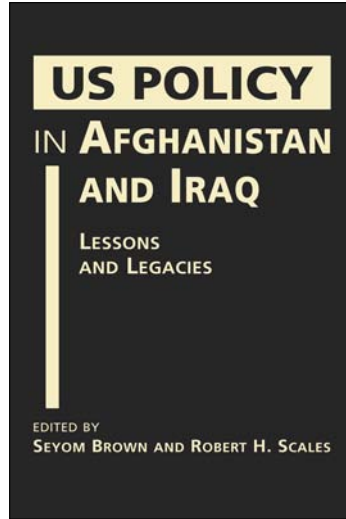


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US Policy in  
Afghanistan and Iraq:  
Lessons and Legacies

edited by  
Seyom Brown  
and Robert H. Scales

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telephone 303.444.6684

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# Introduction

*Seyom Brown and Robert H. Scales*

The first two large-scale military interventions by the United States since the end of the Vietnam War—Operation Enduring Freedom, in Afghanistan, and Operation Iraqi Freedom—strained US capacities and raised doubts about the country’s will to play as significant and valued a world role in the twenty-first century as it did in the twentieth. Our purpose in this book is to help generate an informed national conversation on how the country can and should adapt to the still-unfolding legacies of these interventions and to other situations that have called or might call for the use of US military force—such as the rebellions against dictatorships in the Maghreb and the Middle East, the growing influence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, and the persistent development of nuclear arsenals by North Korea and Iran.

We asked the contributors to the book to assess, from the perspective of their experience and scholarly investigations, the current and emerging effects of the Afghanistan and Iraq interventions on conditions in and around the two countries. We also invited them to join with us, the editors, in reflecting on the implications of their assessments for overall US foreign policy, national security policy, and military strategy and planning.

## **The Regime-Change Question**

The controversial assessments in these pages of the Afghanistan and Iraq interventions point to the need for a deeply probing national con-

versation about the circumstances—foreign and domestic—that warrant the United States becoming involved in efforts to coercively change the governing regime of another country. The lack of anything approaching a national consensus on this fundamental issue was evident in the intense debates even within the Obama administration over how to react to the so-called Arab Spring upheavals spreading through the Middle East, starting in the winter of 2010–2011.

Neither we nor any of our fellow authors seriously challenge the premise that the United States has justification for trying to take down regimes that, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, harbor terrorists determined to injure the United States and its citizens. Yet given the difficulties encountered in both Afghanistan and Iraq, there is little support in the chapters here for a national security policy and overall military force structure designed mainly for conducting such missions of regime change or regime support (against insurgencies). Even under the assumption of a reduced defense budget, “full spectrum” and “hybrid” capabilities are widely endorsed. But what the balance should be in the US military between forces designed for use in “hearts and minds” and stability operations and those designed for larger kinetic operations is still very much at issue. What emphasis is given to the different missions will be highly dependent not only on emerging international challenges, but also on the political climate in the United States, which will be profoundly affected by the still-unfolding outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Pervading our dialogue is the recognition that, whereas a military intervention may be legally and morally justified, it may nevertheless be unwise. This agnosticism reflects, and is part of, the national debate over whether the difficulties encountered and enormous costs borne by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan are inherent in such interventions (as argued by Robert Litwak and Dan Caldwell in this volume) or are the consequence of poorly designed implementing strategies and bad execution (as argued by Stephen Biddle and Vanda Felbab-Brown). How this question is answered has immense implications for US foreign and national security policy and military planning.

### **Counterinsurgency, Stabilization, and Statebuilding Strategies**

Despite the lack of consensus on the basic issue of the future US capacity and will to undertake regime-change operations, the analysis

in all of the chapters proceeds on the premise that the still-conflictual and negative socioeconomic effects of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan constitute a legacy from which the United States cannot simply walk away. Indeed, most of the authors agree, either explicitly or implicitly, with John Nagl's insistence in this volume that the priority task today of analysts and policymakers is to devise strategies and programs for "winning the wars [and statebuilding efforts] we're in." But to grant that this is the priority task is not to hold that the preoccupation with ensuring a satisfactory outcome in the present conflicts should push aside critical first-order questioning of the wisdom of our initial involvement and strategies—embarrassing or not.

The discussion about how to win the wars we're in features assessments in Parts 2 and 3 of the "hearts and minds" philosophy and counterinsurgency doctrine of the US Army and Marine Corps and its basic application in the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan as directed by Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal. This discussion encompasses the growing international and domestic attention (including debates within the US military) accorded to the rules of engagement for US and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in Afghanistan. This is connected with the issue (raised by Biddle) of the best allocation of effort, whether counterterrorism by special operations and drone strikes into western Pakistan on the one hand, or strengthened counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan on the other. This issue in turn raises the question of the role and scope of US and ISAF operations—whether the US/ISAF counterinsurgency missions should be concentrated in a few selected cities, or spread wide across the rural and urban areas of the country and into Pakistan.

As such, the book deals centrally with the controversies over strategies and programs for "statebuilding," particularly in Afghanistan (which, following the insistence of Marvin Weinbaum, is the concept we use here instead of the more common term "nationbuilding"): Weinbaum, Nagl, Robinson, and Felbab-Brown all regard statebuilding as not only the objective of, but also the condition for, successful counterinsurgency. But for Afghanistan this leads to the unresolved issue of the extent to which local warlords and tribal militias should be strengthened, and can be reliably depended upon to assume a large role in counterinsurgency and postcounterinsurgency governance. Nagl supports such decentralization, but Weinbaum and Felbab-Brown are skeptical that the warlords can overcome their internecine struggles to provide durable leadership, and worry that the tribal militias will plunge many parts of the country into anarchic violent conflict.

The controversies over statebuilding in Afghanistan encompass stability operations, reconstruction of infrastructure, socioeconomic efforts to wean farmers away from opium poppy crops, the pacing of transfer of peacekeeping operations to the Afghans themselves, police and judicial institution reforms, distribution of power and authority between the center and local communities and tribes, anticorruption efforts, and—crucially—the extent to which the Taliban should be reintegrated into the institutions and processes of governance.

### **Implications for Military Planning**

In the concluding chapter we trace the implications for military planning given the uncertainties about geopolitical developments and the lack of consensus concerning when and how the United States should attempt to coercively affect the struggle for power within other countries. There is the risk of once again preparing to fight the last war—which would be the case if “irregular” warfare (“the wars we’re in now”) were to become the centerpiece of military planning, skewing procurement, recruitment, and strategy away from a prudent balance between short-term and longer-term preparedness.