

Iraq: Failure in Reconstruction and State-Building
A Squandered Opportunity?

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Abstract

The failure to appease, reconstruct and reform Iraq after the U.S.-led Coalition invasion in 2003 is explained by the multiple breakdown of Iraqi state power in the post-hostilities phase, allowed by and inadvertently caused by the occupation forces.

The flawed and insufficient planning as well as poor implementation of the U.S.-led Coalition effort are investigated from rational-actor centered, organizational, political and psychological perspectives. It is concluded that the failure in Iraq was partly avoidable, and that more preparation for future, possibly necessary exercises in regime change and state-building should be undertaken.

6386 words

You can't get to Jefferson and Madison without going through Thomas Hobbes¹ first.

Larry Jay Diamond (as cited in Byman 2008: 635)

1 Introduction

When then President George W. Bush, on May 1, 2003 declared the end of major combat operations and the mission Iraqi Freedom to be “accomplished”² aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* aircraft carrier, much of the failure and dying in Iraq still lay ahead.

The invasion, starting on March 19, 2003, had been a remarkable military success, on schedule and with comparatively few casualties (139 US troops and approximately 7,500 civilians before May 1, 2003 according to CNN and Iraq Body Count estimates, respectively). In the insurgency that followed (and has recently slightly abated), more than 4,000 US troops and 60,000 Iraqi civilians were killed (*ibid.*). To this date, six years after “major hostilities” ended, the country is still plagued by sectarian violence and crime,

¹Hobbes (1651)

²To much disbelief, the Bush Administration later claimed that the criticized “Mission Accomplished”-banner at the event was in fact referring to the completed turn of duty of the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, which was returning to its Everett, WA harbor at the time.

marred by economic hardship and destruction and paralyzed by deeply divided politics and dysfunctional government. The vision and partial *casus belli* of the “Coalition of the Willing”, to turn Iraq into a role model liberal democracy for the Middle East, has not materialized. Instead, the dying and suffering continues. What’s more, Operation Iraqi Freedom has destabilized the Middle East and brought into disrepute Western intervention for, as well as domestic proponents at political reform and liberalization.

This Essay Asks: What Happened? Did the U.S.-led Coalition³ squander the “golden opportunity” after a successful invasion to win the “hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people? Was failure avoidable?

In the following, it is first investigated why the U.S.-led effort to reconstruct, appease and reform Iraq after the invasion has failed. In other words, *what the policy failure is*.

This Essay Then Asks: Why Did it Happen? If there was a failure in Iraq, why did it occur? How, if at all, did the decision making, planning and implementation lead to failure?

In the second part, alternative and complementary explanations are suggested of how decision-making and planning — or lack thereof — contributed to the fiasco. In other words, *what caused the policy failure*.

The Question of Justification, both morally and instrumentally-rational for the invasion and subsequent occupation is not addressed in this essay. For the purpose of this analyses, the decision to invade and change the regime is taken as given.

³With very few exceptions, most of the following discussion concentrates on the U.S. role in the effort. This is in line with the majority of the scientific writing on the matter and justifiable because of the U.S.’ initiating and dominant role in the campaign. What is said here about the dynamics of the failure, applies to other Coalition Parties, too. Hypotheses about the reasons for the policy failure, however, are developed for the U.S. context and may not apply elsewhere.

2 Explaining the Failure on the Ground

To meaningfully speak about a “failure”, implies both that actual events are compared to a hypothetically more positive outcome and that the observed outcome indeed could have been avoided. In other words, “failure” implies a benchmark and a notion of an alternative course of events, not the inevitability of the observed outcome.

What Constitutes a Failure in Iraq? The hypothetical benchmark, in terms of the cost-benefit argument initially presented by the proponents of regime change, is, at minimum, at better quality of life in post-Saddam Iraq, or at maximum, a liberal democracy serving as a role-model and stabilizer for the entire Middle East.

Both compared to Iraq under Saddam’s reign of terror and a hypothetical Iraqi liberal democracy, reality looks grim(mer): life for many ordinary Iraqis, at least for the moment, is worse than under Saddam, many lives have been lost, the country destabilizes the region and has discredited reform agendas and regime change the (Muslim) world over.

Was Failure in Iraq Inevitable? Opinions differ on the degree to which this failure could have been avoided. Some point to the various challenges inherent to Iraq and military occupations and argue that, given the resources potentially available at the time, the outcome was inevitable (Hendrickson and Tucker, 2005). It is then concluded that the lesson from Iraq is not to “do it better next time” but to “not do it at all” (*ibid.*:vii).

Notwithstanding, again, whether “it should have been done”, the notion of inevitability is unconvincing and unhelpful. It assumes that failure is a matter of either–or, and masks the question which, if any, *incremental* improvements over the observed outcome would have been possible. I show in the below, siding with the majority of analysts, that at many critical junctures, incremental and far-reaching improvements were possible.

Hendrickson and Tucker (2005) are certainly right to point to the complicated conditions in Iraq, that made success difficult. But a meaningful social scientific analysis looks at, as Byman (2008) suggests, the multi-level interaction of “structure and policy choices”.

How to Explain the Failure? Identifying and explaining those very critical interactions of *structure* and *policy* is no simple business, because, as always in history, a counterfactual, let alone many comparable cases, are

not available, defying the classical positivist paradigm of *co-variational case studies* (COV). A *causal-process tracing* (CPT) approach provides a way to deal with cases where comparable “datasets” are unavailable, but a rich and in-depth “storyline” allows for an abstracted understanding of the causal configuration at play (Blatter and Blume, 2008). The “smoking-gun” (no pun intended) narrative of post-invasion Iraq lends itself well to such an explanation in terms of neat causal hypothesis about temporally ordered events and decisions, rather than an overall estimation of an input-output relationship.

2.1 Structural Conditions in Iraq: “Messy” Modernization

A Weak State After years of sanctions, war, mismanagement and a totalitarian reign of terror, Iraq was in a precarious situation already before the 2003 invasion.

The state, in particular, was greatly weakened in its provision of social services by corruption, Saddam’s cronyism and economic hardship (of Commons, 2007).

Boiling Pre-Modern Identities Under the pressure of totalitarian, Sunni dominated Ba’athism, sectarian, ethnic and even tribal (!) identities continued to exist, and often, under discrimination, turned “reactive” (Brown and Bean, 2006). Identities were, under a both weak and repressive national identity, essentializing and pre-modern. Their essential notion stemmed in part from the live-and-death struggle that Saddam’s *divide et impera*-regime imposed on groups: “if your group loses out, you get gassed”, as the Kurdish people of Halabja learned in 1988. Identities were pre-modern in that they were based on quasi-biological references to a putative or actual common descent, thereby easily reinforcing conflicts between sectarian, ethnically or tribally-defined groups: As pseudo-biological concepts both these identities lend themselves to the more primordial instincts of the human condition (genetic nepotism) — survival of oneself and one’s offspring (Van den Berghe 1981: 16).

Lack of Civil Society The explosive mixture of reactive identities was further exacerbated by a complete absence of any non-sectarian, non-ethnic or non-tribal association under totalitarian Ba’athism. Cross-cutting cleavages, held so direly important for liberal democracy by its (consociational) proponents, could not arise (Lijphart, 1999). Also, under totalitarianism

in general, and groupist strife in particular, generalized trust (between unacquainted individuals), another factor seen as important for liberal democracy, can be expected to be low (Putnam et al., 1983). The middle class, lastly, a typical stronghold for liberal reform, was small and weak.

The Conditions of “Messy” Modernization The structural conditions described here are of course not unique to Iraq. They can be generalized to a number of underdeveloped and developing societies, where modernity arrived only partially and in a highly disaggregated fashion, often in the form of a colonial legacy, or through imported technology. These modern innovations then violently transform, and integrate societies, typically through population boom and nascent division of labor *in the absence* of the institutional and attitudinal corollaries of modernization in the West: Emancipation and Secular-Rationality (for further elaboration of and empirical evidence for this strand of Human Development Theory, see Inglehart and Welzel 2005)⁴.

2.2 Interactions with Structure: Failure Through State Breakdown

Saddam was replaced not by Bremer⁵, but by Hobbes⁶

The Need Based on his assessment of the structural conditions in Iraq, Diamond (2004) develops a “washlist” of what the occupation of Iraq needed to accomplish to succeed:

1. Provision of General Security
2. Rebuilding the Countries Physical Infrastructure
3. Ensure State Social Services
4. Political Reconstitution: Reform towards reconciliation and liberal democracy.

⁴Again, the tough moral questions on the inevitability, desirability and epistemological justification of Modernization or Human Development Theory are ignored for the purposes of this argument, and “Messy Modernization” is assumed as given.

⁵Lewis ‘Jerry’ Paul Bremer III, U.S. Administrator of Iraq and Director of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) from May 2003 to June 2004.

⁶Hobbes (1651).

5. Social Reconstitution: Rejuvenate and create a civil society and political culture that foster voluntary cooperation and limit state power.
6. Creation of Rules and Institutions for a Market Economy

Crucially, all of these items interact with one another, and the structural constraints of post-invasion Iraq outlined in the above. All of the goals are made harder to achieve through Iraq's dire social, economic and political situation. Also, all of these goals depend on one another: without security, there can be no physical reconstruction, without which there will be no basic state services (*e.g.*, electricity), without which political and social reconstitution are unlikely, which, in turn should be the basis for socio-economic reform (Byman, 2008).

A more generic way to organize this "wishlist" is to follow the (grossly simplified) development of government and statehood (Leibfried and Zürn, 2005):

1. Security: The Monopoly to the Legitimate Use of Force
2. Rule of Law: Constitutionalization
3. Legitimacy: Democracy
4. Welfare: Redistribution and Free Provision of Public Goods

The Deed From the following analysis appears the notion that the U.S.-led Coalition occupation effort failed at each of these critical junctures of interaction, by both passively letting the Iraqi State break down, and by actively contributing to its dissolution.

The Dynamic From this initial and long-lasting breakdown emerges a powerfully path-dependent struggle of alternative, rivalrous, "rogue" providers of state services, also known as the insurgency. The very essence of *increasing returns* under path dependency becomes the scourge of the country and the U.S.-led Coalition effort (Pierson, 2000): the more the Coalition fails at providing state services, the more power its rogue competitors gain, the harder to fight they are, the more the Coalition fails at providing, increasing returns *full circle*. As decisions at particular critical junctures are taken, such as the failure of the Coalition to maintain the monopoly on the legitimate use of force, the replacing insurgent structures become ever harder, and more costly to reverse.

In the following, this downward spiraling is explained with particular regard to the failure of the Coalition to maintain the monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

2.2.1 How the State Broke Down

State Breakdown Through Coalition Inaction It is hard to grasp just how much the state broke down, extending to all realms of activity: Security, Rule of Law, Welfare, Legitimacy (Leibfried and Zürn, 2005).

Internal security services came to a virtual halt shortly after the bombing began, as evidenced by rampant looting and violence⁷. Incredibly, Iraqi Republican Guard weapons depots were left unattended for several months after the invasion (Hendrickson and Tucker, 2005), resulting in an estimated looting of 250,000 tons (!) of weapons and ammunition Byman (2008).

Externally, security voids included Iraq's borders, left unpatrolled for up to a year after the invasion as a result of which some 5-10% of the insurgents are now estimated to have leaked in from neighboring countries.

The external and internal security voids stemmed from an initially limited mandate and, more fundamentally, from an insufficient troop size. The U.S.-led invasion was significantly understaffed at 180,000 on invasion, quickly reduced to 120,000 in the misleadingly called "post-hostilities" Phase IV. Troop level planning, at the behest of Deputy Secretary of State Wolfowitz, was minimized, and quite the opposite to Colin Powell's Realist doctrine of overwhelming force. Original estimates by Department of Defence staffers, based on well-established metrics for post-invasion (Phase IV) security were ranging around 400,000⁸ (Diamond, 2004). This number would probably have sufficed to ensure security internally (military police, crowd control, etc.) as well as externally (seal the borders).

State Breakdown Through Coalition Action Byman (2008) identifies four key interactions between U.S.-led coalition policy and the structural constraints in Iraq that brought about the detrimental outcome.

⁷Critically, much of the looting and rage was directed *at* state institutions. For instance, 17 of the 27 Baghdad ministries, including crucial documentation and equipment, were damaged beyond repair. This would create major obstacles to later Coalition and Iraqi attempts to reconstruct state services, thereby reinforcing the level of state breakdown Byman (2008).

⁸A recent study by RAND, a think tank, puts the metric for Phase IV security at one soldier or police officer per 500 population, resulting in an even higher estimate of 500,000 troops for successful occupation in Iraq (cited in Byman, 2008)

1. Too Few Troops (see above)
2. Disbanding of Iraqi Republican Guard and Other Security Services
3. Overly Aggressive De-Ba'athification

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) followed an aggressive policy of De-Ba'athification, that is, ridding all state institutions of former leading party members. CPA seemingly was well aware that this would conflict with the efficient and continuing provision of state services. Bremer explicitly ordered that De-Ba'athification “be carried out even at the cost of administrative efficiency” (Dodge 2009: 269). In the end, some 30,000 civil servants were sacked under De-Ba'athification (Byman, 2008).

As a corollary of CPA's aggressive De-Ba'athification policy, the Iraqi Republican Guard and other security forces were also disbanded at Bremer's behest, in spite of successfully U.S. Army-initiated negotiations (Dodge 2009: 269). This worsened the situation in two ways: first, in the absence of sufficient coalition forces to maintain security, a potentially valuable source of security was disregarded⁹. Second, the decision cut loose some 500,000 discontented, armed and trained soldiers, often with families (bringing up the number of affected persons to 1 million) quickly looking for status and income in other places (Byman, 2008).

Both the U.S.-led Coalition policy to disband the Iraqi Army and aggressive De-Ba'athification actively weakened, or destroyed existing institutions crucial to the provision of basic state services.

2.2.2 How State Breakdown Led to Dysfunctional Path-Dependencies

The breakdown of the state, simply put, led to other actors assuming the role of the state. This dynamic and its problems, can hardly be overstated, and yet is frequently glossed over. There are two reasons for this. First, we are used to taking a modern, powerful state for granted. Secondly, under conditions of “messy” modernization, we easily mistake the highly salient

⁹A counterfactual note of caution may be in order here: whether it had indeed been possible, let alone desirable, to re-mobilize the Iraqi Army and other security forces remains somewhat doubtful. Once out of the barracks, and back home, it would have been difficult to get the soldiers back. More importantly, a reinstated Iraqi Republican Guard, formerly so closely implicated with Saddam's reign of terror may not have enjoyed the support and trust of the Iraqi people (Pollack 2006: 8). Still, the enormous costs of a disbanded army should have necessitated a careful reconsideration, as well as a concerted, effort to *disarm, demobilize and retain* (DDR).

identity struggles for the causes of mayhem, to which they are in truth merely epiphenomenal.

When states fail to provide basic services, their authority drains, both to lower domestic levels and abroad. In the following, this dynamic is explained on the background of the Iraqi security void.

The Proto-Insurgency Narrative As the Coalition invasion destroyed the already crumbling Iraqi Leviathan, they created a security vacuum, with suddenly no one holding the essential monopoly to the legitimate use of force. Pollack (2006: 15) provides a chilling account of how precisely this vacuum attracts and creates new holders of power: first, local “security” entrepreneurs monopolize security, later moving on to providing basic welfare services, following the insurgent model successfully pioneered by Lebanon-based Hezbollah and the Gaza strip Hamas. Shi’a cleric’s Muqtada al Sadr’s Mahdi Army, for instance, started providing policing and later food, fuel, welfare relief and healthcare in Bagdad’s “Sadr City” district already in April 2003, rapidly gaining power and support (Byman, 2008).

More evidence for this dynamic comes from the observation that the ideological and organizational consolidation into four of five groups happened only after relatively late 2005^{10, 11} (Dodge, 2007; Baker III and Hamilton, 2006).

Identity Entrepreneurship This dynamic of local, then growing security entrepreneurs provides an interesting new perspective of how the structural constraint of pre-modern, sectarian identities in Iraq interacted with the breakdown of the state.

The conventional notion, often cited in the media is that Saddam’s reign of terror kept in check pre-existing, sectarian identities and violently prevented the ethnic and religious melting-pot from boiling over. Both the empirical account of “security entrepreneurship” and theoretical work on the constructed nature of group markers, particularly ethnicity, reverse and complicate this relationship between structure and policy.

¹⁰Muqtada al-Sadr’s Shi’ite Islamist Mahdi Army (60,000 combatants), Shi’a Islamist Badr Organization and Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, Sunni/Kurdish Jamaat Ansar al-Sunna, Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and Association of Muslim Scholars, as well as recently infiltrated Al-Qaueda (1,300 combatants) and Ansar al-Islam operatives, and Iran-financed Iraqi Special Groups;

¹¹The Arab Nationalist, Ba’athist Fedayeen Saddam, some of which continue to operate, may be the one exception of an organization (and identity) already existing prior to the invasion.

Ethnicity, like other (sectarian) group markers, the Iraq experience and constructivism suggest, are then best understood merely as symbolic resources which *identity entrepreneurs* exploit and construct for their own purposes, rather than objectively pre-existing categories in the world. To avoid such otherwise essentializing “methodological groupism” (Brubaker, 2002) is to deconstruct all group markers as projects by self-interested actors, working, to borrow Weber’s famous distinction, *off* as well as *for* the politics of sectarian identity (1946: 84).

Another way of putting this is that the reference point for identity formation shifted *away* from the state, to local racketeers and insurgents, precisely because, in the absence of an acting state, *that* central point for identity formation, so crucial for divided societies, is lost.

Pre-modern identities are then best understood not as objectively existent feature of a structural setup, but as symbolic *resources* highly contingent on policy and subject to entrepreneurial activism.

Support for this constructivist reading of sectarian and tribal violence in Iraq comes from the 2007 Defense Committee report of the of Commons finding that much of the violence in the UK-controlled Southeast of Iraq was in fact “intra-Shia political, and effectively mafia struggle”, for material profit and under great religious homogeneity (!)(2007: 14).

Racketeering Under State Breakdown The history of government, insightfully titled “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime” by some (Tilly, 1985) provides another angle on this same, path-dependent dynamic. Tilly (*ibid.*) argues that one way to understand the emergence of modern states is to start from the monopolization of violence by initially local racketeers (in exchange for a tribute, you are protected against external, as well as racketeer violence). These racketeers, inspired by new, powerful weaponry and exploiting increased economies of scale in their production of violence started expanding in the 16th century, until, eventually, they would become states. This narrative may strike one as repellent, but on closer inspection, it reveals the *production of* and protection from violence as, in fact, two sides of the same coin (Lane as cited Tilly 1985: 175).

Not coincidentally, this argument was developed with an explicit eye to today’s failed states of the underdeveloped and developing world (*ibid.*: 169). It enables us to understand what happens, when the modern state, *the father of all racketeers*, breaks down: smaller, less sophisticated racketeers (insurgent groups) take over and struggle for dominance and growth. The condition of “messy” modernity, again, exacerbates this problem: when

weak generalized trust and pre-modern mindsets clash with modern technology (efficient weapons) and population growth, the racketeers' struggle is likely to be all the more violent. We may find the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology to be quite medieval, but their AK-47s and the roadside explosives they employ surely are distinctively modern.

The "War on Terror" rhetoric, is then, to put it clearly, very misleading: this war *created* terror in an insurgency-gripped Iraq. The causality in fact, runs the other way: first, there is a collapse of the state, then a security (and other services) vacuum, then follows the insurgent dynamic, not the other way around (Dodge, 2007). As Dodge (*ibid.*: 87) concludes: "The origins of the Iraqi civil war lie in the complete collapse of both the administrative and coercive capacity of the state". If the state fails, authority drains both to what is left of society — criminals or sectarian activists (a matter of degrees) — or to other "master racketeers" across the border, in this case, Iran, which with its Iraqi Special Groups efforts attempts to emulate Hezbollah's successful infiltration of Lebanon (House of Commons 2007: 19).

3 Explaining the Failure in Decision Making and Planning

The, or maybe *one* of the failures in Iraq lies in front of us now: to maintain basic state services throughout the occupation, most crucially security.

How did it happen, then? Did the U.S.-led Coalition not anticipate these problems, and if so, why not? Could they have anticipated the insurgent dynamic, and if so, why did they choose to ignore it? And most fundamentally, could they have avoided or abated the failure?

Last things first. Byman (2008) provides a preliminary number of conditions, under which the occupation *could have worked out* in Iraq.

1. Late, and more careful De-Ba'athification.
2. Use the Iraqi Army (Republican Guard) immediately for public safety, then disarm, demobilize and retrain it (DDR).
3. Come prepared as occupiers, not as liberators. Plan for contingencies.
4. Seal off borders immediately. Gain the support of Syria and Iran, with "a carrot and a stick".
5. Come with sufficient troop levels.

The above analysis of state breakdown suggests that any of these steps would have likely abated, if not prevented the detrimental insurgent dynamic. The charge is then justified: the U.S.-led Coalition *did* squander an opportunity and could have done better.

Answering how this failure came about is even harder than determining what it was. Again, *co-variational* research, for lack of comparative data seems hardly fruitful. Also, *causal-process tracing* case study approach employed in the above is problematic for this question, where causal junctures are less clear, and in-depth records frequently unavailable and/or classified. Blatter and Blume suggest a third *congruency* (CAV) approach to case studies. Under this congruency model, somewhat akin to Weber's (1920) notion of an *ideal type*, rich empirical observations are plotted against theoretical abstractions.

There are many places to look for policy failures. The following discussion of alternative theories of failure is organized according to Allison's (1971) three models of policy, originally developed in his treatment of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The three models of policy are:

1. (The State as) Rational Actor
2. Organizational Processes
3. Governmental Politics

In addition, I add one more model:

- 4 Psychological Processes

3.1 Failure of the Rational, Unitary Actor

The Model The Rational view of (foreign) policy explains decisions as utility-maximizing outcomes of fully rational, self-interested and unitary (!) actors. Intra-national events are ignored in this model.

The Case This model suggests essentially two possibilities: either the observed fiasco outcome was anticipated and desired, or unanticipated and undesired.

Assuming full rationality, the U.S.-led Coalition can hardly be assumed to have desired this outcome. Even in the short term, it incurred massive material costs to the United States, damaged its strategic position and

negated most of the objectives it was thought to obtain (*more* terror in/from Iraq, *no* WMDs, *no* liberal democracy in Iraq).

Relaxing the assumption of full omniscience, the U.S. may then, boundedly rational, not have anticipated the insurgent dynamic and failure in Iraq. A number of theories provide worthwhile insights.

3.1.1 Unintended Consequences

One straightforward approach under bounded rationality is to investigate the failure as an unintended consequence of purposive social action (Merton, 1936). Some aspects of the fiasco lend themselves to this perspective.

The disbanding of the Iraqi Republican Army, for instance, intended, one must assume, to free the Iraqi people of their oppression created the arguably unintended consequence of a security void and frustrated, but armed and combat-trained soldiers finding a new occupation with the insurgency.

Also the initial strategic focus on *counter*-insurgency, targeting the new racketeers, rather than preventing security and even more insurgent activity elsewhere may be framed in terms of an unintended consequence due to a poorly understood dynamic.

3.1.2 Normal Accidents

More sophisticated in its conceptualization, but likewise based on the assumption of incompletely mastered dynamics is the theory of *Normal Accidents* (Perrow, 1999)¹². Normal accidents are those problems that occur in tightly coupled and complexly interacting systems. Tightly coupled systems are those that react fast and dramatically (as opposed to loosely coupled systems). A system is complexly interacting if inputs and outputs interact in ways that cannot easily be anticipated by operators (as opposed to linearly interacting systems). Accidents, under these circumstances are assumed to be “normal”, or unavoidable, because no organizational configuration is available to counteract them. Complexly interacting systems call for centralized, highly aggregated and sophisticated decision-making, while the tight coupling speaks for local, specialized but fast responses.

The occupation in Iraq and its quickly ensuing insurgent dynamic could be held to be tightly coupled, given the pace of the events, unraveling as the

¹²I assume that Allison (1971) would have subsumed the Normal Accident paradigm under the organizational model of policy making, as it is concerned with the match between structure (system) and organizational design. I find this somewhat frustrating as the basic insight of Normal Accidents is, after all, that *no* organizational design can help prevent them. Looking for a flaw in the organizational process is thus, by definition, futile.

first Coalition bombs fell on Iraq (the proto-insurgent dynamic of looting). Local responsibility and swift action from occupying forces, including Iraqi forces, could have helped in this regard.

A complexly interacting nature of occupation, state-building and reconstruction can be discerned from the racketeering dynamic and groupist entrepreneurship described in the above. Here, the system calls for a centrally administered master-plan, preventing in particular all locally-initiated provisions of state services, for these could develop into rival racketeers.

Drawing the analogy to the Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear accident, on which the Normal Accident paradigm was developed, the Bush Administration would then be similar to the TMI supervisor, holding a badly flawed mental model of Iraq, leading to wrong inferences.

3.2 Failure Due to Organizational Processes

The Model The second model draws our attention to the organizational processes leading up to the policy, which is then re-constructed as an *outcome* of a functionally (or dysfunctionally) differentiated organization, not merely a unitary decision.

The Case Postwar reconstruction and state-building exercises in the 1990s had taught one lesson: that even a short period (not so short, in this case) of disorder could have long-lasting, detrimental effects (Fallows, 2004). Also CIA documents and the State Department's Future of Iraq Study project, as well as numerous non-governmental (NGOs) and International Organizations (IOs) had pointed to the likely occurrence of looting and its detrimental consequences (Byman, 2008). Given the abundance of these findings, it seems implausible to assume that the adverse consequences of minimalist occupation were not anticipated. At the very least, they *could* have been foreseen. The question is then, why they were not.

The lack of careful analyses and appropriate planning is maybe the clearest charge that arises from the observations so far: "Because the Iraq War began in ideas, it always suffered from abstraction" (Dodge 2009: 272).

Also explanation demands the excessive optimism displayed by some proponents of the war, such as then Vice President Dick Cheney who, in spite of more careful voices, was confident that "we will be greeted as liberators". No less bald were the initial schedules that called for a withdrawal of ORHA (later CPA) by June 2003 (!) and a hand over to an elected Iraqi government by August 2003 (!). Maybe most bizarrely, it was assumed, that even after

De-Ba'athification, the state could continue to function without fundamental disruptions (Bensahel, 2006).

The civilian reconstruction effort demands extra attention. The CPA (dubbed *Can't Produce Anything*, in military lingo (Ricks 2006: 210)) was a badly flawed organization. It was staffed by a largely pick-up team, often highly ideological political appointees, with little experience and further marred by an excessive turnover (3-month rotation). The Iraq stock exchange, for example, was organized by a 24 year old (*ibid.*). CPA is described as based on “badly flawed pre-war assumptions which were not effectively challenged, left the coalition unprepared and underresourced for the task it faced. (...) The CPA ended up creating nation-building institutions ‘*on the run*’, governing Iraq at all levels, supporting the counter-insurgency campaign, reconstructing and reforming Iraqi state institutions and implementing democratic and economic transformation (Rathmell as cited in Ricks 2006: 204).

3.2.1 Garbage Can Model

The Garbage Can Model of decision making suggests (1) *solutions* have a life of their own, more or less actively looking for a question (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972). They are then matched to (2) *problems* by (3) *participants* (holding both problems and solutions) when (4) *choice opportunities* arise. These four streams exist independently of one another, and interact anarchically under bounded rationality and problematic preferences.

The much criticized, initial planning for “symmetrical” warfare by the U.S. forces may be regarded as an instance of a Garbage Can style decision. When they invaded in 2003, much of their preparation was a solution to conventional hostilities, with little contingencies for the post-invasion Phase IV, let alone counterinsurgent activities. In a way, the Coalition fought, and lost, the proverbial “last war” against a no longer (much relevant) unitary, regular enemy.

If Pentagon briefing rhetoric is any indication, the U.S. military seems to uphold this traditional notion of conventional warfare. Even when the Coalition engaged in counterinsurgency, much of their effort was directed *against* an enemy, rather than, as the above discussion suggests it should have, concentrating on maintaining security wherever they could (Diamond 2005: 424). Also the post-2007 “surge” campaign, often shifted to other (unattended) regions, rather than reduced violence (House of Commons 2007) provides some evidence for an inadequate, but persistent military doctrine.

For this explanation to be convincing, one must assume the U.S. armed

forces to be extremely resistant to change, or, in the model language, independent solutions to be very enduring. More research would be needed to determine whether U.S. paradigms of warfare indeed have persisted over the past decade of asymmetric conflicts after the Cold War.

3.2.2 Turf War

Turf Wars are conflicts over responsibilities and budgets between different (government) agencies. One particular strand of turf war thinking suggests that, as organizations struggle over jurisdictions, they seek to maximize not absolute budget size, or task portfolio, but *organizational autonomy*, that is, the degree to which they can maintain their independence from other entities (Wilson, 1989).

Some of the evidence from Iraq points in this direction of jurisdictional struggle. Bensahel (2006) finds that what led to the failure in Iraq was, largely, a “foul-up” in planning due to a dysfunctional interagency process. Much of the pre-invasion responsibility was monopolized by the Department of Defense (DoD) (in particular, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD)). This led to a fundamental disregard for civilian aspects and capacities during the occupation period. For instance, civilian planning only had barely begun in August 2002 (and did not get off the ground before January 2003), when military planning was long completed (Bensahel, 2006). Why, one has to ask, did the military ignore much State Department resources (The Future for Iraq Study project) and neglect the experience the United Nations and NGOs had gathered in peace-building in the 1990s? (Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Afghanistan) (Pollack, 2006). Because, the logic of turf wars suggests, such interagency cooperation would have compromised the DoD’s autonomy. It was in the Department’s interest to remake Operation Iraqi Freedom into a mission where it enjoyed *exclusive* competence: *enemy combat*.

Likewise, a fear to meddle with other organizations’ business (and people) may explain the DoD-run CPA’s failure to recruit sufficient numbers of civilians from other U.S. agencies well-trained in reconstruction.

Indications for turf wars over autonomy also stem from the implementation. The CPA is probably a worthy subject to study what can go wrong in organizations in itself. On the ground, the Authority frequently struggled with the military over priorities (reconstruction or security) and responsibilities, engaging in blame-shifting (Ricks 2006: 210). Again, the striving for autonomy may have prevented an integrated command structure between the CPA and the Coalition Forces, which Bensahel (2006) deplures.

3.3 Failure Due to Governmental & Bureaucratic Politics

I have always been amused by those who say they are quite willing to go into government but they are not willing to go into politics. My answer is that you can no more divorce government from politics than you can separate sex from creation.

James Forrestal, Secretary Defense (as cited in Allison 1971: 147)

The Model The third image of policy making looks at it as a *resultant* of the bargaining between various actors, their perceptions, motivations, positions, power and maneuvers (Allison, 1971). The model gets the politics of policy making back in the picture. Bismarck’s quip that “laws are produced like sausages” applies here. Defying his advice, we shall look how they are made, anyway.

The Case The planning and implementation of the Iraq war was a highly political matter, deeply rooted in the ideological fervor and neoconservative agenda of some members of the Bush Administration. This is evidenced by the partly public debate at the time, as well as evidence of substantial internal rivalries between the DoD, run by die-hard neoconservatives Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, and a more Realist State Department (State) under veteran General Colin Powell (Dodge, 2009).

3.3.1 Principal-Agent Problems

Principal-Agent problems point to the essential dilemma of delegation. Whenever principals ask agents to act on their behalf, they face the problem of effective control. Typically, agents have more resources and asymmetric information at their disposal that lets them work on their own, rather than the principal’s interest¹³.

A principal-agent take on the fiasco in Iraq then asks which, if any interest and possibility the U.S. government had to obviate its principal, the electorate. The lack of planning, excessive optimism and under-commitment

¹³Presenting Principal-Agent Problems under the rubric of “Governmental Politics” in scheme can be misleading. Like Allison’s (1971) Rational Actor image of policy making, Principal-Agent explanations assume self-interested, and fully rational actors. The justification for this presentation lies not in a different paradigm or epistemological assumptions, but in the lower-level unit of analysis. Principal-Agent explanations of policy making by definition model disaggregated (at least bifurcated) *sets* of actors, *not one, unitary* actor.

of resources can then be regarded as a way to “sell the war”, which otherwise, knowing about the likely total cost in resources and lives, the American public might have chosen to oppose. In other words, the U.S. government offered its people a misleading “teaser rate” for the war. The costs of war, like the sub-prime mortgages interests, steeply increasing later on, at which point the war is waged, or the contract signed, respectively. If this holds true, it explains the neoconservative DoD’s attempts to exclude the more Realist State Department under a more careful, weighted Powell, for his involvement would have undermined the credibility of the “cakewalk” war (Pollack 2006: 3).

A similar, but more cynical, and probably less plausible reading of the agent’s interest is to assume that the U.S. government advertised a cheap, short and necessary war in Iraq to crowd out other matters from the political debate and to improve incumbent electoral performance by “rallying behind the flag”.

A Principal-Agent perspective may also apply to the international relations between the U.S. (agent) and Iraq’s neighboring countries (principals). The U.S. government may have minimized civilian planning for a post-war Iraq because it wished to avoid its politics, and the ensuing criticism from neighbors. Saudis and Kuwaitis, for instance, were much opposed to the idea of a Shi’a dominated liberal democracy¹⁴, a prospect which the absence of publicized (or any) planning concealed (Byman, 2008). Similarly, the eventually attempted enthroning of liberal exiles, if previously explicated, may have met with harsh criticism in the region (*ibid.*).

3.3.2 Successfully Failing Organizations

The theory of Successfully Failing Organizations is a more extreme Principal-Agent configuration, where even the principal has insufficient interest (let alone capability) to see to the effective and efficient implementation of his goals (Seibel, 1996). In the short term, this logic may apply to those disaffected principals (voters) who sharply discount the future, and choose to “have *something* done about Iraq”, no matter the long-term success. In the long run, however, it appears unlikely that the American public would have elected to ignore the fiasco, when its colossal costs in resources and lives are so very tangible.

¹⁴The intricacies of electoral engineering for divided societies are unfortunately beyond the scope of this project. The Iraqi design, it appears, is flawed in many ways. For a review, see Reilly, Reynolds and on International Conflict Resolution. (1999); Reilly (2001, 2002)

3.4 Social-Psychological Factors

The Model Social-psychological considerations were not part of Allison's (1971) three images of (foreign) policy making. They may have been included here under his original rubric of governmental politics, for they share the same unit of analysis: resultants of individual "players" working together, or against one another. In contrast to governmental politics, however, social-psychological factors draw our attention to inadvertent, or inapt performance of social actors, creating resultants. Social Psychology describes dynamics that sometimes, are in the interest of none of the involved.

3.4.1 Groupthink

The theory of Groupthink suggests that, as people interact in cohesive groups, they sometimes engage in dysfunctional homogenization of the group, thereby deteriorating the quality of their thinking (Janis, 1982). Cognitive diversity under Groupthink-imposed unanimity decreases. In other, proverbial words: when "great men think alike", that may not be a good thing.

The ideological cohesiveness of much of the Bush Administration and the associated neoconservative Think Tanks, and the preclusion of the Department of Defense may have caused such Groupthink dynamics. The hubris of Vice President Cheney to expect to "be greeted as liberators" (illusion of invulnerability) and the rhetorical drumfire on the inevitability of the "War on Terror" (incomplete survey of alternatives) may serve as illustrations of just two of the seven identified symptoms of Groupthink (Janis, 1982).

3.4.2 The Role of Neoliberal Ideology

One particular Groupthink implication may stem from the neoliberal ideology shared by much of the Bush Administration. Neoliberal thought stresses free-market interactions as ordering principles, rather than the state, and finds necessary only a minimum provision of public goods (property rights, infrastructure) to enable markets. This mindset, Dodge (2009) hypothesizes, may have led the Bush Administration to neglect the importance of public services and a strong state in post-war Iraq, devoting disproportionate attention to free-market reform.

4 Conclusions

If you break it, you buy it.

I conclude that the fiasco in Iraq was a squandered opportunity, one that was caused by a series of blunders in decision making¹⁵. Of the presented approaches, Normal Accidents, Garbage Can, Turf War and Principal-Agent appear to be in closest “congruence” (Blatter and Blume, 2008) with the observed evidence.

What Can Be Done To at least get some handle on Normal Accidents in the complex dynamics of regime change and state-building, we need to carefully study the UN and NGO’s experience with these daunting projects — and learn from them, as much we can. Overall, in policy making, we need to raise our awareness of risk and uncertainty in tightly coupled and complexly interacting systems, and avoid them, whenever possible.

To avoid military strategy out of the Garbage Can in the future, we must comprehensively revise our military planning, equipment and training. “New Wars” (Münkler, 2002) are different, and they are here to stay. They require counterinsurgent capabilities, asymmetric warfare, and most importantly, they require efficient policing. A more systematized, well-funded and careful approach to decision-making can help us minimize the garbage we inadvertently pick up.

Military leaders must cease their Turf Warfare and re-embrace Clausewitz (1832): That policy is primary, and war but “merely the continuation of politics by other means”. In our context, the policy is to change and reform a regime, and to build and sustain a state, and to that end, only top brass must work. Careful and informed public management of large agencies, and

¹⁵I find some of the official reviews of the failure very disappointing with regard to identifying the blunders. The Baker III and Hamilton (2006) Iraq Study Group report, for instance, includes some helpful recommendations for focusing on a multilateral approach, including Iraq’s neighbors Syria and Iran (with carrot and stick). Generally, though, an air of diplomatic vagueness and politeness prevails. It is hard to tell in how far this vagueness is a result of the political vagaries under which the report was produced, but in any case to ask for clear goals of “an Iraq that can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself” (*ibid.*: 31) or to suggest “a new diplomatic offensive [to] address these key regional issues”, to “marginalize extremists and terrorists, promote U.S. values and interests, and improve America’s global image” (*ibid.*: 33) is but a restatement of the question. The report misleadingly suggests, in my view, that failure in occupying and reconstructing Iraq occurred because of a lack of determination, or sound project management with goals and milestones. A far too trivial treatment of the matter, as I have tried to show.

clear communication about policy goals can help to abate the struggle over organizational autonomy.

Political leaders must be faithful agents to their principals. In planning and waging war, governments must be upfront about the likely costs in lives, suffering and resources, and persuade their constituents in fair deliberation, rather than trick them into authorization through distorted political debate. Where Principal-Agent problems persist, incentivizing agents can help. In politics, “sunshine” methods to increase transparency are probably our best bet to alleviate the information asymmetry.

What Cannot Be Done? From his survey of the fiasco and decision making in Iraq Dodge (2009: 20) recommends that we revise our unrealistic assumptions of what we can achieve in regime change and state-building and stick with the humble prayer of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), pleading to:

*Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

What Should Not Be Done I agree with the notion, that war in Iraq may have been a (squandered) opportunity, but one that should never have been sought, both for moral reasons, and based on a more instrumental weighting of the expected costs and benefits.

In the future, we must prevent that this sort of “second-guessing” with the privilege of hindsight leads us to again overestimate our capability to violently force change and to seek a new, putatively inevitable war, where the better angels of our nature should prevail.

From this paper follows, that even under cold-hearted, but thorough weighing of costs and benefits, future regime-change interventions should be considered more carefully. If the lessons of the fiasco in Iraq are borne in mind and applied in the future, chances are, that distorted political persuasion (vulgo: lies) as those employed by the Bush Administration may no longer succeed.

An assertion of pacifism, however, is not the subject of this essay, and misses an important point.

What Must Be Done I disagree with the fatalism this AA prayer conveys: in our world, it may not be our privilege to “accept [some] things [we] cannot change”.

Where the disruptive might of modernity has enabled a nuclearly armed, but fragile Pakistan¹⁶ or rogue-turned, racketeering North Korea, we *might* have to act.

Where the historical plight of colonialism has grandfathered in violent strife and genocide, as in the plains of Darfur, Sudan or where we have failed to prevent such from happening through peaceful resolution, we *might* have to act.

And even where, or if, we bear no “White Man’s Burden” (Easterly, 2006) for the dangers and atrocities, we *might* have to act.

For “if we broke or break it”, and be it through our exporting of “messy” modernity, “we have to buy it”.

¹⁶In particular, Pakistan’s tribal North-Western Frontier Province, NWFP and bordering Afghanistan now dominated by re-emboldered Al-Quaeda and Taliban fighters threatens we become the next failed state.

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