

America's Second-Longest War: Taking Stock Geopolitical Lessons

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JESSICA T. MATHEWS: OK. I hope that you were able to get some sustenance.

We have explored now in some depth the perilous state of Iraq today. And we have looked at what the war has cost the American taxpayer and the American economy and how that relates to the fiscal problems that we are facing today.

And we turn now to the geopolitical lessons of this conflict, I think the heart of this discussion.

One of the great strengths of this nation, indeed I would say one of our defining characteristics, is the American willingness, inclination, capacity always to look to the future, to embrace it. That ability has driven our growth for several centuries and certainly accounts for some of our greatest achievements.

But it has a heavy cost, and that cost is that we are far too quick to turn the page and to leave our past behind relatively unexamined.

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It was Edmund Burke, not George Santayana, but 250-plus years ago who warned that those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it. And I must say, I was thinking about that this week when I read in the most recent Pew poll that 25 percent of Americans believe that the U.S. achieved its purposes in Iraq. And I had to wonder what those numbers can possibly mean.

Our purpose on this panel is not to examine the factual record, but to try to get behind the facts and to ask what we've learned positively and negatively from this expensive, literally and metaphorically, war. I think if you scoured the country, you wouldn't find two people better suited to this task than those seated next to me.

Zbigniew Brzezinski is, of course, well known to everyone as the national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter. But more important for this purpose, I think, is that he is among a handful, maybe half-a-dozen, of the great strategic thinkers in the United States over the past century. There is no clearer, sharper thinker about national security active today.

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He's been a professor at Harvard, at Columbia and at Johns Hopkins. His dozen books, which span more than half-a-century, have examined two sets of topics: one has been the nature of communism, totalitarianism and of international security relations during the Cold War; and the other, increasingly over the past half-dozen years or more, has been about America's role in the world in a rapidly changing strategic environment and about America's interests looking forward.

And finally, I would add as a qualification for today's discussion, unlike most former holders of high office in Washington, he has been willing over and over again to step outside the conventional wisdom when the issue warranted it, taking some risks with his own reputation.

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General McMaster is one of a very – one of the most prominent of a very small, very elite, very important class of individuals who have earned the title warrior soldiers.

He, too, has been willing to critically examine the past and has done so with such power that rather than end his military career, the work has ultimately advanced it.

His Ph.D. thesis became the widely influential book “Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led To Vietnam.” I think the title gives you some idea of his appetite for straight talk.

He is equally known for brilliance as a combat commander, earning a Silver Star for leadership in the 1991 Gulf War and even wider recognition for his enormously influential success in the Battle of Telfar in the Iraq War.

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In the rest of that war, he went back and forth between field command and increasingly important staff positions, culminating in his role as a leader of General Petraeus' brain trust in developing and applying new doctrine on counterinsurgency operations.

So we have, I think, two people who can really help us examine – help us not turn the page too soon.

And let me start, invite General McMaster to share his thoughts on the critical lessons as he sees them.

MAJOR GENERAL H.R. MCMASTER: Well, thank you so much. Of course, there's so many lessons and our, you know, our military has obviously, over the past 12 years of the wars in both Afghanistan and in Iraq, adapted to what initially were really unforeseen circumstances and difficulties associated with both wars.

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And I think the first lesson is that we have to make sure that we understand the continuities in war and warfare. And this cuts against, to a certain degree, what you see as the emerging conventional wisdom about both Afghanistan and in Iraq, that somehow these wars were aberrations because of their complexity, and they were aberrations because of the type of sustained commitment we needed to attempt to forge a sustainable political outcome consistent with our vital interests.

And this is because, in the years prior to the war, there was a great deal of momentum that built up behind what I would call a fantastical theory about the nature of future armed conflict. And this was based primarily in the belief that advances in communications technologies, information technologies, computing power and precision munitions had completely revolutionized war and warfare; and therefore, wars could be waged in the future in a way that would be very fast, cheap, efficient and low cost, mainly by the projection of firepower onto land, from the maritime and aerospace domains, but also employing small numbers of elite special forces, and that would

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provide the answer to the problem of future armed conflict.

And it was an appealing argument, because we would all like war obviously to be fast, cheap, efficient and low cost.

But of course, as it turns out, in both Afghanistan and in Iraq, we were confronted with realities that really demonstrated that this argument in the 1990s, associated with what was called, at the time, the revolution in military affairs, you know, was mainly a faith-based argument.

And then once we confronted reality, you know, we really had to adapt quickly to, I think, what are four main continuities in war and warfare that were certainly evident in Iraq. And the first is that war is an extension of politics. Of course, this is nothing new and quite consistent with the writings of the 19th century Prussian philosopher Carl von Clausewitz.

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And what this means is you wage war to achieve political outcomes that address the cause of the war and get you to, again, this sustainable political outcome consistent with our vital interests.

We perhaps did not do as good of a job of defining that end state as we should have in context of the political, social, tribal, religious dynamics inside of Iraq, and then how that fit into the broader geopolitical landscape within the region. And so we were at a disadvantage in not really having that clearly defined political objective.

And when you look back at war planning for both Afghanistan and Iraq, you see it dominated mainly by how we're going to apply military force. What are the numbers of troops, how are those troops and those capabilities going to be applied on the physical battleground?

But of course, that should all conform to a political strategy that lays a foundation for all military operations, activities, initiatives and so forth.

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So the first continuity that we relearned, I would say, is that war is an extension of politics.

The second key continuity is that war is a profoundly human endeavor. And of course, we talked this morning really about understanding the history. In fact, Ambassador Crocker said history, history, history. And of course, what is most important in understanding what is going to be the nature of a particular conflict or the character of a conflict is that most recent history.

And so in Iraq, the factors that were most important were the fact that Iraqis had been living under a brutal, murderous regime for over three decades, a regime that had engaged in a destructive and extremely costly war between 1980 and 1988 with the Iranians, a regime that had invaded Kuwait after which U.N. sanctions really put an additional strain on Iraqi society, while at the same time strengthening the criminalized patronage networks associated with Saddam that really controlled the country and the police state there.

The associated polarizing effect on Iraq's communities, how they had become pitted against

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each other, how the regime had used weapons of mass destruction on his own people, the Kurds in the north, and how he had persecuted the majority of the population, the Shi'a population, in the wake of the 1991, '92 Gulf War.

And so – and also other factors associated with his return to the faith initiatives and the use of really a Salafi-jihadist ideology to really turn people's frustrations away from the regime and toward the West and Israel and so forth, in the context of this Zionist crusader conspiracy, and the effect that had on Iraqi society.

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So understanding that human dimension of conflict and, in particular, understanding local conflicts that could occur, how these tribal ethnic-sectarian competitions for power and resources would play out, and then how they would be connected, not just to national politics, but also to the agendas of other countries and organizations. And I think of particular relevance in this case would be Syria, Iran and transnational terrorist organizations associated with al-Qaida.

So the political and human dimensions of war, I think, are obviously extremely important for us to remember and an important lesson for us to carry forward.

The other key aspect, I think, is that war is uncertain. And we heard a lot about today failures to predict the cost of the war, for example. And that's not – that really is not unusual obviously for us not to be able to predict the future, the course of events in war, although we continue to try to do it.

And in fact, I think you could, you know, you could define American war planning oftentimes as a bit narcissistic in terms of defining the problem and what we like to tend to do only in relation to us really, and then to assume what we would like to do is not only going to be relevant, but decisive to the outcome of the war.

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And so it's for this reason when you go to war it's very important to be able to take actions, to adapt continuously, it's for this reason why oftentimes if you try to be efficient in war by limiting numbers of troops, for example, in effect, you could seize the initiative to enemies in Iraq, for example, as in what was initially a decentralized, hybrid, localized insurgency coalesced, we did not have sufficient forces, and forces frankly were not well prepared for a counterinsurgency or security mission to establish security conditions and to address the vacuum of power and rule of law that was left after the unseating of the Hussein regime.

And then I think the final of these four main continuities in the nature of war is that war is a contest of wills and that we have to communicate our determination to see the effort through toward that sustainable outcome consistent with our interests and worthy of the sacrifices and the investments we've made in the outcome of that war.

And so overall, I think it would be fair to say that we are oftentimes fixated when looking back on a conflict on how we did on the physical battleground, how we really operated against the fielded forces of enemy organizations when in fact what we have to do is think about how we

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operate and how we plan to achieve a sustainable political outcome consistent with our interests.

And so I think this is a particularly important lesson now, because as we look at the war in Iraq, the ongoing war in Afghanistan where we still have 66,000 troops engaged every day, there will be a tendency to, again, define the problem of future war in a way that we think we can solve that problem in a way that's fast, cheap and efficient and relies mainly on technological prowess.

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And I think that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are both instructive in terms of their way that they have highlighted important continuities in war and warfare that have to be taken into consideration from the outset.

Thank you.

MS. MATHEWS: Can I – and I mean this with respect – will we ever learn those lessons? (Laughter.) I mean, you know, certainly in the thinking about Iran, less so, I think, with respect to Syria, as I listen to you, I thought we might well have learned a lot of those lessons in Vietnam, the conflict you studied so deeply; it's not so obvious that we've – that much has changed in terms of the learning. Has it?

GEN. MCMASTER: Well, I mean, that's yet to be seen. And I think, ultimately, you can make the argument that what we learned from the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan will be as important as the outcome – could be as important as the outcome of those wars.

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To answer your question, we do relearn these lessons every time we go to war. The question is, will we be able to understand these lessons and apply them to really how we structure our national defense – for national defense and how we prepare, you know, our leaders, civilian and military leaders, to deal with future threats to national, international security. So I think that remains to be seen.

But I think what may be – there are some major impediments to us learning these lessons. One of those impediments is the tendency in the conventional wisdom to view these wars dismissively as, you know, wars of choice or aberrations. Unless you're going to say that future policymakers will make perfect decisions in the future based on near-perfect foresight or understanding of the situation at the outset, then we obviously have to be prepared for the complex interaction that we found in both Iraq and Afghanistan against determined enemies and in very complicated environments.

The other impediment to learning is just really defining war as fast, cheap and easy is appealing. And one of those manifestations of this appeal is this sort of what I would call a rating mentality that has emerged from a misunderstanding of what led to really success in Iraq during the period 2007 to 2009, during which I think we had a very good shot at consolidating gains after that period of time and getting to a sustainable political outcome that was consistent with our interests and, I believe, with the interests of the Iraqi people.

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This is the idea that really future war mainly is about identifying sort of nodes in an enemy's organization and then conducting raids against that organization, an attrition or targeting approach to war, those raids being conducted either by precision-guided munitions or by highly specialized Special Forces when in fact, that sort of approach confuses military activity with progress, again, toward trying to achieve sustainable objectives.

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And so it's appealing, it sounds great, but when you consider the four continuities of war, war's political dimension, human dimension, the uncertainty of war and war as a contest of wills, then you recognize, you know, the inadequacy and actually the danger associated with that kind of approach to future war.

It is, in many ways, strategic (bottom ?) theory from the 1920s in a new guise.

MS. MATHEWS: Zbig, I spent all of 2002 and with many of my colleagues here at Carnegie arguing passionately that every bit of at least of declassified information available suggested that there was nothing other than some very old chemical weapon shells in Iraq, many of which had been shown to be inactive by that time, several years before.

That the record from past U.S. interventions to armed military interventions to change the nature of governments in countries had a very, very, very slender record of success and that Iraq had none of the characteristics that would lead to success of such a venture.

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And third, that the argument that was being made that such an invasion would trigger a tsunami of democratic transformations across the region was, at best, in General McMaster's phrase, a faith-based argument.

You were not there in 2002. But later, you became a very strong critic of this effort. What was it that changed your mind, that led you to make the arguments you did in the mid-2000s?

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI: I remember vividly in the night when the war commenced, you know, I was asked by the "NewsHour" at PBS to be there. The expectation was that war was imminent. And Walter Russell Mead and I were asked to comment on it.

And I remember vividly the moment when all of a sudden the news came that major explosions are taking place in Baghdad, that Baghdad is under air assault and that the war begun. And I had such a sick feeling in my stomach. I said to myself, I just hope to God that we now find those weapons of mass destruction, because that was the reason why the war was started.

And I was already by then conscious of the fact that there was a deliberate confusion in terminology used by the administration to justify the initiation of hostilities. For the weapons of mass destruction were alleged to include atomic weapons, long-range capability to deliver them, and chemical weapons as well as bacteriological ones.

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And of course, anyone knows that chemical weapons were invented back in 1916 and used in World War I and were generally not liked very much by the military as actual tools of war. Although they were employed by the Iraqis against the Iranians in the 1980s and there is now increasing evidence that they used them in – (inaudible) – with us. A book has just come out based on documentary evidence, entitled “The Making of Enemies” pertaining to Iran and the United States, which provides some evidence for the proposition that the targeting by the Iraqis of the Iranian objects and particular population centers was known to us and we were providing them precise information where to strike, knowing that the effect would be massive casualties.

I remember that evening well because by then I had begun to worry that perhaps what was being publicly asserted was not true. But I wasn't convinced of it; I was uncertain; I was a skeptic.

And a few days before the initiation of the conflict, several former officials – for example, Henry Kissinger, myself, I don't remember exactly who else, but there were several there – were invited to a meeting with Rumsfeld, Powell and Rice.

And I remember asking them – and I was conscious of that that evening when I saw the beginning of the war – I asked them, how certain are you that the Iraqis have these weapons of mass destruction? And the answer from all three of them was, it's not a question of how certain we are, we know they have them.

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And that impressed me because these are people whom I have known for a long time, and when you say you know that someone has something, it means to me you know. It's not a question of probability, it's a statement of certitude.

Nonetheless, a few minutes later, it still occurred to me to pursue the subject so I asked them one more question. If you know that they have weapons of mass destruction, what is the order of battle for their use and particularly for nuclear weapons? Because obviously, if they have them and they're ready to use them, there has to be an order of battle authorizing either divisional commanders or brigade commanders or whoever else has the possibility to actually execute the initiation of their use.

And here, the answer was perplexing. They said, we don't know. I found that surprising because it seemed to me that if they have certitude over the fact that they have them, presumably that certitude would extend to some sources of information that would give us an insight into how these weapons would be used in combat, what would be the process of initiation of their use.

So that evening, I was profoundly troubled. And I wrote an article basically arguing that we should defer the attack until Blix of Sweden has had time to conclude his research, his search within Iraq for such weapons of mass destruction. And he was being increasingly provided with targets to inspect from the CIA. And thus, one could assume that the knowledge we have was being put at his disposal and he was pleading for that time so that he could complete his reports to the U.N., but in effect, the United States and indirectly to the two countries that were egging us on, Prime Minister Blair of Great Britain, particularly, and also the Israelis.

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Well, we know what happened subsequently. The weapons were never found and the war was therefore initiated on the basis of assertions which were most charitably described as inaccurate and probably simply as fraudulent.

And that concerned me enormously, because I said I felt that at stake was American credibility worldwide, that this had really significant implications for the position of the United States in the world. And I'm afraid that this has unfortunately come to pass.

The standing that the United States enjoyed at the end of the Cold War and which lasted into the beginnings of the 21st century has been very badly dissipated. And that affects us adversely around the world and has serious implications for future decisions that involve war and peace.

On the basis of what has happened, what level of confidence are we as citizens, is America as a country entitled to have, for example, before initiating a war against Iran? We do have some parties who tell us that there are red lines that should be drawn immediately. Some of these red lines that were recently drawn have been in fact crossed. Now they're being extended by one year.

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But then what happens after that one year from now? And whom are we to trust? On what basis are these assertions being made? How reliable are they? And are there alternatives to war that could be feasible?

I cannot ignore the fact, having been deeply involved in the Cold War, that we managed to deter the Soviet Union, not only from an attack on the United States, but we managed to deter the Soviet Union from the use of force regarding Europe, our friends and our allies, because we protected them credibly, that is to say we made it very clear in advance that we identified our security with the security of Europe, and that any action against Europe would be tantamount to action against the United States.

And we knew very well giving these assurances that we were directly vulnerable because of them, vulnerable on a huge scale. We once had a false alarm, and if that alarm had not been false, within roughly eight hours, about 85 million Americans and Soviets would have been dead. I was then national security adviser so I was involved in that.

So we had this consciousness of serious responsibility and also credible obligation; and we prevailed. The Soviet Union never did it, and we never did it either.

And we're doing the same for the Japanese and the South Koreans vis-a-vis a country that is acting openly in a somewhat seemingly irrational fashion – maybe it's calculated by them – but the impact is disturbing in terms of its questionable rationality.

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And it's a country which already has eight bombs and it has delivery systems that cover all of South Korea and Japan, and potentially for the first time, though they're not, I believe, yet in fact the

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Northwestern parts of the United States. And yet, we find it sufficient to protect South Korea and Japan.

Why is it we can't do that for Israel? Why does the president have to use vague language about all options on the table, which is a threat of use of force? And why does he have to make categorical, verbal guarantees which commit him to the use of that force and create a presumption that he will? Has the country as a whole been consulted?

I dare say that in the present atmosphere, much of Congress probably would support it for reasons more connected with our domestic politics than with foreign policy. But would probably lean that way also on the assumption that it will never happen, but it could happen.

But we're certainly able, if we wish, to protect Israel in a credible fashion, by guarantees which are as binding or even more binding than those that we gave to the Europeans and are giving to the Japanese and to the South Koreans, and especially so vis-a-vis a country which doesn't have the opportunity to threaten us directly because there is no way the Iranians can reach us.

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And at the same time, we should not lose sight of the fact that if we do repeat vis-a-vis Iran what we did vis-a-vis Iraq, we'll probably be engaged in a conflict that's more protracted and more regionally widespread than was the case with Iraq a decade ago.

So these are some of the concerns that are rooted in history.

Beyond that, let me make one more observation about the nature of war. Democracies are very able to wage total war if they're attacked, they're not so good, they're not predisposed, I think they're mentally not prepared to wage total war if they have themselves started the war, but were not attacked. It's an important psychological as well as historical difference.

We were able to break the will of the Germans, in large measure, by massive air assaults on their civilian population. Yes, of course, it was justified by the need to disrupt transportation, undermine industry, but a great part of the motive was also let's break their will by destroying and burning their cities and, in the course of destroying and burning their cities, killing as many civilians as possible.

The most classical example of that was provided by two single strikes, each of very short duration and of absolutely calamitous human casualties, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where in the course of minutes we incinerated, literally incinerated, several hundred thousand people. We were able to do it because we were the victims of an attack, we were defending ourselves, we didn't want to assume the burden of major casualties for our military, which an invasion of Japan would have necessitated.

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We broke their will and we won the war.

But look at the last several wars we have waged where we were not, in a sense, the objects of

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a threat from an enemy that could devastate. We settled for compromise in Korea after several years of bitter war. We withdrew from Vietnam. And we did not prevail fully, judging from circumstances now occurring every day in Iraq or in Afghanistan in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

If we wish to do so, we could have incinerated their populations. We could destroy them. But that is something, thank God, that democracies do not do lightly unless they feel themselves totally threatened. And I think that's an important consideration to bear in mind, because we are today facing the prospect of regional wars in which we'll be fighting aroused populations and not formal states capable of threatening us.

What goes on in Iraq today poses no military threat to the United States, but it is a geopolitical consequence of some cost to us.

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The same is true of Afghanistan. And God knows what will happen after we're out of the Afghanistan and the region as a whole. A war with Iran would certainly spread to Iraq and through Iraq to Syria to Lebanon and Jordan. It would engulf western Afghanistan as well, which is relatively peaceful and where Shi'ites live. And Iran would be able to extend the conflict of war to there as well. The consequences would be massive because we are now facing the possibility of confronting populations that are politically aroused and who, for a variety of ethnic, religious, nationalistic reasons choose to fight. And that is a new reality which, for the United States, if we become more and more embroiled in this kind of conflict will absorb us, tie us down and repeat on a massively larger scale the bitter costs of the engagement that we have had to undertake in Afghanistan and of the one that we did not have to undertake in Iraq 10 years ago.

MS. MATHEWS: Do you see, General, Zbig's distinction between wars undertaken following an attack versus ones that we choose to launch as being equivalent to your distinction between a war of choice – you didn't use the word – but a war of necessity? Is that the same dividing line you see?

GEN. MCMASTER: Well, I think that really we could debate for quite a long time about the decisions to go to war. But I think what is important from a military perspective is to understand really what happens when that decision is made and how the military can contribute, again, to achieving an outcome consistent with our vital interests and worthy of those sacrifices.

So I think to answer your question more directly is that we have to understand the character of particular conflicts on their own terms, to try to seek some kind of equivalency between World War II and the dropping of atomic bombs, and what our response was to the murder of over 3,000 Americans on September 11th, 2001.

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I think you can only get limited utility out of that.

Talking about Iraq, I think we also have to understand that those conflicts evolve over time. Again, war's inherent uncertainty and non-linearity. And it seems that in retrospect as we look at the

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war in Iraq, we don't ascribe any agency at all to our enemies. And again, this is another sort of aspect of the narcissistic approach we take to understanding war and warfare. It is as if only our decisions affect the circumstances and the outcomes.

And what the truth is really, in Iraq, is that we faced very brutal, determined, murderous enemies. And what the – and the conflict evolved over time.

After really unseating of the Saddam regime, there was a period of time during which a decentralized, hybrid, local insurgency coalesced. They pursued a strategy initially, just kill some Americans and they'll leave, sort of the “Blackhawk Down” approach. And Saddam had distributed that movie to his people, and they thought if they inflicted some casualties on us, we would leave. That didn't work.

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Then what they began to do is to attack infrastructure, power lines, water pipes. This is Lenin's, you know, sort of theory of the worse, the better. Grow pools of popular discontent from which the enemy, the insurgency can draw strength.

But then in December of 2003, very early in the war, Zarqawi wrote a letter. And he said, we are losing because Americans over here, they're kind of disoriented, they don't speak the language, they won't be able to really identify us, but increasingly larger numbers of Iraqi forces are becoming more capable. And this was in particular the Iraqi civil defense corps.

The strategy around that time had shifted to attacking, usually with mass murder attacks at recruiting depots and so forth, these nascent security forces before they developed the resiliency to stand on their own.

But in December, what Zarqawi said is, what we have to do is start a civil war, and then once we start a civil war by pitting Iraq's communities against each other, we can gain sponsorship within the Sunni, Arab and Turkmen communities and then use that sponsorship to gain control of territory and resources and perpetuate a sectarian civil war and pursue our objective of establishing the Islamic state of Iraq.

That's when you have in March of 2004 Fallujah won concurrent with some Shi'a militia uprisings in Karbala and Najaf. And from that period of time on, there's a slowly evolving sectarian conflict. So you had a problem of insurgency and transnational terrorist organizations grafted onto that insurgency, and then the character of the conflict at that time began to evolve into a sectarian civil war that really was in full blast after the Samarra bombings, but preexisted the Samarra bombings in February of 2006.

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Now, the other parties to this conflict were not just, you know, not just, you know, insurgencies, insurgent and terrorist organizations that were committing mass murder attacks and trying to keep a cycle of sectarian violence going. Increasingly, these were Shi'a Islamist militias associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran, increasingly so beyond 2003.

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After the Sadrist uprising in early 2004 and the destruction of large numbers of that Sadrist militia, they took a different approach, began to get more training in Iran, get more training on how to conduct assassinations, how to conduct a subversive campaign, how to operate in smaller groups, how to emphasize sniper attacks, small direction-action attacks, and especially employ IEDs and roadside bombs, and the most destructive ones being EFPs.

So by the time – by 2006, the dominant feature of the war had become a sectarian civil war. Our strategy had not kept up with that. What we caught up with, an understanding of the character of the conflict, we were able to develop a political strategy aimed at bringing Iraq's internal communities toward a sustainable political accommodation that would remove support for either Shi'a Islamist militias or for al-Qaida in Iraq, the military strategy aimed at breaking the cycle of sectarian violence through more effective security of the population and by targeting those who were irreconcilable among both parties to that civil war, I mean, the extremist, murderous groups that were perpetuating that cycle of sectarian violence, with the idea being that as we destroyed elements of those organizations, others would learn vicariously and say, my best alternative to a negotiated agreement here is looking pretty bad and so what we're willing to do now is to advance our interests through politics rather than through violence.

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And this when we had a much more, you know, successful election, the parliamentary elections and so forth.

There was an opportunity, I believe, at that stage to consolidate some gains and to move toward a sustainable political outcome. And we know that some of those efforts failed or weren't sufficient to consolidate those gains. And so the future of Iraq is obviously very much in question beyond this point.

But I think it's very important to understand that these conflicts evolved over time. And we're fighting enemies there who have a say in the future course of events, and we need to talk more about those enemies, what are they trying to achieve, what are their goals, what are their strategies, because then we could inform the public about what the stakes are.

But instead we talk about only us, and we talk about only our number of troops and what we did, and as if everything that we did led to the outcome without any interaction with those against whom we're fighting.

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MS. MATHEWS: Let's open the conversation now. And I think what we'll do, given the number of hands I see, is we'll take two or three questions at once if my speakers will allow. Let's start right there. Please do wait for the mic.

Q: Thank you so much. And a great conference. General McMaster, you alluded to two very important concepts propounded by 19th century German, von Clausewitz and, of course, Bismarck's iron dice.

So my question is, given the fact that the last election was, relatively speaking, fairly close and

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that one of the two candidates was advised by a number of neoconservative theoreticians, how do you – and given the three previous sessions' focus on the economic losses, the opportunity costs in Afghanistan, the reputational losses that the nation has taken, how do you explain the continued prevalence of this philosophy in the American political discussion? Thank you.

GEN. MCMASTER: Which philosophy are you talking about?

Q: Neoconservatism.

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GEN. MCMASTER: OK.

MS. MATHEWS: All right. We'll take two right there on the aisle.

GEN. MCMASTER: Define that in three sentences, please. OK, no. I'm sorry. All right.

Q: Yes, thank you. My name is – (inaudible) – and I'm a journalist in town, but having spent five years in Iraq where I had the pleasure of meeting General McMaster in Baghdad actually, I can tell you that Iraq is destroyed beyond redemption. Almost a million Iraqis have died, infrastructure is completely destroyed. Yet, Iraq, as Iran, does not figure in the ongoing debate. So I want to ask Dr. Brzezinski and General McMaster, who should bear the moral responsibility for what has happened in Iraq? Thank you.

MS. MATHEWS: OK, right there.

Q: Thank you. Mark Katz from George Mason University. Thank you for both presentations.

With regard to Dr. Brzezinski's comments about Iran and the president's statements in Israel, I have to admit I'm very confused by what he means by, you know, “all means necessary.” I don't think that the Israeli government is interested in occupying Iran, and I don't think the Obama administration wants to do so. But it seems like the strategy, if there is one, is to make some kind of surgical strike to knock out the Iranian nuclear capacity. And I'm just curious, is that possible, or is that another example of faith-based strategy?

[0:45:34.4]

And for the general in particular, in that you have, you know, raised the importance of understanding how the opponent is going to respond, how – what is the likely response of the Iranians to what is – what we hope to be a surgical strike such as the Israelis delivered on Iraq in '81 or Syria? Thank you.

MS. MATHEWS: OK. I think we've gotten –

MR. BRZEZINSKI: One idea with Iraq and Iran – and there's another issue, which I won't address – on Iraq, the question is very simple, who bears responsibility? I think the answer is very obvious: We do. We started the war, the Iraqis didn't attack us. We went in, you know, some may

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feel for legitimate reasons, others may feel for dubious reasons, some, like myself, feel for fraudulent reasons.

But in any case, the fact is we started it, so we're responsible for what happened. I wish we had done better, even though I am critical of the war. I wish we had been more successful, less brutal.

[0:46:40.0]

The general referred several times to the murderous character of those whom he fought. He's doubtless right. But I wonder how they look at us in that connection? Every war is murderous; and therefore, it depends a little bit also on what its historical antecedents are and what its geopolitical and moral consequences are.

On Iran, well, I don't know what a surgical strike means because we haven't tried one in that set of circumstances. We will be attacking nuclear facilities. Some of them are located close to urban centers, one particularly. What about the fallout? What about radiation? How surgical can an attack on a nuclear facility be?

What about, even without radiation, simply the casualties from the explosives used, casualties, first of all, of the scientific staff that's working in there, and then of people in the adjoining areas? How surgical will that be?

Then beyond that, how decisively effective will that strike be? Well, of course, it depends on its scale. And if it depends on its scale, then the consequences of the earlier question, how costly it will be, depend a little bit on that scale. So it may be surgical, but it may be lethal on the massive scale at the same time.

And then suppose it has to be repeated in a year or two from now. What happens in Iran itself? Will the Iranian people joining us in justified outrage at the mullahs rise in righteous indignation, overthrow the regime and apologize to us for having provoked us into attacking them? (Laughter, applause.) I think the probability of that is not very high.

[0:48:49.9]

And I think a more likely probability is that they will join the regime in a fierce, frustrated, protracted anger at us, which depending on the scale of the casualties and the damage wrought, may last for decades.

But without even waiting for decades, they certainly can do some things around Iran immediately: Impede the access of the world to energy by causing incidents in the Gulf, which our Navy can overcome, but our Navy cannot prevent insurance companies for tripling, quadrupling the costs of acquiring energy. So there's an enormously negative impact on global economy immediately, particularly in Asia, for which neither the Japanese nor the Chinese will be particularly grateful to us, but also pushes Europeans much more in the hands of the Russians.

And then every adjoining area next to Iran is susceptible to local war, which used to be called in the communist lexicon "people's war."

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[0:49:57.9]

I once had a meeting with Deng Xiaoping in which he informed us that he is going to invade Vietnam and he wanted us to be sort of passively friendly, expecting Soviet reactions. And he was asked what is the likely Soviet reaction, by the president of the United States. And he sort of breezily said, well, you know, they may do this, they may do that, they may send arms, that will take a long time because we're not going to be doing it for a long time, and they may stage border incidents, we have had lots of them so we can have a few more, so what.

And then he says, they may invade us from Mongolia, where they have 22 armored divisions, and strike southward toward Beijing directly. And he says we will use people's war on them, and I know what he meant. It meant the kind of thing that we had experienced also. And people's wars don't end that quickly.

And at the same time, the aggressor is less inclined to go all out for total war because the aggressor wasn't threatened, so they are self – self-inhibitions at work here, and particularly so in a case like us and democracy. We're not going to go and kill all Iranians, even if they do these things in the region.

So we're going to be faced with a protracted conflict, which will make this experience of the decade ago really seem like a trifle; and therefore, I am worried as to why we're trying to buy off this pressure that the president is feeling for commitments to military action against Iran without fully contemplating large-scale geopolitical consequences, the effect that we'll be alone in this adventure.

Have no illusions, even those who are kind of semi egging us on, as was the case with Sarkozy, less now with Hollande, as is the case with the British somewhat, they're not going to be in there with us and there will be a lot of countries that will indirectly suffer that will resent it bitterly. So it's a bad choice.

I don't think the president wants to do it. I think the president wants to avoid it and I am sympathetic to his position, but I just wish that some of our rhetoric was more careful because that rhetoric could then be, so to speak, applicable and used by those who favor war as in fact already legitimating such a decision.

[0:52:30.9]

MS. MATHEWS: And we saw that I think in 2002. Let me turn back to you.

GEN. MCMASTER: Well, I think just to – I'll just address one of the questions which was about more responsibility and just to tie into what Dr. Brzezinski said, I think it does have a lot to do with historical antecedents and what evolved inside of Iraqi society, really from the 1970s onward, especially against the destructive war with Iran from '80 to – 1980 to 1988, the decision to invade Kuwait and then the U.N. sanctions that followed that and the effect that that had on Iraqi society, which made it all the more difficult for that society and that polity to move toward stability in the wake of unseating of the Hussein regime in 2003.

And then, you know, from my perspective, I would blame al-Qaida in Iraq and the

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murderous bastards, frankly, who used mass murder as their principal tactic in the war. And this is where I think you have to pay attention to local realities.

[0:53:34.0]

And I would ask Dr. Brzezinski to, you know, to go visit the cities in Iraq that were rocked by these – by these murderous attacks and ask them who they blame. And what they will tell you is they blame the people who committed those murders, and that's who they should blame, I think.

In 2005 when we went into Tal Afar, it was a city that life had been choked out of it because of really systematic attack, a very sophisticated attack by al-Qaida in Iraq and their associated groups. They turned that city into their training base.

I command Fort Benning, Georgia now, which is our maneuver center. This was the Fort Benning, Georgia of the insurgency. It's where they conducted sniper training, mortar training, medical training.

These aren't just insurgencies that kind of happen because people don't like America. These are organizations that mobilize resources and people. This is an enemy organization. Courses offered there in Tal Afar included kidnapping and murder, obviously, and the courses you would imagine in terms of IED courses and so forth.

And they literally choked the life out the city. Schools had been closed for over a year. Marketplaces had been closed. Communities had fallen in on themselves, because they had succeeded in pitting the Sunni and the Shi'a communities against each other. And I think that this is the tactic that gives, I think, us a window to understanding other conflicts in the – you know, really across multiple regions.

[0:55:06.2]

The first lesson, I think, is understand every local context – conflict on its own terms, understand its connection to larger political struggles and conflicts at the national level and regional level.

But one general observation you can make, whether it's in Mali or whether it's in northern Nigeria or whether it's in Syria or, I think, in Lebanon or northern Yemen or southern Thailand or, you know, pick – or Pakistan in the FATA, so forth, is that these groups are pursuing political agendas by the use of terrorist tactics, and those tactics involve trying to gain sponsorship among certain aggrieved portions of the population and to use that sponsorship to gain a foothold and then to use that foothold to perpetuate violence between groups, pitting groups against each other.

So what was necessary in Tal Afar was to set the security conditions to bring people back together, to forge an accommodation between parties who had been fighting against each other and to – for the good people who had – to develop a common vision for the future in which they could believe their interests would be advanced and protected, and then to remove sponsorship for these murderers who were inflicting so much pain and suffering on that – on those communities.

[0:56:34.5]

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And so my experience has been, in both Iraq and in Afghanistan, that American soldiers, Marines, airmen, sailors took great risks and made tremendous sacrifices to break the cycle, these cycles of violence and provide security so that those accommodations can be made.

I think it is analogous to what's happening in Afghanistan, where you essentially have an intra-Pashtun civil war going on, a civil war that was perpetuated in part by a perception that there had been the establishment of exclusionary political economies that left key elements of the population outside the tent. Those became recruiting grounds for the Taliban groups, various Taliban groups, Haqqani network, Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin and Quetta Shura Taliban.

As people saw that providing sponsorships to these groups means a return to the same sort of Taliban brutal rule that they experienced after the 1992 to '96 civil war, and as soon as they saw that they were going to be victims of that kind of oppression again, and then when they saw there was an alternative and we could move toward a more inclusive political settlement at the local level, then that broke that sponsorship for those Taliban groups and we've been able to consolidate gains, at least temporarily, in southern Afghanistan and in eastern Afghanistan.

The same, I think, was true in the period after the very destructive fitna and civil war, very costly fitna and civil war from 2006 to 2008. Iraqis came together, began to forge these sorts of accommodations at the local level and what we hope to see is more of those accommodations at the national level. And we talked, obviously, in the first panel more about why that hasn't occurred.

MS. MATHEWS: OK. This gentleman right here and then we'll try to take a group right here.

[0:58:23.0]

Q: Thank you, ma'am. I am – (inaudible) – with Phoenix TV.

This question is to Mr. Brzezinski. It seems the president right now is taking his very first foreign trip to – in his second term – to the Middle East. How do you see his Middle East policy, and can he really achieve something in his second term?

Thank you.

MS. MATHEWS: I – we're going to take a couple of questions. I'm hoping – I don't want to rule things out, but I'm hoping to keep the focus on the big question we have before us, which is the lessons of a decade of war. Great.

Q: Jeffrey Lin from Senator Angus King's office.

I was wondering, given that the general mentioned how war often doesn't turn out the way we want it to, that if the air-sea battle concept would be perhaps too much heading towards that direction.

[0:59:17.1]

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And to Mr. Brzezinski, sir, I was wondering how the vast investment we've put into Iraq has sort of possibly shifted priorities away from say the Asia Pacific and Europe during the 2000s?

MS. MATHEWS: And we'll take one more. Go ahead.

Q: Yeah, I'm – (inaudible) – from the Arab League.

This is to the general. You said regarding the – one of the – (inaudible) – is history, three decades of brutal and murderous regime, that's correct, but the Iraqis were doing this for three decades. It's only at the end when the United States realized that Iraq, under sanction, that they own weapons of mass destruction, threatening one of your allies there upon false information. So it was not – the regime was brutal all the time.

Thank you.

MS. MATHEWS: OK. Well, we've got the whole world on the table, but maybe briefly if you can –

MR. BRZEZINSKI: I think the brief question addressed to me was, you know, how has our expenditures on Iraq affected our ability to operate elsewhere. Well, the United States is the number-one super power, we have the largest economy, so we manage to remain engaged in other parts of the world and, I hope, act responsibly and effectively. But that doesn't refute the proposition that the war in Iraq was excessively expensive, not only morally, but financially and physically, and it has not contributed to greater regional stability, but has enhanced greater regional instability.

[1:00:54.6]

The kind of phenomena that were described in terms of internal conflict in a variety of these countries is an increasingly pervasive global reality. If the lesson to be drawn from it is that whenever there are, quote-unquote, "murderous groups" doing nasty things, the United States has to go in militarily and to deal with it, I think is a recommendation for a policy that it will be ultimately suicidal.

I think that is the kind of a policy that our adversaries, who would like to see our power decline, who would like to see ourselves spent in endless conflicts all over the place for doubtful reasons. It will be in fact a gift to them. So I'm sure we can maintain a reasonable and stable policy towards the Far East, and we're doing it, but I hope we also draw some lessons from the experience of the conflicts that we have waged in recent years with rather dubious geopolitical effects.

MS. MATHEWS: Can I ask you, maybe both, to address the question of Syria, which seems, more than Iran, to have echoes about the kinds of choices that we – and the kinds of difficulties of intertwined military and political considerations that we faced in Iraq.

[1:02:19.6]

MR. BRZEZINSKI: What I would say on Syria is that we got off on the wrong foot in the first place. Remember the trouble started about two years ago. Not long thereafter, the president of

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the United States declared publicly that Assad of Syria has to go, and that was a choice that he made. One would assume that declaring it publicly involves a commitment by the United States or that the United States is prepared then to make effective and that, therefore, we have the means and the strategy for achieving that objective.

It soon turned out that this was a rhetorical commitment without a real capacity for follow-through on our part.

So we went to the U.N. and we demanded that the U.N. Security Council support us on this. Not surprisingly, the Russians and the Chinese said, well, we don't share this conclusion and we're not going to join you in forcing Assad out. And we object, and the resolution fell.

We thereupon denounced the Russians and the Chinese as having engaged in a stance that is infantile and disgusting, those were the words used by our ambassador to the U.N., which is not a way of soliciting support for further common policy. (Laughter.)

On top of it, it became increasingly clear that the opposition to Assad is very mixed. Some of it involves some of our friends who are sponsoring Salafi movements, some of it involved infiltration of al-Qaida types into Syria, some of it involves Iranian involvement; and therefore, the picture is far from clear.

It was also increasingly evident we didn't really have strong support from groups that were capable of organizing an effective military resistance. So we have been stalemated.

[1:04:22.2]

Recently, we have announced that we will provide money to the resistance groups and humanitarian aid, but we'll not give them arms, which is a curious decision because, first of all, we don't really know to whom to give arms, in the first place. So we're not going to give arms because we don't know who the recipients are, how reliable they are, but we are going to give some people some money and humanitarian aid. Since humanitarian aid, and particularly money, is fungible, they can buy arms. So who are we really arming indirectly, having decided in the first place that there aren't any people that we want to arm?

So I think our policy really is rather shortsighted and not particularly effective.

I think the best that we can hope for is some international settlement still, in which somehow we will manage to get the Russians and the Chinese and through them, therefore, also the Iranians to participate, because otherwise the conflict will go on. It will involve the fragmentation of Syria and probably will have a negative destabilizing impact on Iraq, as well as in Lebanon and on Jordan. And these are not conditions that are felicitous to the kind of Middle East that we would like to promote.

[1:05:44.2]

MS. MATHEWS: General?

GEN. MCMASTER: OK, I'd like to just go back to the question about air-sea battle quickly.

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Air-sea battle is a really – an operational approach designed by mainly the Air Force and the Navy, but with participation of the other services as well, to defeat what is seen as emerging enemy anti-access capabilities.

I think it's – I mean, I'm a huge fan of it because, obviously, you know, as a soldier you can't get anywhere unless you travel through the air or by sea, right, to contingency operations overseas, certainly.

But of course, the question is really – it is not an answer and I think that – I don't think anybody, you know, I would say in their right minds would say it's a solution to the problem of future war. It's just a way to be able to get to – use joint forces in a position to do what they need to do given the situation.

And so the question is, when everybody poses something like this as an operational capability, how does it get to a strategy? Well, it would have to do, I think, with those four continuities of war that we were discussing at the beginning.

On the question of Syria, I can't really comment on that because, first, I'm not an expert at all, by any means. I'm not an expert on Iraq either, but I think the main thing for us to consider, looking back at Iraq as a lesson that may be applicable more broadly, is that we have to understand really all the battlegrounds that are contested between us and our enemies.

And again, you know, we can't – we can't just assume that what we decide to do either is going to be sufficient for us to achieve our objectives or explains everything that's wrong in a particular area.

[1:07:16.1]

What the U.S. is – it seems like we are ready to affix blame for everything, to ourselves as well, which I reject having encountered enemies who do use mass murder as their principal tactic, and I think any sort of comments that go toward the equivalency of what our forces do and what forces do who take a 13-year-old girl and strap her with explosives and have her hold the hand of a 3-year-old mentally disabled girl, walk them into a crowd and remotely detonate them, you know, I just don't accept that kind of equivalency argument.

And so I think – I think we have to recognize where we're contested on the physical battleground, but also on the psychological battleground, because this is a battleground where our enemies use fear and intimidation to advance their objectives.

We also have to be concerned about a battleground of perception, where our motives are portrayed as being, you know, imperialist or associated with some sort of, you know, Zionist crusade or a conspiracy and so forth. So we have to become more effective at clarifying our intentions, countering the enemy's disinformation, exposing their brutality and bolstering the legitimacy of those who are really genuine partners who's interests are congruent with ours.

[1:08:33.4]

And then there's the battleground within governmental institutions that oftentimes we don't

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really recognize. And this really would have to do with Iraq in the case of the infiltration and subversion of state institutions by Islamist groups, mainly Shi'a Islamist groups and those connected to the Iranians in particular. And this made it particularly difficult to strengthen the Iraq state, and especially to move toward, you know, toward rule of law and effective governance.

And oftentimes, we don't even see that subversive campaign. This is nothing new. You know, Sir Robert Thompson wrote many decades ago that there are five keys to effective counterinsurgency operations. One of those is to defeat enemy political subversion.

What happened in Iraq during the period of time when the civil war, the fitna, was particularly destructive is that surrogates of Iran were using state institutions to mobilize resources in what became, you know, a sectarian cleansing campaign in certain portions of the country, and that perpetuated the violence.

The approach that the RGC and her proxies have taken in Iraq is to try to make the Iraqi government dependent on them for support, but at the same time to support the development of militias that lie outside of government control that can be turned against the government if the government takes action against Iranian interests.

So I think if you look at Syria, the key things to keep into consideration are what are the multiple battlegrounds, and then be able to understand what we would define as enemy or adversary activity on those battlegrounds, and that could be a step toward understanding what can be done to support really the – an outcome there that will stop this humanitarian catastrophe of colossal scale, but do so in a way that's consistent with our interests and what I believe is the interests of all civilized people.

[1:10:38.0]

MS. MATHEWS: Thank you.

I – there are dozens of questions in the room, I have several dozen more, but unfortunately, we've run out of time.

GEN. MCMASTER (?): Thank God. (Laughter.)

MS. MATHEWS: I want to thank both – I want to thank all of you who've been with us all day for this discussion.

And in particular, Dr. Brzezinski, General McMaster, I thank you both for – very much for joining us.

(Applause.)

[1:11:12.0]

(END)