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## Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq

From the title of my book, *Squandered Victory*, and perhaps from the subtitle, which asserts that we have bungled the post-war efforts to bring democracy to Iraq, people often assume that I believe we have failed in Iraq and should get out. Let me be clear: that is not my position. I do not think that the cause of democratic development in Iraq is lost, and as I will explain in speaking here today, I don't believe we should simply withdraw by some fixed and arbitrary timetable. However—you knew there was a “however” coming—I do believe we have made huge and costly mistakes in administering post-war Iraq and in preparing to enter Iraq militarily in the first place. As a result of these blunders we did squander the extraordinary military victory in Iraq that we won in the spring 2003, and we thereby allowed Iraq to slide into a state of perilous insecurity, which has crippled the country's economic and political reconstruction.

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I identify in this book a few key factors that I think explain our failure to stabilize post-war Iraq. The first is the failure to plan effectively for the post-war era, including putting enough troops in at the start to secure Iraq's facilities, cities and borders. Second, I talk about three strategic errors that I think we made early on: dissolving the entire Iraqi army, embarking on too sweeping a campaign of de-Baathification, and establishing a full-scale and largely American occupation of Iraq. Finally, our entire style and demeanor in Iraq, while often well-intentioned, was imperial, haughty, and ill-informed about Iraqi realities. I summarize the way we operated in Iraq with four pretty harsh words—arrogance, ignorance, isolation and, at times, incompetence. Because of these attitudes and mistakes, we bungled the effort to bring democracy to Iraq during our political administration of the country from the end of the war in April 2003 to the end of the political occupation on June 30, 2004. However, there is still a strong desire among the Iraqi people to have a decent, free and democratic society. I think, because of the difficulties of the situation, because of a number of mistakes we've made, because a number of the neighboring countries are trying to sabotage this, and because of everything we're up against, it's going to take much longer and be much more costly in lives and treasure than it might otherwise have been.

As I explain in my book, our political occupation of Iraq, which was administered by something called the “Coalition Provisional Authority” (CPA), was constantly torn between the idealistic goal of building an Iraqi democracy and the impulse for control. The tension was painfully evident in the leadership style of the American administrator, whom I worked with, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, III. Bremer was, in many respects, an enormously talented man; I had a lot of admiration for his courage, his work ethic, and his obvious dedication to the cause. However, as I say in my book, he failed to consult often enough or widely enough with Iraqi constituencies or even with his own CPA staff, and when he finally made adjustments they were too partial and too late in coming.

But it was not only Bremer who wanted to be in control. The governance office, which is where I worked, and the entire CPA oscillated between awareness of the need to discuss, negotiate and generate Iraq consent, and the desire, indeed, a mandate, to steer the broad force of Iraq's future. For the senior officials at the CPA it was an awkward situation. There were Iraqi ministers and there was, in each ministry, an American senior advisor. Who was really in control? The answer in the end was the message that Bremer constantly gave the Iraqi Governing Council—the body we appointed, even as he implored and negotiated with them—he

and the CPA were the ultimate authorities in Iraq so long as the CPA existed. But as you can imagine, this reality did not sit well with Iraqis, who did not like the very idea of occupation and expected to be regaining substantial control over their own affairs fairly quickly.

I must confess, I thought she was joking. We were fostering a transition to democracy and sovereignty in Iraq. We had established something called “the Iraqi Governing Council,” but God forbid they should actually seek to start governing! Beneath the humor was a dilemma that was never

people inspired me, they inspired my colleagues in the CPA as I’m sure they do now in the American embassy in Baghdad, and it’s part of what gave us hope and kept us going.

The major point of my book is that the Bush administration failed to prepare adequately for the post-war era. I think this is well established now in many other essays and articles and books. We did not have any real plan for the political transition after Baghdad fell. We did not have nearly enough troops in Iraq to fulfill the first moral, political and legal obligation of an occupying power in a post-war period and that is to restore and maintain order. The military side of our mission was shortchanged, not just of troops but of equipment and of protection, including effective armor for the vehicles and personnel. Many American soldiers and some civilians lost their lives because of these shortages, which were not filled even a year later when Secretary Rumsfeld, went to Kuwait, met the troops, was questioned about this shortage of armor for our Humvees and said in one of his famous lines, “You go to war with the army you have and not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time.” But by then, of course, it was a year and one-half since we had gone to war with the army we had.

These shortages drove to the heart of our problem in Iraq, which was a problem of, in my opinion, attitude in Washington and in the Green Zone—the four square mile area where the occupation was based. The civilian side of our mission was also persistently under-resourced and I experienced it in a very vivid way. We never had enough civilian staff, enough armored cars, body armor, helicopters, or other forms of secured transportation to move people around safely. I myself, had to cancel several speaking trips to try to engage Iraqis on issues of democratic development

effectively resolved during the period of our occupation, and this experience began a slow process of questioning, and on my part, disillusionment with the occupation from the inside, and as I suggested, it began very soon after I arrived.

Throughout my first several weeks in Iraq I remained hopeful and cautiously optimistic. I have to underscore that when you’re home in the United States, as we are now, you mainly see the relentless terrorist violence, insurgent assassinations, suicide bombings, and you think that’s all that’s going on in Iraq. But when you’re on the ground in Iraq you see that a lot more is happening. Schools and hospitals are being rebuilt, communities and commerce in many places are

reviving, a new generation of Iraqis are reporting the news, new civil society organizations are forming and trying to educate for democracy, lobby for women’s and human rights, document the terrible abuses of the Saddam Hussein era. Many Iraqis are cooperating with the American-led effort to rebuild the country—and not only for the pay. In fact, I met a great number of phenomenally brave Iraqis who were committed to rebuilding their country as a democracy despite the risks. This included many Iraqi-Americans who could have returned to a much safer and more comfortable existence here in this country. These

The problem began to hit me in stark relief three nights after I arrived in Baghdad early in January of 2004 when one of my colleagues on the governance staff stormed into the office after a meeting of the Iraqi Governing Council, slammed her purse down on her desk, and uttered, “We have a problem and no one wants to deal with it. The Iraqi Governing Council is starting to issue orders and the ministers are starting to obey them.” Several of us were standing around and we burst out laughing. On the face of it, this statement was absurd and in a way hilarious—initially,



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because there was no way I could get to these places safely and, frankly, I was only willing to go so far to risk my life in this venture. If we had gotten more armored cars we would still have needed many more personal security details to guard the CPA officials in them. We never had nearly enough translators and interpreters, nor did we,

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in my opinion, do even half of what we might have done to protect the lives of the brave Iraqis who came forward to translate for us. This became very personal for me because the Iraqi gentleman who was translating for our governance office was a man whose ability and courage I came to have great admiration for. He insisted on being our interpreter after very specific threats and warnings that they would kill him if he didn't stop working with the Americans and was, in fact, assassinated in January of this year.

We never really had enough expertise on the ground, people who knew the country, its culture, its history and who could speak its language with some fluency. Hence, the CPA relied heavily on the revolving door of diplomats and other personnel who would leave just as they began to gain local knowledge and understanding, and on a large cadre of

eager young neophytes. Many of them were very dedicated, patriotic and talented people but they generally lacked the experience and often the judgment for the awesome responsibilities they were given. In a society that is quite conscious of age and status, youthful American brashness could not help but offend. After weeks of difficult interactions, one of my Iraqi colleagues became exasperated with one of these young political workers within the CPA and challenged him in the following way: "You must," he said, "have thoroughly studied the history of the British occupation of Iraq." The young man sat up rather straight and proud and said, "Yes, as a matter of fact I did." The Iraqi said, "I thought so, because you seem determined to repeat every one of their mistakes."

We never listened carefully enough to the Iraqi people or to the figures within the country that *they* respected. We never won their trust and confidence. We failed to move with the necessary dispatch to transfer power to an Iraqi interim government, as I talk about in Chapter 10 of my book, that might have been chosen through a broad-based consultative process in which the U.N. could have and was willing to play a supporting role. In fact, we didn't give the U.N. the kind of role that I think could have spared us from many mistakes and from being perceived as an occupying power, until we ran into deep difficulty with our own plans and then we did make adjustments, but I think rather too little too late. Against the advice of most experts on Iraq and the region, we completely dissolved the Iraqi army, purged from public life a broad swathe of the existing elite in the de-Baathification campaign. That was necessary, but went too far. And so wound up alienating and marginalizing a whole section of the country, the best organized and best armed, until a series

of readjustments that were again too little, too late.

Against the advice of most people who knew Iraq well, including even the politicians in exile that we had been working with—like Ahmed Chalabi and Ayad Alawi—and flying in the face of a proud national history that we barely study, we established ourselves as an occupying power in Iraq in every respect and so ensured that we would face a dedicated, violent resistance without enough troops to cope. As a result, that violent resistance emerged, as many had warned it would, with elaborate organization and finance, frustrating and undermining post-war reconstruction at every turn. Electricity grids could not be revived, oil pipelines could not be repaired, reconstruction jobs could not be commissioned, supplies could not be delivered, civil society could not be revived and a transition democracy could not move forward nearly effectively enough because of the pervasive terrorist, criminal and insurgent violence. America was simply overmatched in this period in a post-war war for which it was grossly unprepared. This thing evolved in front of us. Major General Paul Eaton, who had overseen the training of the Iraqi army in 2003-04 told an American journalist in October of 2004, "and each day it got incrementally worse until it exploded."

Now, the administration frequently depicts the insurgency, the resistance, as consisting largely of foreign Islamic extremists. I want to say that these people are wicked and evil—all of them who are organizing this violence. Much of the worst violence, the suicide bombings, has been and is being organized by foreign jihadists like the Al Qaeda operative Musab as-Zarkawi. But every study that's been done, including by our own intelligence and military, confirms the fact that the

insurgency is overwhelming indigenous. I will tell you the one thing that unites its disparate political, religious, tribal and other community elements is a strong sense of Iraqi nationalism.

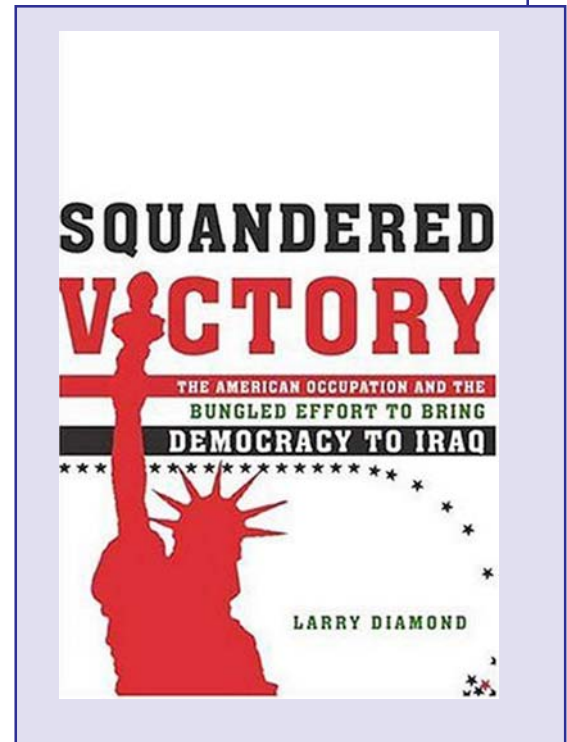
I think that part of what we lacked in this experience and sorely needed was empathy—an ability to see ourselves as the Iraqis saw us. We needed to put ourselves in Iraqis shoes, to feel their sense of pervasive insecurity after the fall of Saddam, their resentment of being occupied, their shame in the face of the pervasive American guns and check points and then the prison abuses, their powerlessness and outrage at having family members arrested and disappear into detention for weeks and months without knowing their status and the sheer physical difficulty of living in a country where it's 125-130 degrees in the summertime with electricity that may come on a few hours a day. With some capacity for empathy, honed, in part, through greater facility with the language and knowledge of the history and culture, we might have seen ourselves as a growing number of

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Iraqis were coming to see us—not as liberator, but as occupiers, offending their national honor and pride even as we sought sincerely to help them.

Now, I want to go from this analysis to the present and the future. I know that many Americans are asking now, “is it just too late to repair the situation? Shouldn't we just get out?” As I argue in the conclusion of my book, I am not prepared to give up on Iraq. We have assumed a moral and political obligation to the Iraqi people, the overwhelming majority of whom want to live in a decent and free society. And we have an obligation to ourselves, because if Iraq goes over the edge into true state collapse, an outright civil war, it will become what it was not before the invasion: a haven for international terrorists and a direct threat to our national security in the way that Afghanistan was before September 11. Moreover, American credibility throughout the Middle East would be severely damaged, and radical American Islamists would be emboldened by our withdrawal precipitously in a way that just lets the place fall into total civil war. At the same time, we have to recognize that we are mired in a costly stalemate in Iraq and we need a fairly bold adjustment of our strategy.

The Bush administration has been learning and adjusting. I give them credit for that, but I think it's been too incremental to date. Briefly, these are the kinds of steps I think we need to take, and I will largely repeat here what I wrote in an Op-Ed in the *Los Angeles Times* on July 3. First, we need to take the nationalists' anti-imperialist steam out of this insurgency, and there's one very clear step that is needed to begin this path. The president of the United States must declare that we do not have long-term imperial ambitions in Iraq and we will not seek long-term or permanent military bases there. One of



the primary tactical and political motivations of this insurgency, uniting all of its disparate factions, is precisely this suspicion that this is a major American goal in Iraq—permanent military bases. Many elements of the resistance have been signaling for a year and a half now that they want to talk directly to the United States. Part of what they want from the U.S. is a commitment, not to immediate, but to eventual full military withdrawal. I don't think we can set a fixed and arbitrary deadline for withdrawal, but we can and we should define some kind of time frame by which we expect to be gone, provided that the Iraqi security forces can basically come up to the ability and the situation can stabilize to the extent that they can secure the situation by then. Then the burden shifts to these various elements of the resistance who are saying, “we want our country back,” to cooperate in the restoration of order so that Americans and other international troops can leave.

Second, we need a strategy to bring into the political process the marginalized Sunni element—about 20 percent of the population—who used to exercise most of the political power in the country. Here, I think, the Iraqi transitional government and the Bush administration have been moving in the right direction. There were virtually no Sunnis—two—on the 55-member constitution drafting committee because the Sunnis boycotted the January 30 elections, a huge mistake on their part, and had very few members in parliament as a result. So they were brought in and they now have 15 members of what is an enlarged 70-member constitution drafting committee. That's an important beginning. This pattern of inclusion and dialogue needs to be continued through engagement with the authentic Sunni tribal political and religious communities who have the capacity, I believe, to wind down—not eliminate—but diminish this violence significantly if they feel they have a stake in the new political order.

Third, no U.S. effort to widen Iraq's political arena and diminish the insurgency can succeed on its own. Obviously, it needs the prominent participation of the Iraqi transitional government, but it also needs

international involvement and mediation. We overcame a potentially disastrous political stalemate with the Shiite religious leader, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, in early 2004 when I was in Iraq, when we brought back the U.N. and worked with it in partnership to

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mediate for us with some Iraqis. I give the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, in particular, significant credit for taking the initiative here to arrange this when the opportunity emerged. We need a new effort of mediation in Iraq involving not just ourselves but the U.N. and perhaps a small contact group

of foreign diplomats resident in Baghdad. Obviously, we need to continue to provide a great deal of technical and reconstruction assistance. We've got a lot in the pipeline; a lot of that \$18.4 billion that was appropriated for this purpose in November 2003 is still unspent because of the insecurity in the country. So, if we're going to spend it effectively to improve the situation on the ground we have to turn a corner more sharply on the insurgency.

Finally, I do believe we need to change our attitude. We have to proceed in Iraq and in the region with a great deal more humility and a more acute understanding of the culture, the language, the history and more concern to find real political partners. We need to recognize throughout the region, as we seek to promote democracy in the way President Bush has called for, that the process of developing democracy will be a long and painful one and we cannot dictate the outcomes. I do not know if we will succeed in Iraq in the end if we take these steps, but I do believe we will fail if we do not. I don't think we have to keep bungling in Iraq. So, gravely worried though I am, I do not think that our squandered victory in the spring of 2003 will mean defeat for democracy in Iraq.

Thank you.

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