



No Way to Win a War

By Eliot A. Cohen

There is little realism in the report of the Iraq Study Group, a consensus group dominated by so-called foreign policy realists. It offers diplomatic pabulum instead of serious discussion of what has gone wrong in Iraq. Our difficulties in Iraq are not a result of having the wrong strategy, but of failing to implement the choices we have made.

The theory of the thing is very peculiar indeed. You are in the middle of a war—a hard war, a war that is going badly. If the government has bogged down or if the people inside have gone stale, you would say that the sound thing—the Churchillian or Lincolnian or Rooseveltian thing—would be to fire a bunch of officials (generals as well as top civilians), promote or bring in fresh talent, and put together a small group of people to take a new and unillusioned look. Those people would report back in secrecy to the president and his most senior advisers and aides.

They would consist of experienced soldiers and civilians in whom the president (who, after all, has to make the strategic decisions, and is the accountable executive) has trust. There would not be many of them—a half dozen or so—and they would have to be hardy enough to visit the war zone for several weeks, talking not just to politicians and generals, but to captains and sergeants. They would go see things for themselves. They would visit a forward operating base near Tikrit; they would spend some time with Iraqi soldiers in Taji; they would take their chances in a convoy to al Asad, or even a patrol in Tal Afar.

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They—not their staff of a few soldiers and secretaries—would do the probing, digging, thinking, discussing, and, above all, writing. The chairman of the group would insist that they air their disagreements candidly and thoroughly in front of the president, engaging in a debate that might last a day, perhaps longer. The rest of us would not find out about the panel until months, or even years, after it reported back; maybe not until the war was over.

The Bush administration's Congressional critics (including those of its own party), however, came up with a different solution: the Iraq Study Group (ISG), which has now produced a document that consists of fifty pages of recommendations preceded by a forty-page thumbnail sketch of the current situation in Iraq and fifty pages of maps, lists of people, and full-length biographies of the commissioners. This is a group composed, for the most part, of retired eminent public officials, most with limited or no expertise in the waging or study of war. It consists of individuals carefully selected with an eye to diverse partisan and other irrelevant personal characteristics. These worthies, with not one chairman but two (for balance, of course), turned to several score experts known to disagree vehemently with one another about the best course of action to be pursued in Iraq.

Some of the commission members and their advisers cordially detest the president and his

administration and opposed him and his war from the outset; others were equally passionate in their defense of both the man and the conflict. And yet this diverse group had an overwhelming mandate, from the beginning, to produce a consensus document. The commission members spent four days in Iraq, and with the exception of a one-day foray by former Marine Chuck Robb, they stayed in the Green Zone, that bubble of palaces and residences that has little to do with the real Iraq of Basra, Kirkuk, Ramadi, Baquba, and Mosul. At the end, they had breakfast with the president and a few hours later posted their conclusions on the Internet for all the world to ponder. There is something of farce in all this, an invocation of wisdom from a cohesive Washington elite that does not exist, a desperate wish to believe in the gravitas and the statecraft of grave men who can sort out the mess in which the country finds itself.

A fatuous process yields, necessarily, fatuous results. “Iraq’s neighbors are not doing enough to help Iraq achieve stability”—a statement only somewhat ameliorated by the admission that some are even “undercutting stability,” which sounds as though Syria and Iran were being downright rude rather than providing indispensable assistance to those who have filled the burn wards of Walter Reed, the morgue in Baghdad, and the cemetery at Arlington. The selected remedy is, first and foremost, rather like the ISG’s credo for its own functioning, consensus. “The United States should immediately launch a new diplomatic offensive to build an international consensus for stability in Iraq and the region,” as if our chief failure with Bashar Assad or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lies with the hitherto unnoticed laziness or rhetorical ineptitude of our diplomats, or as though Europe, Saudi Arabia, and Israel have not yet figured out that stability in Iraq is a good thing. “Syria should control its border” and “Iran should respect Iraq’s sovereignty.”

No kidding—but who is going to make them? That perennial solution, “resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict,” makes its appearance, including direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, but only with “those who accept Israel’s right to exist.” The authors of the report conveniently forget that the elected leaders of Palestine do not, in fact, accept Israel’s right to exist. And they also neglect the grim reality that one of the most terrible things about Gaza, and possibly the

West Bank as well, is that no one, not even Hamas, is really in charge.

Part of Iran’s price for easing up on us in Iraq is pretty clearly taking the heat off its nuclear program. The ISG recommends that the issue “should continue to be dealt with by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany.” Well, what deal should the United States be willing to cut on Iranian nuclear weapons? Do we think the Iranians would deliver? And what are the long-term consequences?

Strategic Ineptitude

War—and warlike statecraft—is a hard business, and though this is supposed to be a report dominated by “realists,” there is nothing realistic in failing to spell out the bloody deeds, grim probabilities, and dismal consequences associated with even the best course of action. Indeed, some parts of the report read as sheer fantasy. Recommendation 15, for example, provides that part of the American deal with Syria should include the latter’s full

cooperation in investigation of the Rafik Hariri assassination, as well as verifiable cessation of Syrian aid to Hezbollah and its support for persuading Hamas to recognize Israel.

The prescriptions for internal processes in Iraq are only somewhat better. The ISG argues that American forces should shift to developing Iraqi security forces and backing them up, which is more or less the course we are on now. It talks of

milestones for Iraqi performance, as if Iraqi benchmarking were more a problem than Iraqi will, and Iraqi will more a problem than Iraqi capability. It suggests announcing our own planned redeployments without considering the most obvious consequence, which is that Iraqis of many political hues will decide that the Americans are leaving, and the time has come to cut deals with Jaish al Mahdi, or the Badr organization, or al Qaeda in Iraq, or any of the other cutthroat outfits infesting that bleeding country.

Quite apart from the psychological impact of our actions, there is the sober fact that the Iraqi army is small—only 138,000-strong (and that number probably overstated)—and that building effective security forces takes time. The 188,000-man police forces are corrupt, riddled with militia influence, and in need of a thorough overhaul. We cannot build the Iraqi security forces

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without a substantial combat presence. The problem is not merely one of training, as Iraqi corporals driving around in pickup trucks without functional radios might have sourly pointed out had they had the chance to talk to an ISG member.

At least the ISG has given considerable thought to preparing us for future conflict. Consider recommendations 47 and 48. Congress, they declare, should allocate money to repair the clapped-out equipment the Army and Marines will bring back from Iraq. This is no doubt better than, say, heaving Bradley infantry fighting vehicles overboard on the way back to American ports in order to provide a home for new coral reefs. "As [American] redeployment proceeds, military leaders should emphasize training and education of forces that have returned to the United States in order to restore the force to full combat capability." Pentagon planners would do well to pursue this plan rather than give the troops six months of leave and then have them paint the sorely neglected rocks outside the sergeant major's office.

The great war leaders, in their private deliberations, shied away from vagueness. Haziness about ends and means, about what to do and how to do it, is a mark of strategic ineptitude; in war it gets people killed. But a Churchill could only call the flattening of German cities "terror bombing" in private.

Thus, unsurprisingly, in a public document of this kind, euphemism and imprecision abound. The U.S. needs to give "disincentives" to Syria and Iran, But the real question has always been whether we are willing to use a variety of overt and covert means—from bombing insurgent safe houses to sabotaging refineries, from mining harbors to supporting their own insurgents—to do so. And, in fact, the report mentions no means for squeezing either country.

True, as James Baker irritably noted at the press conference releasing the report, the United States talked to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. But as the United States did so, it also bankrupted the Soviet Union in an arms race, undermined its client governments in Eastern Europe by supporting Polish labor unions, and killed its soldiers by providing surface-to-air missiles to Afghan guerrillas. Real pain, and not merely tough talk sweetened by a bucket of goodies, paves the way for successful negotiations with brutal opponents.

To the Brink of Failure

What we need in Iraq is not a New Diplomatic Offensive (capitals in the original) so much as energy and competence in fighting the fight. From the outset of the Iraq war much of our difficulty has stemmed not so much from failures to find the right strategy as from an astounding and depressing inability to implement the strategic and operational choices we have nominally made.

This inability has come from things as personal as picking the wrong people for key positions, in the apparent belief that generals are interchangeable cogs in a counterinsurgency machine. It has come from an unwillingness or inability to grab bureaucracy by the throat and make it act—which is why, three years after the insurgency began, we still send soldiers out to risk roadside bomb attacks in overweight Humvees when there are half a dozen commercially available armored vehicles designed to minimize the effects of such blasts. It is why, although the government has declared long before the ISG issued its report that training the Iraqis is

job one, we still embed fewer than a dozen American advisers in an Iraqi battalion when the right number is three to five times that many.

We have not come up to the brink of failure because we did not know how important it is to employ young Iraqi men or to keep detained insurgents out of circulation or to prevent militia penetration of the security forces by vetting the commanders of those forces. We have known these things, but we have not done these things.

The creation of the Iraq Study Group reflects the vain hope that well-meaning, senior, former public officials can find ideas that have not already occurred to people inside government; that those new ideas can redeem incompetent execution and insufficient resources; that salvation can come from a Washington establishment whose wisdom was exaggerated in its heyday, and which has in any event succumbed to a kind of political-intellectual entropy since the 1960s; and that a public commission can do the work of oversight that Congress has shirked for five years in the misguided belief that it would thus support an administration struggling to do its best in a difficult situation. This is no way to run a war, and most definitely, no way to win it.

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