

NPS Guest Lecture:

Reaping the Whirlwind: Can We Leave Iraq Better than We Came In?

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Ambassador to Yemen during Cole Attack Speaks Truth to Power in NPS Special Guest Lecture

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Introduction

Five days after perpetrators of the *Cole* attack made a daring escape from a military prison in Yemen, the U.S. Ambassador during that attack, Barbara Bodine, was doing something even bolder: speaking truth to power.

The bottom line of her distinguished guest lecture at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), "Reaping the Whirlwind: Can We Leave Iraq Better than We Came In?": "Many of the mistakes we made and are continuing to make in Iraq are the result of lack of understanding of the Iraqi people and their culture. We didn't know what we were doing."

Ambassador Bodine's direct and forceful "been there, tell it like it is" remarks were to U.S. and international officer students in NPS Professor Vali Nasr's Middle East area studies courses in "Islamic Fundamentalism" and "U.S. Policy and the Islamic Republic of Iran." Nasr, also NSA Department Associate Chair for Research, invited the former high level diplomat as part of an exchange between NPS and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government Governance Initiative in the Middle East, which Bodine established.

"The Naval Postgraduate School and Harvard's Kennedy School share synergistic and overlapping missions exploring and promoting ground truth understanding of the political, economic, social and cultural issues of this critical region," said Nasr.

The NPS School of International Graduate Studies' National Security Affairs department educates future U.S. and allied military leaders, including from the Middle East, while Harvard's Kennedy School seeks to prepare the next generation of Middle East leaders and scholars through the School's academic programs, training and resources.



Ambassador Barbara Bodine delivers a guest lecture to students of Professor Vali Nasr's Middle East area studies courses.

"A major NPS goal is to provide officer students with the ability and opportunity to see the big picture," Nasr added. "Speakers of the quality and stature of Ambassador Bodine impart more than just big picture knowledge, they elevate the quality of education. The Ambassador said she also learned a lot from her dialogues here at NPS, so we're contributing to Harvard's thinking in this critical area as well."

"It's fortunate to have a connection to an institution this fine," Bodine said. "It's essential that our military officers—indeed all of our national security decision makers—have the in depth background on Islamic fundamentalism and the Middle East provided by Professor Nasr and others at the Naval Postgraduate School. I'm pleased to be able to share the fruit of decades of experience with this critical area of the world with an audience of operationally seasoned officers, many of whom have had tours in Iraq, and look forward to future exchanges."

"I operate on the conviction that reform in the region is not only possible but is ongoing, and that the answers have to come from the region itself, not be imposed from the outside," she stressed. "The core of this conviction is the self-evident truth that both sides need to know about each other. Especially after 9/11, we should be quadrupling the number of foreign students studying in this country. If you're studying Islamic fundamentalism and you don't have a Muslim in the room, you're having a sterile conversation. We need a dialogue, not a monologue, and a much stronger emphasis on personal relationships across cultures and countries."

Attracting large numbers of international officers and educating them in the same crucible with future U.S. military leaders is precisely what the NPS School of International Graduate Studies—and the National Security Affairs Department, which provides its residence masters degree

programs—specializes in. Students in Professor Nasr's "Islamic Fundamentalism" course include a Jordanian Army officer and German Air Force officer, as well as officers from all four U.S. military services. The Iran policy course has a German as well as a Bulgarian student in addition to those from the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps.

"An in depth course on Islamic fundamentalism is vital because its footprint is so global," said Nasr. "The Naval Postgraduate School is doing a very important front line job in educating our officers and those of our allies to be prepared for critical jobs in the Muslim world. We're on the cutting edge, the cusp, of this international educational mission."

"Islamic fundamentalism is a global issue that's especially important in Jordan, where we've had a number of extremist terrorist attacks," said Jordanian Army Colonel and signals officer, Omar Khoury, an NPS international student in defense decision making taking Professor Nasr's fundamentalism course as an elective. "Professor Nasr is a genius who knows more about American history than most Americans. He's brilliant at taking a big picture theory and making it relevant to on-the-ground, real world situations."

"This course is vital because Sunni Islamic fundamentalism is the most powerful movement in the world today," said U.S. Marine Corps Capt. Daryl Desimone, a force protection and communications officer also in the course. "With three operational missions to the Middle East already—in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—it's critical that the future decisions I'm called on to make are as informed as possible. Many of Ambassador Bodine's pointed observations of Administration policy and strategy were powerful and accurate, and will be part of informing my future decisions. After my tour at NPS and 15 months of language training at the Defense Language Institute, I'll be serving as a foreign area officer in Russia, which has experienced increased terrorist violence. Secessionist movements are using Islamic fundamentalism as a motivational and recruiting tool, so everything we're learning here will be extremely valuable in my future operational duty assignments."

"Ambassador Bodine's lecture was very enlightening and her frankness and openness helped me understand the real world situation in Iraq, which I can apply directly to my thesis on 'Military Intervention in Identity Group Conflicts: A Social Movement Perspective on the Sunni Insurgency in Iraq,'" said Air Force Capt. Jeffrey Jackson, an intelligence officer who flew C-17 cargo planes in Iraq and opened up Baghdad Airport. "Professor Nasr's course is giving me the historical and ideological foundations of Islamic radicalism, which is a critical component of my thesis and will help me as an intelligence officer by providing the context in which to understand radicalism as it plays out in future conflicts."

The ground truth that Jackson, Desimone, Khoury and other NPS officer students heard from Ambassador Bodine is serious ground indeed.

"Iraq was supposed to be a simple and cheap and popular war—but it's proven to be none of these," she told the rapt audience. "The invasion and occupation were motivated by arrogance of the most extreme form, driven by ideology and based on the astonishingly naive and delusional assumption that the shock and awe of an Iraqi defeat would be transformative to the entire Middle East, especially to WMD proliferators like Iran. But the Iranians and Iraqis battled to a stalemate for eight years in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) because the prospect of a foreign force, even a neighboring Islamic one, occupying the country was completely unacceptable. So why would we assume the Iraqis would welcome a foreign occupation? The Sunnis, associated with Saddam, would expect they'd be targeted. The Shia would be deeply wary of a second betrayal (as after the first Gulf War). And the Kurds, ever jealous of their autonomy, would be wary of being abandoned in the name of national unity. So who did we expect to be throwing roses and sweets in the streets? Their assumptions—like Islamist terrorism would be forced into retreat and Iraqi reconstruction would be self-financing—proven faulty, the expected rallying power hollow, and the

claimed precedents shown to be ill founded, a war that was almost instantly unsupported internationally has been increasingly questioned domestically.”

Bodine was equally direct in her assessment of the Administration’s choices during the ongoing Iraqi occupation.

“What was our most critical mistake? It was the decision in January 2003 to put the reconstruction of the country under the Office of the Secretary of Defense. This was unprecedented and mixed mandates and missions. The next great mistake was not to curb the violent looting by mobs shortly after the invasion. While the Iraqis watched the center of their history and culture being trashed and U.S. troops doing nothing to stop it, the message was clear: ‘We are pawns and after thoughts. The Americans are here to liberate assets and territory, but not the people.’”

“The third major mistake was not quickly to declare and enforce martial law,” Bodine said. “My second day in Baghdad (as Coordinator for Post-Conflict Reconstruction for Baghdad and the Central Governances of Iraq in 2003), General McKiernan and I met with a group of prominent non-Chalabi Baghdadis. With looting, rogue militias and competing self-appointed authorities, the elephant in the room was, ‘When are the Americans going to announce martial law?’ to make clear what the rules were and that we were prepared to enforce them. It was a plea for a return of authority and stability, not a call for a return of authoritarianism. But General McKiernan’s martial law order got no backing from Washington, and faded away. The lawlessness spun out of control, and that continues to this day.”

“One basic reason the war in Iraq did not go according to plan is that the Administration had no plan,” Bodine said. “We went into Iraq with no post-invasion plan, despite the interagency 18-month ‘Future of Iraq Project’ where many reconstruction issues had been thrashed out by American and Iraqi scholars and practitioners, and prescient reports by the Army War College, Rand, and others. But the Office of the Secretary of Defense chose to put the Project to one side, to start fresh at the end of January 2003. The Project was banished and, more critically, those involved in it, the planners, were also excluded from the OSD effort.”

“Our own choices and actions in Iraq also divided the country,” Bodine continued. “As even Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute has stated, we went in with a greater sense of sectarianism than even the Iraqis themselves have—as if the three main ethno-religious blocks were homogeneous and monolithic—on the vastly oversimplified, and false, assumptions that all Shia were good, all Sunnis were culpable, and all Kurds are small ‘d’ democrats. We discounted the concept of an Iraqi national identity, and we ignored a number of self-evident truths, the most important of which is that Iraq does not in fact sort into neat sectarian or ethnic groups. The reality is Iraq is a mosaic of 27 religious and ethnic groups, not three, and there is a far greater national consciousness and far stronger Iraqi national identity than we gave the Iraqis credit for. When you ask an Iraqi if he is a Shia or a Sunni, he says ‘I’m an *Iraqi*.’” The head of a major Iraqi tribe said it best, to the (U.S.) Ambassador in the spring of 2003: ‘Half of my tribe are Sunni, half are Shia, and they’re intermarried to each other—and to some Kurds, too.’ To go into Iraq with this tripartite assumption was to invite a shattering of the state, not to reform or transform it.”

Despite all the mistakes, Bodine remains guardedly hopeful. “To be a foreign service officer you have to be a realist as well as an optimist,” she said, stressing the future.

“What we need now is to intelligently plan our exit better than our entrance, and have a better appreciation for what the people of Iraq want for themselves. It was unrealistic from the outset to expect a democratically unified, secular Iraq, as we define these three terms. What sort of Iraq can we realistically expect to emerge? What are the suboptimal minimums necessary for us to successfully exit, and what do we need to do to achieve them?”

Not surprisingly, Ambassador Bodine had a clear and carefully thought out answer.

“We need to end our military occupation in a planned manner that can force the Iraqis to come to terms with the real need for internal political compromise,” she said. “The key is legitimacy and the shared perception of legitimacy. First and foremost, we need to fix the perception—both here and in Iraq—that it is up to the U.S. to ‘fix’ Iraq before leaving, rather than that it’s up to the Iraqis to fix Iraq. We must not, and cannot, do it for them, and must not be seen to be doing it for them. The most important thing we can do is to identify, support and strengthen the indigenous centripetal forces within the country—the inherent nationalist forces drawing it together. The answer is political. Shia majoritarianism is as untenable as was Sunni Baathism. The Sunnis must be brought into the system.”

“We must also do everything we can to assure that the Iraqis have not just a legal constitution but a legitimate one, and one that is seen to be legitimate by all the major factions. Such a constitution is possible, but not guaranteed, following the ‘Grand Bargain’ last October that, in exchange for Sunni participation in the referendum and the political process, the Shia and Kurds were to allow the constitution to be open for amendments—critical revisions—immediately upon the formation of the post-December 2005 parliament, rather than after the eight years provided in the current constitutional text. One key area of revision should be the unworkable and divisive oil allocation provisions. Just training Iraqi security forces is also not the answer.”

Professor Vali Nasr is a widely published expert in Islamic fundamentalism and Middle East policy who has provided expert commentary to national and international media, including *CNN*, *BBC*, *National Public Radio*, *Public Radio International*, *CBS News* and *60 Minutes*, and *NBC Nightly News*. His books and articles have been translated into Arabic, Indonesian, Turkish, Persian, Chinese, and Urdu.

In addition to serving as U.S. Ambassador to Yemen from 1997 to 2000, Barbara Bodine's 30-year diplomatic career included tours as Deputy Principal Officer in Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq War, Deputy Chief of Mission in Kuwait during the 1990 Iraqi invasion and occupation, Associate and then acting overall Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the Department of State, Dean of the School of Professional Studies at the Foreign Service Institute, Director of East African Affairs at the Dept. of State, and Senior Advisor for International Security Negotiations in the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs.

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