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Pondering lessons of the Iraq War

The more distance we get from events, the easier it is to consider them coolly and non-politically. In 10 more years, how will we view the Iraq war?

By:
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On the 10th anniversary of the start of the Iraq war, I spent much of the day talking with journalists who called for my thoughts and for lessons learned. That's appropriate because one of the war's lessons, I think, is the importance of an administration's communications with the public.

I believe President Bush made the right decision on removing the Iraqi regime from power. Commentators, of course, tend to focus on the risks of war that materialized in spades, especially the cost in lives (American, Iraqi and other) and the financial costs. But the president had to calculate those risks, before they materialized, against the risks of leaving Saddam in power, which were substantial. That was an unenviable responsibility.

After 9/11, the president knew that America felt vulnerable and had low tolerance for threats to our security. If he had left Saddam in power and Saddam had provided biological weapons agents to a terrorist group for use against the United States, how could the president have explained his inaction to the American people? Saddam had a record of pursuing biological weapons and had a program for making them, even though he was not maintaining the stockpiles that the CIA believed he had.

Here are several lessons about errors, as I see them:

- America's setting up a protracted occupation of Iraq was a mistake. When we transformed ourselves from liberators to occupiers, we aggravated all of our main problems in the country. Also, all of Iraq's enormous problems (for example, ethnic antagonisms, bad infrastructure) became our problems.

- Intelligence is always imperfect and should be read critically, with skepticism. The intelligence community should not present information in a way that suggests greater knowledge than the community has in fact. The Bush administration should have made clearer that the war's rationale did not hinge on classified information, but could be grasped by anyone who read the newspapers and history books.

- It's important for the president to inform the public honestly, intelligently and effectively about his national security views and the reasons for his actions. Inadequate communications, even if made in good faith, can undermine public support and risk severe harm to policy. Congress almost cut off funding for the Iraq war in the summer of 2007, in part due to the administration's poor communications strategy, which focused exclusively on trying to create a stable democracy for Iraq rather than on the importance of safeguarding Americans from the threats posed by Saddam's regime. The latter was the war's actual rationale, but, after the failure to find the chemical and biological weapons stockpiles that the CIA said were in Iraq, top White House officials decided the president should talk only about democracy promotion and the future, rather than review why we went to war to begin with. That was, I believe, a big (and almost decisive) mistake. It nearly ended the war before the surge so radically turned around the situation on the ground.

It is good to ponder history's lessons. The more distance we get from events, the easier it is to consider them coolly, non-politically and with more and more information. The conventional wisdom about Iraq was forged when passions about the war were white hot and much of what the public heard about the war was factually incorrect. Tenth anniversary reflections are good; 20th, one hopes, will be even better informed and more profound.

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