

Planning the aftermath: A postwar Iraq

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When he was running for president, George W. Bush decried “nation building.” It was not the task of the U.S., he insisted, to bring order to chaotic countries. The U.S. may be the global cop, but it is not the global social worker.

After sending troops to Afghanistan, Bush changed his rhetoric a bit. He committed the U.S. to rebuilding that country, and even invoked the tradition of George Marshall, the U.S. secretary of state after World War II who channeled billions of dollars to war-torn Europe.

But the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan has been decidedly Bushian, not Marshall-esque. The U.S. pledged \$296 million this year, a small fraction of the \$4.5 billion pledged internationally (and a small fraction of the billions already spent on the military effort). Much of that money has been tied up in bureaucratic red tape. Virtually nothing has been done to address the Afghans’ need for roads, schools, water and electricity. Nor is the U.S. committed to ensuring the basic prerequisite for rebuilding the country—security. According to the *Washington Post*, only 4,500 peacekeepers are deployed in Afghanistan, and those only around Kabul, the capital. The American approach to the country seems summed up by the diplomat who said: “We go in, we hunt down terrorists, and we go out as if we’d never been there” (*Washington Post*, June 9).

So what will happen in the aftermath of a “regime change” in Iraq? The Bush administration has shown no signs that it has thought much about it.

George Bush *père* famously decided, in the waning hours of the 1991 gulf war, that dealing with Saddam Hussein was preferable to dealing with the political turmoil of a post-Saddam Iraq. George Bush *fils* evidences no such worries, but the challenges of stabilizing Iraq after a military invasion remain formidable. And the responsibility of meeting those challenges will fall directly to the U.S.

Iraq is a mix of Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, along with semiautonomous Kurds. It is bordered by a long-hostile Iran and a Turkey anxious about Kurdish nationalism in Iraq inflaming Kurds within its borders. Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq possesses vast oil deposits, which will give the U.S. and other nations an incentive to be on the ground floor of reconstruction. But lots of heavy lifting will still have to be done.

An army study released in September said that the U.S. would have to commit 100,000 troops to Iraq in order to occupy and rebuild the country the way it did Japan and Germany after World War II. James Fallows suggests that the postinvasion demands on the U.S. to provide Iraqis with emergency relief, civil governance, economic reconstruction and military security will be comparable to adding another state to the union (*Atlantic*, November).

Have Americans even begun to count these costs, and to ponder the nation's postwar responsibilities?