waging it more aggressively we also know. But one searches in vain for evidence they had any strategic concept other than more intense bombing or the dispatch of even more men to the fighting front."

Seeking Strategic Purpose in Iraq

Applying the preceding to the Iraqi situation Bush currently faces, the need for having a clear strategic concept—I prefer the phrase "strategic purpose"—is vital. We do not know what

President Bush has learned from Cohen's book, and what lessons he has drawn from it for his upcoming involvement in a military campaign against Iraq. However, if Cohen's observation about the significance of having a right strategic purpose is correct, then military action against Iraq should never take place.

The litmus test of a right strategic purpose is the answer the question, what does the United States want to achieve by taking military action against Iraq? Is the strategic purpose of such a campaign for the United States to become a "puppeteer" of Iraq and a controller of its vast oil reserves, as is generally believed in the Middle East? Undoubtedly, no U.S. official will answer affirmatively to that question. Is the strategic objective of the United States to disarm Iraq? If so, then the issue of a military campaign is obviated, unless Saddam categorically rejects any U.N. inspections. But the issue has not even reached that stage yet. However, reading the daily press coverage, and watching President Bush's regular public discussions of Iraq, there is little doubt that the decision to invade that country has been made, and only its timing remains in question. As things stand now, however, the Bush administration appears unable to effectively answer such basic questions as, *why attack Iraq now? What crucial information has the United States acquired about Saddam's dictatorship that supports the conclusion that he must be ousted in the near future?*

Absent articulation of a clear strategic purpose, we are still left with an unambiguous need for having one. One frequent suggestion is that Iraq will be a good test case of a new U.S. strategic concept—mentioned in Bush's National Security Strategy of September 2002—that the Muslim world should be introduced to democracy, and only the United States is qualified to do that. In an essay on the "grand strategy" of the United States under Bush, Johns Lewis Gaddis speculates about the current Administration's "grand" purpose as follows: "What appears at first glance to be a lack of clarity about who's deterrable and who's not turns out, upon closer examination, to be a plan for transforming the entire Muslim Middle East: for bringing it, once and for all, into the modern world."^[1]

If there is, indeed, a U.S. grand strategy to democratize the Muslim world, there is little doubt that the timing of it is horrible, and the methodology potentially disastrous.

It takes little knowledge of current affairs of the Muslim world, and not very much imagination, to conclude that anti-Americanism in those countries is at an all time high. No Arab state at the present time wishes to be perceived as friendly to any U.S. aspirations regarding Iraq. In fact, the Bush administration's handling of the PLO-Israeli conflict has fostered deep Muslim hostility toward Washington. Even after the tragic explosion in Bali, the government of President Megawati Sukarnoputri has not cracked down on Islamists to the degree sought by the United States. There have been attacks on U.S. Marines in Kuwait, which owes its current independence to the American-led Gulf War of 1991. A U.S. diplomat was murdered in Jordan. The government of Egypt, one of the closest Arab allies of the United States, seems to be pandering to anti-Israeli sentiments by showing the 41-part film *Horseman Without a Horse* across the Arab world, despite American and Israeli requests that the film be banned as anti-Semitic.

There are suggestions in some quarters that the best the United States can hope to accomplish after conquering Iraq is to occupy it and utilize the Japanese and German occupation models of transforming it into a democracy. Those who point to these models fail to recall that both those nations were parties to a world war. Iraq, on the contrary, is not party to a conflict of that magnitude against the United States. It has neither attacked the United States, nor does it aspire to. More to the point, Iraq is not a Buddhist Japan or a Christian Germany whose socio-religious milieus were not hostile to the United States. Occupation of a Muslim country by the United States during an era when the contentious rhetoric of Osama bin Laden is constantly depicting it as an "infidel" power is only an invitation for daily disasters as long the American troops continue to occupy Iraq.

The Need for Supreme Command

An accurate reading of Cohen's book underscores the importance of having a correct strategy *before* the United States invades Iraq. But if my reading of the public debate on this issue is correct, that strategy is evolving on a daily basis. There is no empirical evidence available indicating that a regular—more important, rigorous—examination of that strategy is being done. Only President Bush is well placed to ask the right type of questions to his subordinates; only he ought to be asking: why should we invade Iraq? Why now, why at all? Is there any other way to dealing with the situation; is invasion likely to promote America's strategic objectives; how would it affect the United States' ongoing global war on terrorism, etc.? Watching the official debate from a distance, he seems to be very much a part of the hawkish rhetoric that is so pervasive within Washington official and semi-official circles. One only hopes that away from public scrutiny, he is asking his subordinates the aforementioned questions on a daily basis.

The military leadership is off the hook in the contemporary era when the U.S. military dominance is awesome and unquestionable. The military operations against Iraq will be successful, as they were against the Taliban/al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan in 2001-2002. But the success of a strategic campaign is an entirely different story. The jury is still out on whether the United States has, indeed, won the overall war in Afghanistan. By the same token, it will be a long while after the conclusion of the military campaign before one may be able to state with certainty that the United States has, indeed, won in Iraq. When it comes to Saddam, the feeling of hatred of him is so pervasive and intense that rational analysis of the issue of toppling him may not be possible. Hawks and doves in the United States may be of one mind on the issue. However, considering what is at stake, one hopes that their hatred of the dictator of Iraq will not tilt them on the side of a wrong decision. The supreme commander of the United States armed forces will be ill served then.

As long as one is thinking of Bush's role as a statesman in the context of the seemingly impending war in Iraq, a number of observations must be made. First, unlike the four great statesmen's awesome ordeals that are the topics of Cohen's analysis, the military portion of United States' war against Iraq is going to be minor. Second, the statesmen of Cohen's study could not avoid the wars of their era. War against Iraq, on the contrary, belongs to an entirely different category. It is highly avoidable, and, indeed, unnecessary. Third, the modalities of the performance of Lincoln, Clemenceau, Churchill, and Ben Gurion in their respective wars—i.e., the fact that they kept their sights focused on their strategic objectives, and that they immersed themselves in the operational details of them while ensuring that their commanders continued to serve their overall purpose—made them great. The main challenge of Bush's statesmanship will depend on how he manages the nation-building phase of the military invasion of Iraq. On this issue, his record in Afghanistan leaves little room for optimism—especially when one considers that the post-war challenges in Iraq may dwarf those in Afghanistan.

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¹ John Lewis Gaddis, "A Grand Strategy," [Foreign Policy](#), November/December 2002, pp. 50-57.