

Critics on Iraq Policy Come Out of the Woodwork Too Late

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With the continued quagmire in Iraq and the likely indictments of senior Bush administration officials for trying to shore up the shaky rationale for the invasion, one would think that things couldn't get much worse for the administration. But where success has a thousand architects, failure leads to much finger pointing. The administration's latest headache comes from Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, former Secretary of State Colin Powell's chief of staff. In a well-publicized recent speech before the New America Foundation, which I attended, Wilkerson lambasted the "Cheney-Rumsfeld cabal" that got control of U.S. foreign policy from a president "not versed in international relations and not too much interested either."

Wilkerson's scathing remarks were designed to deflect criticism from his former boss. As one anti-war Republican Senate staff member told me, Wilkerson "summoned his courage about three years too late." The typically politically correct, inside-the-beltway audience was too polite to ask why Powell and Wilkerson didn't resign over the invasion of a foreign nation that they privately opposed.

Those taking a more optimistic view might say, "better late than never." Like Richard Clarke and Paul O'Neil before him, a disgruntled former administration official like Wilkerson draws a lot of public attention to horrendous administration policy. In his speech, Wilkerson praised a new book by Democrat George Packer, a staff writer for the New Yorker, called *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq*. The book will be just one of many new books exposing the administration's incompetence in the Iraqi occupation, but will certainly get a boost from Wilkerson's speech and the extensive media coverage of it.

Packer traveled to Iraq multiple times to research the book. Although valuable for cataloging the Bush administration's bungling, however, the book falters by implying that a more competent administration could have been more successful in the Herculean task of restructuring an entire society's political, economic, and social system. In other words, the author presents an essentially Wilsonian Democratic critique of a Wilsonian Republican occupation, thus avoiding the larger question of whether such grand nation-building can ever be successful.

Packer's is mainly a critique of how the administration implemented a policy that he supported. He notes that, initially, the administration planned to lop off only the top layer of the Iraqi army and bureaucracy after the invasion, install Iraqi exiles in that highest echelon of a fully functioning state, significantly draw down U.S. forces within six months, and use Iraqi oil revenues to pay for it all. He says that insufficient post-war planning resulted from such rosy predictions of early withdrawal, the military's reluctance to engage in nation-building, and the administration's suppression of any hint of possible post-war complications that might erode support for the invasion in the first place.

Packer argues that the administration wanted to proclaim “freedom” for Iraqis, but, fearing loss of control in Iraq, did not develop the institutions needed to make it a reality. Also, Packer implies that the U.S. government did not pour money fast enough into Iraq’s reconstruction. But he then cites Jerry Silverman, a former Agency for International Development(AID) official who worked in both Vietnam and Iraq, as saying that aid failed to buy political support for the United States in Vietnam, but may have in Iraq if security could have been established sooner. This mysterious reversal of outcome is a dubious proposition. Furthermore, security is what the United States has been trying to buy with the aid, not vice versa.

Packer also notes the U.S. reluctance to take casualties, but does not see the grave implications for nation-building projects. Packer cites Silverman as concluding that unlike the U.S. military and civilian personnel who were in Vietnam, those serving in Iraq are unwilling to take the casualties needed to secure the cities and highways so that reconstruction has a chance to succeed. Silverman said, “Our troops are in force-protection mode. They don’t protect anyone else.”

Force protection as priority number one has been around for some time—for example, Somalia in 1993, the Bosnian peacekeeping mission in 1995 and thereafter, and the war in Kosovo in 1999. The notion is bizarre that the United States would commit armed forces to a mission and then worry more about force protection than accomplishment of the mission. Yet that happens when the American public doesn’t really support its elected leaders’ wars of choice.

Often, the public will give the president the benefit of the doubt and support his initial decision to send troops overseas. But if the mission is not really vital to U.S. security and victory is not swift, casualties mount, or things go wrong, public support erodes quickly. Contrast this attitude with the public’s acceptance of mass casualties in World War II—a conflict that was perceived as critical to the nation’s survival. One would think that the American public’s justifiable casualty aversion in wars of choice would make the nation’s leaders cautious about committing military forces to conflicts that didn’t affect U.S. vital interests. But given the history of U.S. meddling in, for example, Lebanon, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and now Iraq, the leaders haven’t given up their unwise interventionism, but instead have opted to try to fight brushfire wars without massive casualties.

Some U.S. officials, usually former military officials like Powell and Wilkerson who served during the Vietnam period, do evidently have some qualms about such wars of choice. It’s too bad that even as civilians, they remain such good soldiers that they fail to publicly protest before American lives are endangered needlessly. According to the Senate staffer, even when they do openly dissent after the fact, they “go out of their way to blast the incompetence of the execution, while avoiding any criticism of the premise on which the whole mess was based, that is, that the U.S. has a presumptive ‘right’ to invade and occupy other countries.”

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