

# Thoughts On Cordesman's "Post-Conflict" Lessons From Iraq

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | June 15, 2004

Anthony Cordesman, the thoughtful incumbent of the Arleigh Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, titled his May 19, 2004 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee "The 'Post-Conflict' Lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan." Cordesman presented a devastating critique of the pervasive lack of planning and preparedness throughout the Executive Branch in general and the Pentagon and White House in particular for translating success in war into success in peace.

Most of Cordesman's points have been made before by him and by others. But they tend to assume increased *gravitas* by being assembled in one document that, while dwelling on Iraq and Afghanistan, also provides insight into regional consequences. And it is the latter that the rest of these remarks will address.

## The Indeterminacy Principle in International Relations

Cordesman places the military assaults against Afghanistan and Iraq within the larger "war on terrorism," which also includes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—with the distinction that the Iraq adventure was war by choice. But he clearly rejects the notion of a "clash of civilizations," seeing instead a clash of interpretation within the Islamic world, to which the U.S. and its western allies are observers.

Unfortunately, in large measure because of the "West's" (including the developed economies in the Far East) heavy dependence on petroleum originating from Muslim countries, the U.S. has become an ever-more involved and active "participating observer." What began during World War II as an

effort to preclude Arab support for Nazi Germany turned into covert subversion in the 1950s and generally unquestioned support of oil-rich non-democratic regimes even through the oil shocks of the 1970s.

Ironically, the fact that these "friendly" regimes were growing richer and richer meant that the traditional non-military levers of U.S. influence—economic aid and private sector development—that proved so potent in helping Western Europe rebuild after

World War II were meaningless. What were left were military-to-military interactions, which again because of oil revenues, came down heavily on weapons purchases and contracts for maintenance, repair parts, and training support.

The instability of this largely one-dimensional relationship was further exacerbated by the propensity of many uninformed or under-informed U.S. elected officials to create categories and gross generalizations about non-European countries and their peoples. Emerging from the Vietnam War (actually a regional war also involving Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand), the Nixon administration selected "reliable" client-states whose military forces—liberally supplied and

---

Unfortunately, in large measure because of the "West's" (including the developed economies in the Far East) heavy dependence on petroleum originating from Muslim countries, the U.S. has become an ever-more involved and active "participating observer."

---



Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)

[www.fpi.org](http://www.fpi.org)  
A Think Tank Without Walls

---

advised by the U.S.—could and would act as surrogates for U.S. interests.

In the Gulf, the surrogate was autocratic Iran (Persia), which made the Saudis and Arab mini-states on the Arabian Peninsula nervous. Iran's tumultuous transformation into an Islamic republic opposed to the pervasive U.S. presence in the Gulf induced Saddam Hussein to start what became an eight-year war against Iran, a gambit the U.S. supported on the dangerous maxim that having a common enemy translates into common interests if not outright alliance. Just how dangerous this tactic is became apparent in August 1990 when Saddam invaded Kuwait and seemed poised to move into Saudi Arabia.

There is a more profound and universal maxim at work which Washington officials and pundits tend to overlook. That is, by simply being a presence in a given situation or set of circumstances, a foreign body (observer) changes the paradigm's parameters. (In physics, this is the Copenhagen Interpretation of Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy.)

Viewed from the White House and Congress, a vital U.S. national interest—assuring the unimpeded flow of petroleum from the Gulf—warrants a robust U.S. presence in the region. As noted earlier, however, the only tangible category to exert influence is military, both supplying client states and having an actual, robust U.S. military presence. The latter, largely confined to a training mission for the Saudi National Guard (really a praetorian guard) and a variable naval presence until the “tanker wars” of the mid-1980s, became a larger, seemingly permanent—and therefore objectionable to conservative Muslims—presence after the first Gulf War. And this presence provided a point of transference by which hatred of secular, “apostate,” or otherwise “illegitimate” Muslim regimes focused on the United States.

## Inverted War

Just as the current correlation of perceptions and events took years to develop, it probably will take years of effort before the U.S. will find itself trusted again in the Middle East and beyond. The degree of trust between countries, of course, is a variable, and normally will depend in part on the degree of commonality of interests and the extent to which each country takes into account the internal dynamics and sensitivities that underlie or even drive the policy positions of its partners.

Cordesman points out that, historically, solutions to these challenges—demographic, social, economic, and political—tend to be worked out over time at the nation-state level. But the U.S. declaration of a “global war on terrorism” (GWOT) in which Afghanistan and Iraq are “fronts” undercut this historical course. Moreover, the drive to wrap up direct involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, as evidenced by the simultaneous declarations on May 1,

2003, that major combat was over in both countries, ignored the power of these non-military dynamics, a power that U.S. military might could not subdue but could—and did—infuse and activate against the “liberators.”

Thus, in Afghanistan, in addition to those areas the Taliban and al Qaeda fighters have made unsafe, much of the country is only nominally controlled by the central government in Kabul. Economically, unemployment remains a major obstacle, growth is stymied, and drug cultivation is again on the rise. The development of civil society, viable political processes and institutions, and societal practices that combine traditional Islam with human rights have been very uneven, so much so that elections have been postponed once already and may have to be delayed again. Two other factors that must not be

---

Just as the current correlation of perceptions and events took years to develop, it probably will take years of effort before the U.S. will find itself trusted again in the Middle East and beyond.

---

ignored are the continued heavy reliance on militias controlled by war lords to maintain some semblance of security in the country, and the more serious systemic weakness at the national and regional levels that result in key personalities rather than institutions holding the country together. Together with shortfalls in donor pledges of economic assistance for the Karzai government, these conditions suggest the absence of sustained interest by the administration in the welfare of a country emerging from 30 years of constant war, a third of which was directly encouraged by the U.S. in the latter stages of the Cold War.

Similarly, the failure of the U.S. to fill immediately the power vacuum created by Saddam Hussein's rapid military defeat sent a message of disdain for the Iraqi people and institutions. The high-handed, unilateral, and often contradictory actions of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the heavy toll of noncombatant Iraqi civilians at the hands of U.S. troops, the importation of U.S. contractors awarded reconstruction contracts in lieu of Iraqi companies who would employ Iraqis, drove Iraqis to bridge the ethnic, tribal, and religious chasms that are a staple of Iraq's history and unite against the liberators-turned-occupiers.

The resulting anti-coalition outbreaks of violence, from the sporadic attacks in Mosul and other northern areas to the full-fledged insurgencies in the "Sunni Triangle" and the Shi'ite Baghdad and Kufa-Najaf-Karbala regions, which included targeting foreign contractors and Iraqis working with the coalition, undermined the reconstruction schedule. With less than a month until the coalition returns sovereignty to an interim government, foreign forces are desperately trying to shift their efforts from counteracting the unexpected and enduring insurgencies to protecting Iraq's physical and economic infrastructure and building a reliable Iraqi security apparatus. In fact, what the U.S. seems to have finally learned, as

---

Shared culture, traditions, and language are obvious factors, but the very significant drop in incidents also suggests that many "insurgents" are not opposed to democracy in Iraq but are opposed to the continued domination and presence of foreign forces in Iraq.

---

evident in Fallujah and Najaf, is that disciplined, trained Iraqis are better at handling rebellious Iraqis than are U.S. forces. Shared culture, traditions, and language are obvious factors, but the very significant drop in incidents also suggests that many "insurgents" are not opposed to democracy in Iraq but are opposed to the continued domination and presence of foreign forces in Iraq.

The failure of the U.S. occupation forced a strategic *volte face* by the administration with regard to the role of the UN in Iraq. So unpopular has the CPA become that Iraqis would have instantly rejected anyone the U.S. might have named for the interim Iraqi administration. But in capitulating to the obvious, the White House waited so long that it gave the UN a virtually impossible task of trying to manage the transition from the CPA to a technocratic Iraqi administration. As events have unfolded, the CPA-appointed, expatriate-dominated, politically-motivated Iraqi Governing Council (IGC)

threw the selection process into turmoil by announcing its preferred candidates for prime minister and president—effectively by-passing the UN mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi, who was under heavy pressure from the U.S. In all, four IGC members "transitioned" into the new interim government—and into three of the four top positions—along with seven heads of deputies of cabinet ministries. In the end, this assertion of independent action may endow the interim government with greater legitimacy, especially if the new U.S. ambassador, John Negroponte, is not allowed to participate in Iraqi cabinet discussions as his counterpart in Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad, does in Afghanistan.

In retrospect, beyond exacting revenge against the Taliban for harboring those responsible for September 11, 2001, the continuity of policies and tactics employed to introduce "democracy" to

---

Afghanistan and then to Iraq point to a new version of the “domino theory” for the Middle East. But Kabul does not lead to Baghdad anymore than Baghdad leads to Jerusalem—or to Tehran or Damascus or Riyadh. Democracy has never come from a gun barrel, especially one in the hands of a foreign power.

That is not to say the U.S.-induced regime change has had no effect. Of all the countries in the Gulf, Iran has probably been the most affected by the fallout from the Iraq fiasco in that it has slid off Washington’s bulls-eye. The swift coalition military victory in Iraq left a significant and very efficient fighting force on Tehran’s doorstep just as the extent of Iran’s efforts to acquire nuclear weapons technology began to come to light. But as Iraq absorbed more of Washington’s attention, Tehran seemed to calculate it could deflect U.S. demands to make more complete disclosures and to open enrichment facilities not previously declared to a more intrusive and rigorous inspection regime.

### Courting Backlash

Within the broader Middle East region, the Bush administration has compounded its dilemma in Iraq (and Afghanistan) by its decision to side so openly with the latest schemes of Ariel Sharon: to withdraw all military posts and Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip, a number (but not all) of posts and settlements from the West Bank, and to route the so-called “security fence” on the West Bank into Palestinian areas to help fortify the settlements that will not be dismantled. The endorsement of this Israeli “unilateral withdrawal” declaration, coming on top of the expanding scope of the revelations of abuse against Iraqis by coalition forces, has rekindled a vague sense of communal spirit among “the Muslim street” stem-

ming from simply being “Muslim”—what scholars call the “ummah.”

Many observers believe that, for the time being, the centripetal sensibility that underlies the ummah remains weaker than the centrifugal forces emanating from the variations in national political, economic, and social systems in Islamic-majority and minority countries around the globe. (In fact, globalized communications are driving both sets of forces. It contributes to the “ummah consciousness” in the immediacy of protests to unfolding events in one of the “wars on terror” and works against it by allowing “the street” to hear and see the differences among Muslims.) However, this could change if the U.S. continues policies toward the Muslim world that, to all intents and purposes, are one-sided. And should a re-ignited ummah develop, the danger is that groups with fundamentalist interpretations will take control and brand as apostates anyone who differs with them.

That the same cause—globalization—can spin off completely opposite forces suggests that the Bush administration’s simplistic division of the world into countries that “are with us or against us” is bankrupt. Cordesman speaks of dealing with the world honestly and objectively, but this would require a transformation of the administration’s core beliefs about the unique role of the U.S. as the moral exemplar for and leader “by divine right” of the rest of the world.

Thus there is the anomaly of Washington’s demands that others, such as Libya and Iran, strictly adhere to international treaties such as the Nuclear Nonproliferation pact while the U.S. retains more than 2,200 warheads on alert. Restraints on sales of advanced conventional weapons systems to countries in volatile regions are few, even though it is conventional weapons that continue to be the real “weapons of destruction of the masses.” At the same time, the

---

That the same cause—globalization—can spin off completely opposite forces suggests that the Bush administration’s simplistic division of the world into countries that “are with us or against us” is bankrupt.

---

---

Pentagon demands for itself ever newer, more expensive weapons because current top-line equipment has been sold to other countries, which poses a “threat” to “legitimate” U.S. military dominance.

### The Strategic Trap

Such systems, most of which were conceived or originally built as counters to expected new Soviet equipment, have marginal utility today. In fact, in a strategic sense, war itself has marginal utility today for the United States. As Cordesman points out, the U.S. must demonstrably and unmistakably “win” every military venture it begins, while opposition forces need only mount a sufficiently determined resistance to leave the issue in doubt. In this light, the coalition has created a trap for itself. It must stay in Iraq long enough for organized resistance to abate and for a sense of physical security to be restored throughout the country, especially in the areas of current unrest. Short of this, even if “mission accomplished” is declared, departing coalition forces may be required to fight their way out just as they fought their way in. Not only would this be ominous for Iraq, it could spur broader anti-U.S. and anti-Western attitudes and terror incidents.

In light of the above, Cordesman concludes that going after the insurgents in Falujah and Muqtada al-Sadr might have been a better choice than turning to Iraqis to resolve these challenges. But his alternative would have undoubtedly increased casualties in every category—U.S. and other coalition members, the Iraqis opposed to the U.S. occupation, and innocent civilians—and turned al-Sadr into a martyr.

Two pragmatic lessons seem to be re-emerging from Iraq—and Afghanistan. The first, which Cordesman recognizes, is: don’t make opponents of key power

blocs. In Iraq for the most part, only the Kurdish factions have remained aligned with Washington. The fact that the most influential Shi’ite religious leader, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has steadfastly refused to meet with any U.S. representative should have been a clear warning of how tenuous the coalition’s position is. This argues for turning over to Iraqis as much of the day-to-day governance as possible in the expectation that the uncommitted or “occasional” insurgent will be willing to give an indigenous government a chance to deliver security, reconstruction, and aid.

The second lesson is: wars, because they are always directed at killing people and destroying things, are costly—in lives lost, talents diverted, opportunities lost, and treasure expended. Such costs always exceed the forecasts as the “fog of war” inevitably disrupts smooth implementation of military plans. But what seems never to be forecast is the cost of what might be termed the “amnesia of war”—the tendency to regard opponents in war as less than human and therefore unworthy of respect and dignity.

Investigations of reported torture and abuses at Abu Ghraib prison and other locations in the 91 cases acknowledged by the Pentagon are but the latest known examples of an unacknowledged cost of war. The real tragedy of the amnesia of war is in the spiral of abuse that corrodes an individual’s sense of self-regard and self-respect which then plays back into increased disdain for the humanity and dignity of opponents. Political leaders who launch wars on the basis of uncompromising ideology, who cast wars as “just” or as a “liberation,” magnify the downward spiral by creating a dangerous sense of righteous superiority that “excuses” and then condones increasingly inhumane treatment.

We have yet to pay the complete costs of the militarization of foreign policy under the Bush administration, and the bill will be high.

---

Investigations of reported torture and abuses at Abu Ghraib prison and other locations in the 91 cases acknowledged by the Pentagon are but the latest known examples of an unacknowledged cost of war.

---

---

*Dan Smith <dan@fncf.org> is a military affairs analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)), a retired U.S. army colonel and a senior fellow on Military Affairs at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.*

## **FOR MORE ANALYSIS FROM FOREIGN POLICY IN FOCUS SEE**

Charging on in Iraq—But Which Way?

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (June 7, 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0406charging.html>

The Defense of “Command Influence”

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (May 18, 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0405comminf.html>

Of Rumor and Reality

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (April 30, 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0404rumorreality.html>

Iraq: Descending into the Quagmire

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (June 2003)

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/quagmire2003.html>

---

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2004. All rights reserved.

## **Foreign Policy In Focus**

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org).

Recommended citation:

Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.), “Thoughts On Cordesman’s “Post-Conflict” Lessons From Iraq,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, June 15, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/0406lessons.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.)

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

**p. 6**

---

**www.fpif.org**

A Think Tank Without Walls

