

## Lessons Learned from the Iraq War

*A Conversation with Michael Gordon, Barbara Leaf, and Frank Sobchak.*

*Moderated by Bradley Bowman.*

MAY: Welcome to *Lessons Learned from the Iraq War*. We will explore lessons learned from the context of the Department of Defense Force Planning and current policy in the Middle East. Including decisions related to Syria and Iran, as well as efforts to address the use of hybrid warfare and gray zone operations by China and Russia. This event is hosted by FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, CMPP, launched earlier this year. CMPP seeks to promote, on a bipartisan basis, a better understanding of the strategies, policies, and capabilities necessary to effectively deter enemies of the United States and our allies and make sure we have the capability to precisely defeat any who cannot be deterred. CMPP provides rigorous, timely and relevant research and analysis, a senior group of former U.S. officials serve on our board of advisors which is chaired by retired General Lieutenant H.R. McMaster. Before we begin by way of housekeeping, you guys should know that this event will be live streamed and recorded.

Many thanks to those in our audience today, and for those tuning in remotely, I encourage guests here and online to join in on today's conversation on Twitter, @FDD. I also encourage you to check out our website [fdd.org](http://fdd.org) where you can find FDD's latest analysis and subscribe to receive information on our latest research, projects, our experts, our podcasts. Also, please silence your cell phones. With that, I'm pleased to turn the conversation over to my colleague, Brad Bowman. Brad is senior director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, which you can follow on Twitter @FDD\_CMPP. Brad previously served as a national security advisor in the U.S. Senate, as well as an active duty U.S. Army officer, pilot and assistant professor at West Point. Thank you and over to you, Brad.

BOWMAN: Thank you Cliff. All right, welcome everyone, as Cliff said I'm Brad Bowman with the Center on Military and Political Power, I really appreciate all of you taking time to be here. As Cliff said the title of our event today is *Lessons Learned from the Iraq War*. From my perspective, there's certainly an element here where you'll understand from an intellectual, academic and professional perspective, what happened during the Iraq War. But for me it's much more than that. I think it's important to look back so that we can look forward more clearly, more precisely, to learn the lessons that we need to learn to inform U.S. national security policy decisions being made as we speak and going forward. So I approach this topic with a sober mind frame and with humility, reminding myself and everyone here to do so. We have the benefit of hindsight and a lot of the people that were making decisions at the time did not.

So I approach it with humility, and then also remembering that a lot of Americans, a lot of our allies, and a lot of Iraqis lost their lives and were injured. So we approach this topic with the seriousness and the gravity that it deserves. So to discuss this important topic with the stakes that I just described, we have what I would characterize as an exceptional panel, exceptional both because of what they've individually accomplished but also their diversity of backgrounds. We have a career soldier, historian, we have a senior Foreign Service officer, and a respected journalist, and so they're bringing those three unique perspectives to this very important issue. More directly we have Michael Gordon, national security correspondent for the *Wall Street*

*Journal*. He has extensive experience on the ground in Iraq, and has written as much as anybody on the topic including his books *Cobra 2*, *The Generals War*, and *The End Game*, both for the first and second Iraq War.

Barbara Leaf served as U.S. Ambassador to the UAE from 2014 to 2018. Held a number of high level positions, directly relevant to our discussion today, she was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq, 2011 to 2013; directed the U.S. provincial reconstruction team in Bosnia, from 2010 to 2011; and then before that served as the Department of State's first Director of the Office on Iranian Affairs from 2006 to 2008. She's now a senior fellow at the Washington Institute. Last but not least on the end, is Colonel Retired Frank Sobchak. He's a retired U.S. Army Special Forces colonel who deployed extensively during his career and taught world history and peace keeping at West Point, and most relevant today is the author and co-editor for these two volumes right here that I have in front of you for visual impact. Very robust and impressive effort.

So the general plan here is for us four to engage in a discussion until about 12:50, and then I'll welcome questions from all of you so to bring you into the conversation as well. So with that, Frank, obviously some of us are quite familiar with your impressive work, but for those who are not, can you provide a brief overview of the study? More specifically, who commissioned it? Conducted it? Who wrote it? And what were its goals and scope? Please.

SOBCHAK: Thank you Brad, I really appreciate having the opportunity to be here. So the study was commissioned in 2013 by then Chief of Staff of the Army General Ray Odierno. He put together a team that eventually its high water mark hit 15 people, and he commissioned us to write the official, operational level history of the Iraq War. And so kind of in Army terms the operational level is where strategic guidance from political leadership is translated into battles, campaigns, and campaign strategy for military units. He directed us that it be unclassified, because he felt that if it was classified no one would read it, and that it would effectively be like the Ark of the Covenant at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. He was passionate about that the lessons be learned. When he first sat us down, he told us that we never really – we being the Army – never really wrote a history or lessons learned in the Vietnam War. And so he spent the first two years of the Iraq War relearning many of those lessons in blood and treasure.

And so he was adamant that this one be something that was readable, in a narrative format, and he also underwrote it in terms of risk so that if something was a little bit controversial, he was okay with that because he wanted people to read it.

BOWMAN: Excellent thank you, we'll get into some of the findings and recommendations in a moment. But before we do so, Ambassador, from your perspective what is new or significant, generally speaking, about this study that the Army undertook?

LEAF: Well look Brad, I spent the better part of a beautiful spring weekend diving into Frank's masterpiece, and it is a masterpiece. It pulls together in a way that I've seen nowhere else, every level of decision making and operational activity and all the different inputs that took us through this – adventure, for lack of a better word. And the candor was really painful to read,

but it reinforced for me what I think we as Americans really do best as a society. We look at ourselves hard, we self-criticize, we put it out there for others to learn and really the lessons that Frank and his team drew out over this master work, really should inform current thinking about some other great issues on the national security ledger.

BOWMAN: Thank you. Michael from your perspective what is new here?

GORDON: Well I think the broad conclusions in this study, I think, parallel a lot of the work that's been done by the initial histories of the conflict, and about the value of post-war planning; the difficulties with the transition strategy with General Casey; the success of the surge as a military proposition, but its lack of success in terms of the politics that followed, but what I thought was particularly important about it was the focus on Army specific issues that I think, because it went into those in greater depth than a lot of authors such as myself – notwithstanding my last book was like 800 work pages – and for example, and I think this is what made it controversial for the Army and is what ended up delaying its release. But it asked some tough questions about whether the reserves and the National Guard could really take the place of active duty brigades and counterinsurgency situations. Its verdict was not really, not entirely. And it got into some decisions made by Army leadership early on in the conflict that had a deleterious effect on the way the war was prosecuted.

It also at the end made a number of broad observations, some of which I agree with, some of which I don't agree with but they're all interesting and important and informed about sort of lessons learned about these conflicts, generally. I'm not confident these lessons are going to be learned by the defense establishment but at least they're written down now so years from now when we're involved in one of these things people can go back and read them.

BOWMAN: Thank you. So Frank correct me if I'm wrong so Chief of Staff General Odierno asked for this to be done in 2013 –

SOBCHAK: 2013, yes, yeah.

BOWMAN: The report was basically completed when?

SOBCHAK: About 2016.

BOWMAN: Okay, so it took two and half years for it to be published. It was published in January, what took so long?

SOBCHAK: So when General Odierno retired there was a significant change in the willingness to accept risk and controversy over our publication. And when General Milley became the Chief Staff, there was a decision made first to change our publisher. We changed from the Center of Military History, which would title it as an official history, and it was shifted to the Army War College so that it could be an academic document covered by academic freedom. At the same time there was a series of road blocks put in our way, vis-a-vie doing additional interviews, doing additional reviews, internal in the Army. There was a lot of concern

over the same level of controversy that General Odierno had wanted. Now that level of controversy was seen as something that was not welcomed.

BOWMAN: All right. So we know that the Administration published its National Defense Strategy in 2018 and the Center here has focused a lot on that. We've had one of – our first event on that was with the National Defense Strategy Commission. The audience will know that a key focus of the National Defense Strategy was great power competition, with a real focus on China and Russia. Michael, how would you respond to someone who says that this is a study that looks at a counterinsurgency with 150, 100,000 plus troops in the Middle East? The U.S. is not going to do that again, this is really a relic and is not relevant to the great power competition that we now confront?

GORDON: Well I think that was the Army's desire to sort of focus on its new mission deterring the Russians with all the bureaucratic and programmatic and funding implications that entails, namely big Army lots of new modernization. I think was one reason it was not so anxious to publish a sort of backward looking study but one with implications for the future. My own view on this sort of thing is that as a journalist having covered and been part of seven wars is so many of these have not been anticipated. You don't really get to pick your wars, and if I asked you in July of 1990 would we be liberating Kuwait with two Army Corps, no one would've thought so and I dare say some years ago no one would have anticipated that U.S. Forces would be part of kind of a hybrid warfare in Syria against a group like the Islamic State. So one reason that General Petraeus, along General Mattis actually, had to put out his manual on counterinsurgency during the Iraq War is that a lot of the lessons that had been learned toward the end of the Vietnam conflict had been forgotten.

Because people were saying, “Well we're never going to do that again, so we're going to Europe and we're going to focus on the Russian threat.” And so – you know, never is a very long time. I think that – it's just a matter of time. I don't know where, I don't know when, I don't know how, that the U.S. will be involved in some form of counterinsurgency again. I think that the lessons could still apply to a certain extent in Afghanistan and even indeed in Iraq and Syria where we still are in a conflict that's I think we all recognize is not really finished even though the ISIS territorial caliphate has been defeated. So I think it has applicability and I think it's highly relevant.

BOWMAN: Ambassador, do you agree? What's the current relevance of this backward looking study?

LEAF: So I think that it's not just the U.S. Army or the U.S. Military, that needs to look at this in detail. Because many, many other participants in those eight years looked at the experience, the enemies that we fought. Whether it was Iran or indigenous Iraqi groups, Syrians, so many, many people took away lessons from that experience. Just how difficult it is to fight in that gray zone, just how difficult it is for the invading army, which especially as Frank and his authors noted a number of times, who had virtually no understanding of the Iraqi human terrain. Just how difficult it is for those big armies to then adjust and understand what operational effects flow from – what political effects flow from operations, both up to the national level as well as to

the local level. So many people in the region who were still there, including the Quds Force and other actors took away many, many lessons.

I dare say the Russians have really learned a lot from this, and they are working all the time now in the gray zone so the idea that we're going to get to choose our next war, I think is a fallacy. I think it's incredibly valuable the work that was done on this.

BOWMAN: Frank in addition to the point that they both have made in terms of we don't know what our next war would be, we don't get to pick our wars, what would you say is the direct application of the lessons learned here, generally speaking, the great power competition with respect to China and Russia? Are there lessons here that we can directly apply to the great power competition?

SOBCHAK: So I think it also had relevancy to great power competition in that while you're going to have larger force-on-force kind of engagements, at the same time there's going to be action kind of in the gray zone, there will be action kind of in the space in between war and peace. We see this through proxies, we see militias, we see the involvement in democratic elections, all these things that we saw in Iraq that we learned from. That same kind of a gray space action is going to occur when we have conflict with a gray power.

BOWMAN: Okay thank you. So in our remaining 15 minutes let's just dive real quick in some of the key elements in the chronology, if you don't mind. Some of the more operational things that obviously had strategic implications. Frank, the study says that from December 2003 to December 2006, the war in Iraq evolved from a relatively loose insurgency – your words, the study's words – against the U.S.-led coalition into a horrific ethno-sectarian civil war. The report says that the coalition was at risk of a strategic defeat, along the lines of the 1968 offense in Vietnam. How did that happen?

SOBCHAK: So it happened for a variety of reasons, some of which are very well known and very well documented, for example by Michael's books, the decisions that were made both prior to the invasion being launched and then the immediate period right after the invasion. The CPOA orders one and two, the inability to properly resource the invasion and then the phase four operation, those are very well known. What I think is a little less well known, is the period kind of the transition strategy, where from 2004 to 2006, the U.S. pursued a policy kind of driven by two ideological concepts. First, the concept of the antibody theory and that U.S. forces represented kind of an infection in Iraq and thereby created antibodies just by being there. So thereby we needed to draw down our forces both in presence and in numbers. And then second, the concept of dependency where because American forces are so gung ho, so want to do missions and accomplish things, that we also had to draw down our forces, because if we left large numbers of troops there we would do things for the Iraqis and thereby delay our eventual withdrawal.

And delay the ability of the Iraqis to become confident and able to accomplish things by themselves. The consequences of this strategy was that as the civil war was kind of gaining steam, we lost situational awareness of what was going on. At the same time as we transition

responsibility to the Iraqis, we transition responsibility at times to a government that was not an honest broker and that was not – that was actually part of the sectarian civil war itself.

BOWMAN: Ambassador, in this study that Frank led they say – they discuss a U.S. misperceptions regarding democratization and sovereignty. Maybe Frank, just very quickly I want to ask both of you to respond, what is this misperception regarding democratization, sovereignty that the study describes?

SOBCHAK: There's a sense within the U.S. military – you look at the Marine Corps Small Wars Journal or the Counterinsurgency Field Manual – that elections are a salve. That they automatically will tamp down in insurgency and kind of make a situation better by deflating an insurgency and defrauding legitimacy to a government. The challenge is that in a state like Iraq where it was a very heterogeneous state with different ethno sectarian elements that are ready to compete and fight for political power, elections rather than being a salve actually served as an accelerant to violence. And the choice to have elections held very quickly left very little room to kind of have reconciliation and opportunities to try to solve problems.

BOWMAN: So Ambassador I hear Frank saying that the rush to elections, the rush to hand off sovereignty was a mistake? Do you agree with that?

LEAF: I mean I would agree, and look I mean I wasn't there having to make decisions on the ground, let alone at senior levels in Washington at this time, but again it strikes me that when you have set out a directive in November of 2001 to the U.S. Military, to the Army to set up a plan to decapitate the regime and take out the WMD. You're entering into unknown territory right there, and the notion that you can then proceed with so little knowledge internally to a country of almost 30 million is another just sort of leap of faith into the dark. And then once there, being in the mist of this and in a society that is deeply, deeply damaged, not just from the previous 10 years or so of international sanctions but going back to the late 70s when Saddam took over. So all of this then rushing into the desire to hand things off as Frank says, drove us for years. Always seeking and it was on the civilian side as well as the military side.

And this notion that the elections were going to be a salvation, we should've understood in 2003, 2004 that that was unlikely and especially when the Grand Ayatollah Sistani challenged us on that that very road path that we were setting up to get here.

BOWMAN: Michael?

GORDON: It's important to recollect just how confused and confusing American policy was in the initial phases of the war, and I was embedded with these forces for a lot of it. And it was sort of whiplash just going through it, and the actual war was based on the premise that it was essentially going to be a turnkey operation and that the U.S. was supposed to get in and get out pretty quickly. And I remember being in Baghdad in June of 2003 just a few months after the April takedown of the capital, and Tommy Franks the CENTCOM Commander, was giving guidance to his top deputies that they should try to get forces down to a division plus by the end of the summer, I don't know what that'd be necessarily – maybe 20,000 troops or 30,000 something like that – and his particular guidance was take as much risk on the way out as you

did on the way in. So that was the original concept, and of course he didn't stay around to deal with the aftermath, but insisted on retiring and handing it over to others. So that was the original concept of this mission and it didn't take long for it to just dissolve.

Given the anarchy in Iraq, the collapse of institutions, one point the book makes is that the state collapse was not desired or foreseen, in fact it was predicated on an assumption that the ministries, that the military, core institutions, the police, would somehow endure and we would just sort of hand over to them. Once that strategy was thwarted, it swung to the other end of the pendulum, in a way that's still mind boggling to me, when Jerry Bremer came in with the coalition provisional authority and he sort of adopted a vice word approach and issued directives we're dissolving institutions, and we're going to build essentially a new government from the ground up, which was also far more than the Bush Administration bargained for. Lots of tension between CPA and the Pentagon, so that was what the policy was, it zigzagged all over the place and it was really unclear.

One thing I would question is whether elections can be avoided. I take the point that elections are not a panacea, they certainly aren't in this country – they left this country pretty divided so why would it be different elsewhere? But there was the notion that sure, they people vote, they get the government they want, we can begin to ease out of there. But what happened is, and Ayatollah Sistani was insistent on it because he understood that they would empower the Shia majority of the country, and that would have all sorts of implications. Now unless we're going to stay there and thwart the popular will, I don't know that elections can or should necessarily be avoided, but one should go into – especially for a country like the United States that considers itself a democracy – that, but I think you need to go into it with the realization that they can be problematic. And I think another sort of failure of imagination in the planning of this war was not really to think through, “So what will happen when we empower this long repressed Shia majority? What will be the effects in Iraq? How are we going to deal with it?”

I don't think any of that was thought through, the military has these concepts phase, one, two, three and four. Phase four is post-war operations and a U.S. Army colonel – they did a great job of on thinking through phase one, two, and three, getting the divisions up to Baghdad, taking down this or that unit, sort of seizing control of the country, but an Army colonel once said to me, “If you haven't really thought through phase four,” – which they hadn't – “Maybe you shouldn't do phases one, two and three.” And that's the lesson that I personally take away from this.

**BOWMAN:** Ambassador do you have something to add?

**LEAF:** No I was just thinking we also as Americans suffer from a lack of a sense of history, the Iraqis don't have that, they don't suffer from that. So this notion which Frank and his co-author has laid out very nicely in those opening chapters is a sense of just basically leave the south to the British to manage and the Shia would be our friends etc. while we focused on the incipient Sunni problems that we had. You know there was a huge reservoir of anger towards us for the events of March 1991 that were only 12 years earlier. And the sort of October 56 kind of call to the Hungarians to rise up, in this case the Shia, to rise up against Saddam and then they

were brutalized. So the lack of our sense of our own history with the country also daunt us, but I totally subscribe to what Michael said about phases one through three.

BOWMAN: Thank you and the report obviously Frank, throughout talks about – to quote, “Throughout the war, the commands in Iraq had too few troops to accomplish their military missions, chronic shortage of troops.” Ambassador do you see the same sort of shortages with Foreign Service folks and USAID folks?

LEAF: Let me just remind everybody, so I came back from Bosnia where we were busy nation building, more or less semi-successfully in the summer 2006. And this previous fall, Secretary Rice had determined that one of the ways to remedy these governance issues, etc. and get our hands out there was to set up the provincial reconstruction teams across Iraq's eighteen provinces. And so we set to it, of course typically on a shoe string and really no resourcing to it. When I got back in the summer of '06 to take up the Office of Iranian Affairs and get it set up and moving, what I was hearing constantly was people reporting my colleagues coming back from the Pentagon, that the folks at Pentagon were saying that State didn't show up for the war. The Foreign Service is 8,000 people strong, that's it, for the globe. 8,000 generalist diplomats for the globe. So – we're tiny. We are not subject matter experts in nation building, although we by the nature of our generalist profession and experience we can jump into that. With that field and figure it out but we're tiny.

BOWMAN: Thank you. My last question before we go to the audience that I feel compelled to address is just the role of Iran in the Iraq War. Obviously we had the news this week of the IRGC being designated as a foreign terrorist organization. We had the report last week from the State Department and DOD that a hundred additional troops or more than 600 had been killed by Iran in Iraq. Frank, very succinctly if you wouldn't mind, what was the role of Iran particularly the IRGC in the Iraq War?

SOBCHAK: Iran's role evolves where it first once the Saddam regime was decapitated, there's kind of fear within the Iranian regime of whether they're next kind of in the access to people. But that quickly evolves to a sense of, “Hey, the United States is having trouble, and this is really our opportunity to take action against our arch nemesis, our rival that we fought an eight year war against and lost hundreds of thousands of our citizens in.” So very quickly, they took a very active role in targeting American soldiers, they took an active role in kind of blending influence from Iraqi elections and were very active in directly challenging U.S. objectives.

BOWMAN: And in the report you talk about you just make a distinction between Iran's initial behavior in terms of when they were perhaps afraid that we were going to go to Iran next and then how that evolved over time, can you speak quickly to that?

SOBCHAK: Yeah certainly, I mean there's a real evolution whereas at first there's a concern and a fear that the decapitation that occurred in Iraq would quickly happen to the Iranian regime. But once they kind of realized that the U.S. was having trouble, they began slowly kind of almost in a latent incipient type of insurgency where they started funneling in undercover operatives, buying up land, purchasing safe houses, infiltrating IRGC Quds Force operatives to take action to kind of manipulate the nascent democratic process towards their ends. Over time

as they saw that the United States really was not pushing back against them, it emboldened them to take further action – military action where they used militias as proxies, again kind of similar to anything that would happen in a gray type of zone – type conflict with the other nation states – against us to directly target our soldiers.

BOWMAN: So they were using explosively foreign penetrators, they were using improvised rocket assisted munitions, their Ambassador was a covert Quds Force Officer. Michael, you helped break the story or – you broke the story last week in terms of the designation of the IRGC. What is your assessment of Iran's role over time in the Iraq War?

GORDON: I'm not taking a position as a journalist on the wisdom of the designation, but Iran's role in the Iraq conflict was really pernicious. And during this period from '05, '06 on, I was working for another New York based newspaper at the time, and I was writing stories about EFPs which was a type of IED that the U.S. could not defend against. An upbomber Hum-Vee could not stop an EFP, and the casualties from it were really horrendous particularly in the Baghdad area and near Sadr City and places like that. And the Brits too were taking those kinds of casualties. And so the Iranians wouldn't do this themselves, that's not how they do that. They're slicker than that. They trained in Iran, forces, Shia militias and with the help of Lebanese Hezbollah. And would then give them these weapons, these kind of rat lines from Iran, and all of this was known to the U.S. military which was then faced with the following dilemma: do we extend the war into Iran to get these camps to strike out Iran specifically for providing this assistance to an enemy of the U.S.? They faced the same dilemma in Syria by the way because of its enabling Al Qaida in Iraq.

And the decision made by the Bush Administration, which is sometimes portrayed as being – I don't know – reckless, was actually very cautious. And it was no, we're not going to spread the war into Iran or into Syria really. We're going to try to deal with these Iranian enabled proxy forces within the boundaries of Iraq. And that's kind of what happened, and I think it's very important that Frank and Joel Rayburn and the team's study documents this because this proposition at times that Iran was playing this role was initially a little controversial but was so well documented, the interrogation, some of the Shia leaders and the forensic evidence itself. One thing that's interesting, and this is apropos the current situation, is there's been none of that in Iraq now in the fight against ISIS. And we did have a situation – I'm doing another book on this subject – that where U.S. forces and Iranian operatives and Shia militias shared the battlefield in and around Mosul, in around Payge, in and around Felucia. And each side was careful so far to refrain from any of that the – there have been no known Shia militia attacks on U.S. forces or vice versa.

So because they had a common enemy: ISIS. Now that kind of common enemy is more or less on the way to defeat, if not entirely defeated, potentially defeated. And we have an upsurge in tensions between the U.S. and Iran so you'll notice that when the designation was made and we reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, CENTCOM raised the alert level for U.S. forces in the area, and there's a reason for that. The reason is the past history and a fear that somehow those activities might emerge again.

BOWMAN: Frank quickly?

SOBCHAK: I was just going to say this historical parallel, where in both 2005 and 2006, because of a strategic level the U.S. was not willing to expand the war. Not willing to do an Iraq war equivalent of the Cambodian incursion during the Vietnam conflict. At the operational level the theatre commander looked at whether they were going to declare the IRGC Quds Force an enemy combatant. And what this means is the legal term in that they don't have to present a threat, they don't have to raise a rifle, they don't have to potentially create a danger. Just the simple fact that you know someone is an IRGC Quds Force operative, you can kill them. You can kill them whether they're sleeping, you can kill them whether they are – have weapon or they don't have a weapon. It's the equivalent of being, in the Army for example, the uniformed military that is a declared enemy. It is similar to the issues that were debated now, the reason why in both 2005 and 2006 that they decided not to do that was the fear of climbing the escalatory ladder with Iran.

BOWMAN: Okay thank you, and then the report – Frank talks about how the main reason they felt that they ramped things up in 2005, 2006 was that they felt they had a sense of impunity. And now we know that that's the argument, whatever one's opinion about the argument that's the argument that Mr. Hook made recently. Is that, yes this might increase danger but probably the most dangerous thing is for Tehran to feel that they can continue to attack Americans with no impunity or no consequences.

LEAF: Well I was going to say – I mean the problem with that – wrapping the FTO designation around with this argument I think is that what is the designation actually do that hasn't been done already. So operationally doesn't have a lot of effect, it has a political sort of a banner effect, but if you're going to try to cut Iran off on the escalatory ladder, my argument would be you have to do that on the battlefield. We failed to do so not just in Iraq over our conscious decisions bias, Michael said an administration that was tagged with being wild-eyed about Iran but actually was quite cautious, I would say overly cautious at a certain point given the evidence that was there as to the Iranians that were handed all of this. So it's not just in Iraq, it goes back of course decades and the Iranians do look at this and draw conclusions. So I think it's a bit of a stretch to say that the FTO designation carries the same effect as what you might have gotten on the battlefield –

GORDON: There's an interesting potential disconnect, at a time when things are potentially heating up with the IRGC in the Middle East arena, apropos your question what's our national defense strategy? To pivot away from the Middle East and Afghanistan and concentrate on China and Russia, to include to transferring resources from the Middle East and positioning them in Asia and Europe and spending of that. So our longer term deeper strategy is to focus on China and Russia, but now we're heating things up with Iran, so it's going to be – not to say the military can't deal with multiple threats, but that's not the direction I thought the Pentagon was headed in about two weeks ago.

BOWMAN: Thank you let's go to the questions from the audience if you would wait for the microphone to come to you, please identify yourself and your affiliation if you wouldn't mind. Looks like we have a question in the back there.

FRIEDMAN: Thank you, I'm Aharon Friedman, in terms of the escalatory ladder with regard to Iran are there lessons to be learned from the 1980s, mostly enable confrontations late 1980s, when Iranians were laying mines, the U.S. attacked the Iranians, the Iranians basically backed off because they saw the U.S. was fighting?

SOBCHAK: I mean I would agree with that, I think Ambassador Leaf indicated, during the war we were very concerned, almost I think too much, that Iran really had the ability to cause large numbers of U.S. casualties, much more than what was already happening. And I think to counter that is I think in some ways that if we had pushed back more, that Iran probably would've backed down. I think in terms of the power imbalance, we certainly have leverage over Iran.

BOWMAN: Ambassador?

LEAF: Oh, no, I would agree.

BOWMAN: Next question over here.

GILSINAN: Hello, Kathy Gilsinan with The Atlantic. Thanks for doing this panel. In terms of applying the framework to our current conflicts, I'm wondering if any of you can speak about possible lessons learned in terms of the Syria withdrawal. Are we in phase four there? What phase are we in? And I don't hear as much discussion of an Iraq withdrawal, but if we could sort of look at those holistically and what – please.

BOWMAN: Applications to Syria, how do you apply the lessons in the current decisions in the U.S. to Syria?

SOBCHAK: So I think the first lesson is that with the military the enemy always gets a vote. And so you can declare someone defeated and particularly when you're in the middle of an ideological fight, it's very difficult to kill something that has as much power as kind of the extremist religious fervor of Degech. So I think – to declare something over as quickly and kind of – move on I think is very problematic.

LEAF: I mean we really didn't have phases one through three, and least of all have phase four, I think Syria policy as such has been muddled now just deeply, deeply muddled. And incoherent across two administrations. Sort of adverting that a leader of a given state, must go, they're not really following up with anything and sort of subcontracting out the fight to a variety of partners who aren't that good at it, they throw a lot of money around the battlefield becomes populated with a lot of wild eyed fairly extremist fighters, and then it's just a mess. So, I think the question of that troop component is sort of a separate thing but I'm not faulting Obama as such for not going into Syria, I would have said why did we go into Libya for that matter? But it's rather the policy was never framed coherently and it isn't today.

GORDON: I would say the lessons of Iraq to one extent I can think in one way in which it was learned. We are keeping some troops in Iraq to train and try to rebuild and shore up the Iraqi Army which took an enormous number of casualties in the fight with ISIS and was depleted

and needs to be improved, and NATO's there too – NATO forces are there too. So what the U.S., so far, although this administration seems to be able to change policy like on a dime, but so far it looks like the policy is to stay there and not to leave as the U.S. did in 2011. So that's a lesson learned. The lesson unlearned is the low regard with which stabilization programs are held by the current administration. Because once the fighting is over you still have to stabilize and restore these areas in the hope that of least depriving people in those areas of having the motivation to join ISIS which is still out there, or a son of ISIS, which you know grew out of Al Qaida in Iraq, the enemy that we thought was defeated.

BOWMAN: Frank one of the lessons learned relates to detentions operations. We know the Syrian Defense Forces have a lot of ISIS detainees or they have in the recent past. What was – very quickly – what was the main issue with detention operations in Iraq?

SOBCHAK: The issue in Iraq was that the Geneva Conventions and the protocols kind of leave a gray space for civilian detainees, for individuals who were not part of a uniformed military, but who are more insurgence or part of militias. There's a review process that is required every six months, that effectively really pushes from any of them to be released. And in the U.S. this became very problematic and really a huge source of friction between the operational and strategic level and the tactical level. Where the tactical levels felt that the detention programs were really just a catch and release program, where we would catch insurgents, hold them for six months, allow them as a kind of trade tactics techniques and procedures and like a Jihadist gladiator training camp within our detention facilities, and then release them back out onto the battlefield. So that was really the core of it, and it was frankly something we never really resolved.

BOWMAN: Not making clear that these were enemy combatants – making a policy decision that these were enemy combatants and everything that comes along with that.

SOBCHAK: Correct.

BOWMAN: And the most famous one released was Al-Baghdadi right?

SOBCHAK: Absolutely.

BOWMAN: We had Al-Baghdadi and then we released him. Is that right? Okay next question, yes, right over here?

ALQURAI SHY: Thank you. My name is Mohammad Alquraishy and I am with the Iraq Embassy. My questions is to Colonel, thank you for your service. You have mentioned in your presentation that when you transferred the board to the Iraqi – to the Iraqi government there was an honest broker. Would you elaborate that because, if you mean the Prime Minister, he came after the United States, he was allowed to speak in front of a joint session in the Congress. This is one. The second question is if you can describe the most biggest mistake you have in Iraq. Thank you.

SOBCHAK: Sure I mean I think that the largest mistake is really the inability to anticipate what was going to happen after the Saddam regime was defeated. There's a sense that as is indicated previously that we'd be able to fall in kind of on everything, and that the military, the police, would still be able to be functioning and that they can form the future Iraqi government. The sense that we really missed the ability to appreciate that in many cases once the regime collapses, all the structures of state kind of go with it. And that it creates challenges to try to do anything after that. Could you restate your first question? I apologize. Sorry.

ALQURAI SHY: Yeah you have mentioned that when you transferred the board it was an honest broker, you have described the Iraqis an honest broker. Could you please – who was that?

SOBCHAK: Okay so in 2004 there was a transition of authority to the Iraqi government. And at that point Allawi became the Prime Minister. And so there was a general sense within the United States that Allawi, because he was a secular Shia, and that he had representation from some Sunni parties, which was evinced later in the 2010 elections, that he was – had more of a broad swath of support within the Iraqi domestic constituency.

ALQURAI SHY: That did answer my question.

BOWMAN: Okay, thank you, other questions, yes?

SPOEHR: Thank you, Tom Spoehr from The Heritage Foundation, I'm interested in any conclusions about the training of Army senior leaders particularly generals, and maybe their training and their educations. As you look over their shoulders, things we can do differently in that area.

SOBCHAK: Yeah so let me give you a little analogy, this is funny, as we were about to finish publishing this there was a certain general who went through the conclusion chapter and wanted to make something like 40 or 50 changes to it. And the core of the changes were, "Why are you talking about the strategic level? This is not what we do." And this was from an Army academic institution that governs the senior staff college. And the Army's academic – senior level academic institution that promotes and teaches its highest level leaders. And I found it personally just shocking that the institution is supposed to be teaching the strategic level was telling me, "Hey you can't touch this, we're not supposed to talk about this." And to me, that is one of the challenges within Army leaders, is that in many cases, not always, we tend to promote people who have a lot of tactical expertise. But who don't have as much strategic vision or strategic appreciation.

I mean there are definitely individuals who are superb, and who have a real gift and the ability to understand and see this strategic battlefield. But I would argue one of the challenges we have is we promote and focus on the tactical level.

GORDON: You know, Frank is being a little diplomatic. This report – and it was interesting to me and I actually wrote a whole big *Wall Street Journal* article about it because the Army's reluctance to issue the report is almost as revealing as the report itself. And there was a phase where this thing was supposed to – remember it took two years to write okay, takes them

forever to edit it and publish it, got it – but it was supposed to come out I think about a year ago in the spring, because I'm tracking this thing. And then it got brought to the attention of the Army Secretary, and senior Army leaders on the military and civilian side. And this induced some sort of sense of I don't know what – concern, panic, unease that they would put out a document that had criticisms of some previous Army strategies, programs, officers. So the whole thing went into some sort of review where they considered all sorts of options including reclassifying an unclassified study. And at the end of last summer, we're going back more than a year really, right?

SOBCHAK: Yes, yeah.

GORDON: I'm trying to remember, they had a plan to – end of last summer there was a plan afoot, they said well maybe we can put it out at the end of August and basically no one, when the Congress was not in session, except the Congress was in session, Congress is usually isn't in session. And no one will notice and we'll do it as an academic release, and there won't be any press conference or discussion like this or about any of the conclusions, sort of like in the dead of the night maybe no one will notice it. And then they came up with a plan to say we're going to make this a work of the authors. Meaning it would be as if Frank and the 13 other people he worked with or a dozen other people got together in a Starbucks and wrote like a 1,300 page op-ed article, that didn't spend millions of dollars of the Army money, wasn't done at NDU and didn't have the Army's imprimatur, just kind of did it on their own. And that was sort of the operating scenario for how the Army was going to handle this, as a work of the authors where they were going to then try – and do this, they were going to excise from this document the forewords by General Odierno and they were not going to have one by General Milley, or any of the acknowledgements of thanking this or that Army institutions for cooperating with this enterprise.

And I dare say that was sort of the favorite way of handling it, and so I the journalist came in and said, “You're going to do that, and how come you're not going to have a foreword? And how do you spend millions of dollars on a project that's not – doesn't carry the Army imprimatur? And what's going on here?” And then finally they kind of did what seemed to be the appropriate thing and published it, although, how many printed copies are there?

SOBCHAK: I think there are only 40 printed copies. And -

BOWMAN: That makes these very valuable right?

GORDON: And what sort of press conference or event or seminar was there when this two year effort was released? Was there any?

SOBCHAK: No.

LEAF: What's the onward plan for printing?

SOBCHAK: None. Effectively at one point we were going to have 45,000 dollars to do a dissemination and to visit corps and division and higher levels of headquarters and kind of do

internal lessons learned as well as to distribute additional copies. And that was killed. So we were at buntkis.

BOWMAN: Oh please, Ambassador.

LEAF: No I was just going to say that you know what, ultimately it did see the light of the day.

BOWMAN: And it does have a foreword from General Milley –

LEAF: Yeah Milley wrote a good foreword which you can read as sort of a lesson to the civilian leaders as well, not just Army I mean all of these lessons learned applied to the civilians back in Washington who were making a lot of the calls. And I don't know any comparable effort at any point in the past years nor in the future planned by any civilian entities, state or anybody else. So we can all learn something from this.

BOWMAN: It's starting to feel a little defensive, because an Army profession, a profession that is introspective, I'd like to see how many other professions have looked at themselves like this with this level of comprehensiveness, I would just argue. Coming back to your good question, Tom, if I may just read from the study and then ask any of you to respond. This is a direct quote from the report, "Innovative commanders emerged during the war and were empirically successful, but the process of encouraging institutionalized innovations was uneven. More often it appears they learned what was required through peer to peer interaction on the battlefield, not in the institutional venues back home. Indeed it seems that the most successful innovators were actually inverting policy rather than operating within policy. Most notably in the case of brigade and battalion level of coin approach in 2005 and 2006, which took place during the time of the transition strategy. And it seems possible that the Army in the Iraq War were actually tended to penalize successful leaders who challenge their commanders." Response?

SOBCHAK: Yeah, I think that is very much the case, and I think one of the challenges, you know, we have the Army is that in some ways the way to get ahead is don't rock the boat. Don't create drama, don't try to change anything and then if you just follow the path line of least resistance that is almost the best way to get promoted, to move ahead, and to succeed. And those who take risks, the McMasters and others, in many cases those innovations are not rewarded. It's almost like there was an episode of the *Simpsons* once whereas Lisa is talking in school, there's an independent thought alarm that kind of goes off somewhere. And the black ninjas in uniforms and helicopters then descend upon the individual who has exhibited this. And so it's a real problem.

BOWMAN: Question? Right over here.

COLLINS: Hi, this is actually a response to Frank's question. We did a study for General Dempsey, at the National War College, and the National Defense University called, "Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War." It was about the strategic lessons and when they started the project, they asked General Dempsey, "Well what do you mean by strategy?" He said Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and above. So our book doesn't have a lot of great operational

lessons, but it does talk an awful lot about military people participating in inter agency decision making problems that that would – that cost. And we fought for a long time to get the title "Lessons Encountered," a lot of people didn't like it to begin with, but as my five or six authors went through their work, they realized most of the lessons that we were learning at the highest level had been learned two or three times before, especially during the Vietnam War.

SOBCHAK: So Dr. Collins actually was my professor at Georgetown. So and I would like to actually highlight his work, it is a really good study, take a look at it, especially at the strategic level and that our gap – our focus was at the operational level. So his study captures a lot of the critical strategic level issues that was not central to our focus.

COLLINS: And you guys were very, very nice in sharing a lot of the stuff that you got with us, from you and Joel. Thank you very much, we always wanted your work to come out first.

BOWMAN: Very quickly, one of the debates around this issue certainly on Capitol Hill, has been the question, "Would a residual U.S. military presence in Iraq after 2011 have prevented the collapse of the Iraqi security forces and the resurgence of ISIS?" Do any of you have any thoughts on that? A question we'll never know for sure.

LEAF: I mean I do, so from my vantage point in the Shia heartland from 2010 to 2011, I was never in any doubt going back to Washington that if push came to shove, the Iraqi political leaders would say no thanks, we don't really want your forces while the Iraqi military general officers, etc. very much conveyed that they did want to need that assistance. Why? Because the security situation was more or less with the presence of all 50,000 troops still in the country, a residual violence, they felt they basically had it, and why did they need to invest political capital in the conditions that the administration was requiring religious immunities for the troops, etc. Why should they invest the political capital? So I go back to Washington quite certain that the public didn't want troops, the political leadership except for the Kurds didn't want it. And so yes, Obama himself didn't want to keep the troops there, but he was met very much in that mindset by the Iraqi political leaders.

And then we saw what Maliki did in the ensuing period which devastated the fitness of the ISF and furthered the ground work for AQI and its successor ISIS. So I'm – given the numbers we're talking about, I don't think it would have really materially made a difference.

BOWMAN: Michael?

GORDON: Well I think it would've – I disagree on that point because I think it would've made a difference in a number of respects. First would it have made a difference if the politician – the generals on both sides, American and Iraqi, understood U.S. presence was required and necessary because the Iraqi Army was a work in progress. The politicians on both sides were playing to their domestic audiences in the United States and Iraq. But should there have been, had they worked out something to keep a force there, it would've made a difference in a number of respects. What made Mosul such a surprise to the White House in Washington, what made it such a sudden victory for ISIS was the collapse of the Iraqi Forces. It wasn't the several thousand

ISIS fighters or several hundred ISIS fighters, which could've been handled by any competent military. And so what happened was the U.S. lost its situational awareness, it's understanding of the very military that spent billions of dollars and eight years building, because they had nobody with these guys.

It didn't have any advisors for the Iraqi second and third division in Mosul with the Iraqi police, they had no idea what was going on in these units. It didn't realize to what extent they had deteriorated, and in fact one of the first things President Obama had to do was send a team back to Iraq to go look at all these units and say so can they be fixed or not? So that – we would've detected that too, and if you have giving aid and support to a foreign country you have a degree of leverage and influence, that you don't if you're not even a part of this situation, and so to some extent I think we would've been able to counter some of Maliki's sectarian impulses. I think we would have had a better understanding of the situation. Could you have averted the growth of ISIS entirely? I don't think so, because it was feeding off the conflict in Syria and Iraq is Iraq. But I think it really would've mitigated it and the final force that the Obama Administration was thinking about, by the way, was much less than the U.S. military recommended.

It was 3,500 troops with the rotating 1,500 forces for a grand total of 5,000. But I still think since we probably had a little more than double of that fighting ISIS, I still think it would've made a difference if nothing else, we wouldn't have been blindsided by what was happening.

BOWMAN: Frank was the deal gettable in 2011 with the Iraqis?

SOBCHAK: It's counterfactual, so it's hard to know what really would have been possible, and I agree with a lot of what has previously been said. You know I think in terms of the Iraqi military, I think many Iraqi military leaders wanted to have U.S. presence. There was almost a civil military fissure within Iraq, in that some of the military leaders publicly made statements of, "Hey if you stay as long as you've been in Germany or Korea, that's what we would like." On the political side however, I think Prime Minister Maliki, there are some of the authoritarian tendencies as well as sectarian tendencies that were coming out. He was reluctant to have a U.S. presence for sure, in that, a U.S. presence he would see as potentially a retarding influence, or a blocking influence on his authoritarian and sectarian influences. At the same time I think obviously Iran, which I think is a very important actor to consider, wanted us the heck out of there. So they were putting extreme leverage on Iraqi politicians as well as the domestic base to try to push that eto for us to withdraw.

At the same time in terms of U.S. policy, there was again a civil military fissure where the military was recommending a division size, 12 - 15,000 and eventually what was settled on was 3,500 which kind of dovetailed with what the Iraqis felt, Prime Minister Maliki and others felt, was kind of really too little to try to get – to pay a political price for that amount. And that they would not really get a sufficient bang for their buck, if they were going to expend considerable political capital on that. At the same time there was a sense that the U.S. had put a requirement for a parliamentary approval for residual force within Iran. And that, that some of the research that we did indicated that that was a U.S. kind of pushed concern –

GORDON: It was a U.S. requirement that sought by the Obama Administration but not a condition on the Bush Administration for what we did get.

SOBCHAK: Right, as well as on the Iraqi side there was a sense that it was not a requirement. And that in itself became something that Prime Minister Maliki was, you know, there's no way he can deliver that.

BOWMAN: What are the lessons here for Afghanistan?

SOBCHAK: You want me to start?

BOWMAN: Yeah.

SOBCHAK: I mean I think for long term, you know, this kind of process is an extremely long process. It's a multi decade process. And if there's something that we deem as having of strategic national security value, where we want to retain a commitment towards that we have to accept the fact that is going to require a very, very long time. At the same point, I think it raises questions of is Afghanistan a national security interest?

BOWMAN: Ambassador?

LEAF: Well I would just say the problem with Afghanistan at this point is very much of this generalized war fatigue in United States. It's strangely at a time when there's arguably less connectivity on an individual basis of American citizens with those who go off and fight these wars. But there's a generalized sense of apox on all their houses overseas, especially in the Middle East, with this notion that we've been in a forever war in Iraq although we haven't actually, the ISIS, counter ISIS fight was clearly a paramount national security interest for us. Afghanistan at this point much less so.

BOWMAN: Michael?

GORDON: I don't have anything to add.

BOWMAN: Question, yes right here? Second row?

WAHAB: Thank you very much, Bilal Wahab over at The Washington Institute. Mr. Gordon already touched on my question a little bit. It's about nation building and the United States had experience of nation building in Iraq. That phrase is radioactive now in Washington, D.C. Is it something that the U.S. does not know how to do? Therefore should abandon? Or is it something that the U.S. can learn how to do? Thank you.

SOBCHAK: I think there's actually historical precedent both in Germany, Japan, Korea, where, granted there are definite very significant differences between the case studies, but I think we were successful in the past, and I think the challenge is that it requires true and consistent commitment over multiple administrations, over multiple decades. And I – our own political, I suffer to say – our own political situation is fractured to a point where I wonder whether we have

that ability, barring something that's similar to the Cold War and a perception of an existential Soviet threat. That it would give us enough to congeal to make that commitment.

LEAF: I think the real difference too is in the different cases you would lay out to compare and contrast, and so nation building in a Yemen or in a Libya or post 2003, Iraq is a very different prospect than what we faced in Germany, Korea or Japan.

BOWMAN: Alright looks like David Maxwell for the last question there in the in the back row, please.

MAXWELL: Thank you for great comments, Frank we've kind of touched on this with previous questions, I'd really like to ask what conclusions have you drawn about personnel management? Personnel process? We've had unit rotation versus individual replacement, patch chart, CSL command select, all those rotations. And then the exorbitant amount of individual augment requirements, ad hoc units, PRT's, mids bits and all those things. Any concrete lessons that you've drawn in the report for our personnel processes that will help us in the future?

SOBCHAK: Yeah I think there are a series of them, I think for first of all in almost every case where we went to an ad hoc solution rather than an organized unit that the ad hoc solution was not successful. There were very few occasions where an ad hoc solution worked out, both at the headquarters level, the detention headquarters level, the mid-teams which were responsible for the security force training. All of those were problematic. I think we also had challenges in terms of personnel management in the one year deployment cycle in that, many leaders kind of told us that we fought the war nine years, one year at a time. And that in many cases the one commander would almost reject some of the conditions or decisions that were made by the commander prior to him. So I think, in many ways I think, if we revamp that structure, and whether we go to more of a model where the units are there for a longer period of time, or whether the units rotate back and forth to the same exact spot, and retain situational awareness, vis a vie the two units are linked, the forward unit and the rear unit. They go exactly where they're going to go, and many times we really, and some of this was caused by the fact that we didn't have such enforcements kind of at a strategic level. It was caused by that problem. I think we can manage that much more effectively.

BOWMAN: With that please join me in thanking our panelists, thanks for coming again.