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Stephen Benedict Dyson. "What Really Happened in Planning for Postwar Iraq?"

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Renanah Miles. "After War: Inside the U.S. Civilian Struggle to Build Peace." *Political*

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Two years after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, as the Barack Obama administration contends with a drawdown in Afghanistan, significant new scholarship is reengaging persistent questions about both conflicts. Stephen Benedict Dyson and Renanah Miles share a concern with some of the conventional wisdom that has emerged over the years, and they offer sharply focused and emphatic correctives. While they tell different kinds of stories and take distinctive approaches, together they suggest a levels-of-analysis dilemma that puts their contributions in perspective. After summarizing the core arguments of each article, this review will consider that dilemma along with a few substantive and evidentiary questions.

Dyson's main target is the popular claim that the George W. Bush administration went to war in Iraq entirely unprepared to manage the aftermath of a predictably lopsided conflict. After dispensing with two stubborn if contradictory "myths"—that the administration did not even plan for the postwar and allowed the Pentagon to disregard the State Department's Future of Iraq Project—he describes the long planning process by which an interagency Deputies Committee debated three competing postwar models (457). The Deputies were locked in disagreement until days before the March 2003

invasion. But the underappreciated good news, Dyson reports, is that the conceptual possibilities on the table allowed their bosses on the Principals Committee to approve a compromise hybrid plan. It called for the creation of an Iraqi Interim Authority (IIA) and borrowed elements from two of the contending postwar concepts: a provisional government and a transitional civil authority. Unfortunately, the vagaries of personality and a flawed policy process allowed Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, who came on the scene in May 2003, to abandon this plan in favor of a ramped-up Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Bremer's CPA concept was similar to the MacArthur model, a centralized, absolute power that was the least favored of the three possibilities discussed by the Deputies. By rejecting the IIA-centered plan, Bremer "formalized a direct occupation" (455), delayed the transfer of power to Iraqis, and all but provoked the insurgency.

To explain all this and tell "the real story of the IIA and its abandonment..." Dyson focuses on "the interplay of personality and process in policymaking" (456). The personalities, beliefs, assumptions, and decision-making styles of a handful of leaders were decisive. He emphasizes the stark differences between Bremer and his predecessor, Jay Garner, as well as President Bush's insouciant nonchalance and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's momentary vacillation over allowing an exile-dominated provisional government. He highlights, in particular, a critical May 6, 2003 lunch meeting between Bush and Bremer, when the President apparently signaled to the latter—perhaps unintentionally—that he could run Iraq as he saw fit. On the process side, Dyson describes how administration principals had devoted most of their time and attention to war planning and political support, generally leaving their deputies to discuss but not decide postwar matters. In the end, he faults the Bush administration for allowing the IIA-based plan to be discarded after a single lunch meeting and interprets the outcome as a cautionary tale for policy planning and implementation.

Dyson's account is somewhat heartening in its reassurance that the Bush administration was not wholly incompetent, and more deeply unsettling in its depiction of the ease with which painstaking, long-in-the-tooth plans can be derailed. While it is convincing on both scores, however, the 'myth' of administration incompetence that he debunks has always had a partisan and rhetorical ring. And since the time of President Dwight D. Eisenhower (and John Lennon, for that matter), observers have noted repeatedly that planning is everything but plans themselves can be put aside very quickly. Decision makers regularly ignore strategic plans, intelligence assessments, and foreign-policy analyses generated at tremendous cost and effort by legions of officers, analysts and bureaucrats. This goes with the territory.

More to the point is an empirical question—or a counterfactual assertion—at the heart of Dyson's claim. Would an Iraqi Interim Authority have fared better than the CPA in postwar Iraq? Would it have been possible to empower trusted political figures, avoid the stigma of occupation, build momentum, and leave quickly? The evidence he presents is necessarily thin, since the IIA Organizing Committee and Leadership Council were never created. Skepticism is warranted, however, because the plan was reached at the eleventh hour and rooted in untested assumptions about the likely success of a rapid, rolling, ministry-by-ministry transfer of authority (or "sovereignty") to Iraqis, many of whom were exiles (480). It was not entirely untenable, though Dyson's evaluation of the IIA's plausibility comes partly from interviews with the former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas Feith, a key architect of the war and the subject of withering postwar criticism.

This raises a larger, levels-of-analysis question about the value of drilling down to examine leadership in long foreign-policy episodes. In this case, a close look at the decision makers seems necessary to explain the seeming blunders that afflicted the postwar period. But what if no plan or planning was likely to have made a real difference in the end? If your manned mission to Mars crashes due to

faulty landing techniques, but no earthly technique could have withstood the planet's hostile conditions, how narrowly should you investigate specific mission deficiencies? Would the Iraq venture, given the many constraints of conquering and transforming a distant country, have succeeded if only Bremer had stuck to the plan? This begs more questions about the war's multiple and contested objectives. But there is no evidence that the United States could have deposed Saddam, reassured itself of the absence of weapons of mass destruction, and made a fast exit from Iraq—newly democratized or not—under any plan or concept considered by the Bush administration.

Dyson recognizes this in identifying the President's "conflicting beliefs," or the tension between his stated commitment to democratization and his policy of "no nation-building" (484). Critiquing the non-implementation of a particular postwar plan, however, may not address this tension sufficiently. While there is significant value in clarifying the story of postwar planning in Iraq, one cannot infer too much from the corrected record about Iraq's subsequent trajectory. To do so is to understate what went wrong and perhaps miss the folly of the entire episode, which is more evident at other levels of analysis. Admittedly, foreign policy outcomes sometimes hang on minute details—the length of Cleopatra's nose, the Kaiser Wilhelm II's withered arm and all that—but postwar trouble in Iraq may have been overdetermined by the abundance of combustible elements on the ground the moment the United States arrived.

Renah Miles shares Stephen Dyson's concern with a policy process gone awry in Iraq, as well as in Afghanistan. Rather than faulting individual decision makers, she examines the bureaucratic and organizational deficiencies that undermined U.S. efforts. Specifically, she uses these cases to determine the "dominant obstacles to capacity development" in the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), particularly in the realm of stabilization and reconstruction (491). Given the complexity of these endeavors, her main focus is not "the ultimate outcome of such operations, but rather on U.S. institutional failure to learn, adapt, and demonstrate an enhanced conflict response capability" (492). After presenting and evaluating the problem in detail, she makes recommendations to strengthen U.S. preparedness for future possibilities.

Miles starts with a discussion of the antecedent conditions that have inhibited U.S. capacity to undertake stabilization and reconstruction, most notably the political ambivalence and resource deficiencies that the State Department and USAID faced in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such variables are not determinative, however, so she devotes herself to addressing five major factors that limit capacity-building most directly—two internal to State and USAID, two external, and one relating to Congress. The internal factors, she finds, are the most significant. Serious bureaucratic infighting between State and USAID, along with differences in organizational culture, hamstrung stabilization and reconstruction efforts more than poor relations with the Pentagon or Congressional indifference. State, for example, does not have an "operational culture," which is essential to planning, implementing, and managing stabilization and reconstruction initiatives; USAID mirrors the development community and does have such a culture, but it tends to devalue the stabilization and reconstruction mission itself (497). These and related problems prevent the civilian side of the government from taking the lead in meeting post-conflict challenges, obligating a reluctant Defense Department to step in.

Miles's close and thoughtful attention to the bureaucratic and organizational constraints on rational policy implementation is persuasive, though it does suggest larger questions that merit discussion. The premise of the article, from its title to its concluding sentence, is the need to enhance the U.S.

civilian capacity to operate “after war” and “to close the gap between the ability of the United States to wage war and its capacity to build peace” (516). In both Afghanistan and Iraq, however, interstate wars morphed quickly into insurgency and extraordinary civil upheaval. It is no wonder that lower-echelon personnel in USAID rejected the stabilization and reconstruction mission in both cases, and that State had “[c]hronic difficulties filling billets in Iraq and Afghanistan” (502). These were active war zones, and not self-evidently amenable to civilian-led political and economic activity. Miles does note that, by definition, stabilization operations are conducted before the shooting has stopped and peace has been achieved, and USAID does have a record of operating successfully under challenging security conditions. But full peace-building under such circumstances may never be within the capacity of State or USAID, at least not without their becoming alarmingly more like Defense in their capacities and orientations.

In fact, the American shift toward emphasizing whole-of-government operations in this area reflects the extraordinary nature of the task, rarely undertaken successfully by the United States after World War II, as Miles’s Table 1 shows (495). Both state- and nation-building, regardless of how they are defined, are exceptionally difficult for outside parties. Improved bureaucratic coordination, the promotion of an operational culture, reductions in stove-piping, and Congressional buy-in cannot change the fact that such operations happen several thousand miles away, are conducted by foreigners who—in Afghanistan and Iraq, at least—do not speak the target countries’ languages and first arrive as invaders (or liberators). There is a kind of hubris in the assumption that better institutional capacities can change the results dramatically. Reducing bureaucratic and organizational dysfunctionality is laudable and necessary but not sufficient to achieving the larger strategic objective of a stable, prosperous, well-governed country. Organizational and bureaucratic fixes might improve capacities, but as Miles herself notes, actual outcomes are a different matter because they are subject to such a wide array of influences.

In all likelihood, other contextual factors will be very different the next time the United States considers such a mission on a major scale. And with outcomes so dependent on factors beyond American control, one wonders if the benefits are worth the costs to all parties—including potential beneficiaries. Regarding the costs, Miles points sensibly to the danger of jeopardizing State and USAID’s traditional competencies in diplomacy and development by augmenting other capacities to undertake “expeditionary diplomacy” (515). An additional risk is that turning diplomats and development specialists into something else might create a kind of moral hazard or unintended consequence: why should Foggy Bottom worry about conflict prevention when it is prepared and incentivized for all contingencies? Without more evidence that a decent, not to say happy, ending is possible, it may be better for the United States to concentrate its efforts elsewhere.

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