



Lessons of Operation Iraqi Freedom

By Richard Perle

The war in Iraq has demonstrated the significance of strong, decisive government leadership, bold military tactics coupled with advanced technology, and the possibility of spreading freedom and democracy throughout the Arab world.

We have learned at least nine lessons from the war in Iraq.

First, the successful conduct of this war, from the concept through the execution, required an extraordinary sense of purpose, determination, and courage. It took an extraordinary president, vice president, and secretary of defense to do this. When was the last time we saw a president risk his presidency to accomplish something that he thought was vital to the nation? It does not happen very often. It happened in this case, and we are enormously in debt to those leaders. There were so many occasions when some alternative policy must have seemed attractive.

Second, there are huge rewards for boldness. This was a bold strategy. There are huge rewards for surprise, and I think we delivered a surprise to Saddam Hussein. Ample evidence suggests that he expected a repetition of Desert Storm with a long period of bombing prior to the introduction of ground forces. It entailed serious risks to move in with ground forces at the outset. The war plan was bold; it achieved surprise. It permitted the war to be won in a very short period of time. It saved lives, ironically, by reflecting a strategy that ran counter to the common wisdom that the way to save lives was to do all the damage from the air before intro-

ducing ground forces. And General Tommy Franks and others deserve enormous credit for their vision and for their willingness to take the risks that that vision entailed.

By the way, I think one of the reasons why we have had trouble finding weapons of mass destruction—and we will find them—is that they were hidden in a way that made them not easily accessible. And whatever time the Iraqis may have thought they would have to reconstitute those hidden capabilities was simply denied to them by the rapidity of the advance.

Third, the war has demonstrated a really quite remarkable ability of the United States to operate more or less independently. Of course, we needed some space in Kuwait and elsewhere to amass some forces, but we were extraordinarily independent in this operation. When Turkey refused to allow access for a northern front, we adapted quickly. And without the availability of that real estate, we were nevertheless able to reshape and execute a very complex war plan.

This independence meant that we could say to our allies: You can opt in or you can opt out. This is a coalition of the willing. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. (Some of our allies, like the Germans, decided not to participate even before they were asked to do so.) The ability to operate more or less independently, working only with those who are willing to join us, is of enormous political importance for the future.

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Implications of Military Technology

Fourth, the importance of precision cannot be overstated. I remember a paper some years ago, by Alan Greenspan, in which he talked about intellectual capital and related it to physical capital. He talked about how much of the steel, concrete, timber, and glass had been squeezed out of the modern building by engineering and new materials. We have seen the military equivalent of that. We squeezed out—and you heard some of the figures—massive quantities of iron by making sure that the iron that we did deliver hit the target. And, of course, when you reduce the iron-on-target you reduce the whole forces and logistics base that delivers that iron. The leverage that comes from the kind of precision of which we are capable is truly breathtaking. And we are at the beginning of the transformation that incorporates that ability—at the beginning. The combination of the ability to hit the target at which you aim and the ability to acquire information about the location of the target and transmit that information in real time has changed warfare forever.

This was truly the first modern war, and it has enormous implications for this country and the world. If we can see a target, we can destroy it. And sensor technology permits us to see targets under adverse circumstances at significant distances operating from beyond the lethal range of the enemy. And we are, if not unique, almost unique today in the ability to do that.

These technological advances also have important political implications. When you can win a war as we have done it, with the destruction of targets so precise and so appropriately defined that you could walk through downtown Baghdad today and not see any evidence that a war had taken place, or see the ruin of a building here and a building there that was selected for destruction because it was instrumental to Saddam Hussein's ability to fight back, it means that politically we can use force in a way that would not have been possible if we had to create a Dresden. And, indeed, much of the opposition to the war, certainly in Europe and even some in the United States, was predicated on a very wrong image of what the war would be like. I am quite sure the Germans saw Dresden when they thought about this war. Had they understood that a small number of targets would be destroyed decisively and that this country would be liberated in a matter of days, we might not have had the political opposition that developed. We need to drive this lesson home:

when the United States goes to war, it will not recreate the assault on Dresden.

A B-2 can destroy sixteen distinct targets. A future version of the B-2, or future armament for the B-2 will permit a single aircraft to destroy potentially as many as 300 targets—a single airplane, and an airplane that, by virtue of its stealth characteristics, is essentially beyond the range of the enemy. Three-hundred targets from a single airplane.

Lesson five, transformation, is hard, but it is worth it. When I say it is hard, I can recall battles when I was in the Pentagon two decades ago on the very question of precision. It was hard work to get the military establishment to accept the importance of precision. And battles were fought on this issue, and lost, by civilians who believed that we had to drive as fast and as hard as we could to incorporate the technologies that would permit us to operate precisely. Programs were cancelled; programs never got off the ground. But finally there is now a recognition of the overwhelming importance of being able to strike the target at which you aim.

This means that small forces can do the work that at one time required massive forces. It is Greenspan's observation about the efficiency of intellectual capital. It means that we can downsize. I think we all remember that period of about a week when the pundits thought we were bogged down and the Q word appeared—quagmire. There was no quagmire; there was never a quagmire. But the number of editorialists and retired military and others who said we had taken too few forces to the theater simply did not understand that in today's world with today's technology—with our technology and a war plan that exploits that technology—a small force can do extraordinary things that in the past could only have been done by a much larger force. And Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was right. He would be in deep trouble today if he had taken too small a force and so would the vice president. But they had it right. They understood the leverage that comes from our technology, and we were able to do this with a small force.

Lesson six: Faced with overwhelming power, dictators cannot count on their subjects to fight for them. The Iraqis did not fight for Saddam Hussein. There were individuals who fought because, as instruments of the regime, they knew they had no future in Iraq. In the first thirty days after the liberation of France, 35,000 Frenchmen died at the hands of other Frenchmen. The people who fought, and the people who are fighting today, are like the French collaborators. They know they have no future in Iraq. And we were

right to suggest that the Iraqis would not fight for Saddam, and they did not.

Political Implications

Lesson seven: In the political world, the political consequences of war are inseparable from victory. If you win, it solves a lot of the problems you anticipated as you contemplated going to war. How often did we hear it said that the Arab world would rise up in opposition to the United States, that we would create a thousand bin Ladens? It did not happen. The Arab world did not rise up. There is no evidence that we have created new bin Ladens. On the contrary, for the first time, the terrorists and their friends and supporters and sponsors are on the defensive. Victory settles these issues.

Lesson eight is not such a happy lesson: our allies are woefully inadequate by comparison with the United States, and there is no sign that it is getting better. Indeed, in many ways, it is getting worse. This has important political implications, because as we contemplate the use of force in the protection of our own interests and the interests of others, our friends and allies, it is not clear they can

fight alongside us. What we saw in Europe in the form of opposition to this war reflects, at least in part, the inability of Europeans to participate in a way that accords their own soldiers and citizens the relative safety that we have earned by virtue of the way we fight, by out-ranging the enemy, for example.

The last lesson is that we have set the stage for another transformation, a political transformation of enormous importance. A great deal depends, of course, on how successful we are now in this postwar period in facilitating the construction of a decent and modern society in Iraq. But I think we will demonstrate that democracy is possible in the Arab world, and I think we will demonstrate that there is a better future when people are no longer ruled by the likes of Saddam Hussein. And in terms of protecting this country from the terrorist threat we face, and indeed, in liberating people throughout the Arab world, this transformation, if it succeeds in Iraq, will spread. It will spread by inspiring others who are now the victims of oppression, and it will spread by recognizing that the Western world is not unique in its desire for individuals to live in freedom.