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The Center for National Policy

“Stability Operations: The Lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan”

One Massachusetts Ave N.W.

June 10, 2008 12pm

The Center for National Policy invited **Dr. Anthony Cordesman**, the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, to discuss the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan in U.S. stability operations. Cordesman formerly served as national security assistant to Senator John McCain of the Senate Armed Services Committee, as director of intelligence assessment in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and as civilian assistant to the deputy secretary of defense. **Tim Roemer**, President of CNP, moderated the event.

Tim Roemer began the event by introducing the speaker and the topic. **The U.S. is in need of a new foreign policy that can face the changing needs of the 21st century.** As we soon will elect the next President, we must ask whether our strategies are on the right track, and whether we are moving quickly enough to reaching our goals. How will the next administration learn from the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan?

Cordesman began his lecture noting **the complexity of stability operations.** In the current global situation, traditional alliances have been replaced by local and regional ones. When combined with asymmetric warfare, and demands by U.S. politics for quick results, stability operations become even more difficult.

He noted that while Iraq and Afghanistan prior to Sept. 11th were largely different from each other, they did share one quality: both were broken states in which basic governmental functions and the economy had failed, making the **goal of nation building a daunting task, even if U.S. efforts had not made any mistakes.**

Cordesman cited several reasons for the failure of U.S. objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan. First, there was a vacuum where no experienced and knowledgeable institution was able to analyze the situation on the ground accurately. In addition, the U.S. incorrectly framed the objectives. **Only the host country wins, with both political and security stability, not the foreign countries lending support.**

In regards to the potential for developmental success in Iraq and Afghanistan, Cordesman stated that the **likelihood was the same as “preserving a snowfall in hell.”** In part this is because of an enormous gap between Washington talk and the situation in the field. The U.N. predicts that **successful development will take until 2020, when Washington believes it can reach its goals until 2009.** In addition there is a gap in objectives. Washington uses the language of

“reconciliation,” whereas Iraqis are just hoping for “accommodation,” when they can reach a point where both sides can compromise without erupting into violence.

As for lessons for future U.S. operations, Cordesman warns that every case is specific. **In Iraq and Afghanistan we moved and reacted in the field too slowly, and did not correctly balance priorities.** He was also strongly skeptical of the idea of creating a civilian police force. “No one has ever created a functioning police force where there is a counter-insurgency problem and government corruption.”

In regards to governance, Cordesman stated that **“legitimacy and popular support is not the product of elections, but of quality of representation and services provided by local governments.”**

He concluded by reminding the audience that victory is relative, that **you cannot transform an entire society, political system, or set of values** and that you cannot control the future whether we stay in Iraq or not.

When asked how to best institutionalize stability operations in the U.S., Cordesman argued that any institution must be able to **assess the prospects on a case-by-case basis**, keeping in mind the available resources. It must be staffed by an operational group with field experience that recognizes the limitations of these operations. Cordesman strongly disagreed with using military contractors who are given immunity from liability. He also recommended changing the career patterns that recognize that it takes between 6 to 12 months to establish working relationships inside the host countries.

When asked to address the problems with the National Security Council, Cordesman stated that **the reason why the NSC has been unsuccessful is because it operates by consensus and interagency cooperation.** It needs a strong central command and smoother operations. He also noted that the Net Assessment Office was moved from the State Department to the Defense Department, and **is currently filled by people without practical experience.** Managing a situation like Iraq must be done in Iraq by the country team, not from Washington, in order to adapt to ground realities quickly.

Cordesman refused to discuss the Presidential candidates and expressed little hope that these important issues would be discussed in a serious way during the debates leading up to the election. He did however state that the next president will find that **until Iran has a basic shift in power, there is no way prevent them from pursuing nuclear capabilities and from engaging in game playing.**

In regards to engaging in dialogue with Iran, **Cordesman recommended that we should negotiate while being aware that dialogue doesn’t always achieve results.** In addition, he recommended that the U.S. recognize Iran’s legitimate pursuits. “If we were Iran, and the forces around us were the same as in Iran, would we pursue nuclear weapons or try to drive out other regional powers?” Cordesman stated that these seem to rely on basic values of nations.

When asked how the U.S. can be careful to address being seen as colonialist occupiers, Cordesman recommended that stability operations understand the forces at work, which include ethnic and cultural divisions, and to be more realistic in our objectives. **“If you declare instantly that there is equality between men and women, it’s not going to happen. If you say there must be rule of law, it can’t happen overnight. If you encourage them to be secular, when they exercise sectarian religious divisions, it is not working.”** This includes not pushing for political referendums too quickly, before basic ethnic issues are addressed.