

Blueprint for a Mess

By David Rieff

On the streets of Baghdad today, Americans do not feel welcome. United States military personnel in the city are hunkered down behind acres of fencing and razor wire inside what was once Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace. When L. Paul Bremer III, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, leaves the compound, he is always surrounded by bodyguards, carbines at the ready, and G.I.'s on patrol in the city's streets never let their hands stray far from the triggers of their machine guns or M-16 rifles. The official line from the White House and the Pentagon is that things in Baghdad and throughout Iraq are improving. But an average of 35 attacks are mounted each day on American forces inside Iraq by armed resisters of one kind or another, whom American commanders concede are operating with greater and greater sophistication. In the back streets of Sadr City, the impoverished Baghdad suburb where almost two million Shiites live—and where Bush administration officials and Iraqi exiles once imagined American troops would be welcomed with sweets and flowers—the mood, when I visited in September, was angry and resentful. In October, the 24-member American-appointed Iraqi Governing Council warned of a deteriorating security situation.

Historically, it is rare that a warm welcome is extended to an occupying military force for very long, unless, that is, the postwar goes very smoothly. And in Iraq, the postwar occupation has not gone smoothly.

I have made two trips to Iraq since the end of the war and interviewed dozens of sources in Iraq and in the United States who were involved in the planning and execution of the war and its aftermath. It is becoming painfully clear that the American plan (if it can even be dignified with the name) for dealing with postwar Iraq was flawed in its conception and ineptly carried out. At the very least, the bulk of the evidence suggests that what was probably bound to be a difficult aftermath to the war was made far more difficult by blinkered vision and overoptimistic assumptions on the part of the war's greatest partisans within the Bush administration. The lack of security and order on the ground in Iraq today is in large measure a result of decisions made and not made in Washington before the war started, and of the specific approaches toward coping with postwar Iraq undertaken by American civilian officials and military commanders in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Despite administration claims, it is simply not true that no one could have predicted the chaos that ensued after the fall of Saddam Hussein. In fact, many officials in the United States, both military and civilian, as well as many Iraqi exiles, predicted quite accurately the perilous state of things that exists in Iraq today. There was ample warning, both on the basis of the specifics of Iraq and the precedent of other postwar deployments—in Panama, Kosovo and elsewhere—that the situation in postwar Iraq was going to be difficult and might become unmanageable. What went wrong was not that no one could know or that no one spoke out. What went wrong is that the voices of Iraq experts, of the State Department almost in its entirety and, indeed, of important segments of the uniformed military were ignored. As much as the invasion of Iraq and the rout of Saddam Hussein and his army was a triumph of planning and implementation, the mess that is postwar Iraq is a failure of planning and implementation.

1. Getting In Too Deep With Chalabi

In the minds of the top officials of the Department of Defense during the run-up to the war, Iraq by the end of this year would have enough oil flowing to help pay for the country's reconstruction, a constitution nearly written and set for ratification and,

perhaps most important, a popular new leader who shared America's vision not only for Iraq's future but also for the Middle East's.

Ahmad Chalabi may on the face of it seem an odd figure to count on to unify and lead a fractious postwar nation that had endured decades of tyrannical rule. His background is in mathematics and banking, he is a secular Shiite Muslim and he had not been in Baghdad since the late 1950's. But in the early 90's he became close to Richard Perle, who was an assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration, and in 1992, in the wake of the first gulf war, he founded the Iraqi National Congress, an umbrella organization of Iraqi opposition groups in exile.

In the mid-90's, Chalabi attended conferences on a post-Hussein Iraq organized by Perle and sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute. There he met a group of neoconservative and conservative intellectuals who had served in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, who later formed the core group that would persuade President George W. Bush to go to war with Iraq. As a number of Iraqi exiles have since related, Wolfowitz, then the dean of the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, was particularly appalled and shamed by the first Bush administration's failure to help the Kurds and the southern Shiites in the aftermath of the first gulf war. Encouraged by President Bush to "take matters into their own hands," these groups had risen against Saddam Hussein, only to be crushed by his forces while America did nothing. Wolfowitz and his colleagues believed that removing Saddam Hussein would have been the right way to end the first gulf war, and during their years out of power they lobbied the Clinton administration both publicly and privately to make the overthrow of Saddam Hussein a priority.

In the mid-90's Chalabi fell out of favor with the C.I.A. and the State Department, which questioned his popular support in Iraq and accused him of misappropriating American government funds earmarked for armed resistance by Iraqi exile groups against Saddam Hussein. He remained close with Perle and Wolfowitz, however, as well as with other neoconservative figures in Washington, including Douglas Feith, a former aide to Perle, and regularly appeared with them on panels at conservative policy institutes like the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. Chalabi lobbied senators and congressmen to support action against Saddam Hussein, and a coalition of neoconservatives, including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Perle, sent a letter to President Clinton calling for a tougher Iraq policy. Together they succeeded in persuading the Republican-controlled Congress in 1998 to pass the Iraq Liberation Act, signed into law by President Clinton, a piece of legislation that made regime change in Iraq the official policy of the United States.

After George W. Bush assumed the presidency, Chalabi's Washington allies were appointed to senior positions in the defense establishment. Wolfowitz became deputy defense secretary, Feith under secretary of defense for policy and Perle head of the Defense Policy Board. Chalabi and the neoconservatives in the Pentagon were united by a shared vision of a radically reshaped Middle East and a belief that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was the essential first step in the realization of that vision. The Iraq Chalabi envisioned—one that would make peace with Israel, have adversarial relations with Iran and become a democratic model for (or, seen another way, a threat to) Saudi Arabia—coincided neatly with the plan of the administration neoconservatives, who saw post-Hussein Iraq as a launching pad for what they described as the democratization of the Middle East. (Wolfowitz, Perle and Chalabi all refused or did not respond to requests to be interviewed for this article.)

Bush had come into office strenuously opposing "nation building," and in the early months of his presidency the neoconservatives' interventionist view was by no means dominant. But the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, gave the movement new energy. Within days of the attacks, Wolfowitz was spearheading efforts to put on the table a plan to

overthrow Saddam Hussein.

Initially these efforts seemed to go nowhere. There was the war in Afghanistan to fight first, and many senior officers within the military feared that a war in Iraq would stretch American military capabilities beyond their limit at a time when the threat of war loomed on the Korean Peninsula. But the war in Afghanistan was a quick success, and in early 2002 a vigorous lobbying effort by the neoconservatives, both in public and inside the White House, succeeded in moving the idea of Hussein's overthrow to the center of the administration's foreign policy agenda.

Planning began not only for the war itself but also for its aftermath, and various government departments and agencies initiated projects and study groups to consider the questions of postwar Iraq. As Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld would put it later, planning "began well before there was a decision to go to war. It was extensive."

Chief among these agencies was the so-called Office of Special Plans, set up after Sept. 11, 2001, reporting to Douglas Feith in the Pentagon. It was given such a vague name, by Feith's own admission, because the administration did not want to have it widely known that there was a special unit in the Pentagon doing its own assessments of intelligence on Iraq. "We didn't think it was wise to create a brand-new office and label it an office of Iraq policy," Feith told the BBC in July.

The office's main purpose was to evaluate the threat of Saddam Hussein's nuclear, chemical and biological warfare capabilities; its mission reflected the Department of Defense's dissatisfaction with the C.I.A.'s conservative estimates of Saddam Hussein's suspected weapons of mass destruction. Chalabi provided the Office of Special Plans with information from defectors ostensibly from Saddam Hussein's weapons programs—defectors who claimed to be able to establish that the Iraqi dictator was actively developing weapons of mass destruction.

Through such efforts, Chalabi grew even closer to those planning the war and what would follow. To the war planners, the Iraqi National Congress became not simply an Iraqi exile group of which Chalabi was a leader, but a kind of government-in-waiting with Chalabi at its head. The Pentagon's plan for postwar Iraq seems to have hinged, until the war itself, on the idea that Chalabi could be dropped into Baghdad and, once there, effect a smooth transition to a new administration.

At the insistence of the civilian administrators in the Pentagon, Chalabi and 500 of his fighters in the Free Iraqi Forces were flown to Nasiriya in southern Iraq in April, in the first weeks of the war. At the time, American military officials were continuing to stress the importance of Chalabi and the Free Iraqi Forces. Gen. Peter Pace, then the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described them as the "core of the new Iraqi Army." But to the surprise and disappointment of American military leaders on the ground, Chalabi failed to make much of an impression on the people he tried to mobilize.

Timothy Carney, a former American ambassador to Sudan and Haiti who served in the reconstruction team in Iraq just after the war, says that there was, in the Pentagon, "a complete lack of grasp of Chalabi's lack of appeal for ordinary Iraqis." In the end, Chalabi sat out the war in the Iraqi desert and was taken to Baghdad only after the city had fallen and the Americans had moved in.

Many Iraqis outside the Iraqi National Congress felt marginalized by the Pentagon's devotion to Chalabi. According to Isam Al Khafaji, a moderate Iraqi academic who worked with the State Department on prewar planning and later with the American reconstruction office in Baghdad, "What I had originally envisioned—working with allies in a democratic fashion"—soon turned into "collaborating with occupying forces," not what he and other Iraqi exiles had had in mind at all.

Carney agrees. "There was so much reliance on Chalabi in those early days," he says.

2. Shutting Out State

In the spring of 2002, as support for a war to oust Saddam Hussein took root within the Bush administration, the State Department began to gather information and draw up its own set of plans for postwar Iraq under the leadership of Thomas Warrick, a longtime State Department official who was then special adviser to the department's Office of Northern Gulf Affairs. This effort involved a great number of Iraqi exiles from across the political spectrum, from monarchists to communists and including the Iraqi National Congress.

Warrick's Future of Iraq Project, as it was called, was an effort to consider almost every question likely to confront a post-Hussein Iraq: the rebuilding of infrastructure, the shape Iraqi democracy might take, the carrying out of transitional justice and the spurring of economic development. Warrick called on the talents of many of the best Middle Eastern specialists at State and at the C.I.A. He divided his team into working groups, each of which took on one aspect of the reconstruction.

David L. Phillips, an American conflict-prevention specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and a former adviser to the State Department, served on the project's "democratic principles" group. In his view of the project, "Iraqis did a lot of important work together looking at the future." But however useful the work itself was, Phillips says, the very process of holding the discussions was even more valuable. "It involved Iraqis coming together, in many cases for the first time, to discuss and try to forge a common vision of Iraq's future," Phillips says.

There were a number of key policy disagreements between State and Defense. The first was over Chalabi. While the Pentagon said that a "government in exile" should be established, presumably led by Chalabi, to be quickly installed in Baghdad following the war, other Iraqis, including the elder statesman of the exile leaders, Adnan Pachaci, insisted that any government installed by United States fiat would be illegitimate in the eyes of the Iraqi people. And the State Department, still concerned that Chalabi had siphoned off money meant for the Iraqi resistance and that he lacked public support, opposed the idea of a shadow government. The State Department managed to win this particular battle, and no government in exile was set up.

There was also a broader disagreement about whether and how quickly Iraq could become a full-fledged democracy. The State Department itself was of two minds on this question. One prewar State Department report, echoing the conventional wisdom among Arabists, asserted that "liberal democracy would be difficult to achieve" in Iraq and that "electoral democracy, were it to emerge, could well be subject to exploitation by anti-American elements." The C.I.A. agreed with this assessment; in March 2003, the agency issued a report that was widely reported to conclude that prospects for democracy in a post-Hussein Iraq were bleak. In contrast, the neoconservatives within the Bush administration, above all within the Department of Defense, consistently asserted that the C.I.A. and the State Department were wrong and that there was no reason to suppose that Iraq could not become a full-fledged democracy, and relatively quickly and smoothly.

But Thomas Warrick, who has refused to be interviewed since the end of the war, was, according to participants in the project, steadfastly committed to Iraqi democracy. Feisal Istrabadi, an Iraqi-American lawyer who also served on the project's democratic principles group, credits Warrick with making the Future of Iraq Project a genuinely democratic and inclusive venture. Warrick, he says, "was fanatically devoted to the idea that no one should be allowed to dominate the Future of Iraq Project and that all voices should be heard—including moderate Islamist voices. It was a remarkable accomplishment."

In fact, Istrabadi rejects the view that the State Department was a holdout against Iraqi democracy. "From Colin Powell on down," he says, "I've spent hundreds of hours

with State Department people, and I've never heard one say democracy was not viable in Iraq. Not one."

Although Istrabadi is an admirer of Wolfowitz, he says that the rivalry between State and Defense was so intense that the Future of Iraq Project became anathema to the Pentagon simply because it was a State Department project. "At the Defense Department," he recalls, "we were seen as part of 'them.'" Istrabadi was so disturbed by the fight between Defense and State that on June 1, 2002, he says, he took the matter up personally with Douglas Feith. "I sat with Feith," he recalls, "and said, 'You've got to decide what your policy is.'"

The Future of Iraq Project did draw up detailed reports, which were eventually released to Congress last month and made available to reporters for The New York Times. The 13 volumes, according to The Times, warned that "the period immediately after regime change might offer . . . criminals the opportunity to engage in acts of killing, plunder and looting."

But the Defense Department, which came to oversee postwar planning, would pay little heed to the work of the Future of Iraq Project. Gen. Jay Garner, the retired Army officer who was later given the job of leading the reconstruction of Iraq, says he was instructed by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to ignore the Future of Iraq Project.

Garner has said that he asked for Warrick to be added to his staff and that he was turned down by his superiors. Judith Yaphe, a former C.I.A. analyst and a leading expert on Iraqi history, says that Warrick was "blacklisted" by the Pentagon. "He did not support their vision," she told me.

And what was this vision?

Yaphe's answer is unhesitant: "Ahmad Chalabi." But it went further than that: "The Pentagon didn't want to touch anything connected to the Department of State."

None of the senior American officials involved in the Future of Iraq Project were taken on board by the Pentagon's planners. And this loss was considerable. "The Office of Special Plans discarded all of the Future of Iraq Project's planning," David Phillips says. "I don't know why."

To say all this is not to claim that the Future of Iraq Project alone would have prevented the postwar situation from deteriorating as it did. Robert Perito, a former State Department official who is one of the world's leading experts on postconflict police work, says of the Future of Iraq Project: "It was a good idea. It brought the exiles together, a lot of smart people, and its reports were very impressive. But the project never got to the point where things were in place that could be implemented."

Nonetheless, Istrabadi points out that "we in the Future of Iraq Project predicted widespread looting. You didn't have to have a degree from a Boston university to figure that one out. Look at what happened in L.A. after the police failed to act quickly after the Rodney King verdict. It was entirely predictable that in the absence of any authority in Baghdad that you'd have chaos and lawlessness."

According to one participant, Iraqi exiles on the project specifically warned of the dangers of policing postwar Iraq: "Adnan Pachaci's first question to U.S. officials was, How would they maintain law and order after the war was over? They told him not to worry, that things would get back to normal very soon."

3. Too Little Planning, Too Late

The Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) was established in the Defense Department, under General Garner's supervision, on Jan. 20, 2003, just eight weeks before the invasion of Iraq. Because the Pentagon had insisted on essentially throwing out the work and the personnel of the Future of Iraq Project, Garner and his planners had to start more or less from scratch. Timothy Carney, who served in ORHA under Garner, explains that ORHA lacked critical personnel once it arrived in

Baghdad. “There were scarcely any Arabists in ORHA in the beginning” at a senior level, Carney says. “Some of us had served in the Arab world, but we were not experts, or fluent Arabic speakers.” According to Carney, Defense officials “said that Arabists weren’t welcome because they didn’t think Iraq could be democratic.”

Because of the battle between Defense and State, ORHA, which Douglas Feith called the “U.S. government nerve center” for postwar planning, lacked not only information and personnel but also time. ORHA had only two months to figure out what to plan for, plan for it and find the people to implement it. A senior Defense official later admitted that in late January “we only had three or four people”; in mid-February, the office conducted a two-day “rehearsal” of the postwar period at the National Defense University in Washington. Judith Yaphe says that “even the Messiah couldn’t have organized a program in that short a time.”

Although ORHA simply didn’t have the time, resources or expertise in early 2003 to formulate a coherent postwar plan, Feith and others in the Defense Department were telling a different story to Congress. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Feb. 11, shortly before the beginning of the war, Feith reassured the assembled senators that ORHA was “staffed by officials detailed from departments and agencies throughout the government.” Given the freeze-out of the State Department officials from the Future of Iraq Project, this description hardly encompassed the reality of what was actually taking place bureaucratically.

Much of the postwar planning that did get done before the invasion focused on humanitarian efforts—Garner’s area of expertise. Through the U.S. Agency for International Development, Washington was planning for a possible humanitarian emergency akin to the one that occurred after the first Gulf War, when hundreds of thousands of Kurds fled their homes in northern Iraq and needed both emergency relief and protection from Saddam Hussein. This operation, led by Garner, had succeeded brilliantly. American planners in 2003 imagined (and planned for) a similar emergency taking place. There were plans drawn up for housing and feeding Iraqi refugees. But there was little thought given to other contingencies—like widespread looting.

Garner told me that while he had expected Iraqis to loot the symbols of the old regime, like Hussein’s palaces, he had been utterly unprepared for the systematic looting and destruction of practically every public building in Baghdad. In fairness to Garner, many of the Iraqis I spoke with during my trips were also caught by surprise. One mullah in Sadr City observed to me caustically that he had never seen such wickedness. “People can be weak,” he said. “I knew this before, of course, but I did not know how weak. But while I do not say it is the Americans’ fault, I simply cannot understand how your soldiers could have stood by and watched. Maybe they are weak, too. Or maybe they are wicked.”

One reason for the looting in Baghdad was that there were so many intact buildings to loot. In contrast to their strategy in the first Gulf War, American war planners had been careful not to attack Iraqi infrastructure. This was partly because of their understanding of the laws of war and partly because of their desire to get Iraq back up and running as quickly and smoothly as possible. They seem to have imagined that once Hussein fell, things would go back to normal fairly quickly. But on the ground, the looting and the violence went on and on, and for the most part American forces largely did nothing.

Or rather, they did only one thing—station troops to protect the Iraqi Oil Ministry. This decision to protect only the Oil Ministry—not the National Museum, not the National Library, not the Health Ministry—probably did more than anything else to convince Iraqis uneasy with the occupation that the United States was in Iraq only for the oil. “It is not that they could not protect everything, as they say,” a leader in the Hawza, the Shiite religious authority, told me. “It’s that they protected nothing else. The Oil Ministry is not off by itself. It’s surrounded by other ministries, all of which the Americans allowed to be looted. So what else do you want us to think except that you

want our oil?”

As Istrabadi, the Iraqi-American lawyer from the Future of Iraq Project, says, “When the Oil Ministry is the only thing you protect, what do you expect people to think?” And, he adds: “It can’t be that U.S. troops didn’t know where the National Museum was. All you have to do is follow the signs—they’re in English!—to Museum Square.”

For its part, the Hawza could do little to protect the 17 out of 23 Iraqi ministries that were gutted by looters, or the National Library, or the National Museum (though sheiks repeatedly called on looters to return the stolen artifacts). But it was the Hawza, and not American forces, that protected many of Baghdad’s hospitals from looters—which Hawza leaders never fail to point out when asked whether they would concede that the United States is now doing a great deal of good in Iraq. The memory of this looting is like a bone in Iraq’s collective throat and has given rise to conspiracy theories about American motives and actions.

“The U.S. thinks of Iraq as a big cake,” one young Iraqi journalist told me. “By letting people loot—and don’t tell me they couldn’t have stopped the looters if they’d wanted to; look at the war!—they were arranging to get more profits for Mr. Cheney, for Bechtel, for all American corporations.”

4. The Troops: Too Few, Too Constricted

On Feb. 25, the Army’s chief of staff, Gen. Eric Shinseki, warned Congress that postwar Iraq would require a commitment of “several hundred thousand” U.S. troops. Shinseki’s estimate was dismissed out of hand by Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and other civilian officials at the Pentagon, where war plans called for a smaller, more agile force than had been used in the first Gulf War. Wolfowitz, for example, told Congress on Feb. 27 that Shinseki’s number was “wildly off the mark,” adding, “It’s hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and secure the surrender of Saddam’s security force and his army.” Shinseki retired soon afterward.

But Shinseki wasn’t the only official who thought there were going to be insufficient troops on the ground to police Iraq in the aftermath of the war. The lack of adequate personnel in the military’s plan, especially the military police needed for postconflict work, was pointed out by both senior members of the uniformed military and by seasoned peacekeeping officials in the United Nations secretariat.

Former Ambassador Carney, recalling his first days in Iraq with ORHA, puts it this way, with surprising bitterness: The U.S. military “simply did not understand or give enough priority to the transition from their military mission to our political military mission.”

The Department of Defense did not lack for military and civilian officials—men and women who supported the war—counseling in private that policing a country militarily would not be easy. As Robert Perito recalls: “The military was warned there would be looting. There has been major looting in every important postconflict situation of the past decade. The looting in Panama City in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion did more damage to the Panamanian economy than the war itself. And there was vast looting and disorder in Kosovo. We know this.”

Securing Iraq militarily after victory on the battlefield was, in the Pentagon’s parlance, Phase IV of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Phases I through III were the various stages of the invasion itself; Phase IV involved so-called stability and support operations—in other words, the postwar. The military itself, six months into the occupation, is willing to acknowledge—at least to itself—that it did not plan sufficiently for Phase IV. In its secret report “Operation Iraqi Freedom: Strategic Lessons Learned,” a draft of which was obtained by The Washington Times in August, the Department of Defense concedes that “late formation of Department of Defense [Phase IV] organizations limited time

available for the development of detailed plans and pre-deployment coordination.”

The planning stages of the invasion itself were marked by detailed preparations and frequent rehearsals. Lt. Col. Scott Rutter is a highly decorated U.S. battalion commander whose unit, the Second Battalion, Seventh Infantry of the Third Infantry Division, helped take the Baghdad airport. He says that individual units rehearsed their own roles and the contingencies they might face over and over again. By contrast, the lack of postwar planning made the difficulties the United States faced almost inevitable. “We knew what the tactical end state was supposed to be at the end of the war, but we were never told what the end state, the goal was, for the postwar,” Rutter said. (Rutter was on active duty when I spoke to him, but he is scheduled to retire this month.)

Rutter’s unit controlled a section of Baghdad in the immediate postwar period, and he was forced to make decisions on his own on everything from how to deal with looters to whether to distribute food. When I asked him in Baghdad in September whether he had rehearsed this or, indeed, whether he received any instructions from up the chain of command, he simply smiled and shook his head.

Rutter’s view is confirmed by the “After Action” report of the Third Infantry Division, a document that is available on an Army Web site but that has received little attention. Running 293 pages and marked “official use only,” it is a comprehensive evaluation of the division’s performance during the war in Iraq, covering every aspect of operations, from the initial invasion to the postwar period. The tone of the report is mostly self-congratulatory. “Operating considerably beyond existing doctrine,” it begins, “the Third Infantry Division (Mechanized) proved that a lethal, flexible and disciplined mechanized force could conduct continuous offensive operations over extended distances for 21 days.”

If the report contains one pre-eminent lesson, it is that extensive training is what made the division’s success possible. “The roots of the division’s successful attack to Baghdad,” the authors of the report write, “are found on the training fields of Fort Stewart”—the Third Infantry Division’s Georgia base. “A direct correlation can be drawn between the division’s training cycle prior to crossing the line of departure and the division’s successful attack into Iraq.”

But as the report makes clear, no such intensive training was undertaken for postwar operations. As the report’s authors note: “Higher headquarters did not provide the Third Infantry Division (Mechanized) with a plan for Phase IV. As a result, Third Infantry Division transitioned into Phase IV in the absence of guidance.”

The report concludes that “division planners should have drafted detailed plans on Phase IV operations that would have allowed it”—the Third Infantry Division—to operate independently outside of guidance from higher headquarters. Critical requirements should have been identified prior to the beginning of the war, the report states. The division also should have had “a plan to execute” a stability-and-support operation “for at least 30 days.”

The report says that such an operation should have included “protecting infrastructure, historic sites, administrative buildings, cultural sites, financial institutions, judicial/legal sites and religious sites.” It notes, with hindsight, that “protecting these sites must be planned for early in the planning process.” But as the report makes clear, no such planning took place.

Without a plan, without meticulous rehearsal and without orders or, at the very least, guidance from higher up the chain of command, the military is all but paralyzed. And in those crucial first postwar days in Baghdad, American forces (and not only those in the Third Infantry Division) behaved that way, as all around them Baghdad was ransacked and most of the categories of infrastructure named in the report were destroyed or seriously damaged.

Some military analysts go beyond the lack of Phase IV planning and more generally blame the Bush administration’s insistence, upon coming into office, that it would no

longer commit American armed forces to nation-building missions—a position symbolized by the decision, now being reconsidered, to close the Peacekeeping Institute at the Army War College in Carlisle, Penn. According to Maj. Gen. William Nash, now retired from the Army, who commanded U.S. forces in northern Bosnia after the signing of the Dayton peace accords: “This is a democratic army. If the national command authority tells it that it doesn’t have to worry about something anymore”—he was talking about peacekeeping—it stops worrying about it.”

It is hardly a secret that within the Army, peacekeeping duty is not the road to career advancement. Civil-affairs officers are not the Army’s “high-fliers,” Rutter notes.

Nash, understandably proud of his service as commander of U.S. forces in post-conflict Bosnia, is chagrined by the way American forces behaved in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Baghdad. “I know they expected to be greeted with flowers and candy,” he says, “or at least the civilians in the Pentagon had assured them they would be. But we know from experience that this kind of welcome lasts only a few days at most. You are welcomed with roses—for one day. Then you have to prove yourself, and keep on proving yourself, every succeeding day of the mission. There are no excuses, and few second chances. That was why, when we went into Bosnia, we went in hard. The only way to keep control of the situation, even if people are initially glad to see you, is to take charge immediately and never let go of control. Instead, in postwar Iraq, we just stood around and responded to events, rather than shaping them.”

5. Neglecting ORHA

In his Congressional testimony before the war, Douglas Feith described General Garner’s mission as head of ORHA as “integrating the work of the three substantive operations” necessary in postwar Iraq. These were humanitarian relief, reconstruction and civil administration. Garner, Feith said, would ensure that the fledgling ORHA could “plug in smoothly” to the military’s command structure on the ground in Iraq. But far from plugging in smoothly to Central Command, ORHA’s people found themselves at odds with the military virtually from the start.

Timothy Carney has given the best and most damning account of this dialogue of the deaf between ORHA officials and the U.S. military on the ground in Iraq. “I should have had an inkling of the trouble ahead for our reconstruction team in Iraq,” he wrote in a searing op-ed article in *The Washington Post* in late June, “from the hassle we had just trying to get there. About 20 of us from the Organization for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance showed up at a military airport in Kuwait on April 24 for a flight to Baghdad. But some general’s plane had broken down, so he had taken ours.”

Carney stressed the low priority the military put on ORHA’s efforts. “Few in the military understood the urgency of our mission,” he wrote, “yet we relied on the military for support. For example, the military commander set rules for transportation: we initially needed a lead military car, followed by the car with civilians and a military vehicle bringing up the rear. But there weren’t enough vehicles. One day we had 31 scheduled missions and only nine convoys, so 22 missions were scrubbed.”

More substantively, he added that “no lessons seem to have taken hold from the recent nation-building efforts in Bosnia or Kosovo, so we in ORHA felt as though we were reinventing the wheel.” And doing so under virtually impossible constraints. Carney quoted an internal ORHA memorandum arguing that the organization “is not being treated seriously enough by the command given what we are supposed to do.”

The lack of respect for the civilian officials in ORHA was a source of astonishment to Lieutenant Colonel Rutter. “I was amazed by what I saw,” he says. “There would be a meeting called by Ambassador Bodine”—the official on Garner’s staff responsible for Baghdad—and none of the senior officers would show up. I remember thinking, This isn’t right, and also thinking that if it had been a commander who had called the

meeting, they would have shown up all right.”

Carney attributes some of the blame for ORHA’s impotence to the fact that it set up shop in Saddam Hussein’s Republican Palace, where “nobody knew where anyone was, and, worse, almost no one really knew what was going on outside the palace. Some of us managed to talk to Iraqis, but not many, since the military didn’t want you to go out for security reasons unless accompanied by M.P.’s.”

Kevin Henry of CARE, a humanitarian organization active in Iraq, says that he still has similar concerns. “One of my biggest worries,” he says, “is the isolation of the palace.”

Garner disputes these complaints. He is adamant that he managed to talk with many Iraqis and strongly disagrees with claims that officials in the palace were out of touch.

Still, ORHA under Pentagon control was compelled to adhere rigidly to military force-protection rules that were anything but appropriate to the work the civilians at ORHA were trying to do. Larry Hollingworth, a former British colonel and relief specialist who has worked in Sarajevo and Chechnya and who briefly served with ORHA right after Baghdad fell, says that “at the U.S. military’s insistence, we traveled out from our fortified headquarters in Saddam’s old Republican Palace in armored vehicles, wearing helmets and flak jackets, trying to convince Iraqis that peace was at hand, and that they were safe. It was ridiculous.”

And Judith Yaphe adds, “In some ways, we’re even more isolated than the British were when they took over Iraq” after World War I.

Kevin Henry has described the Bush administration as peculiarly susceptible to a kind of “liberation theology in which they couldn’t get beyond their own rhetoric and see things in Iraq as they really were.”

As the spring wore on, administration officials continued to insist publicly that nothing was going seriously wrong in Iraq. But the pressure to do something became too strong to resist. Claiming that it had been a change that had been foreseen all along (though it had not been publicly announced and was news to Garner’s staff), President Bush replaced Garner in May with L. Paul Bremer. Glossing over the fact that Bremer had no experience in postwar reconstruction or nation-building, the Pentagon presented Bremer as a good administrator—something, or so Defense Department officials implied on background, Garner was not.

Bremer’s first major act was not auspicious. Garner had resisted the kind of complete de-Baathification of Iraqi society that Ahmad Chalabi and some of his allies in Washington had favored. In particular, he had resisted calls to completely disband the Iraqi Army. Instead, he had tried only to fire Baathists and senior military officers against whom real charges of complicity in the regime’s crimes could be demonstrated and to use most members of the Iraqi Army as labor battalions for reconstruction projects.

Bremer, however, took the opposite approach. On May 15, he announced the complete disbanding of the Iraqi Army, some 400,000 strong, and the lustration of 50,000 members of the Baath Party. As one U.S. official remarked to me privately, “That was the week we made 450,000 enemies on the ground in Iraq.”

The decision—which many sources say was made not by Bremer but in the White House—was disastrous. In a country like Iraq, where the average family size is 6, firing 450,000 people amounts to leaving 2,700,000 people without incomes; in other words, more than 10 percent of Iraq’s 23 million people. The order produced such bad feeling on the streets of Baghdad that salaries are being reinstated for all soldiers. It is a slow and complicated process, however, and there have been demonstrations by fired military officers in Iraq over the course of the summer and into the fall.

6. Ignoring the Shiites

It should have been clear from the start that the success or failure of the American project in postwar Iraq depended not just on the temporary acquiescence of Iraq’s Shiite

majority but also on its support—or at least its tacit acceptance of a prolonged American presence. Before the war, the Pentagon's planners apparently believed that this would not be a great problem. The Shiite tradition in Iraq, they argued, was nowhere near as radical as it was in neighboring Iran. The planners also seem to have assumed that the overwhelming majority of Iraqi Shiites would welcome American forces as liberators—an assumption based on the fact of the Shiite uprisings in southern Iraq in 1991, in the aftermath of the first gulf war. American officials do not seem to have taken seriously enough the possibility that the Shiites might welcome their liberation from Saddam Hussein but still view the Americans as unwelcome occupiers who would need to be persuaded, and if necessary compelled, to leave Iraq as soon as possible.

Again, an overestimation of the role of Ahmad Chalabi may help account for this miscalculation. Chalabi is a Shiite, and based on that fact, the Pentagon's planners initially believed that he would enjoy considerable support from Iraq's Shiite majority. But it rapidly became clear to American commanders on the ground in postwar Iraq that the aristocratic, secular Chalabi enjoyed no huge natural constituency in the country, least of all among the observant Shiite poor.

The Americans gravely underestimated the implications of the intense religious feelings that Iraqi Shiites were suddenly free to manifest after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Making religious freedom possible for the Shiites was one of the great accomplishments of the war, as administration officials rightly claim. But the Shiites soon demonstrated that they were interested in political as well as religious autonomy. And although the Americans provided the latter, their continued presence in Iraq was seen as an obstacle to the former—especially as the occupation dragged on and Secretary Rumsfeld warned of a “long, hard slog ahead.”

After the war, American planners thought they might be able to engage with one of the most moderate of the important Shiite ayatollahs, Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim. He was rhetorically anti-American and yet was willing (and urged his followers) to establish a detente with the occupiers. Had he lived, he might have helped the Americans assuage Shiite fears and resentments. But Hakim was assassinated during Friday prayers in the holy city of Najaf on Aug. 29, along with more than 80 of his followers. At this point, it is not clear who the current American candidate is, although there are reports that American planners now believe they can work with and through Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Meanwhile, in the streets the anger of ordinary Shiites grows hotter. Every reporter who has been in Iraq has encountered it, even if administration officials think they know better. As Robert Perito argues, “One of the things that has saved the U.S. effort is that the Shiites have decided to cooperate with us, however conditionally.” But, he adds, “if the Shiites decide that they can't continue to support us, then our position will become untenable.”

Although they are, for the most part, not yet ready to rebel, the Shiites' willingness to tolerate the American occupation authorities is growing dangerously thin. “We're happy the Americans got rid of Saddam Hussein,” a young member of the Hawza in Sadr City told me. “But we do not approve of replacing ‘the tyrant of the age’”—as he referred to Hussein—with the Americans. We will wait a little longer, but we will fight if things don't change soon.”

Or as his sheik told me later that afternoon at the nearby mosque, so far they “have no orders” from their religious superiors to fight the Americans. Still, he warned, “we have been very nice to them. But the U.S. is not reciprocating.” Last month, in the Shiite holy city of Karbala, the first firefights between American forces and Shiite militants took place, suggesting that time may be running out even more quickly than anyone imagined.

The Next Steps

In Iraq today, there is a steadily increasing disconnect between what the architects of the occupation think they are accomplishing and how Iraqis on the street evaluate postwar progress. And as the security situation fails to improve, these perceptions continue to darken.

The Bush administration fiercely denies that this “alarmist” view accurately reflects Iraqi reality. It insists that the positive account it has been putting forward is the real truth and that the largely downbeat account in much of the press is both inaccurate and unduly despairing. The corner has been turned, administration officials repeat.

Whether the United States is eventually successful in Iraq (and saying the mission “has to succeed,” as so many people do in Washington, is not a policy but an expression of faith), even supporters of the current approach of the Coalition Provisional Authority concede that the United States is playing catch-up in Iraq. This is largely, though obviously not entirely, because of the lack of postwar planning during the run-up to the war and the mistakes of the first 60 days after the fall of Saddam Hussein. And the more time passes, the clearer it becomes that what happened in the immediate aftermath of what the administration calls Operation Iraqi Freedom was a self-inflicted wound, a morass of our own making.

Call it liberation or occupation, a dominating American presence in Iraq was probably destined to be more difficult, and more costly in money and in blood, than administration officials claimed in the months leading up to the war. But it need not have been this difficult. Had the military been as meticulous in planning its strategy and tactics for the postwar as it was in planning its actions on the battlefield, the looting of Baghdad, with all its disastrous material and institutional and psychological consequences, might have been stopped before it got out of control. Had the collective knowledge embedded in the Future of Iraq Project been seized upon, rather than repudiated by, the Pentagon after it gained effective control of the war and postwar planning a few months before the war began, a genuine collaboration between the American authorities and Iraqis, both within the country and from the exiles, might have evolved. And had the lessons of nation-building—its practice but also its inevitability in the wars of the 21st century—been embraced by the Bush administration, rather than dismissed out of hand, then the opportunities that did exist in postwar Iraq would not have been squandered as, in fact, they were.

The real lesson of the postwar mess is that while occupying and reconstructing Iraq was bound to be difficult, the fact that it may be turning into a quagmire is not a result of fate, but rather (as quagmires usually are) a result of poor planning and wishful thinking. Both have been in evidence to a troubling degree in American policy almost from the moment the decision was made to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s bestial dictatorship.

David Rieff is the author, most recently, of “A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis.” His last article for the magazine was about the United Nations sanctions imposed on Iraq.