

Security Scholars Say Iraq War Most Misguided Policy Since Vietnam

By Jim Lobe | October 13, 2004

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq has been the “most misguided” policy since the Vietnam War, according to an open letter signed by some 500 U.S. national security specialists.

The letter, released October 12 by Security Scholars for a Sensible Foreign Policy (S3FP), said that the current situation in Iraq could have been much better had the Bush administration heeded the advice of some of its most experienced career military and foreign service officers. But the administration’s failure to do so has actually fueled “the violent opposition to the U.S. military presence,” as well as the intervention of terrorists from outside Iraq.

“The results of this policy have been overwhelmingly negative for U.S. interests,” according to the group, which called for a “fundamental reassessment” in both the U.S. strategy in Iraq and its implementation.

“We’re advising the administration, which is already in a deep hole, to stop digging,” said Prof. Barry Posen, the Ford International Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), one of the organizers of S3FP which includes some of the most eminent U.S. experts on both national security policy and on the Middle East and the Arab world.

Among the signers are six of the last seven presidents of the American Political Science Association (APSA) and professors who teach in more than 150 colleges and universities in 40 states.

Besides Posen, the main organizers included Stanley Kaufman of the University of Delaware; Michael Brown, director of Security Studies at Georgetown University; Michael Desch, who holds the Robert M. Gates Chair in Intelligence and National Security Decision Making at the Bush School of Government at Texas A & M University; and Jessica Stern, at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, who also served in a senior counterterrorism post in the National Security Council during the Clinton administration.

“I think it is telling that so many specialists on international relations, who rarely agree on anything, are unified in their position on the high costs that the

U.S. is incurring from this war,” said Prof. Robert Keohane of Duke University in North Carolina.

Their critique mirrors an unprecedented statement released by 27 retired top-ranking foreign service and military officials last June, many of whom said they had voted for Bush in the 2000 election.

The 27, called Diplomats for Change, accused the administration of leading the country “into an ill-planned and costly war from which exit is uncertain,” and charged that “it justified the invasion of Iraq by manipulation of uncertain intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, and by a cynical campaign to persuade the public that Saddam Hussein was linked to al-Qaida and the attacks of September 11. The evidence did not support this argument.” As their name suggested, they called for Bush to be defeated in 2004.

The new statement’s signatories also include a number of retired government officials, “some career military and foreign-service officers, and other political appointees in Democratic and Republican administrations” who are currently working at colleges and universities.

Much of their critique echoes arguments voiced by Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry who, in recent weeks, has pounded away at alleged failures in the way Bush has prosecuted the “war on terrorism,” particularly with respect to Iraq.

“We judge that the current American policy centered around the war in Iraq is the most misguided one since the Vietnam period, one which harms the cause of the struggle against extreme Islamist terrorists,” S3FP writes.

“One result has been a great distortion instead of facts, based on mythology instead of calculation, and on misplaced moralizing over considerations of national interest,” they wrote.



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The scholars applauded the Bush administration for its initial focus on destroying al-Qaida's bases in Afghanistan, but they charged that its subsequent "failure to engage sufficient U.S. troops to capture or kill the mass of al-Qaida fighters in the later stages of that war was a great blunder."

"It is a fact that the early shift of U.S. focus to Iraq diverted U.S. resources, including special operations forces and intelligence capabilities, away from direct pursuit of the fight against the terrorists."

The letter noted that "many of the justifications" provided by the administration for the Iraq war, including an operational relationship between al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein and Iraq's programs for weapons of mass destruction (WMD), have proven "untrue" and that North Korea and Pakistan pose much greater risks of nuclear proliferation to terrorists.

"Even on moral grounds, the case for war was dubious: the war itself has killed over a thousand Americans and unknown thousands of Iraqis, and if the threat of civil war becomes reality, ordinary Iraqis could be even worse off than they were under Saddam Hussein."

Since the invasion, "policy errors" have created a situation in Iraq "worse than it needed to be," according to the letter, which noted that the administration ignored advice from the Army Chief of Staff on the need for many more U.S. troops to provide security and from the State Department and other U.S. agencies on how reconstruction could be carried out.

"As a result, Iraqi popular dismay at the lack of security, jobs or reliable electric power fuels much of the violent opposition to the U.S. military presence, while the war itself has drawn in terrorists from outside Iraq."

While Saddam's removal was "desirable," according to the scholars, the actual benefit to the United States was "small," particularly in light of the fact that Iraq posed far less of a threat to the U.S. or its allies than the administration had asserted.

"On the negative side, the excessive U.S. focus on Iraq led to weak and inadequate responses to the greater challenges posed by North Korea's and Iran's nuclear programs, and diverted resources from the economic and diplomatic efforts needed to fight terrorism in its breeding grounds in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Middle East."

Worse, the occupation's failures, such as the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere, have acted as a recruitment tool for al-Qaida and similar groups throughout the region, according to the letter.

"Recognizing these negative consequences of the Iraq war, in addition to the cost in lives and money, we believe that a fundamental reassessment is in order," the letter said.

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