

Blame rests on a bad idea, no matter how much spin lays it elsewhere

Hugh White

The Sydney Morning Herald

14 March 2006

P.11

When he sent our forces to help invade Iraq, John Howard was sure they would not be there long: months, not years, he said. Last week his new Defence Minister, Brendan Nelson, was visiting the troops still in Iraq three years after the invasion. And he made it clear he expected them to stay a lot longer.

I'm sure Nelson is right. So how and why was Howard so wrong?

The conventional view is that a brilliantly successful invasion was followed by a hopelessly ill-planned and mismanaged occupation.

The US-led forces didn't stop the looting after Saddam Hussein fell, they didn't restore power and water, they didn't crack down early and hard on the insurgency, they didn't have enough troops in the country. If only these errors had been avoided, Iraq would now be well on the way to stability and democracy, and our troops would be safely on their way home, the argument goes. I don't buy it.

The failure in Iraq is not a failure of execution; it's a failure of conception. The occupation and political reconstruction of Iraq was not a good idea badly implemented. It was a bad idea that no amount of administrative skill, political savvy, cultural sensitivity or military firepower could have made work.

You can see why political leaders might prefer to see the problems in Iraq as failures of execution. That shifts the blame from those who thought of the idea to those who had to carry it out. But if we are to learn by our mistakes it is important to understand what those mistakes were, and who made them.

We need to face squarely the mistakes of our leaders. We can all be glad that Saddam no longer rules Iraq. But we all know that none of the leaders who conceived and drove the invasion would have done so had they been able to foresee how things stand in Iraq today. Howard was more careful than the others, but he lent his weight — and Australia's — to their arguments.

These leaders misunderstood the costs and risks they were running in setting out to reshape Iraq. And that is what they were about. One thing the flood of instant history has made clear is that, while Howard, George Bush and Tony Blair undoubtedly believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, that was not why the invasion went ahead.

It went ahead to destroy the Baath regime and replace it with something more congenial, something more aligned with our interests and, they stressed, our values.

The conception at the heart of this enterprise was that if a fully functioning liberal democratic Iraq did not spring spontaneously from the ashes of Saddam's dictatorship, it could be speedily and efficiently conjured by the application of US power. Especially military power; the whole project was, after all, a Pentagon initiative.

This misconception was powered by a misunderstanding of the nature and limits of armed force. Armies are very good at fighting other armies, but they are of very limited use for anything else. The contrary view is the beguiling illusion that military force can be used to achieve political goals and promote values, rather than secure purely military objectives.

It is an idea that not even the Vietnam War could quite kill off. The invasion of Iraq three years ago was a product of its resurgence. The situation in Iraq today is yet another demonstration of its fallacy. A force of 180,000 troops — and the expenditure of billions of dollars a month — gives the coalition very little influence over what happens in Iraq today, or over the shape of its future.

There is still a faint chance that Iraq's ill-matched factions will find a way to work together in some semblance of national government. But whether they do or not is out of our hands.

We had the power to destroy Saddam's regime, but not to build a new one. Only the Iraqis can do that. Only they can make the compromises, build the trust, contain their fears and curb their rage enough to generate the sense of shared interests necessary to make Iraq work as a democratic political entity. All we can do is watch.

From the coalition's point of view — and especially Washington's — to leave now would be a disastrous political and strategic defeat, with unpredictable consequences.

It might come to that anyway, but in the meantime our leaders just hang on and hope that even if we have failed, the Iraqis will somehow make something work. It's a forlorn hope, but better than certain humiliation.

And for Australia? We are there, above all, to support our ally. As an exercise in alliance management, that is probably justified.

But the fact that we find ourselves in this predicament, compelled to sustain a largely futile symbolic presence in a land in which we can achieve so little, is a testament to the failure of Howard's initial conception.

We need to remember this the next time someone tries to argue that we should send our new "hardened and networked army" to promote Australia's values far away.

Hugh White is a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute and professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University.