

Commentary: President Bush Deserved Better

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On 8 September, a somber President George W. Bush told the nation that accomplishing his goals in Iraq would take a lot more money and a lot more time than the public had been led to believe. He deserved better from his military.

A few days earlier, The Washington Times reported how he had been let down. It published excerpts of a Department of Defense (DoD) "lessons-learned" paper that found planning for the situation following major combat was so rushed there was insufficient time for essential work, and that command relationships and responsibilities were not defined clearly until just before combat began. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and U.S. Central Command (CentCom) Commander General Tommy Franks had one chance to do it right—and they failed to do so. Recovery proceeds, but the outcome is far more in doubt than it had to be.

On the News Hour of 30 September, Jim Lehrer asked retired Marine Corps General Anthony C. Zinni, the former CentCom commander, "Do you believe what is going on on the ground now, postwar in Iraq, could have been avoided?" General Zinni replied, "I think we could have done it better. I think many of the things we're confronting now could have been and should have been anticipated. . . . I think those responsible for planning in the Pentagon should have [foreseen many of the conditions that are now being encountered]."

In answer to Mr. Lehrer's question about General Franks's role in preparing a postconflict plan, General Zinni said, "That wasn't Tommy's responsibility; that was the responsibility of the Pentagon . . . they [told Congress] they had a post-Iraq or post-Saddam administration they were ready to put in place. It failed."

Asked if "heads should roll because of this," General Zinni replied, "Absolutely. Any time we lose lives, any time we have miscalculated, any time we have to go back to the American people and ask for more treasure, more sacrifice, and it was not calculated and it should have been, then somebody should be held responsible."

After watching his appearance, I sent an e-mail to General Zinni (whom I have known for many years and greatly respect) stating that, while Secretary Rumsfeld and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff must be held primarily accountable for the second phase ineptness and the resulting problems, I also hold General Franks accountable. The Rumsfeld-Franks partnership extolled by Secretary Rumsfeld during the major combat phase had failed thereafter—and at a huge cost.

Allowing me to quote him, General Zinni replied that "Tommy was severely limited to just handling the planning of the 'combat' phase. . . . Phase IV planning was kept at the Pentagon."

Only in January 2003 did Secretary Rumsfeld appoint retired Army Lieutenant General Jay Garner as head of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance to deal with postwar Iraq. It was late already, but that month, General Franks should have said something like this to Army General John Abizaid, his newly arrived and highly capable Arabic-speaking deputy commander: "The postwar planning effort is not going well. If it falls short, I will be responsible. So I am going to tell Secretary Rumsfeld that you will plan the second phase, which will begin seamlessly as soon as we defeat Saddam Hussein's army. As my deputy, you will take over General Garner's operation and become the temporary military governor of Iraq. Get busy planning for a military-civilian operation, basing your organization on the solution applied by General Creighton Abrams that was successful—but too late—in the Vietnam War.

"We will find a civilian to play the part of Robert Komer, who first headed the Civil Operations Rural Development Support effort in Vietnam. You will make your own estimate of post-victory conditions, which will be chaotic. Here is one idea I want you to consider. There are 18 provinces in Iraq. Organize 18 province teams under three regions, one of which will be Baghdad and vicinity. I will get the Army War College to name 18 smart students to do full-time planning and to stand by to move to their province seats with their teams, complete with communications and local security from U.S. troops.

"Next week, I will move you and a small planning staff to Carlisle Barracks, near Washington, D.C., for convenient interagency planning. Start gathering data on Iraq and doing research on former occupations of countries. Be ready to brief me on your concept by mid-February. I will fight for sufficient resources."

General Franks should have acted along these lines and insisted that Secretary Rumsfeld accept his approach. Think of the difference it would have made.

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