Just days before the late-September disclosures of intelligence projections of growing, long-term violence in Iraq, I attended a forum here in Washington on September 19 hosted by the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI). The forum revealed how great the disconnect is between hard-nosed, insider assessments of the situation in Iraq and what the Bush administration continues to say about staying the course until victory over terrorists is won.

The FPRI forum introduced two new reports on America’s continuing efforts to try to stabilize and reconstruct Iraq more than three years after the U.S. military toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein. The reports, based on extensive interviews with Americans and Iraqis both inside and outside the military, were written by Andrew Garfield, now a Fellow at FPRI and formerly a senior British military and intelligence officer and advisor to the British defense ministry, and by Frank G. Hoffman, a retired Marine officer and Pentagon analyst who also now serves as a Fellow at FPRI. The reports can be obtained from FPRI at 1528 Walnut St., Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102; www.fpri.org; 215-732-3774.

Both reports emphasize that the troubles and disorder in Iraq today reflect, in part, failed American strategies from the beginning. The U.S. has needed a comprehensive approach to Iraq and not only a military aim. Now during the supposed stabilization and reconstruction phase of American involvement, military force is of limited utility. Other capabilities are more important, but it may be too late for the U.S. to develop and exercise them in Iraq. American civilian leaders and military forces still lack adequate understanding of the complex and diverse cultures in Iraq even though one of the most important ingredients of this kind of engagement is “winning the support of the people.” According to the authors, the U.S. is conducting more of an anti-insurgency campaign (to kill insurgents) than a counter-insurgency campaign (to build security and confidence among the people so they will want to resist the insurgents). Only the latter can be successful.

The two reports imply, even when they do not say it directly, that the longer the mismatch of American tools and Iraq’s needs continues, the less and less likely it will be
that stability and reconstruction can succeed. The Iraqi national government, which the U.S. put in place too quickly without adequate foundations or popular support is still not in a position to command and control Iraq’s national military forces that the U.S. is trying to “stand up.” According to Garfield, “Many Iraqis believe that the Iraqi government and the [American-led] Coalition have failed them. They do not feel safe, essential services are intermittent at best, their standard of living has declined, and they have lost hope that the future will be any better. For most, the objective is simply to make it safely through the day. Worse still, many now see parts of their government as a threat to their well-being.”

American-led Coalition forces are also not recognized by the people as having sufficient legitimacy to do the job that needs to be done. As Garfield states it: “Most interviewees felt that in Iraq the Coalition had even today far less legitimacy than was the minimum necessary for success, for reasons including the lack of a second UN resolution [to support the 2003 invasion]; the failure to locate any WMD; excessive civilian casualties owing to the indiscriminate use of force; the failure to properly secure Iraq after the invasion, mainly because of insufficient forces and misunderstanding the situation; a lack of cultural awareness; hugely underestimating the degree of likely opposition; a continued inability to protect ordinary Iraqis; and failure to quell the growing insurgency.”

Coalition forces are not large enough or trained sufficiently to control the population and to stop the infiltration of dangerous elements across Iraq’s borders. Once again, Garfield’s summary: “Most interviewees felt the Coalition had failed to achieve any meaningful degree of population control, for reasons including inadequate troop levels; a force-protection obsession that encouraged seeing all Iraqis as potential threats; the lack of cultural awareness; the excessive use of force and indiscriminate and poorly targeted cordon-and-search operations; and the failure to provide adequate security for most Iraqis, which encouraged many to form or join militias, resulting in the creation of virtual no-go areas. The Coalition’s inability to control the population has allowed the insurgents to train, organize, and operate with relative impunity.”

Hoffman contends that the Marines are so well-trained to be flexible that they have done a remarkable job adjusting to changing circumstances and taking on new assignments in Iraq. However, in the future, he says, military efforts should not have to “always rely upon completely ad hoc solutions with tools ill-suited for the purpose. Nor should operations be conducted in such a way that they engender or actively motivate a resistance to our own policy aims.” Hoffman’s overarching metaphor to describe what he found in his research is that of trying to change tires on a moving car. “Changing flat tires is a messy necessity of modern life,” he writes, “but it doesn’t have to be done on a moving car—while being shot at. Nor does it have to be done with one arm (or agency). This will require additional educational, doctrinal, and some force structure changes within the American national security community. Just as important, it will require additional investment in non-military tools to ensure that tomorrow’s Cyclops has a holistic ‘lens’ and is fully armed with all elements of national power.”

Neither of these scholars makes any judgments about the advisability or the justice of the Bush administration’s decision to go into Iraq in the first place. They are writing from the perspective of the present and assessing what has gone right and wrong in order to try to draw lessons for future action. Nonetheless, if one places their reports in the larger
context of American foreign and defense policy since 9/11, one can see more clearly the huge predicament that the United States now faces because of its decision to invade Iraq in 2003 the way it did.

In several September speeches, President Bush addressed the engagement in Iraq largely in terms of the international war on terrorism. His overt statements and implications conveyed the idea that America is winning the war on terrorism and can continue to do so only if it stays the course in Iraq until Iraq can defend itself. But much of the so-called “war” on terrorism is succeeding, when it does, because of the intelligence and police efforts of many nations capturing terrorists or breaking up terrorist plots. America’s military engagement in Iraq has little to do with any of that. On the other hand, many critics have indicated that the extended war in Iraq, which has led to what Garfield and Hoffman show to be more failure than success, has provided an inspiring training ground for terrorists. So we could more logically draw the conclusion that by staying the course in Iraq and doing what we have been doing, we will continue to foment terrorism and possibly help to produce another failed state. Yet the president is correct that simply pulling out of the mess we have helped to create in Iraq is no answer either.

So the proper response to the crisis in Iraq and to continuing threats from terrorists would seem to demand that the United States take an very different approach to the engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan (which is also breaking down), and to other dangerous states and terrorist groups around the world. Yet this is where the frank realism of the Garfield and Hoffman reports should startle us. The prospects for change, they contend, are very long term and not short term at all.

From a just-war point of view, which is the perspective from which I have been trying to evaluate the American response to 9/11 ever since that fateful day, the situation appears bleak indeed. For if the U.S. violated most if not all of the just-war criteria by its invasion of Iraq in 2003 and by its means of occupying it ever since (see my “Evaluating America’s Engagement in Iraq with Just-War Criteria,” Public Justice Report, 4th quarter, 2005), then there are no easy ways to overcome such mistakes. The errors have not only been militarily tactical or strategic; they have been the kind of political, diplomatic, and legal errors that have produced growing disrespect for American actions; an inability to secure the country we invaded; an inability to win adequate support from other nations whom we cut off at the outset; an over-extension of military and police forces without the ability now to beef them up quickly in a way that Americans themselves could support; and a mode of argument and choice of policies that the Bush administration refuses to back away from for fear that by acknowledging its failures it may encourage terrorists.

It would appear then, as President Bush himself has indirectly suggested, that regardless of what happens in this November’s elections, any significant changes in American policies toward terrorism, Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond, will have to await the arrival of a new administration in 2009. Yet that is so far in the future relative to the crises that now engulf us that we must hope and pray for some kind of massive change for the better in world affairs, whether that change is initiated, encouraged, or simply recognized and acknowledged in Washington.

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