

THE BIG IDEA

Occupational Hazards

How the Pentagon forgot about running Iraq.

By Jacob Weisberg

The shooting down on Sunday of a Chinook helicopter, which claimed more American lives than any episode since the fall of Saddam Hussein, confirms what the Bush administration has spent weeks attempting to deny: The occupation of Iraq is going badly.

It is not at all surprising that we've run into trouble over there. The difficulties we have faced, from looting to the lack of viable institutions, were largely to be expected from a devastated post-totalitarian society in a part of the world overwhelmingly hostile to the United States and its interests. What is surprising—amazing, in fact—is how unprepared we were for these problems. Much of the discussion in the postwar period was focused on the question of where those weapons of mass destruction went. An even more important question is how the Bush administration failed to prepare for what it knew was coming. How did the world's greatest military power plan the invasion of a country without also planning its occupation?

David Rieff's Nov. 2 article in the *New York Times Magazine* offers pieces of an answer. The neoconservative Iraq hawks inside the Pentagon—Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Douglas Feith—thought our troops would be welcomed as liberators and that the Iraqi National Congress could run the country for us (a view Gideon Rose demolished in *Slate* back in April). Wolfowitz, in particular, was known for his view that fixing Iraq would provoke a reverse-domino effect of democratization throughout the Middle East. Those who bought into this wishful thinking didn't want to hear about the potential problems.

The hawks' big mistake was not in thinking that optimistic scenario might be borne out. Their mistake—especially stunning because the Pentagon is essentially a planning agency—was not preparing for alternate scenarios that were, at the very least, equally likely. The neoconservative architects of the invasion seem not to have, at any point, seriously engaged the question, "What if things do not go the way we hope they will?" What if the Iraqis are glad to be rid of Saddam but not glad to have the Marines as neighbors? What if Ahmad Chalabi turns out not to be the next Vaclav Havel? The Pentagon spends hundreds of millions of dollars staging elaborate war games to help anticipate unexpected turns in battle. Somehow, it neglected to game out the postwar peace.

The assumption that events will conform to a preconceived model is a failing to which neoconservatives are notably vulnerable. Part of this may be Marxist residue that never quite washed off. The intellectual descendants of Trotskyists, the neocons find the idea of revolution from above, in which intellectuals and ideas play the crucial role, instinctively appealing. Many neocons also tend to buy into overly deterministic, Hegelian theories of history (see Fukuyama, Frank). In this sense, the assumption that Iraq was destined to become a liberal democracy with just a nudge from the United States is an error akin to Jeanne J. Kirkpatrick's Hannah Arendt-inspired view that Communist totalitarian societies could never reform from within. There was nothing wrong with that theory either, except that it happened to be completely wrong.

Another reason the neocons go for grand theories may be that their primary experience tends to come from the classroom, rather than the real world. Colin Powell, who took fire in Vietnam, has a visceral sense of what happens when a military engagement turns sour that those who served out the war at the University of Chicago may lack.

What's more, few neoconservatives have cultivated a deep appreciation or understanding of other cultures—unless you count the Athens of Pericles or Machiavelli's Florence.

Constrained within a strong foreign-policy-making apparatus, such as that of the previous President Bush, theory-makers can be highly valuable. People like Wolfowitz are assets when it comes to challenging the assumptions of pre-existing policies, bringing ambitious ideas into a debate, and articulating basic principles. Kirkpatrick, Richard Pipes, and others were useful in exactly this way under President Reagan. Under Reagan, the more ambitious fantasies of the neoconservatives were effectively checked by George Shultz and other practically minded policymakers.

Under the current Bush, however, the check was blank—Powell was beaten down while Condi Rice and Dick Cheney somehow went AWOL. The result was that a few charismatic, outside-the-box thinkers were able to bamboozle the president into mistaking their roll of the dice for a mature judgment. No wise old head (where was Brent Scowcroft when we needed him?) took the president aside to explain that winning a debate in the Cabinet room isn't the same thing as having a sensible policy. (Bush's tax cuts are another example of a similar phenomenon, driven by a different set of ideologues: the supply-siders.)

Back during the 2000 campaign, George Will and others argued that presidential intelligence didn't matter. This notion was reinforced after Sept. 11, when it became fashionable to argue that Bush's "moral clarity" was preferable to the ability to comprehend many sides of a complicated issue. In fact, presidential intelligence does matter. The intellectual qualities Bush lacks—historical knowledge, interest in the details of policy, and substantive (as opposed to political) judgment—might well have prevented the quagmire we're facing in Iraq right now. A more engaged president—one who understood, for instance, the difference between the Sunnis and the Shiites—surely would have asked about Plan B.

When Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki testified before the war that occupying Iraq would require a force of several hundred thousand troops, he was publicly repudiated by Wolfowitz and retired shortly thereafter. The State Department's "Future of Iraq" project, which drew heavily on Iraqi exiles, produced a 13-volume study that warned specifically about looting and anarchy. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld—who wanted to prove his own theories about how high-tech warfare reduced need for military manpower—personally told Gen. Jay Garner, the first head of the reconstruction effort, to ignore it.