



Iraq: Next Steps for U.S. Policy

Luncheon Keynote Address
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Thank you very much, John [Podesta]. I'm delighted to be back at the Center, though I'm sorry that we're still addressing the same issue I addressed during the Center's inaugural conference.

Three years ago, almost to a day, just as the war was beginning, I appeared on the Jim Lehrer show, and at the end of the show, Lehrer, as his last question asked me, "What do you think is riding on this war?" And my response was as follows: *Ultimately, American global leadership is at stake in this war.* It's not Saddam who is the issue, it's whether America can lead, lead constructively, and in a way that others respect. Three years later, I think it's appropriate to ask: Where are we? Where are we headed? And what should we do?

First, *where are we?* The answers to this are easy, and on this I can be quick. The war has proven to be prohibitively costly. American leadership, in all of its dimensions, has been damaged. American *morality* has been stained – in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. American *legitimacy* has been undermined – by unilateral decisions. American *credibility* – particularly the case for the war, has been shattered. Leadership depends on morality, legitimacy, credibility. The economic costs of the war are escalating into hundreds of billions of dollars. More importantly, American casualties are in the thousands, with more than tens of thousands maimed. We are not even counting Iraqi casualties; we prefer not to know what they are.

But we know that the country is devastated, three years after, quote, "liberation," end quote. Regional and global hostility to the United States is rising. I recently read a book that was quite revealing in an unintended fashion. It was Jerry Bremmer's memoir of his stewardship as the governor general of Iraq. At the end of the book he says something that is very true. He says, "Ours is a failed occupation." A failed occupation, that's his definition of it, and I agree.

It is a failed occupation as a consequence of a decision-making process that compounds errors, that involves a very narrow group of true believers, and that evades responsibility and accountability – for errors and even crimes. No one responsible for wrong judgments

has been fired. No one responsible for setting in motion a chain of events that produced extraordinarily embarrassing crimes has been put on trial. The [administration's] resistance to the International Criminal Court is perhaps more understandable under these circumstances.

The book is also quite revealing, incidentally, on the decision-making process itself. The discussion of NSC [National Security Council] sessions, based apparently on actual minutes, is very revealing regarding the decision-making process. The commander in chief appears largely as a cheerleader, and tough issues are hardly discussed.

That brings me to a more difficult question: *Where are we headed?* We know where we are. At least I think I know where we are, and I've just told you where I think we are: we are in a mess. But where are we headed, that's more difficult. That requires somewhat contingent judgments.

First of all, are we prevailing? There was recently a very incisive report published by the International Crisis Group, and I believe one of its participants spoke here this morning. Their report studied the insurgency and its conclusion was that the insurgency is both consolidating and more and more widespread; that it is at an advantage because it is engaged in a war of attrition. In a war of attrition a foreign occupier is always at a disadvantage.

In fact, I think one can argue that under the porous U.S. military umbrella which suffers from very poor intelligence because it is an external occupation army, there are two wars going on at the same time, but one feeds and stimulates the other. One war is the insurgency against the occupier, and that seems to be gaining more sympathy from the public as time passes, which is an ominous sign. More sympathy – not necessarily more engagement – but more sympathy, more vocal emotional support. And the other war that's ongoing is of course a sectarian conflict between the Shiites and the Sunnis. And the U.S. umbrella, which in effect is designed to stifle these wars but is so poor that it perpetuates them, in a sense keeps these wars alive.

We could, I think, probably put an end to it – to both wars if we were to put in enough troops. Theoretically, if we were prepared to put in – and I'm pulling these figures literally out of a hat not as a result of any serious study – if we could put in 500,000 troops, we probably could crush the insurgency; we probably could stifle some of the sectarian conflict. But we can't put in 500,000 troops. We've recently made a difficult decision to increase our force presence in Iraq. We are putting in 700 more troops, and that is not an accident.

We are not in a position to really increase the occupation force, unless we declare some state of national emergency and engage in actions which are simply politically not being seriously considered. So we are not able to crush these two conflicts, but our presence is perpetuating them and probably unintentionally actually intensifying them.

My judgment is that this is not yet a civil war. And in that respect I happen to agree with the administration. It is not yet a civil war in the sense it is not a comprehensive nationwide collision between the Shiites and the Sunnis. But I do think, as I have already stated, that we are stimulating it, unintentionally, by an occupation that is resented and, as Bremmer has said correctly, it is a failed occupation. It is ineffective.

There is of course a great deal of thought about creating, in the course of the next year or so, a national Iraqi Army which will relieve us of the undertakings that the occupation forces are pursuing. Let us think of what that – those two words – actually mean: “national army.” A national army in Iraq – first of all, Iraq is composed of Kurds and Arabs. The Kurds have an army, and a rather good one actually, and are not going to be part of any Iraqi “national army,” so that is already a pitfall.

But beyond that there is, alas, the reality of the increasing split between the Sunnis and the Shiites and their reliance on militias that are sectarian as well as tribally based. They are not going to be a part of a “national army” either. To speak of a national army as a serious political prospect is to engage in self denial.

There is not going to be a national army in a country in which there are armed forces that are anything but national in outlook, discipline, command and, above all, loyalty.

The British recently discovered in Basra what it means to have a loyal, local, police force – for when push came to shove, it turned out they were totally infiltrated by tribal and sectarian loyalties.

This is a war of attrition and it is a war that I do not see us as winning. The question is, are we losing? In the longer historical run, we probably are actually not improving but rather deteriorating. But it is admittedly a judgment that it is difficult to make. It is also a judgment that – unintentionally, but very revealingly – the president himself shares somewhat. More recently, he has not been talking so much about a “mission accomplished,” but about the choice being between victory or defeat. Victory or defeat. Something which seemed inconceivable two years ago, and certainly nearly three years ago when we occupied Baghdad and “mission accomplished” seemed to be a reality.

I know that one of the speakers who was supposed to be with you this morning but who could not come was George Packer. I think his book [The Assassins’ Gate] provides the best eyewitness account of the ongoing, ambiguous but disturbing Iraqi realities.

And that brings me to the third part of what I wish to say to you: *What should we do?* Admittedly we face difficult choices. I have been a policymaker and most policy decisions that are important are difficult to make. They always involve contingent judgments. There is rarely certainty about outcome. There are always risks.

But in a situation of this sort it, is important not to let ourselves become the prisoners of uncertainty. Prisoners of uncertainty in the sense that, because there is uncertainty, we become its prisoners by saying we cannot change course because the course we’re on is

familiar, and what might follow – a change of course – is unfamiliar, and therefore even more perplexing than the reality we confront.

The judgments that we make will be based on uncertainty and derived from uncertainty. They will be contingent. But we must confront contingency. *That* is a task of leadership: uncertainty and confronting contingency.

We must also make certain that we are not prisoners of slogans. And it's easy to succumb to slogans, especially in a decision-making setting that is self-reinforcing, composed of true believers, and then articulated to the public in a manner that accentuates the elements of fear and anxiety, and therefore makes the public more inclined to join the decision-makers in being prisoners of uncertainty.

In my judgment, quote end quote “victory” is unlikely. I think that's a judgment that, if I were a decision-maker today, I feel I would have to reach. And I certainly realize that the consequences of the absence of what we would have liked to have happened, namely victory, are uncertain.

There could be problems, and grave problems. And thus we need to make a cold judgment, a really cold judgment, about whether prolonged staying of the course is likely to be more or less damaging to overall U.S. interests. In other words, if we were not to stay on course – and I'll speak more fully of what that means – would a civil war between the Shiites and the Kurds on one side and the Sunnis on the other be more destructive than the consequences of staying on course. That's a contingent judgment one needs to make.

I have already hinted to you that in my view this is not yet a civil war, in the sense that most of what we see as sectarian violence occurs in areas in which there is overlap between Shiites and Sunnis, particularly Baghdad and a few other places nearby. Most of the anti-American insurgency is in purely Sunni areas. There is less violence in Shiite areas.

It is not yet a civil war – and if that is correct, if the judgment that this is not yet a civil war, but rather incipient stages perhaps of a civil war – then how certain are we in the judgment that if we were to desist, the Shiites and the Kurds would not be capable of compelling an arrangement with the Sunnis. The Shiites and the Kurds together account for about 75 percent of the population and they have an overwhelming advantage. The Shiites then would be faced with a difficult decision and the Sunnis then would be faced with a difficult decision: whether to accommodate or to resist, to challenge. And I think a reasonable judgment is they will probably be divided.

Some will choose the path of accommodation and we know even some Sunni leaders who advocate that. And some will choose the path of resistance. But the outcome, I think, of such a confrontation is also predicable: namely, that the Kurds and the Shiites will prevail. Is that an outcome necessarily worse than staying on course if one makes the judgment that staying on course involves a more and more difficult war of attrition, not to

speak of its international consequences, but focusing purely on the Iraqi context?

These are the kinds of questions that need to be addressed seriously by decision-makers, who then look carefully at actual options and timetables and steps to be taken if a particular choice is made that cannot be undertaken in a setting in which the decision-makers are the very same people who initiated the war itself and are responsible for some of the major tactical and strategic errors involved. They are not capable of making a cold judgment. They are not able to look at alternative options because of their stake in past misjudgments – and in some cases lies, and in some cases perhaps crimes. And thus there's a real problem with the decision-making apparatus.

And yet if the president is serious in saying that our choices have become more difficult, I think it behooves him to widen the circle of decision-makers. It is in his own interest as well as in the country's interest. This does not necessarily mean reaching out to the opposition, but even reaching out even to members of his own party who have, in different ways, some subtly, some more directly, expressed an uneasiness about the course on which we have embarked.

I think it is clear to you by now, I hope, that I favor a decision by the United States to leave Iraq. And the way I would go about it would be that I would ask the Iraqi leaders to ask us to leave.

I would not announce it arbitrarily, but I would talk to the Iraqi leaders about our decision, our inclination, and I would encourage them to ask us to leave. And I think there would be Iraqi leaders who would ask us to leave. Some of them are openly opposed to the occupation. And others may be more ambivalent now that their own political positions would be strengthened if they identified themselves with the hostility of the Iraqi people to the occupation. And some of course would not wish to ask us to leave. And they would be the ones who would leave when we leave, which tells us something about the depth of their capacity for leadership. I think we should ask them to ask us to leave and to treat them as adults, and not as colonial wards, which is what we are doing.

We are teaching them democracy while at the same time arresting them, bombing them, humiliating them – and also helping them. It's an ambivalent course in democracy – and one not likely to foster it.

I think we should set a date for the termination of the occupation. I've recently written publicly in an op-ed piece that I think roughly at the end of this year should be the target date. I am not dogmatic about that particular date. It could be somewhat later, perhaps even somewhat sooner. I do not know. But I would think that within a year we should be able to complete an orderly disengagement and the process would be extremely useful in concentrating Iraqi minds on what will follow and encourage them to assume responsibility.

I do not believe for a minute the argument that setting a date somehow or other would help the insurgency, that somehow or other the insurgents would go into their hiding caves or wherever and wait until the moment we leave and then suddenly they will surface and pounce. It's not the kind of an insurgency. It's an insurgency that is much more dispersed, spontaneous, in the crevices of Iraqi society expressing itself, also sometimes on the basis of monetary opportunity.

The assumption of responsibility by Iraqi leaders who know that they are now going to be responsible for the future of the country is more likely to produce leaders that are prepared to lead and have the capacity to lead.

I would also encourage the Iraqi government – not have the U.S. do it – to call for a regional conference. I would have the Iraqi government call for a regional conference of Muslim states, some immediately adjoining Iraq, others more distant. By way of example, one might mention Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, perhaps also Turkey (although that is sensitive because of Kurdistan), Algeria, Tunisia, and maybe even Iran.

I noted in the news today the Iranian willingness to talk to us about more stability in Iraq, to deal with the issue of post-disengagement stabilization, something which is in their own interest, and so therefore it is not a plea, a desperate plea for help. It is not a plea to replace one occupier with another set of occupiers, but it is to ask them to be engaged with the Iraqis on an Iraqi initiative regarding stabilization after the United States has left.

Of course we could also separately on our own then ask the Europeans, the Japanese, and others, maybe even the Chinese, to become more directly involved in doing what can be helpful to consolidate the post-departure Iraqi conditions. But all of that has to take place in a setting in which we also face up to the increasing risk that our policy in Iraq is in many respects a symptom of the wider regional blindness and increasing global self-isolation.

I think we have to recognize – and this is why such a decision has wider strategic ramifications – that what is happening in Iraq is dangerously part of a wider, developing collision between America and the world of Islam, a collision which could, if it widens and becomes truly intense, be devastating to America's global position. And America in a conflict with the world of Islam will be an America that will find it more difficult to ensure our national security and to promote our leading position in the world.

And that means that in addition to thinking about Iraq, regarding which we have some difficult choices to make – and I repeat, in contingent and uncertain conditions – we have to take a critical look at two other unresolved issues that interact with the consequences of our involvement in Iraq.

First, our policy towards Iran. Why is it so different from our policy towards North Korea? North Korea is perhaps doing more of what we don't want the Iranians to be doing. Yet with North Korea we are engaged in direct multilateral negotiations with the North Koreans in which other parties participate – Chinese, Japanese, South Koreans, and

Russians. We refuse to do that in the case of Iran. We refuse to negotiate with Iran. We are negotiating, yes, all the time with the British, the Germans, and the French – asking them to make certain decisions, to make certain demands. We are not negotiating with the Iranians. Why not? Because we have said that that will bestow legitimacy on the Iranian government. Are we deliberately legitimating the North Korean government?

What is the issue? There is an issue: namely, the apparent Iranian quest for nuclear weaponry. That is the issue. Not the issue of the legitimacy of the Iranian government, which incidentally has been elected to a far greater extent than is the case of the North Korean government. We are not only participating in multilateral negotiations – we are participating in bilateral negotiations with the North Koreans.

We will not touch the Iranians. Why not? Are we perhaps trying to prevent a compromise? Do we really want Iran to desist, or do we want to drive it into extremism? It surely cannot be our deliberate intention to fuse Iranian nationalism with Iranian fundamentalism. But that is precisely what we are doing.

As a general proposition, without going into any further detail on Iran, in international affairs, sometimes delaying something undesirable is far more effective than seeking directly to prevent it.

And I believe that in the long run, time is on our side with Iran, and therefore engaging in a process that encourages accommodation and has the effect of significantly delaying what is undesirable may be more effective than marching towards confrontation that certainly would affect the stability of the region.

Secondly, we also need to provide serious evidence that we are committed to a lasting and equitable Israeli-Palestinian peace. Not a one-sided imposed solution. Regardless of how much more conciliatory it may be as compared to previous formulas, a solution that would be viewed by one of the two parties to the conflict as imposed is therefore ultimately less legitimate.

An imposed solution, even if more fair than what was discussed in the past, will still be viewed by the weaker side – the Palestinians – as illegitimate and thus the conflict will fester. I think it is important – especially now when the prospects for the peace process moving forward have somewhat receded, for understandable reasons – to make clear what in our view, and in the view of our closest allies, represents an equitable ultimate solution.

At least we should outline its fundamental principles, by codifying the various individual statements on that subject made at the highest American level. Such as territorial swaps for changes in the 1967 lines. Such as some formula for sharing Jerusalem, regarding which more than 55 percent of Israelis are prepared to accept a compromise. That would certainly help at least give credence to the notion that we do have a long-term solution that is viewed as legitimate by both parties actively in mind. Because without it we will

contribute to a situation in the Middle East that enhances the prospects of an American-Islamic collision on a much wider front.

And that brings me to my last and concluding points: ultimately at stake in all of this is how do we define, today, America's relationship with the world.

The president in releasing this morning the new National Security Strategy started off by saying, "America is at war. This is a war time national security strategy." Let me just say this to you: words have consequences. And the deliberate misuse of words can be very dangerous. Fanning a fearful, but fundamentally misleading definition of reality, contributes to the emergence of a fear-driven nation, a self-isolating nation.

The president experienced that in the last two weeks on the Dubai issue, when he himself reacted to excessive national fears. And yet just yesterday the International Relations Committee of the House voted 37-3 to impose punitive embargos on any country that invests in increased Iranian oil production. If that is not a self-defeating policy, then I don't know what it is.

But it is a part of this atmosphere of Manichean polarization which is being bred by a phony definition of reality. Neither President Truman nor Eisenhower – Democrat and Republican – ever spoke of America being a "nation at war" during the Korean War. Neither President Johnson nor Nixon ever spoke of America being a "nation at war" during the Vietnam War. Yes we have a serious challenge from the potential threat of terrorism and we have to wage an unrelenting struggle against it. But to describe America repeatedly as a nation at war – implicitly of course with a commander and chief in charge – is to contribute to a view of the world by America that stimulates fear and isolates us from others. Other nations have suffered more from terrorism than America. None of them has embraced that definition of reality.

What troubles me the most is not that which that I have criticized, but that which hasn't happened. That is to say: a serious and comprehensive Democratic challenge on this subject. Democratic leaders have been silent or evasive. They have not offered an alternative to the war in Iraq. It's easy to criticize – that was the first part of my speech. That is easy to do, although some of us did it sooner than others.

But they haven't offered an alternative. Also they have not seriously challenged the view of the world that is being propagated from the top. At a time of a deepening and widening crisis in Iraq, and a widening gap between America and the world, that to me is a form of political desertion.

END SPEECH