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How to Lose a War

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The Bush administration's mismanagement of Iraq has been chronicled in shocking detail.

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IT MAY BE that much of the trouble the United States now faces in Iraq was the inevitable result of the decision to crack open a complex society that had been repressed and brutalized for three decades by Saddam Hussein. The fierce unwillingness of many Sunnis to accept minority status; the uncompromising drive of Shiites and Kurds for power so long denied them; the relative absence of competent or inspiring leaders: All this and more meant that the reconstruction of Iraq could not have been simple, short or entirely peaceful.

It nevertheless seems clear that U.S. chances for success would have been far better than they are today were it not for the overwhelming and shocking incompetence with which the administration has managed the war. From the failure to produce a coherent postwar plan to the disastrous performance by the occupation authority that was belatedly installed, the Bush team turned a difficult mission into a near-impossible one. President Bush and his most senior aides meanwhile stubbornly refused to listen to advisers who warned of the consequences of their policies.

In-depth accounts by journalists are beginning to provide a detailed picture of what has gone wrong in Iraq and why. Most recently, The Post's Bob Woodward reports in the book "State of Denial" how Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld monopolized administration planning for Iraq, repeatedly misjudged the tactics and resources needed for success, and ignored reports from his own top aides about how the war was going wrong.

In "Fiasco," The Post's Thomas E. Ricks recounts how Mr. Rumsfeld's Pentagon excluded the State Department from reconstruction planning, then failed to produce any plan of its own. When L. Paul Bremer was abruptly handed a mandate to rebuild the country from the ground up, still more fateful mistakes were made. As former Post Baghdad bureau chief Rajiv Chandrasekaran details in the book "Imperial Life in the Emerald City," staff members for Mr. Bremer's authority too often were picked on the basis of Republican political affiliation, rather than experience or competence -- with the result that people in their twenties were handed control over matters such as the Iraqi government budget.

Mistakes are inevitable in any war. But the common theme of these accounts is the triumph of ideology and arrogance over the pragmatism that is needed to recover from errors or adjust to changing conditions. Having dispatched too few troops to Iraq at the beginning of the war, Mr. Rumsfeld has perpetuated this signal failing for 3 1/2 years. Having ignored reconstruction in prewar planning, the administration then excluded the professionals who might have made the occupation authority successful.

Mr. Bush himself refused to take one of the essential steps needed to remedy the resulting mess -- replacing Mr. Rumsfeld -- despite repeatedly being advised to do so by his own chief of staff, among others. The result, as Mr. Woodward describes it, is a defense secretary who has lost the confidence of the military he directs. Even more disturbing is the portrait of a president who, with two years left in his term, seems unable to come to terms with the damaging and dangerous situation he has helped to create -- much less imagine a way out of it.

We continue to agree with Mr. Bush that it would be wrong and dangerous for U.S. troops simply to withdraw. But it is also dangerous when leaders such as Mr. Bush, Vice President Cheney and Mr. Rumsfeld continue to resist reality.

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