

# Why the US and its high-tech weapons failed in Iraq

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**W**HEN Saddam Hussein's regime ruled Iraq, it depended on use of its massive military and security apparatus to force the majority Shites into submission. The regime created the so-called Republican Guards whose sole purpose was to terrorize the Shites and ensure Saddam's dictatorship backed up by the minority Sunni Arabs. Ultimately, they failed and Saddam paid with his life for the atrocities committed by his regime and the once-dominant Sunnis are now at the mercy of the Shiite majority.

Similarly, when the Americans invaded Iraq in 2003 to dismantle its non-existent weapons of mass destruction and its unproven links with Al Qaeda, it was thought to be an easy victory. On March 20, 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched with massive air strikes by stealth and B52 bombers raining down laser-guided weapons of mass destruction and heavy artillery bombardment. The "shock and awe" was so pervasive that American military historians Williamson Murray and Robert Scales Jr. described this as America's serving notice "to the entire world that the United States has the capacity and will to defeat rogue states ... who threatened the vital interests of the American people." U.S. President George W. Bush piloted a fighter jet to land on an aircraft carrier to declare, "The mission

accomplished."

But the battle victory turned out to be a defeat in the war to conquer and pacify Iraq. In the years that followed, the United States became embroiled in a war with no end in sight. While American and British forces quickly occupied Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom didn't bring the anticipated victory after the collapse of the Ba'athist regime. Rather, an unconventional war, unanticipated by the United States and its CIA, has been taking heavy tolls of American and Iraqi lives. By the end of 2006 more than 3,000 American troops and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis had been killed by an array of different insurgent groups using such low-tech weapons as roadside improvised explosive devices (IED) and suicide bombings.

These attacks quickly became increasingly vicious and shocking. The Sunni insurgents expanded the war by systematically slaughtering the Shites, hoping to trigger a Shi-Sunni civil war. Who can forget the horrific sight of the destruction of Askarya Mosque – one of holiest Shiite shrines? And in grim flashback of Somalia in 1993 when jeering Somalis tore down the bodies of downed American helicopter pilots, angry Iraqi mobs burnt bodies of four American contractors in Fallujah, triggering a US counter attack. But American casualties continue to mount as more helicopters are being shot down and more Americans are being killed by roadside bombs. The war in Iraq is

far from over.

The destruction of the Golden Mosque triggered the Shiite backlash and much feared Shi-Sunni civil war has been unleashed and the Americans seem to be impotent to contain it. In fact, the Americans are now facing a multi-faced conflict that is beyond their control. The Sunni insurgents are carrying out suicide bombings of the Shites districts and attacking the Americans through IEDs and sniper attacks. The Shiite militias such as the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades are killing the Sunnis and attacking the Americans through their own roadside bombings.

Both of them also have their own regional supporters. The Sunni insurgents enjoy the support of other Sunni Arabs, especially in Saudi Arabia. Many Saudi nationals are sympathetic to the Sunni insurgents who are fighting Shiite domination of Iraq. As such, most of supports, both financial and material, are coming from the Sunnis from countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. And the United States cannot do anything against these countries because they are traditional allies of America. But with friends like these who need enemies!

Similarly, the Shites enjoy the support of Shiite Iran and Iranian Mullahs have been supplying weapons and cash for the Shiite militias in their war against the Sunnis and Americans. For Iran, the ouster of the Sunni-dominated Ba'athist regime has opened an opportunity

to expand Iranian influence in Iraq. As a result, the Americans are caught between two proxy wars carried out by the Shiite Iran and Sunni Arab neighbours and this is a war the Americans cannot win.

With Shi-Sunni conflict raging out of control, any surge in American troops will only mean more American casualties. It must be understood that peace and stability in Iraq cannot be purchased by shedding more American blood. Only Iraqis can do this by coming to an agreement among the Sunnis and the Shites and the neighbouring countries. As long as American troops are embroiled in the conflict, this will not happen. The United States can invade Iran to punish it for its support for the Shiite militias in Iraq. But by doing so, it will expose itself to renewed attacks by the Sunni insurgents with the support from other Sunni Arabs in Saudi Arabia and other countries. By expanding the war, America will only help the Sunni insurgents to attack the Shites and the Americans on the back.

The Bush administration invaded Iraq on the false intelligence about weapons of mass destruction. Now it must not act on flimsy ground of Iran supplying weapons to Shites. It should look to Iraq's own history for the answer. Although the long history of Shi-Sunni conflict started in Karbala in Iraq, Iraq enjoyed the greatest period of peace and

prosperity during the Abbasid Sunnis dynasty. Iraq was embroiled in Shi-Sunni conflict until 750 AD, when the formation of the Abbasid Caliphate began what is called the golden age in the history of the Arabs, Islam and Iraq. Lasting until 1258, the Abbasid Caliphate was marked by great achievements in science, literature and philosophy. Baghdad became the capital of Abbasid Empire -- and the Abbasids brought a blending of Persian and Arab cultures to the city. Although the Abbasids were Sunnis, they accepted the Shites as fellow Muslims following a different variety of Islam. They also brought about peace with Shiite Iran.

The Abbasids achieved this through tolerance and mutual respect. The Shiite tribes were allowed maximum autonomy to carry out their own tribal and religious customs. They were accepted as partners and not enemies. As a result, peace and prosperity reigned in Iraq. Later in the Abbasid rule, cleavages between Shites and Sunnis resurfaced when Sunnis Caliphs failed to act impartially. By the 13th century, these differences had made Iraq vulnerable to the invasion of Genghis Khan and his Mongol hordes who captured Baghdad in 1258, ending the Abbasid dynasty. Iraq had never seen peace and prosperity since then.

The Americans should take a



look at Iraqi history and withdraw from Iraq, letting the Iraqis find a solution themselves. Iraqis must go back to their own history and re-enact the achievements of the Abbasids, by reaching out to each other without foreign intervention. The Bush administration must realize that democracy cannot be imposed by force. It must grow

within over a period of time. The Americans, like the Mongols before them, have only brought war, chaos and destruction to Iraq. Similarly, the short American occupation has only brought increased sufferings to Iraq. Now the Americans let the Iraqis find their own answers to

their miseries. If US high-tech weapons could not defeat the low-tech weapons of the insurgents, how can they bring democracy in Iraq? Only a political settlement involving Sunnis and Shias and their regional backers like Iran and Saudi Arabia can bring peace and stability in Iraq.

The author is a freelancer.

## Getting real about the war on terror

MICHAEL HIRSH

**D**URING Watergate, the Nixon administration was fond of issuing "non-denial denials" -- criticizing The Washington Post's reporting on the scandal without denying the facts in the stories outright. The Bush administration has grown enamored of making what I would call "non-concession concessions." President George W. Bush and his senior aides are correcting course big time -- and implicitly admitting previous errors -- without any acknowledgement that they are

doing so.

One such concession was the administration's decision to drop its opposition to talks with Iran and Syria at a regional conference on Iraq. "There's no change in our policy," insisted State Department spokesman Sean McCormack this week. But going back to 2002, the administration has consistently resisted engaging Iran and Syria on Iraq, even in the context of multilateral talks. In a meeting with former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan in the summer of 2002, Iran's deputy foreign minister at the time, Javad Zarif, suggested that

the governments launch a "six-plus-five" process on Iraq -- meaning the "Permanent Five" UN Security Council members plus the six neighboring countries surrounding Iraq, including Iran. The Bush administration dismissed the idea. But that's exactly the kind of meeting that's now scheduled to happen in March and April.

Another shift came two weeks ago: the administration, which had long declared it would not succumb to Kim Jong Il's "nuclear extortion," announced an aid-for-nukes pact with North Korea. When I asked her about the new agreement at a Feb.

13 briefing, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice denied that it was a change of position, saying the deal was similar to a plan the administration was contemplating back in 2002 "when we got derailed." Hard not to see that as a reversal, though, since in Bush's first term, the administration made clear it would not even consider sitting down with the North Koreans unless Kim Jong Il dismantled his nuclear program first.

In fact, the whole premise of Bush's first-term policy was called into question Wednesday when the vice president mentioned that congressional Democrats were threatening mildly to cut off aid.

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This amounted to the vice president conceding that America is so constrained in Iraq, in terms of troops and resources, that it dares not put

too much pressure on its dubious ally, Musharraf, any longer. On the contrary, the meeting was friendly, Kasuri said. "There was talk of the [Taliban's] spring offensive. Naturally, we are worried, and the Americans are worried."

There's been no bigger non-concession concession than Dick Cheney's bomb-plagued visit to Afghanistan this week. Though you won't hear Cheney or any senior Bush official say it, the veep's surprise diversion to troubled Central Asia from a trip to the Far East was an acknowledgement, in effect, that the administration's confident assessments of Afghanistan have been mostly hype. As recently as last September, former Defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Afghanistan was making "excellent" progress. But now it is plain that

increasingly large portions of the country are falling under control of the taliban again.

Cheney may have gone to the region to try to crack down on the rising threat. But he found himself hamstrung in making tough demands of the Pakistani president. In an interview with NEWSWEEK on Wednesday, Pakistani Foreign Minister Mian Khurshed Mehmood Kasuri said that, contrary to media reports, Cheney did not read the "riot act" to Musharraf, even though the vice president mentioned that congressional Democrats were threatening mildly to cut off aid. (Cheney himself, in remarks to reporters on his plane, denied that he had "beat up" on Musharraf.)

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How worried? Bush announced two weeks ago that he needed money to double the size of Afghanistan's national army, and he was extending the stay of 3,200 U.S. troops. What this means is that a lot of mistakes are coming back to haunt us at once in a part of the world that was home to the 9/11 plotters place that may be failing because it is the victim of what Bush's former Afghan envoy, Jim Dobbins, calls "the most under resourced nation-building effort in history." The United States has consistently put Afghanistan on lesser priority than Iraq, says former Pakistan diplomat Husain

Haqqani. "And so when you do that, you end up depending on warlords in Afghanistan, and you have to take what you get from Pakistan." And what Musharraf is willing to give, according to Haqqani and others, is the bare minimum. Until Cheney's visit, it had been more than a year since Pakistan offered up a high-level arrest or target to Washington.

But abruptly Thursday, after weeks of denying that fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Omar or other senior Taliban officials were in the town of Quetta, Pakistan's government announced the arrest of a senior Taliban official there. Says Haqqani: "Most of Musharraf's actions against jihadis have been reluctantly taken under tremendous U.S. pressure, often preceding or just following a high-level American visit." (The Pakistan foreign minister insists this is nonsense that his government is doing everything it can. But its influence is limited in the tribal areas. "What we're trying to do is wean people away from the militants," he says.)

Above all, Cheney's trip was a tacit admission that the administration took its eye off the main task when it pivoted from Al Qaeda's base, in the mountains of Afghanistan, toward Iraq in early 2002. Indeed, the fact that Al Qaeda-type terrorists have rebuilt their haven in Afghanistan and the border region of Pakistan - combined with the fact that a new failed state has emerged in parts of Iraq - is the most powerful evidence to date that the Bush administration may have misconceived the "war on terror." Al Qaeda was always a transnational movement, one rooted in failed states and in uncontrolled areas like those in Afghanistan and Pakistan. What's

now become clear is that the real center of gravity in the global war on terror was not "state sponsors" like Saddam (or the Iranians for that matter). Based on the evidence, these states were little more than interested observers, perhaps supplying some help or encouragement or looking the other way, but that's about it.

There was only one fully committed state sponsor: Afghanistan's Taliban government, a movement bought and paid for by Osama bin Laden's money. And we must now conclude that Bush's critical diversion of attention and resources away from that fight cost us the death blow the United States might have delivered to both Al Qaeda and the Taliban had we stayed focused on Central Asia. (Just ask Gary Bernstein, the CIA officer in charge of the "Jawbreaker" operation at Tora Bora, who implored Rumsfeld in vain for more U.S. special forces while the trapped bin Laden escaped and the Pentagon began to turn its attention to Iraq.) Just as bad, the invasion of Iraq gave the Al Qaeda chieftain a new lease on life by vindicating his argument about the peril of the "far enemy," as the United States was known in his group's rhetoric. On the eve of 9/11, according to documents obtained from Al Qaeda's seized computers, bin Laden and his top aide, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had difficulty persuading their fellow jihadis that it was wise to take on the distant superpower. (One of them even compared bin Laden's grandiose war against America to "tilting at windmills.")

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Al Qaeda rhetoric - in the Arab world by invading Iraq.

And now the merger between the old "near enemy" - the Sunni Arab regimes - and the new "near enemy" America - is all but complete. The president's newest conception of the global war on terror is that it is a fight that pits him and fellow "moderates" (Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, King Abdullah of Jordan and so on) on one side against "extremists" (the democratically empowered Islamists like Hamas and Hezbollah, who've been grouped with Al Qaeda) on the other. This is a dramatic expansion of bin Laden's political base and undoubtedly, if he is still alive, it is a dream come true.

So we have gone from a war with just one front, Afghanistan, to a war on many fronts. Iraq is failing, and it has become a jihad factory that could easily dwarf what Afghanistan was to Al Qaeda in the '90s. Afghanistan itself, meanwhile, seems to be making a comeback as a home to extremists. Yes, it's a good thing that the administration is finally getting real on many issues and ridding itself of previous unworkable or ill-considered policies. The Bush team appears more willing to negotiate - with North Korea, Iran and Syria - than ever before, and more open to acknowledging the hellhole Afghanistan has become.

But while it has been belatedly getting its head straight, the rather simple battlefield Bush once faced on 9/11 has become infinitely more complex. And no amount of non-concession concessions will change that ugly reality.

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## Straying from the script

MICHAEL ISIKOFF and MARK HOSENBERG

**A** N anonymous US official, assigned to provide a recent "background" briefing to the news media in Baghdad, strayed from his script and overstated evidence linking Iranian leaders to weapons found in Iraq, according to four US intelligence officials familiar with the matter.

The White House is still trying to recover from the stumble, which happened during a much-anticipated Feb. 11 briefing. US officials had hoped to use the event to ratchet up pressure on the Tehran regime.

But instead of focusing public and congressional attention on the role of Iranian government agents in stoking violence in Iraq, the briefing wound up raising new questions about whether the Bush administration is hyping intelligence about Iran in much the same way it did about Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq four years ago.

The briefing has also inadvertently called attention to what may be an even more serious problem: the limits of US intelligence in deciphering Iranian government

technical intelligence about the country's military and nuclear programs, US intelligence agencies are being forced once again to fall back on "deductions" and "inferences."

In many ways, this is the same "guesswork" process that a White House review panel later concluded was governed by "groupthink" conclusions -- which ultimately led to wrong calls about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

The briefing, which took place at the US Embassy in Baghdad, was billed in advance as the forum in which the Bush administration would finally lay out its most disturbing findings about Iran's role in Iraq.

It was originally scheduled to take place before Feb. 11, but was delayed -- which increased anticipation about what would be revealed.

Three briefers -- one described as a "senior defense official," another as a US military "analyst" and the third as a US military "explosives expert" -- were assigned to conduct the session.

But their full names and titles were not provided to the attending journalists (an unusual step even for "background" briefings), in order to protect their anonymity.

In addition, cameras and tape recorders were banned from the session and no transcript was made, leading administration critics

to charge that the White House was afraid to expose its evidence to full public scrutiny.

According to several Washington intelligence officials involved in monitoring fallout from the presentation, the Baghdad briefers were supposed to stick closely to a script and slide show about Iranian weapons shipments into Iraq that had been carefully vetted by the National Security Council in Washington.

The slide show's contents also had been approved by US intelligence agencies, including the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the CIA.

The slide show, which was later e-mailed to NEWSWEEK by a US military spokesman in Baghdad, includes a flat assertion that "Iran is a significant contributor to attacks on Coalition forces and also supports violence against the Iraqi Security Force and innocent Iraqis."

It continues with explicit claims that the Quds Force provided weapons and money to Iraqi militants engaged in anti-US attacks.

In the absence of an official transcript, the briefer's precise words are unclear. Most news accounts quoted the briefer as saying that the "highest levels" of the Iranian government had authorized the weapons shipments.

The Iranian government.

According to the four US intelligence officials (who, like all government sources in this story, would not be named talking about intelligence matters), the BBC account is an accurate reflection of the view of most US intelligence analysts.

Based on the way analysts understand the historical and day-to-day relationship between the Iranian government and the Quds Force, US agencies believe that someone at the top of the Iranian government had to know about and probably authorized the Quds Force to ship weapons to Shia militias in Iraq for use against US troops.

The US officials said this deduction is based on the US understanding that the Quds Force is tightly controlled by top Iraqi leaders -- as is its parent organization, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, one of Iran's principal internal security forces.

But the US officials acknowledge that what the briefer said in Baghdad is only a deduction -- in other words a guess, perhaps even an educated guess.

The "assessment," the four sources said, is not backed up by hard intelligence linking any specific weapons shipments or Quds Force activity in Iraq to any specific order by any individual Iranian leader.

Various reports -- and some statements by US officials -- have suggested that the Quds Force reports to either Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, or Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme religious leader.

But the intelligence officials said the US government has no intelligence reporting proving that either of these leaders knew about or issued any order regarding the shipment of weapons into Iraq.

"The Quds Force is like a special unit that reports to the leadership. They take direction from the leadership," said one Defense official in Washington, who is familiar with intelligence reporting and analysis on the subject. But, the official added: "Who gives the order, we don't know."

Another official who has monitored relevant intelligence reporting said allegations that top Iranian leaders approved alleged Quds Force activity in Iraq is at best circumstantial.

"There is no evidence Quds has authorization to kill Americans ... or that the ayatollah knows what an EFP is," the official said.

The official added that he believes the Baghdad briefer who made the inflated claims now "regrets the certainty" with which the original assertion was