Military Interventions and the "Lessons of Iraq"

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The disastrous invasion of Iraq has shed a stark light on the limitations of military interventions. Much of the ensuing skepticism is quite healthy. But there is a risk that "the lessons of Iraq" will be learnt to the exclusion of lessons that can be drawn from the more than two dozen other interventions of the post-Cold War era.

All states face a fundamental dilemma when they intervene to impose political order in weak and failed states. They can choose to accommodate all armed groups in the target state in a powersharing arrangement. Alternatively, they can attempt to enforce their preferred political order, either by ensuring the military victory of their preferred faction or by deploying their own forces to create a demilitarized space in which broader political participation and the rule of law can—in theory, at least—evolve. All of these alternatives present characteristic trade-offs. The first option presents the lowest risks to intervening forces but tends to yield unstable regimes in all but the most benign environments (Roeder and Rothchild 2005). The second option—backing a proxy—commonly produces regimes that are more stable but often highly repressive.[1] The final option—the enforcement of a demilitarized space in which relatively more democratic politics can evolve—presents the highest risks of all. It engages intervening forces in direct confrontation with local parties who stand to lose from political change. On the other hand, if successful, this option promises the most benign political order of the three alternatives.[2]

My research suggests that nearly every instance of significant democratization during the course of a military intervention has occurred during an enforcement-type mission—that is, an operation in which intervening forces have the authorization and capabilities to use force to ensure the success of their mission.[3] Diplomacy and aid do not appear to be enough to leverage significant democratic change in the wake of major civil wars or state failure. Moreover, only a small handful of states have strategic cultures that predispose them toward intrusive strategies of state-building. Obviously, such approaches to intervention carry enormous risks: They are much more likely to lead to fiascoes such as those in Iraq or Somalia. They also appear to offer the best hope for promoting positive political change in places such as Bosnia and Sierra Leone.

Understanding these trade-offs is critical for understanding the likely consequences of a future "Iraq Syndrome" parallel to the "Vietnam Syndrome" of a generation ago. In particular, if overdrawn, the "lessons of Iraq" may have two negative effects.

First, before the invasion of Iraq, many observers advocated a policy of fewer but more militarily robust humanitarian missions. Having seen a number of awkward, UN-brokered powersharing structures overthrown militarily, they recommended interventions that would present a credible deterrent to potential "spoilers." Since the United States and Great Britain are two of only a handful of states capable of anchoring such robust missions, a broad reaction against military interventions in these countries will make effective humanitarian and peace operations less common.

An "Iraq Syndrome" presents a second risk in the context of counter-terrorist operations. In the wake of the Vietnam War, the United States adopted a policy of arming and funding American proxies throughout the world, regardless of their political legitimacy or human rights records. Abandoning a quixotic quest for democracy promotion with limited means and with little attention to local contexts would clearly be a welcome turn for U.S. foreign policy. But if the alternative to liberal internationalist "nation-building" is a realpolitik "nation-building" that supports repressive, autocratic forces around the world, then democracy promotion might not turn out to be the most pernicious American policy of the post-Cold War era.

The Iraq fiasco returned a critical dose of skepticism to American debates on intervention. The challenge now is to integrate this skepticism with a recognition of the limits inherent in alternative strategies of promoting relatively benign political orders in weak and failed states.

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Notes

1. On the consequences of outright military victory in civil wars, see Licklider (1995).

2. Hegre et al. (2001) argue that mature democracies are the most peaceful and stable regime type.

3. Enforcement operations can be contrasted to consensual peace operations, such as the multidimensional, traditional, and observer missions in Doyle and Sambanis' (2000) typology.

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