What went wrong in Iraq?
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By ERIC DAVIS

WHEN I FIRST visited Iraq in May 1980, I learned firsthand the horrors that Saddam Hussein was inflicting on the Iraqi people. Thus I strongly supported his regime's overthrow in March 2003.

However, the Bush administration had no plan to win the peace in Iraq. In my view, the arrogance with which the Bush administration approached invading Iraq, and the incompetence of its post-war policies, not only represent a major foreign policy failure but also threaten the ability of the United States to effectively fight the global war on terrorism.

What were the Bush administration's mistakes?

First, many State Department specialists, whose knowledge of Iraq could have helped jump-start democracy, were deliberately excluded from administering post-Saddam Iraq.

Second, invading Iraq with insufficient troops and equipment made it difficult to secure major cities such as Baghdad where extensive looting occurred at war's end. Beyond destroying much of Iraq's cultural heritage and economic infrastructure, the looting made Iraqis lose trust in the United States' ability to bring about the democratic change it promised.

Why, they asked, did U.S. troops only secure Saddam's Republican Palace and the Ministry of Oil? The lack of troops also prevented securing the Iraqi-Syrian border which dozens of terrorists cross every day.

Third, awarding large no-bid contracts to corporations such as Halliburton and its Kellogg, Brown and Root subsidiary, for large infrastructural projects such as highway bridges ignored the fundamental need to provide Iraqis with jobs. With the post-war economy in shambles, the United States could have won many friends by employing Iraqis to clean up garbage and sewerage in their neighborhoods, refurbish schools, and provide school lunches to attract children back to the classroom.

Fourth, overriding American and Iraqi military advice, Coalition Provisional Authority administrator L. Paul Bremer dismissed the 400,000 man Iraqi army. These conscripts, not part of Saddam's elite military units, did not support the Baathist regime. But without incomes, many were forced to turn to ex-Baathists and insurgents for money in exchange for attacking American troops. The firing of all Baathists in the Iraqi civil service, without distinguishing between ideologues and those who only joined the party to keep their jobs, was another of Bremer's costly mistakes.

A fifth Bush administration blunder was its failure to send competent American administrative personnel to Iraq. Under the Clinton administration, Balkan experts implemented U.S. policy in Bosnia and Kosovo. For the most part, Bush administration officials had no prior knowledge of Iraqi society and politics. One result is that the officials responsible for the reconstruction budget have not known how to spend the funds, preventing much of the Congressional allocation for Iraq from serving its intended goals. Sixth, the Bush administration has yet to actively involve the Iraqi citizenry in decision-making about their future. Administrator Bremer did not even begin consulting Iraq's shiites, 60% of Iraq's population, until late fall 2003 when Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani complained that the shiites were being excluded from the political process. Through his caucus system, Mr. Bremer tried to assure that only Iraqis deemed supportive of US interests would participate in political decision-making, further alienating many Iraqis.

Most damaging is the arrogance of the Bush administration, which has made it difficult to gain international support for its policies in Iraq. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's reference to our allies, France and Germany, as
part of "old Europe," and the Bush administration's failure to mobilize an international coalition before invading Iraq, alienated many of the United States' supporters. Dishonest statements about weapons of mass destruction further damaged the administration's credibility.

What needs to be done?

First, the size and training of Iraqi security forces must be dramatically increased. Without security, there can be no elections and positive change in Iraq. The Bush administration has only belatedly begun to seriously train Iraqi security forces, almost a year and a half since Saddam's fall.

Second, an international conference needs to be organized in which Arab and European states are given a meaningful role in promoting reconstruction and democracy in Iraq, in whose future they too have a great stake.

Third, a "New Deal" policy that offers hope to unemployed Iraqis is key to undermining the current insurgency.

Finally, the United States must make clear that it has no intentions to control Iraqi oil or establish permanent military bases.

If the situation in Iraq does not change soon, success may no longer be possible. An American defeat in Iraq would have disastrous consequences, not just for the Iraqi people but the global war on terrorism. The Bush administration's failures in Iraq underline the urgent need for new thinking and major new policy initiatives. Let's hope it's not already too late to still win the peace in Iraq.

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