



Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: Removing Saddam Hussein by Force

Steven Metz, John R. Martin

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Understanding the ways that military leaders advise those who exercise civilian control over the military is important for the continuing prosecution of that war, but also for the inevitable next time that the United States considers embarking on such an endeavor. A second objective of this series is to provide military and civilian leaders a clearer picture of what they must do to ensure that U.S. Armed Forces are properly prepared—with strategy, doctrine, force structure, equipment, training, and leadership—for future operations. Literature about the war in Iraq is already extensive, although—as the Foreword states—the definitive history of the war is still undoubtedly years away. However, most of the writing—by policymakers, journalists, scholars, and other students of national security issues—focuses on the effects of various decisions, not on the decisions themselves. For example, there is ample writing about how the 2003 decision to “de-Ba’athify” the Iraqi government was executed and what effects it had. How that decision was made, though, has been studied less. With this series, SSI intends to make a valuable addition to the literature on the war in Iraq by addressing the how and why of various key strategic decisions that were made over the past 8-plus years of planning and fighting. Some of the effects will inevitably be discussed as well, but the focus will clearly be on the decisionmaking processes, not the subsequent results. The facts and data presented and the ensuing analysis will identify the nature of the decisionmaking process involved as either idiosyncratic or systemic. Idiosyncratic decisions can be made based on the circumstances of a particular situation; a unique decision might have been required by the facts on the ground. The sectarian divisions, the long years of repression under Saddam, and the history of American inaction after Operation DESERT STORM in 1991— among other factors—might have combined to create distinctive conditions that led decisionmakers down idiosyncratic paths. The early years of the Iraq conflict offer several examples of another idiosyncrasy: the personalities of the different people making the key decisions. Different people viewing the same facts of a situation might draw different conclusions and make different decisions. Some key people making decisions about Iraq made dramatically different decisions than would have been expected of other reasonable people. At the very top of the pile is the strong personality of former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, balanced somewhat by equally forceful Secretary of State Colin Powell. Coordination of the activities of their two Departments, though, was left to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, perhaps hopelessly outweighed—at least in public—by these two longtime players in major national security issues. Whether challenges in decisionmaking were idiosyncratic by personality or situation, though, differentiating them from systemic challenges is clearly important. Some analysts and pundits argue for procedural changes, either by executive fiat or legislative action, that are not supported by the relevant facts of the particular decision involved. One is the continuing call for a Goldwater-Nichols Act for the entire interagency. 1 Attempting to address idiosyncratic issues through systemic changes may not be the right approach; this monograph series should help identify the nature of the factors—processes or personalities—that led to certain decisions and to suggest ways to address any shortcomings.

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