I have chosen to discuss Iraq in part because there are over 150,000 Americans serving there in the military, as well as U.S. civilians: government officials and supporting contractors. Every week between one and two dozen of these individuals are killed or gravely injured, and our presence is costing taxpayers about $1 billion per week. It is far from clear that we are making significant progress on our political and security objectives in Iraq, or that our continued presence is serving our country’s interests in the region, or in the rest of the world, or that our presence is helping the people of Iraq. But there is no indication of a timetable for withdrawal. How did we get into this situation and what should we do now? I bring to this discussion my experience as a policymaker in the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, and the Intelligence Community.

In the decade following the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam Hussein remained a source of instability in the region, was judged to possess usable chemical and biological weapons, and continued to oppress the Iraqi people. Despite recent efforts to rewrite history, Saddam was not an active sponsor of terrorist groups around the world. But Saddam did not hesitate to have his enemies assassinated overseas and he did provide—as documented by the 9/11 Commission—some sanctuary to terrorists within Iraq.

In President Bill Clinton’s second term, the replacement of Saddam became declared U.S. policy, but with no agreed path to achieve this end. It was only after the attacks of 9/11, in the first George W. Bush administration, that the United States decided that the time had come to go to war to replace Saddam. While there was justification for seeking to replace the Saddam regime, the reasons why the Bush administration chose March 2003 for armed intervention remain somewhat obscure. At the time, the compelling reason that garnered much public backing and over-
whelming bipartisan support in the U.S. Senate was Saddam’s capability for the “imminent use of weapons of mass destruction.” It turned out that Saddam did not possess stockpiles of chemical or biological weapons that the Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence services of other governments believed to be present.

It may be that the Bush administration was only using an argument, as all administrations do, to convince Congress to approve a desired and already decided action. I accept that the Bush administration believed that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction, but I do not believe this was the main reason for the timing of the administration’s decision to intervene. I believe the deeper reason is the one I take issue with today: the conviction of some in the administration that U.S. military intervention to topple Saddam would result in a near-spontaneous conversion of Iraq, and with luck, the entire Middle East, to a democratic society.

**IT WAS COMPLETELY PREDICTABLE THAT A RAPID TRANSITION TO A STABLE AND SECURE COALITION GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT OCCUR.**

For knowledgeable observers, there was never any doubt that the United States, because of its military strength, would rapidly defeat the Iraqi army, however, it was completely predictable that, under the circumstances prevailing on the ground, a rapid transition to a stable and secure coalition government would not occur. First, there were neither credible individuals nor a nascent government in exile with the necessary stature or legitimacy to effect a smooth transition. Second, once the decision was taken to disband the Iraqi army, an impossible security situation was created: a combination of hostile ethnic factions, demobilized but armed military and security units, and surrounding nations actively supporting warring factions. An aggressive insurgency against both U.S. occupation forces and any provisional government was inevitable. Third, the nations surrounding Iraq—Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iran—which have vital stakes in the region, have no common understanding of how a successor government would share power among Iraq’s Kurds, Shi’ites, and Sunnis. This uncertainty further motivates the neighboring states to meddle in the internal affairs of Iraq. Such a security situation cannot be overcome easily by either U.S. military forces or immature Iraqi security forces.

It is folly to engage in a distant part of the world without first building significant support in the affected region. In this regard, consider the difference in the way President George H.W. Bush entered Iraq in 1991 and the way President George W. Bush intervened in Iraq in 2003. Bush “41” entered with the support of a substantial local coalition—including Kuwaitis, Saudis, and others paying the greater part of the cost—while Bush “43” entered with little support in the region. There was much wisdom behind the still often maligned decision of the first President Bush in the first Gulf War not to proceed to Baghdad to topple Saddam: the countries in the neighborhood had no common view about a successor regime, although they all despised Saddam; there was no credible Iraqi leader or group ready to assist in a transition at that time, either; and, most importantly, there was no way of knowing how or when American troops would get out of Baghdad.

It is always preferable for the United States to have the support of the United Nations and our European allies before intervening somewhere in the world. But in the case of Iraq, the relative absence of international support was much less important than the absence of support from the countries in the region. (On a related matter, there is debate about whether United States intervention in a foreign country is legitimate without the sanction of the United Nations Security Council. A UN process that sanctions intervention by no means assures that the chance of error will be avoided or even significantly reduced, so I do not believe the Iraq experience is evidence that the United States should forgo its sovereign discretion to decide on when to intervene until it has the approval of the United Nations or any other international body.)

The intelligence community’s mistake in predicting that Iraq still possessed a chemical- and biological-weapon inventory after the destruction of the stocks and weapons that occurred at the end of the 1991 Gulf War and through the actions of UN weapons inspections deserves comment. The estimate of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction inventory was a major reason for congressional support of the intervention, especially among Senate Democrats. The mistaken estimate has caused widespread cynicism about the administration’s willingness to misuse intelligence information to achieve a desired political outcome. The failure creates doubt that U.S. leaders have accurate information on which to base their decisions. Both inside and outside the United States, official statements about our estimates of North Korean and Iranian nuclear capability will understandably be viewed more skeptically, indeed rightfully so.

The combination of this mistaken estimate of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction capability with the failure to predict the 9/11 al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington led to an understandable public and congressional call for a reorganization of the Intelligence Community. No one should imagine that the deficiencies in intelligence responsible for these two failures could be remedied entirely, or even primarily, by reorganization. A good deal of the responsibility for the mistakes should be placed on poor professional performance, especially with regard to intelligence analysis and sharing of information between agencies.

After several commissions and much debate, Congress passed the 2004 intelligence-reform legislation, intended to remedy the deficiencies that led to the intelligence failures of 9/11 and the estimates of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. However, the legislation contains many ambiguities that will take considerable time to work out. The situation is reminiscent of the history of the creation of a strong secretary of defense. The 1947 legislation created a defense establishment, but the position of secretary of defense was not created until 1949, and the secretary’s authority was not clearly defined until 1958. It took 10 years before authority and responsibility were relatively clearly defined. I fear that during the lengthy period of time that may be required to resolve the legislation’s ambiguities in responsibility and authority, many critical intelligence functions will suffer. Worse yet, there is no assurance that the new system will perform any better than the old.

**BEYOND THE CURRENT SITUATION IN IRAQ AND THE DEFICIENCIES OF U.S. INTELLIGENCE, I WANT TO ADDRESS A MORE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION: WHAT DOES OUR INVOLVEMENT IN IRAQ SAY ABOUT HOW THE**
United States chooses its foreign-policy goals and the criteria for use of military force?

It seems evident to me that our foreign policy should be guided by two principles: first, to advance our country’s security and political interests; and second, to encourage prosperity and responsive government for people around the world. It may be that with our encouragement and example, other nations will choose to adopt democracy and a market economy, presumably adapted to their local culture and society. Clearly, at the end of the Cold War, every Eastern European nation made this choice. But it may be that some nations will follow a vastly different road for some period of time, perhaps indefinitely. China, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea come to mind as examples.

It may be that ethnic differences, poverty, and historical and religious traditions make a reasoned choice not a realistic possibility, at least for some years. Our nation embarks on an especially perilous course when it proactively engages in some region of the world with the intention of achieving an outcome of establishing a government based on our values. It is one matter to adopt democracy and a market economy, presumably adapted to their local culture and society. Clearly, at the end of the Cold War, every Eastern European nation made this choice. But it may be that some nations will follow a vastly different road for some period of time, perhaps indefinitely. China, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea come to mind as examples.

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The policy instruments that we have and are willing to deploy to achieve nation-building are not up to the task. Broadly speaking, we have three types of instruments: diplomacy, trade and economic assistance, and military force. Diplomacy is useful for aligning interests and creating circumstances that encourage evolutionary change toward common ends. Trade and economic assistance are powerful incentives for nations to adapt their ways in order to better enjoy economic benefits. Even the dark North Korean state saw the advantages, for a period of time, of constraining (albeit selectively and temporarily) its nuclear-weapons activities for the economic benefits that accompanied the 1994 “framework agreement.” Libya, more recently, retreated from its policy of secret pursuit of weapons of mass destruction apparently due to the sole expectation of economic benefit. The change in the apartheid regime in South Africa shows what sometimes can be done by collective economic action through an embargo. We should be much more willing to use our considerable economic strength, combined with diplomatic efforts, to proffer carrots as well as sticks to nations whose behavior we seek to influence. This means spending more on foreign aid and other forms of economic assistance.

What about using the military as an instrument of change? Well, the answer to this question is simple, but many people don’t seem to like it: The U.S. military, which is the best in the world, is built to fight and win wars, and has only limited ability...
to police, build civic infrastructure, or reshape governments. We can ask the marines to defeat Republican Guard divisions or destroy Fallujah, but, as now constituted, it is not a major part of their mission, capability, or training to maintain local security, broker political alliances, and run local water systems, hospitals, power plants, and schools.

When asked to do civic action, U.S. Marines and Army Special Forces Units do admirably—Haiti and Afghanistan are examples—at working constructively with the local community as an occupation or peacekeeping force. But, in general, we train and equip our military forces to fight, not to occupy. It is a mistake to ask the Department of Defense and joint military commands to perform the nation-building functions (beyond training indigenous forces) that are required to carry out our political objectives in Iraq or Bosnia.

We can imagine reshaping our military to have more capability for the activities that the Pentagon euphemistically calls “stability and security” operations. But such a reshaping will come at a cost—both in the potentially compromised war-fighting capability of our military forces and in the resources needed to support the civic action that underlies nation-building. If political change is unlikely to work, it seems both expensive and foolhardy to reshape our military in a major way for this purpose.

This leaves the question of what should be done today. There is a widespread view that we have a responsibility to stay in Iraq until certain minimum conditions are achieved: some degree of security for the Iraqi people, a reasonable start on stable and representative self-government, and partial reconstruction of the civilian infrastructure. Any thought of prompt withdrawal is considered unthinkable by most Republicans and Democrats, because it is difficult to envision an early withdrawal that leaves a peaceful Iraq in its wake. A withdrawal followed by a violent collapse of the nascent Iraqi regime would signal failure of our Iraqi policy and possibly invite further unrest in the region. So the expectation is that the United States will be in Iraq for several years, perhaps in a somewhat reduced presence, but spending considerable money and lives while working to achieve the minimum objectives mentioned above.

The reasonableness of this approach depends on a judgment call about how much progress is being made on achieving the conditions required for withdrawal. However, there are two additional important factors to consider: first, how much are the United States' interests in the region and in the Arab world generally being harmed by our continued presence in Iraq; and second, how much does the United States presence in Iraq reduce our ability to deal with other important security challenges, notably North Korea, Iran, and combating international terrorism? Those who argue that we should “stay the course” and believe that early withdrawal will affect our credibility in the region must consider the possibility that the United States will fail in its objectives in Iraq and suffer even worse loss of credibility at the time of a later withdrawal.

I believe that we are not making progress on our key objectives in Iraq. There may be days when security seems somewhat improved and when the Iraqi government appears to be functioning better, but the underlying destabilizing forces of a robust insurgency and warring factions supported by outside governments are undiminished.

So my judgment is that the United States should withdraw from Iraq as soon as possible, say by the end of the year. In January, Senator Edward M. Kennedy suggested five measures that I believe are a sensible start to achieving a successful withdrawal: (1) progressive political disengagement by the United States, with Iraqis making more of their own decisions; (2) adoption of a clear exit strategy and a timetable for withdrawal (it should be possible to structure the timetable so as not to provide tactical advantage to the insurgents); (3) an initial withdrawal of some military forces; (4) conducting regional diplomacy with Iraq’s neighbors and the Arab League to discourage external intervention in Iraq; and (5) continued training of Iraqi security forces.

Such measures cannot guarantee a secure and democratic Iraq free of external domination. But they are first steps toward adopting a posture that will permit the United States to pursue successfully its long-term interests in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

John Quincy Adams, a former Harvard Phi Beta Kappa orator, said it well in 1821:

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her [America’s] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.…The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force.... She might become the dictatrix of the world: she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.

John Deutch, Institute Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of Central Intelligence (1995-1996) and deputy secretary of defense (1994-1995), delivered these remarks at Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa Literary Exercises on June 7.

Family grief: a brother weeps over the body of a truck driver killed in an ambush at Khalidiyah, June 14.