

Charles University

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Title of MA- thesis: *Iraqi Democracy: American Nation-Building and Counter-insurgency in the Iraq War*

1. Fulfillment of stated objectives

1.1. Introduction of the topic and stated hypothesis

In *Iraqi Democracy: American Nation-Building and Counter-insurgency in the Iraq War* Vojtěch Petráš seeks to determine the reasons for the American failure in the Iraq War. His focus is the nation-building process and the Counter-insurgency strategy linked to this effort which succeeded the swift U.S. military intervention in March 2003. The author poses the question why the nation-building efforts and the counter-insurgency tactics ultimately were met with limited success. He offers one hypothesis – American strategic culture – as explanation for the American failure in Iraq. In the conclusion, which focuses almost exclusively on the strategic and military components of the American intervention in Iraq, Vojtěch Petráš argues in favor of the validity of his hypothesis based on the dictate of American strategic culture in past and present military interventions. He suggests therefore that a change in the American strategic culture is necessary in order for future U.S. military interventions to be successful. Such interventions should to a higher degree take into account the reality of irregular warfare.

1.2. Execution of stated objectives

The author has carried out the stated objectives to determine the origins of the American failure to carry out nation-building and counter-insurgency in Iraq however with limited success.

2. Strength and weaknesses

The strength of this MA-thesis is the cohesive and clear discussion on the strategic and military aspects of the American failure in Iraq. At the same, however, the over-emphasis on the military strategy, warfare and specifically the singling out of the variable of strategic military culture as the only explanation to the American failure in Iraq, is highly problematic. A basic Internet search will tell you that among many military analysts variables, such as contextual understanding and cross-cultural understanding are often given high explanatory value for the failure in Iraq. Indeed it is also the failure in Iraq which has emphasized the need for cultural

understanding and contextual knowledge within the military establishment.¹ It is a basic understanding and something that the author should have taken into account. A proper discussion of how you opt for one hypothesis over other alternative hypotheses is warranted in a MA- thesis. A complex issue such as the War in Iraq and the reasons for the relative failure met by the U.S. military there can never be reduced to a single hypothesis alone. The author could, however have discussed strategic culture in relation to cultural cross-understanding and posed the question whether the strategic culture is reluctant to take such considerations into account. That would have been an interesting and more valuable discussion. Also, the military establishment is treated like a closed entity with no relationship with the White House or the DOD. One issue to consider here is whether the military to a considerable degree were victims of ideological and economic considerations linked to the idea of imposed democracy promotion and oil driven by such personalities such as Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney. Where the military leadership sufficiently consulted on the feasibility of the intervention in Iraq? Those are key questions to consider here and which the author has failed to take into account since the focus is only on the strategic aspect and strategic culture. It is the role of the researcher to always look for alternative explanations, not to choose explanations that fit neatly with the established hypothesis. There was for example a marginalization taking place of Iraq specialists and who were against the intervention in the State Department, in Think tanks, and in academia.

Furthermore, the author discusses the Neoconservative movement but in a very superficial way. A proper definition of the term *neoconservative* and related concepts such as *American exceptionalism* and *American Empire* is also warranted here since there are different orientations within this current and not all of them focus on US foreign policy. Also, there are discussions among leading neoconservatives on a potential intervention in Iraq at least from 1992.

What also strikes the reader as odd is the lack of maps with clear boundaries for ethnic and sectarian cleavages and key cities since these elements also were crucial for the strategic development in Iraq. Indeed a contextual concise discussion of the political, ethnic, geographic and economic elements would have been helpful. The issue of oil here and the disparate character of the Iraq state before, during and after the American intervention should have been taken into account. From a military strategic standpoint these are crucial elements indeed. By

¹ Dunderlee D., William. "Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness: A Primer for US Armed Forces Deploying to Arab and Middle Eastern Countries". Combat Studies Institute Press Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027 http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/csi_wunderle_cultural_awareness.pdf

the way a paragraph on the strategic implications of the American Intervention for the region would also be useful in relation to the Iran-Saudi hegemonic rivalry, the Kurdish question the development of Al Qaida and the Islamic State.

Another issue that strikes the reader as odd, is that there is no proper definition of the term strategic culture despite it being advanced as the key independent variable. Also, the term nation-building is not sufficiently problematized. The questions needs to be posed whether imposed nation-building is desirable in the first place. Furthermore, there is no proper discussion of the Grand-Strategy for the Middle East developed by the George W. Bush administration and the idea of democracy promotion and nation-building as it was conceived in relation to Iraq.

2.1. Specific Issues

Insufficient source referencing, Lack of specificity and Lack of critical analysis

The complete lack of sources for the introductory foundational discussion is also tremendously surprising. Handbooks and other sources used in this discussion should have been referenced. The discussion here could have been more specific by citing specific dates. “Many” Iraqis could have been replaced by specific statistics and “many” government officials could have been replaced by the citation of a few names. Furthermore, the author could have provided a few concrete examples of US foreign interventions in the past.

P.5 There is a complete lack of source referencing in the counterinsurgency definition and an incomplete source referencing for Clausewitz, which is a seminal author. The same is true for the definitional discussion on nation-building and insurgency on page 6.

Literature review

The literature does mainly address literature that supports the author’s general hypothesis, which reduces the validity of his basic argument. He has decided at the outset that it is only strategic culture that is important and does thus not address other issues. Many military reports published during and after the Iraq stress lack of cultural knowledge as one important variable explaining lack of success in Iraq. There is also a debate regarding the nature of the new wars and the necessary strategy involved?²

² Durand, Etienne. “Stabilization Operations in the Era of ‘New Wars’: Addressing the Myths of Stabilization“. http://www.nids.go.jp/english/event/symposium/pdf/2008/e_11.pdf

Furthermore, the literature review does not sufficiently problematize and critically assess the literature or inform the reader why it is important.

Chapter 1., p. 11: *Why were there tensions between the USA and Iraq at the end of the 1990s?*

A concise development would have been useful to explain this essential issue. It also would have been useful to explain the opposition to nation-building; which was not only tied to the quagmire in Vietnam. Finally, the issue of the transformative character of “*Nine Eleven*” in regards to the US Middle East Policy is not sufficiently explained.

3. Format and linguistic aspects

Stylistically and linguistically Vojtěch Petráš MA-thesis is well executed. There are very minor writing errors such as omission of the word *the*, and a few grammatical mistakes related to the past tense. Structurally however, there are some issues. It would have made more sense to place chapter 2 before chapter 1 since it works as foundational discussion for the following discussions. Also, the discussion on civil-military relations is interesting but it is not explained to the reader how it fits with the over-arching discussion and argument. Also, the discussion is mainly from the military point of view.

4. Final assessment

My final assessment based on the previous discussion is that Vojtěch Petráš despite the shortcomings being advanced here should be recommended for defense and that he should be awarded the grade 3.

Dr. Anna Viden June 9, 2015 in Prague