On October 11, 2006, the Yale University International Security Studies program hosted a roundtable titled “The War on Terror: Past, Present, and Future.” The event sought to address fundamental questions about American means and ends in the War on Terror, and to judge the progress in that fight more than five years after the attacks of September 11.

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The discussion was moderated by Professor John Lewis Gaddis, who prompted the participants with a simple yet provocative statement: that the War on Terror is going both extremely well and extremely badly. On one hand, in the five years since September 11, no attack has occurred on American soil—a major success by any standard. Yet, after three years
of a major military presence in Iraq as part of the larger mission, terrorist violence there remains endemic, and victory in that struggle remains elusive.

**Frederick Kagan:** I would like to start by agreeing with the statement, and saying that I think we have been successful in the part of this struggle that we thought was going to be the hardest, and have been unsuccessful in the part that we thought was going to be the easiest. I would like to offer an explanation about why that is the case.

Right after September 11, we told ourselves that the world had changed fundamentally, that all the rules were different, and that we needed to find new ways of doing everything. The old ways were discredited. It was “old think” to talk about a large footprint or large military forces. The hardest thing we were going to do was to face this networked global enemy, and we were going to have to find innovative ways to do it. And so we rejected all the traditional approaches that one might have taken out of “counterinsurgency 101”—even “post-conflict 101”—if you had taken a course here or anywhere else. We rejected basic principles and instead preferred new solutions. As a result, we did get ourselves very much wrapped around the axle of new solutions which worked reasonably well in fighting the new enemies—we’ve actually been fairly successful at that—but it turns out that the world hasn’t changed as much as we’ve said it has. And there’s quite a lot of old think that could be very helpful if we would actually apply it to situations where it matters, updated appropriately. I think it is the search for the new new thing that has fundamentally confused us in this regard.

**Vance Serchuk:** I’ll be a contrarian just for the sake of being one. I agree with Fred to a point. Certainly the infatuation—especially in the context of military affairs—of newness led the administration, particularly in Iraq, to think that you could substitute various things for mass and for a big military footprint. At the same time one of the things I’m most struck by, particularly when I spend time in Afghanistan, is the extent to which the fundamental institutions of the American government have remained remarkably static. The foreign policy institutions, the apparatus that we inherited from the Cold War, are basically unchanged: a State Department, a Defense Department, USAID, and an intelligence agency. While there have been some attempts at reform, the kinds of fundamental challenges that we face in a place like Iraq or Afghanistan cut across these traditional lines.

To give one example: police. There are few things that are more important in the context of counterinsurgency than being able to stand up indigenous
police. Who is responsible in the U.S. government for police? It might be the Justice Department, it might be State, it might be Defense, or it might be USAID. In fact, it’s all of the above, and they argue about it constantly. The result is, five years after we’ve gone into Afghanistan, there still is an interagency fight over who is exactly responsible for police. I agree with Fred that newness for newness’ sake doesn’t make a lot of sense. But, if on the other hand you have a mission that your institutions are fundamentally unsuited to do, you have a problem. At least in that regard I am struck that it’s not just the administration getting caught up in these fancy notions. It is that, even when they have the right notion—even after they acknowledge, as I think we have in Afghanistan in the last two years, that police are really important—there’s no mechanism to actually execute it.

Mary Habeck: I think there’s a different way of thinking about the question: that there are things we’re doing extremely well, some things that we’re not all that great at, and some things that we’re terrible at. Rather than placing myself at one point on that spectrum, I would argue that there are certain things that our government—the way it’s put together and the way people think about things—actually does quite well. Things such as finding terrorist cells and preventing them from carrying out attacks in the United States, working with other countries, and interagency cooperation have all been wonderful in many ways. It’s played into one of our strengths—as long as you could break down interagency barriers for people to work together and prevent attacks.

Also, the entire project in Afghanistan has been fairly well done. The original group that was sent off to Afghanistan was fifty people. You may remember Bush continually saying “a small group of people.” Well, it was fifty people that went to Afghanistan and basically brought down the Taliban—and the only reason I know that is because one of those fifty people was a student in my class. There were certain things that we were set up to do and that we did very well. On the other hand, there are other things that we don’t do well at all—in fact that we’re pretty terrible at. I blame this on conceptual frameworks, and the way people think about issues rather than bureaucratic infighting, although I’m certain there is a lot of infighting here as well. Let me give two examples.

First, why was there such a failure in Phase IV planning in Iraq? There was some sort of handoff between the Defense Department and State that somebody fumbled, and both of them now spend their time accusing one another of being responsible. I was at a conference last year in which the people that did the actual planning for Phase IV—both within DoD and State—were
there, and explained what they did, what they had planned for, and what
they thought they were planning for. And there were two conceptual failures
that led to a lot of the problems that we see now, and a third one that I’m
going to talk about in greater depth after this. The first conceptual failure
was that DoD said, “there may be an insurgency, and we’re going to create
a branch plan for an insurgency, but we’re not going to resource it, we’re not
going to give manpower for it, we’re not going to give funding for it.” In other
words, it was out there as sort of a theoretical “maybe,” but it wasn’t until
November 2003 that former military commander Lt. General Rick Sanchez
was willing to admit that there was an insurgency—because there was no
thinking beforehand that there could be an insurgency. And that’s why DoD
wasn’t ready for one.

Next, the representatives from State said, “we did a fantastic job planning for
Phase IV, it has to be blamed on DoD. We had six months to put this together,
and we had fantastic plans.” However, the issue is that there was a difference
in the understanding of what constitutes a plan. For DoD a “plan” means the
resourcing, the manpower, the funding—everything lined up, essentially on a
week-by-week basis. For the State Department, it consisted of 6 months of planning
in the sense of having meetings, putting together lists of things that we should be
careful about and that we might have to work towards—it did not consist of any re-
sourcing, manpower, funding, or thinking in-depth about what it was going to be like
on the ground. The issue is that the State

Department is not designed for creating governments—that’s not its purpose.
In fact, the State Department is not designed to do anything. Its entire purpose
is to talk so that people won’t fight. A task was given to it for which it was not
designed, either intellectually or institutionally, to handle—it was simply put in
its lap. And that’s why, in my opinion, Phase IV planning was so poorly done,
and why there was such a fumble for almost a year and a half trying to figure
out what in the world we were doing.

The third thing I’d like to talk about—the sort of conceptual failure—is that
none of the people that were involved in any of these enterprises took seri-
ously the issues of religion and culture that were necessary before you become
involved in this sort of enterprise. Nobody was thinking about tribalism, for
instance. Nobody was thinking about cultural sensitivities that have to be
watched out for. Nobody was given cultural sensitivity training beforehand
even, which was something that people were good about—ostensibly at
least—before the first Gulf War. There was little thought given to how we were actually going to interact with people both in Afghanistan and Iraq once we were deeply involved in state building there. There were people here and there who were thinking about it, but it wasn’t built into the institution itself. And I actually blame that on a larger issue, which is that the people who are trained in the social sciences in general in our country, except for anthropologists, are not trained to think about and integrate religion and culture into their thinking. So political scientists who do our policy training, or people who do international relations theory for example, are not trained in how to integrate these types of things into their ways of thinking—so if you have people like that in charge of policy, of course they’re not going to take it seriously when they put together a policy.

Roman Martinez: I want to pick up on that point, because I think it’s exactly right—the final observation about our government’s lack of preparedness in dealing practically with these issues of religion and culture. In a sense, I think it’s a broader failure even than in our government. During the Cold War we had to develop an educational system that channeled people to study history, and study Kremlinology, and study science for those purposes. At a national level today, we don’t have that kind of system that produces the kind of minds—in a wide number—that would have been able to understand some of the complexities in a country like Iraq.

More specifically I personally think that, looking back at our work on the political process, the most important failure of planning, or understanding, was a failure to appreciate the importance of the Shiite religious leadership in Iraq and the role that it would play in the power vacuum following the fall of Saddam Hussein. The senior Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Sistani, ended up being, unquestionably, the most important single individual in Iraq—certainly for the first year that the United States was in Iraq after the war. And we start reading the books that are coming out now, about various things that went wrong—and there were a lot of them—I think it’s important for us not to be tempted by the ease of blaming one specific factor for the problems we have had, or any particular group of people either inside or outside of the government. There was a systemic failure on the part of the American government, to be sure. But the problem extends more broadly, throughout American society as a whole—to the politicians, journalists and policy experts who were speaking and writing on these topics. Virtually everyone missed the Sistani phenomenon in advance.

To illustrate this point with some data, I did a Lexis search for all the times that Ayatollah Sistani’s name was mentioned in the media over the year
leading up to the invasion. Thirty-three articles in the entire Lexis-Nexis network mentioned him. Over the same period, there were about 1200 articles mentioning Ahmed Chalabi. Both of them were important players; both of them were people that we needed to know about and understand. Surely, our government misjudged the situation—and for those of us who were there, I think the failure was ours. But the problem was really broader than that, too, and I think it extended to our academic and journalistic institutions. There are some exceptions of course, on both the Right and Left. Among conservatives, Reuel Gerecht has been attuned to Sistani and the Shiite clergy, and Noah Feldman on the other side has been talking about the importance of religion for several years now. But even the “liberal hawks” who were in favor of the Iraq war and are now blaming a lot of the problems on the incompetence of the current administration got it wrong. If you look at what people like Ken Pollack were writing on these issues, he said essentially that Iraq was a very secular country, and that at most 15 percent of Iraq’s Shiite community will be paying attention to the clerics in a serious way.

I’ve gone on a little too long on this point, but I think that this is a fundamental idea: if the United States is going to be engaged in the endeavor of dealing with countries and helping reconstruct countries, then we really do need to understand them in a much deeper way than we did in Iraq. This issue raises larger questions of whether this kind of nation-building effort is something that we’re capable of doing at all, but I think we need to be thinking about the problem in these broader systemic terms.

Mary Habeck: I want to second that. I’m not trying to blame this on one particular group of people or another. I think this is a systemic thing, and it cuts across any sorts of lines of support or non-support for the original intervention in Iraq. Another point is—Roman talked about the Shiite side—there was a fundamental misunderstanding about what was going on with the Sunnis as well. The Sunnis had a terrible fear of the Shiites, not just because they think of them as heretics or something like that, but their understanding of the world is that the Sunnis are an actual majority in Iraq. Their understanding is that if there are a lot of Shiites in the country it’s because they’ve all come over the border from Iran. So their real fear is of Iranian domination—and nobody understood that before we got in there and started promoting people who had very close ties with Iran into positions of power, and made it look like we were supporting Iranian domination of their country.

Fred Kagan: I just want to add a couple of quick points. Agreeing with virtually everything that’s been said, I think that my colleagues on this panel have evaluated the systemic failures very accurately, and they’re very deep
and very broad. One that has been sort of latent that I think we need to pull up has been the intelligence failure. And I don’t mean the weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—which was also an intelligence failure that needs to be studied—but the total failure to understand how the Sunni population was going to react, and the even larger failure to understand how Saddam had Islamized Iraq in the period between 1991 and 2003 when we invaded. That’s almost inexcusable for any intelligence organization—it really shouldn’t have been that hard to see that. And it really does tell you something about the very deep intelligence failure that was across the board, of which the WMD was in a certain sense only a small part, because that’s actually kind of hard to do. But seeing that you’ve got a massive Islamization program going on in a country of 25 million people ought to be something that the Central Intelligence Agency can pick up.

But for all of these systemic fundamental and broad factors, and I think they’re all right, I want to actually put a finger on an individual and say that it mattered that Donald Rumsfeld was Secretary of Defense, and that it mattered a great deal. Because these sorts of questions and the problems in Phase IV planning that Mary described with tremendous accuracy—I’ve seen the briefings too, and this is absolutely right. The fact of the matter is that any responsible Secretary of Defense should have been pounding his fist on the table and saying, “tell me what’s going to happen the day that the shooting stops.” That’s normal. That’s what you would do in normal, responsible war planning: “I want to see the Phase IV plan, I want to know how it’s going to be resourced, tell me what’s going to happen, tell me how we achieve our objectives.” And he signally failed to do that. We can talk about all of the personal or political reasons why that was the case, but the reason that the Phase IV planning was under-resourced is because Rumsfeld allowed it to be. I think it’s important that we had a personality dysfunction in addition to these systemic problems.

Michael Rubin: I just want to interject with three minor points about Iraq, but also some broader points, because the reason why Iraq is important and the reason why we’re discussing this today—as anyone who’s been reading the newspaper over the past several days knows—there’s a number of other crises. And while no one wants a repeat of Iraq, the fact of the matter is it’s imperative to look at some of the lessons learned as we apply them forward.
First of all, another failure we had—and this plays into the Shiite-Sunni divide, as well as the Kurds for that matter—was a failure to appreciate the psychological impact of 1991. When on February 15, 1991, George H. W. Bush called upon the people of Iraq to rise up and throw off the dictator, they did. Then, we didn’t come to their rescue, and it created a lot more fence-sitting than people expected there to be. If anyone has seen Iraqi coins, or has seen pictures of Iraq, you might know that Iraq is known for its tall, stately date palms, about sixty feet high. But when you go into areas around Musayib or Karbala in heavily Shiite areas—Musayib was actually a mixed area and it’s part of the so-called “triangle of death” right now—you see orchards where the date palms are only about fifteen feet high, because Saddam bulldozed them in 1991 in revenge. That’s a reminder to everyone that you can’t trust the Americans. That plays also into what’s going on now with regard to concepts of “giving up.”

It also plays in a great deal with regard to the United Nations and questions of international legitimacy. What is legitimate in New Haven, Paris, London, and Berlin isn’t necessarily legitimate inside Iraq. A lot of people know about the United Nations and the Oil for Food scandal here—but the fact of the matter is the story wasn’t broken by Claudia Rosett. It was broken by al-Mada newspaper in Baghdad. Likewise, when it came to Lakhdar Brahimi, who’s a very talented diplomat, many Shiite and many Kurds said, “Before he was the UN envoy to Afghanistan, before he was Algeria’s foreign minister, he was the Deputy Secretary General of the Arab League. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, at a time when Saddam gassed the Kurds, massacred the Shiites—do you know what he said? Absolutely nothing.” All too often it’s important to base these questions of legitimacy not just on our own opinions, but what the Iraqis feel.

One of the greatest mistakes I think that we’ve made was allowing ourselves formally to be defined as an occupying power. We haven’t in previous conflicts—previous peacekeeping and liberation operations—but it really played into the rhetoric of the insurgents, and it undercut the ability of some of our allies—Iraqi allies—to side with us, because they were accused of being traitors.

Another small-picture issue I want to bring up, and then I’ll throw out my big picture issues, is some of the catch-22s with which we are now currently faced. I was a bit cynical and wrote some things that weren’t too nice about General David Petraeus and his efforts to develop the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). To his credit he did a far better job than I thought he would. The ISF is doing a fine job, and what has been accomplished is pretty incredible.
However, too many people conflate the ISF with the police. The police are an absolute disaster. What was successful about the ISF was that we embedded people at basically every level, from the foot patrol all the way up to dispatch. They can’t do anything without trainers being present. The police? No, death squads run rampant. The question is how do you apply the lessons from the ISF to the police? In this case you’re in a catch-22, because while the ISF are in well-protected military bases, the police aren’t—hence why we keep hearing about police stations being blown up. On one hand we need to station our people inside police stations. On the other hand they’re not secure enough to do that, creating a catch-22 which we need to break through and deal with if Iraq is going to move forward.

There are three big picture issues, which I mean to segue into discussions of Iran and perhaps North Korea, and elsewhere. I want to throw out the idea that momentum in foreign policy is important. The more we deal with diplomacy, that’s fine, and diplomacy has a role. But we have to recognize that the time spent on diplomacy also has a negative, because it lets adversaries mobilize. One instance involves the looting—it wasn’t all random. Copper wire was being smelted into copper bars and smuggled out of the country—not gold, as some false reports initially stated. But the fact of the matter is a whole network was already in existence then which was able to organize—that Iran and Syria were able to organize.

Number two, sometimes we sacrifice effectiveness on the altar of multilateralism. Every time we have more allies, it comes with strings attached. There’s the issue of international diplomatic legitimacy on one hand, but on the other hand, the issue of what we will lose, and we need to face that. It’s not good enough just to condemn unilateralism. What is the balance?

Number three, there is a tendency in Washington to figure that it’s just us and Iraq—a sort of bureaucratic arrogance. It’s not enough, no matter where we are, to have a plan about how we want to get from point A to point B. We also have to have a plan about how we’re going to keep our adversaries from getting to point A and point B. Because if their goal is to stymie what we’re doing, we cannot pretend that they don’t exist. It wasn’t just us and Iraq—it was us, and Iraq, and Jordan, and Iran and Turkey and so forth.

Vance Serchuk: I think my role on the panel is to say “Yes, but.”

Mary Habeck: It’s the Yale way.
Vance Serchuk: As Mary says, if the answer is either A or Z, the Yale way is to find a way to make it M or N. Maybe that’s what I’m trying to do right now.

Everyone has genuflected toward the idea of the importance of specialized information—of education, about knowing more about what we’re doing in this part of the world. Just for the sake of saying “yes, but” I think there’s a really subtle but important point to be made here. We’ve been saying this a lot since September 11—that we need to know more about the Muslim world, we need to know more about the Arab world, more about the enemy. We just need to know more. On the one hand I think that’s a logical and a fully sensible reaction. Having more people with language skills is important. At the same time—and this is where I’d pivot, not just toward Iraq and Afghanistan, but looking toward the future, to places like North Korea and Iran—just two basic points: First, closed societies are inherently hard to read. Second, specialist communities in my mind are often overrated, which is to say that when you look back over the history of things, specialist communities—specifically regionalist communities—often don’t do very well in reading the countries that they’re supposed to be studying. When you look at the history of the Cold War and the extent to which Sovietologists got so many things fundamentally wrong, we didn’t win the Cold War because we really pegged the Soviet Union right at critical moments. I can think of many key moments where we got it fundamentally wrong, and, in fact, when one looks at the crisis of confidence that struck the Middle East academic community after September 11, I think there’s a direct analogy that can be made to the crisis of confidence that struck a lot of the Russia policy community right after the collapse of the Soviet Union—which was not something they had read. With some critical exceptions, of course. Present company is always excluded.

When I look at Afghanistan, it’s not so much the failure to get things right. It’s the failure to learn. The notion that after Fallujah—when you have Americans dangling from a bridge, and people dancing around happily—that anyone could say, “actually the problem is not the Sunni population itself” strikes me as insane. Yet, there we were in April of 2004 and people were still resolutely holding onto the line that actually this was just a small number of dead-enders, instead of recognizing that we actually have to be able to pick up intelligence on the ground and recognize that we’re going to get things
wrong. In Afghanistan for that matter, the fundamental assumption going in was that Afghans are xenophobes, that they do not like foreigners—that they reject people when they come in. But it actually turned out that after twenty-one years of unremitting civil war, Afghans were really excited to have an international leviathan to come in and impose some sort of order. That was a window of opportunity that began to close very fast. I don’t think that we reacted particularly quickly to it. We had our assumption, we continued blithely on, until about, more or less, eighteen months in. Maybe that’s just an inherent learning curve of bureaucracy, but it strikes me that in all these cases it might be unreasonable to expect perfect knowledge. What isn’t unreasonable is to expect people on the ground to be able to gather information and be acutely attuned to the fact that they are likely getting things wrong—that the assumptions going in should be constantly challenged. That’s one area where—to return to Fred’s point, the personalities of this particular administration have served particularly poorly.

Mary Habeck: I’d like to briefly say one point of warning and then I’d like to give the good news, because there’s been a lot of doom and gloom here. I think that’s actually the American way. Unlike many other people on the world, we seem to dwell on our failures. This is a good thing because it means we’re thinking about our failures and about what to do to fix them, or perhaps how to get beyond them, or hopefully to try and avoid them in the future. I think it’s a good thing to talk about what we’ve done wrong, and I’m glad we haven’t avoided it. But, there’s some good news as well.

Let me first give the word of warning. We’ve been talking a lot about Iraq. I think many of us, and the American public as well, see the problems there very clearly, but there are far more serious problems in Pakistan and Afghanistan than there are in Iraq. I’m actually quite optimistic about the future of Iraq, because we have a feel for the problem, and there might in fact be a solution to it that we can implement. I’m far less optimistic about the long-term future of Afghanistan and especially about Pakistan because Al-Qaeda has managed to recreate themselves in northern Pakistan, and is using it as the base to carry out attacks—not only inside Afghanistan, but to support every one of the attacks that was carried out after September 11 on Western countries. Furthermore, many of us see Afghanistan as the perfectly “good” war—that it was the right thing to do, a direct response to September 11 with massive public support in the United States. On the other hand, Iraq was the “bad” war—it’s the war we were divided over, almost immediately, and there were obvious problems right away. The truth is the jihadis saw the War in Afghanistan as far more important than Iraq. Afghanistan was the center for their migration and for their planning. It was the base—the place
from which they were going to go out and literally conquer the world. So the loss of Afghanistan is seen as far more important. For instance, the attack in Bali—before Iraq, as everyone knows—was carried out in the name of Afghanistan and East Timor. The other attacks, in Madrid and London—those were all carried out first in the name of Afghanistan, and then in the name of Iraq. For us, they were all about Iraq. In fact, I would see statements in Western newspapers that would say things to the effect of “war in Iraq provokes attacks,” but that wasn’t what the jihadis were actually saying when they made their statements. It was about Afghanistan, and then only secondarily about Iraq. That’s my word of caution.

Now, the optimistic side. First of all, regarding counterinsurgency theory, I think the military has finally gotten it, and they’re now able to impose security and stability on vast tracts, even of Al-Anbar province, which is the very worst of the worst places. And most of the increasing violence in 2006 has not been from the insurgency, it’s been from the ethnic tension and sectarian violence—provoked, of course, by Al-Qaeda. But the places on which they’ve imposed this notion of counterinsurgency have stability, and people are actually turning in the Al-Qaeda members. So all up and down the border with Syria from Tal Afar all the way to al-Qaim, there’s basically peace, and that’s been because the people there have bought into the notion of stability and security and are turning in the insurgents—a big sign that you’re winning. They’ve got the idea, they know how to do it, but the second point is that they don’t have the people to actually do it themselves. If we put in another 200,000 people, you could have stability and an end to the insurgency—not by tomorrow, but within a year—but you would have done it at the expense of creating an Iraqi army that could have done it on its own, without our support and without our intervention. That would mean in 10 years we’d have a terrible problem there. We can’t put in our own people and impose stability and expect Iraq to take care of itself from then on. You have to let the Iraqis do it themselves.

**Frederick Kagan:** There’s a question which I don’t think is very interesting anymore at this point, of whether it was central to the War on Terror when Bush invaded Iraq. A lot of people have gotten wrapped around the axle on that question, and I think that’s not very important anymore. The question is “is it central now?” I think the answer is “absolutely.” Mary is quite right—Afghanistan was the base, there was no intention to make Iraq the base before we invaded, and we eliminated Afghanistan as a base. But if we in fact fail in Iraq, we will have replaced a base that’s in the middle of nowhere, characterized by 20,000 foot mountains, no roads, and no wealth, with a base that is in the middle of the Middle East with access to oil revenues
and also to scientists who’ve been working on WMD programs. That would be an unmitigated catastrophe in my view. And so, for nothing but strategic reasons, if we lose in Iraq, it will be a fundamental, catastrophic defeat in the War on Terror at this point.

We can go on and talk about the question of democracy as a model. It seems to me that we’re in a struggle where the jihadis have been making the argument all along that democracy is inappropriate for Arabs and impossible in Arab lands and wrong in the eyes of God. I think that whatever you think about Iraq as a beacon of hope, allowing them to demonstrate that democracy is impossible in an Arab land when they set out to make it impossible, would also be a disastrous ideological defeat.

**Roman Martinez:** I’ve been out of government for a year now, and don’t know exactly where I now come down on many of the grand strategic questions—perhaps that reflects the complexity of some of the observations I have on these issues. With regard to Iraq and the War on Terror more generally, it seemed that when we went in, in addition to the WMD rationale, there was a sense that Iraq was part of the War on Terror in a proactive or offensive sense by the U.S. government. The idea was that we were going to make a strategic inroad into that part of the world to help Iraq transform itself into a more decent place. Iraq would then be useful as a way of inspiring or showing the Arab world that this kind of model would be possible. So even aside from the Al-Qaeda connections and WMD, there was a kind of proactive strategic rationale as to why we’d want to be fighting in Iraq as part of the War on Terror. Now, it seems we’re on the defensive there. As Fred pointed out, Iraq is key now because it’s where the bad guys are—they’re trying to get us and we’re fighting them back. But I’d like to take this chance to ask if there are any thoughts among my fellow panelists on the broader question of democratization. Are there “lessons-learned” that have come out of the Iraq experience? Is it that, to paraphrase Rumsfeld, the unknowns are so great when you are going into any country, that we shouldn’t do it unless we absolutely have to—in other words, do we need to have a much higher threshold for intervention than we did in Iraq? Or is this still the right model to be pursuing?

**Michael Rubin:** Well, to paraphrase someone else, I’d say you shouldn’t misestimate democracy. What struck me is that, before the war, the *Guardian* newspaper of Great Britain—which is hardly a newspaper that’s ever favorable to American foreign policy—had an article about how under Saddam, one out of every six Iraqis had fled Iraq. It’s a pretty amazing figure when you think about it. When that portion of Iraqis which settled in the
West came there, they had absolutely no cultural impediment to accepting democracy. This leads me to believe that the issue isn’t democracy where we’re failing, but again going back to rule of law, and perhaps one of the things we didn’t plan for: a concept of how cruel, and how brutal some of the terrorism would be. All too often when I read or hear western media, everything is done in the passive voice: “three soldiers were killed,” “twenty schoolchildren were killed,” “a bomb was set off”—these statements are missing a subject. Terrorists set off the bomb.

Likewise when we think about terrorism, all too often when we hear about a car bomb it’s spontaneous to us. When we hear about a suicide bomber, we believe it to be spontaneous. The fact of the matter is that every time a car bomb goes off at a school, for example, there’s been a planning meeting before that happened, in which people decided to shock the western media, and deliberated about how to kill the most children. Likewise, in Palestinian terrorism, all too often there are stories about how a seventeen year-old from a refugee camp went and set off a suicide bomb. What’s not asked about is the network behind that. Who in the refugee camp, or who in the high school, identified him or her as someone who might conduct this operation? How did they put them in the hands of the recruiters? Often, the families swear they didn’t know and they’re being truthful. It simply means there are networks out there which our intelligence hasn’t penetrated. There are financial networks as well.

To segue back to Roman’s point about democracy, before the War on Terror, everyone believed the Arab-Israeli situation to be central to everything. The Syrian government, the Libyan government—everyone inside the Middle East—would divert attention by blaming things on the Arab-Israeli situation. Now, people might condemn U.S. democratization policy, but the fact of the matter is that for the first time, throughout the Middle East—not just in English but in Arabic and Persian as well, there’s a real debate about democratization, and reform, and dissent—the key issues. I’m reminded of Salameh Nematt’s November 2004 column in al-Hayat in which he asked why it has been that the two freest elections in the history of the Arab world have both come under occupation—in Iraq under American occupation, and in Palestine under Israeli occupation? What does that say about the Arab political culture, and what does that say about the West’s intentions? It has sparked a very active debate, which I think is a very healthy debate to have.