

The Iraq War and the Utility of Force

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The invasion of Iraq by the United States and the United Kingdom in 2003 was justified by the reasoning “that they were acting to enforce the ‘will’ of the UN Security Council, that they were responding to a ‘material breach’ of the cease-fire that ended the 1991 Gulf War, and also that they were pre-empting Iraq’s future potential use of weapons of mass destruction.”[1] Force can and often is used to eradicate an enemy’s capabilities and resources, including forced disarmament of weapons that are perceived as a threat to a state’s personal security.[2] Military force was used throughout the war, with mixed levels of efficiency. Whilst eventual success was achieved, strong opposition to the war as well as a lack of evidence for the reasons behind it question whether this use of force was justified, and whether the same goals could not have been achieved through a more efficient use of weaker force.

The Iraq war could be viewed as being made up of two main parts: the initial one was to remove Saddam Hussein from power and remove the threat of weapons of mass destruction: the second to help instigate stability and to set up conditions suitable for a thriving democracy. However, the conflict did not end after the positive goal of Hussein’s removal was achieved. As observed by The Project on Defence Alternatives based in Cambridge Massachusetts: “The rush into a large military operation precluded making adequate arrangements for the post war political environment and humanitarian needs”. [3] Even after the surrender of Iraqi forces [4] the British and American military had to remain in Iraq in order to fight a war against local insurgents and terrorists. Although much of the then increased violence was a result of the dictator’s removal and thus a result of the American and British troops’ actions [5], they were unprepared and uncertain as to how to deal with the insubordination of the Iraqi nation on such a large scale with an effective utility of force. The masses of casualties caused and the millions of dollars wasted should be taken into account by these Western states when assessing whether the use of force was appropriate, and lead to an increased awareness that sheer force isn’t always an effective means to achieve your goals in a foreign state: economic, political, religious and social factors are equally, if not more important. Extreme consideration should be taken before attempting to exercise similar strategies in the case of dealing with insurgents in potential future wars after the lessons learnt in Iraq.

In the initial part of the war, force was used extremely effectively by American troops. The coalition forces were far better organised and the Iraq forces seemed completely unprepared and uncertain of how to respond to their advance. [6] The capital of Baghdad was captured quickly and easily, with minimal damage to troops and with a minimal loss of civilian life. [7] However this could also be credited to extremely ineffective use of force by the Iraqi army. Their military strategy was poorly organised, especially in regard to lack of coordination between their air force and the Air Defence Command [8].

The initial minimum life loss during the war was especially important in the U.S; as it has been considered a major point that that the U.S public, following the tragedies of the Vietnam War, would only support military operations where the cost to human life as measured by combat casualties was minimal. [9] Without support of the public at home, it becomes difficult to justify the use of force, especially when considered that there had been large amounts of opposition to the mission in the first place, on both a national [10] [11] and international level. [12]

The use of force in the initial part of the Iraq war can be understood from a realist viewpoint. It involved conventional warfare between two states both employing their national army. The U.S had superior military power and used appropriate tactics to secure their political aims of capturing the capital and removing the nation’s leader. There is not

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that much to be learned from the war so far as this: the U.S knew how to tackle a foreign state's military; it is known for the future that the tactics they deployed and the utility of force were effective, and are likely to be appropriate to use in a similar fashion in future conflicts. Issues arose after the official surrender.

In May 2003 the President of the U.S George Bush declared the end of major combat operations.[13] The removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq however created a large power vacuum in the country, which many terrorists and local insurgents rushed to try and fill[14]. It has been argued that only a dictatorship with followers as loyal as Saddam Hussein's truly had the power to control the many warring factions within Iraq. America believed it would be just as easy to instigate a new regime as to remove an old one[15], and were thus unprepared for when peace proved far more difficult to organise and control than the takedown of the Iraqi army. The Bush administration showed itself to be more concerned with the removal of insurgents[16]: the country's reconstruction was more of an obligation that felt necessary, although this may be in part down to the role of personality in the U.S leader, George Bush. Despite advice and protest from both official advisers and his own nation's general opinion, Bush choose to invade Iraq, and shunned those who doubted his decision[17]. Had there been a different political leader, with more liberal or tolerant views, the war might have used force in a very different way.

Jamal Benomar stated important lessons in trying to develop constitutions after conflict. Amongst these was the lesson of "promoting legitimacy by encouraging popular participation"[18]. The context in which America tried to promote democracy to Iraq may have been viewed as potentially counterproductive. One appeal for democracy is it is supposed to promote a peaceful society[19], yet the United States, one of the world's leading democracies[20], invaded and took over Iraq by force, and killed thousands of innocent civilians. Local people would resent this invasion by foreigners, and may possibly have viewed voting as something to go against, if only because it was encouraged by a state that many would have viewed as the enemy.

One key theory suggested for fighting insurgents in guerrilla warfare is that the centre of gravity that needs to be achieved to tip the balance in ones favour is to "win the hearts and minds of the people".[21] By gaining support from the local population, the American's could have helped to ensure cooperation and participation in local government, which would have meant the balance of power could have been transferred back to the Iraqi people far sooner, leading to earlier withdrawal from Iraq and saving millions of dollars. However, America demonstrated an ineffective utility of force: they continued to use extremely strong force, on a level akin to when they were fighting the Iraq army, but against a completely different type of enemy. It has since been realised that this level of force was counterproductive, as it lead to increased numbers of civilian deaths, without removing the insurgents. The civilian deaths lead to increased resentment from the local people, making them less likely to support the U.S and instead more likely to harbour support (even if only secretly) for the insurgents, who may have been viewed more in the manner of freedom fighters than terrorists. Support from locals makes it easier for insurgents to escape the American military, increasing the U.S frustration.[22]

Whilst the American military was often effective in achieving its tactical goals, such as bombing areas where insurgents were believed to be hiding, this did little to achieve the strategic goal of setting up a context where democracy could be achieved. Force is a means to a political end, but it appears during the second part of the Iraq war that force was an end in itself. If the U.S was only achieving tactical goals, then questions must be raised as to whether or not that use of force was warranted. Lessons have been learned by the American military now that such extensive use of extreme force is nether effective or appropriate in cases of fighting against non-state actors.

The removal of the country's dictator created confusion, which the U.S should have capitalised on by introducing new ideas or even social reform. Instead there was the continued focus on violence and warfare, so any gratitude for granting the Iraqi people freedom was soon sidelined.

If the U.S army had used less force, and more soft power, for example in terms of educating local people on the benefits of having a democracy, or even less morally justifiable but still effective means such as bribery, instead of focusing on killing insurgents, then they could have better achieved their negative goal of maintaining local support. If both the positive and negative goals had been achieved, then it could have been argued that America effectively utilised power during the Iraq war, rather than solely focusing on positive aims.

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