



**HOW WE FAILED IN AFGHANISTAN  
AND HOW WE CAN DO BETTER**

**By The Hon. Dov S. Zakheim**

*Dov Zakheim is Vice Chairman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He was Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller) from 2001 to 2004 and DoD Civilian Coordinator for Afghanistan from 2002 to 2004. The following is a version of the talk that Zakheim gave at FPRI on July 27, 2011 on his new book, A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan.*

The “policy wonks” who assume high government office after an election rarely think about implementation. They act as if executing policies is a job for somebody else. At the very end of my book, I quote the famous line by Leona Helmsley: “taxes are for the little people.” For policy wonks, implementation is for the little people. They don't worry about such matters; their concern is to make policy.

The people who gravitate to presidential candidates are policy types; and they are so for a very simple reason. The candidates do not yet have to worry about implementation. They just have to worry about getting elected. They formulate policies that they think people will support. As a consequence, those who take sub-cabinet level jobs, much like those at the cabinet level, invariably are policy people.

Cabinet officers clearly are the equivalent of Chief Executives of major corporations. They should be making policy. But the second level, that of the Chief Operating Officer, calls for management and implementation skills. In the Department of Defense, however, all too often the people who have filled sub-cabinet level positions have also been policy people who simply do not focus sufficiently on the challenges of policy implementation.

Implementation means a lot of things depending on who is doing the implementing. Those who wear the uniform are implementers; they fight wars to realize policy objectives. Those who acquire weapons are implementers; their job is to provide the military with the wherewithal to prevail in combat. Those who wear “green eye shades,” the comptroller staffs, are implementers; they must calculate how to pay for programs, or for fighting a war. Other less glamorous functions in the Department of Defense and other national security agencies also involve implementation.

I resided in the policy world during the Reagan administration. Even then, my job involved both planning and resources. I was an interface between the two. But in the job that I held from 2001 to 2004, I was solely an implementer. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld asked me to be the Comptroller, the person in charge of the budget. His argument was that the budget is policy, which in a sense it is.

An interesting aspect of Donald Rumsfeld's plan to manage DoD, which was not grasped by many people, was that he was going to be his own Chief Operating Officer. He understood very well what the Pentagon needed to do to change itself. In fact, on September 10, 2001 he said that the biggest enemy to the Pentagon was its own bureaucracy. Rumsfeld wanted to change all sorts of things, notably the way the Pentagon managed acquisition as well as its finances. He focused, literally, on getting the trains to run on time. And he didn't focus as much on policy issues, leaving many of them to his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, whose background, expertise and academic interest were in the policy realm.

Wolfowitz was the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), but he never wrote an article, much less a book, about human resources, financial management, logistics and supply chains, or any of the other things that involve the kind of job he took, which was a COO's job. Instead, he wanted to be Rumsfeld's alter ego, which was fine with the Secretary, who combined the CEO and COO jobs in his own person.

Then came 9/11. Suddenly, Donald Rumsfeld was transformed into the Secretary of War. He had to pass on to his deputy the task of implementing policy but his deputy had little passion for such matters. What I found, therefore, as the person in charge of the financial side of implementing policy, was that I was often brought in too late to the discussions leading up to policy decisions. At the same time, however, I was often being asked to figure out how to fund those decisions. Sometimes I succeeded; sometimes I failed. I believe that I succeeded more than I failed; otherwise, my tenure at DoD would have lasted six months, not three years.

In any event, this was no way to run the Department; there should have been a much greater focus on implementation. I am convinced that, after 9/11, the DoD leadership's lack of focus on implementation led directly to a lack of focus on Afghanistan after mid-2002. And that, in turn, contributed heavily to what went wrong in Afghanistan.

## AFGHANISTAN: WHAT WENT WRONG

The situation in Afghanistan in 2002, 2003, and 2004, was much different from what it is today. In those years, most of that country was reasonably safe. I recall walking in Kabul and elsewhere without body armor. I returned to Kabul last year and again this year because I serve on a commission that is looking into wartime contracting, and in these last two years I did have to wear body armor.

The security situation had not yet deteriorated even during my final visit to Afghanistan as Under Secretary in 2004. At the time, people were still returning to Afghanistan. No less than two million refugees returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan in the first few years after the launching of Operation Enduring Freedom. Drugs were not as big a problem as they are now. Shops and small businesses were reopening. The environment was just different from that which prevails today.

Richard Haass, the President of the Council of Foreign Relations, recently wrote a book with a title that is widely quoted: *War of Necessity, War of Choice*. Haass's title has become a catch phrase underscoring the distinction between Operation Enduring Freedom, a war of necessity, and Operation Iraqi Freedom, a war of choice. I would call "Afghanistan One" the war of necessity; Iraq, the war of choice; and "Afghanistan Two," which began in late 2004/early 2005, and which we continue to fight, the unnecessary war, totally unnecessary. We are fighting this war because we did not focus on implementation; we did not provide enough money for the Afghans to fully rebuild their country. We need not have fought this second war at all.

Let me give you some examples of how we under-funded Afghanistan in those early years. In the fiscal 2003 budget, the Office of Management and Budget—which my book identifies as the major culprit in the underfunding of Afghan reconstruction—was prepared to provide only minimal funding for Afghanistan's military in the account called Foreign Military Financing. This account would, for example, have funded the training and equipping of the Afghan National Army. OMB's initial proposal for financing the Afghan military was a paltry one million dollars. Not surprisingly, the OMB proposal prompted absolute outrage elsewhere in the government. The State Department was furious, the Defense Department was furious, and at last OMB backed off.

The same miserly mentality governed OMB's proposals for the fiscal year 2004 supplemental appropriation. This time it was not a matter of a draft proposal that others might alter. The OMB requested \$983 million from Congress to fund the back-office operations of Ambassador Jerry Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. By comparison, in that same supplemental, OMB requested \$800 million for everything to do with Afghanistan. Everything. Happily, Congress added funds to those that OMB requested for Afghanistan. The final approved amount was 50 percent higher, a total of \$1.2 billion.

For reasons I have never been able to fathom, the Deputy Secretary of Defense worked very closely with an official at OMB who was behind both the minimal Foreign Military Financing proposal of Fiscal Year 2003 and the following year's supplemental request for Afghanistan. I was essentially "end-run."

It was ironic that on occasion Donald Rumsfeld would call me into his office and say, "Dov, you don't have it in you to take on OMB," while in fact I was constantly jousting with OMB. Paul Wolfowitz would then call me in right after I saw the Secretary and ask me why I was getting Rumsfeld all excited about OMB.

In effect, we had a situation where the Secretary and the Deputy essentially were working at somewhat cross-purposes. The Office of Management and Budget and the Defense Department were also working at cross-purposes. And of course the State Department and the Defense Department were working massively at cross-purposes, because—and I am only partly exaggerating for effect—the people at State thought the Defense people were trigger-happy, while the DoD people saw their counterparts at State as lacking backbone.

I happened to have worked closely with my counterparts at State and Treasury. I was the only senior person at Defense who actually received a commendation from State, as opposed to muttered insults. This was no way to manage a war. But because the focus was on policy, it was easy to slip into ideology. The more the focus is on getting things done, the more the focus is on business, the less one can afford to focus on ideology. As everyone knows, government has no real "bottom line" as business

does, except during wartime. Then there is a very real bottom line, though it is of a very different nature. Implementation is the key to a successful bottom line in wartime, a principle that policy wonks unfortunately seem to overlook.

## IMPLEMENTING POLICY AND FINDING PARTNERS

One of the proposals I outline in my book to ensure better implementation in DoD is to appoint two Deputy Secretaries of Defense—one for policy and one for management.

Permit me to explain. When I served the Defense Department during the Reagan Administration, we focused on twenty countries, at most, twenty-five. The Soviet Union was the “big bad wolf.” Then there were perhaps a half dozen countries in NATO that mattered—the British, the French, the Germans, the Italians, the Norwegians, the Turks. We would generally focus on some of the other NATO states if they were not being sufficiently cooperative, while we essentially took the rest for granted. We took Portugal for granted, for example. All too often we even took Italy for granted. But we really had to pay serious attention to only a few of our NATO allies. In addition, we paid a lot of attention to only a few other states, whether or not they were formally allied to us, for example, the Saudis, the Israelis, the Egyptians, the Japanese, the Koreans, the Chinese and the Australians. All told, perhaps two dozen states were permanently on our radar screen.

With the emergence of the War on Terror, we have had to pay serious and ongoing attention to about 190 countries because terrorists can set up shop anywhere. There was a need to ensure that governments, no matter how big or small, were on America’s side. Suddenly, senior Defense officials have to worry about states ranging from the “stans” of Central Asia to tiny Sao Tome and Principe, countries that many Americans did not even know existed.

What does it mean to worry about 190 countries? It means that the Secretary of Defense has to meet with an endless round of Defense Ministers because the countries are all important. And then there are the foreign ministers of those countries, who often also want to meet with the Defense Secretary. There are the emirs and the sultans and the kings and the prime ministers. If the Secretary is a superstar like Don Rumsfeld, or for that matter Bob Gates, everybody wants to see him (or her).

It is important to remember that meetings with a senior foreign official consume considerable time and effort. Before a Secretary of Defense meets with a foreign counterpart, s/he has to spend time being briefed on the upcoming meeting. S/he is given background on the visiting official, on the policies of the official’s country, on major issues with the US, on what the official might be seeking. In addition, countless hours go into preparing what is called “The Book,” a thick volume, full of information that supports the briefing to the Secretary, some of which is eminently forgettable. Someone will be taking notes in the course of the meeting; there will often be a post-mortem afterwards. Every one of these official visits with the Secretary is not trivial in terms of the time and the people involved. And the Secretary’s time is as limited as it is valuable.

I once participated in a meeting with a European foreign minister that underscores the point I just made. I was at the meeting because I was involved in a number of international financial negotiations for the department and because in the summer of 2002 Secretary Rumsfeld appointed me to be the civilian coordinator for Afghanistan, an unlikely job for a comptroller. The foreign minister sat down at the meeting’s outset and asked Rumsfeld, “Do you know why I’m here?” “Why are you here?” the Secretary shot back. “Because I wanted to meet you” was the frank, but disconcerting, reply. Whether one of the 190 foreign, defense, and prime ministers, not to mention monarchs of various stripes, has a crucial reason for seeking a meeting with the Secretary, or simply wants to meet the Secretary, all have to be accommodated. And that can consume the Secretary’s time.

White House policy meetings also consume the Secretary’s time, and not all of them are scheduled in advance. The White House calls a meeting, and the Secretary adjusts his schedule accordingly, setting off a chain reaction of schedule changes: the Deputy’s, those of the Under Secretaries, the Assistant Secretaries, and further on down the line. And these changes can take place several times a day.

Clearly, whether it is to cope with the crush of visiting dignitaries or the exigencies of the White House, or, for that matter, the endless round of appearances on Capitol Hill, the Secretary must have a Deputy who deals with policy matters. But the trains do have to run on time as well, and for that the Secretary must have a second deputy. To its credit, the State Department has recently created a second deputy secretary position, focused exclusively on management.

Defense must do the same, especially at a time when defense budgets are being severely cut back as part of the aftershock of the debt ceiling crisis. How defense cuts are managed over the next few years will determine the Nation’s security posture for decades to come. The Department must have a deputy who can oversee the implementation of these cutbacks without being distracted by very real policy debates and the interactions, whether with the leaders of other nations or other agencies, which are part and parcel of those debates.

## THE SHIFT FROM AFGHANISTAN TO IRAQ

In late August 2002 I was appointed to be the Civilian Coordinator for Afghanistan. Why was the DoD Comptroller named as the Civilian Coordinator for Afghanistan? Forget the fact that I had a policy background. That was not the nature of my then-current job. The simple answer is that Afghanistan was no longer top drawer. In August and September of 2002, our focus was shifting rapidly to Iraq. Since a relatively senior person had to look after Afghanistan's non-military concerns on behalf of the Department, since I had a policy background, and since Doug Feith trusted me because I never meddled in his affairs, I suddenly became the coordinator for Afghanistan. What does that say about misplaced priorities? Shouldn't the job have gone to the Under Secretary in charge of policy?

I was one of the people who in 1997 signed the famous open letter that called for regime change in Iraq. But getting rid of Saddam didn't mean getting rid of Saddam in March of 2003. As I relate in my book, the subject came up in a discussion with Paul Wolfowitz early in 2001 when we both were consultants to the DoD, since prospective appointees serve as consultants prior to Senate confirmation. (In my case, the government being the government, I was already a consultant but had to resign my consultancy so they could make me a consultant!) We were walking down the E-Ring, which is the main ring of the Pentagon where the Secretary and Deputy Secretary's offices are located, and we got to talking about Iraq. I told Paul Wolfowitz that I had signed the same letter that he did but that we needed to be careful about breaking the place up. Wolfowitz turned to me and said, "You're too close to the Arabs." I realized then and there that we were just not on the same page on this issue. Iraq was already on Paul's mind well before 9/11. Nobody had dreamed of 9/11 in January of 2001.

In any event, when we really started gearing up for Iraq someone had to work with the Afghans to convince them that we had not totally forgotten them, but it wasn't going to be the people who were consumed by the Iraq buildup. There was too little focus on implementation in Afghanistan by a senior leadership that was engrossed in policy formulation for Iraq. So I became the coordinator for Afghanistan.

Even before my Afghan mandate was official I had been asked to find materiel support as well as funds to support Operation Enduring Freedom; once the Iraq War had begun I was asked to do the same for our efforts in Iraq. One of the lessons I learned while seeking assistance for Operation Iraqi Freedom was that we have to be very careful about how we treat our allies. Because the attack on Iraq took place in the way it did, we had trouble with the Germans, we had trouble with the French, and we had trouble with the Canadians. As a consequence, Paul Wolfowitz decided to deny reconstruction contracts to any country that had not initially supported us.

His approach contrasted with that of Ronald Reagan toward Britain after American forces went into Grenada in 1983. Margaret Thatcher had bitterly criticized Reagan for doing the American intervention. Many American officials were indignant, since we had unstintingly supported the British during the Falklands War of the previous year. Nevertheless, Reagan did not respond by denying American contracts to the U.K. He was clever enough to recognize that the British were our close allies and to let the matter pass. He treated Thatcher's critique as a short-term spat and nothing more. It is unfortunate that we did not follow Reagan's example two decades later.

My team and I, working alongside counterparts from State, and often from Treasury as well, scoured the world for troops to join the Coalition forces in Iraq. It was like getting blood from a stone. Most of the states that we approached insisted on a U.N. mandate before they would commit forces to Iraq. In contrast, smaller countries in Eastern Europe and Central Europe were content to contribute what they could without a U.N. mandate, but their biggest problem was how to get to Iraq. We had to provide them with airlift, which we did.

One country did the reverse of calling for a U.N. mandate. They asked that we pay them at U.N. rates. I said, "Thanks, but no thanks."

As part of the search for forces, we developed a unique relationship with Spain, which contributed a brigade of its own. I and three other officials had met with Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar on a trip that he made to Washington. He told us that when he would visit towns in the American West and Southwest and would speak to Hispanic audiences about working closely with the United States, the crowds would go wild. Listening to him it occurred to me that we should recruit troops in Latin America jointly with the Spanish. This had never been done before. So I called my opposite number, the Deputy Defense Minister of Spain, and put the idea to him.

Initially, the response was totally negative. Upon further consideration, the Spanish Government agreed that Deputy Defense Minister Fernando Diez Moreno would join me in leading a Spanish-American delegation to four Central American/Caribbean states. We began in El Salvador, where we met with Amherst and Harvard-educated President Francisco Flores, who spoke perfect English. We briefed him on why we needed troops from his country. He was supportive, but told us that he needed approval from his Congress, which might be tough to obtain, since not all of them liked "Gringos."

Then it hit me. Why not have our Spanish compatriots brief the Congressmen in Spanish? Fernando Diez Moreno agreed to

my suggestion; Congress voted to send the troops. We did the same thing in Honduras, and got a commitment to send troops. We tried the same thing in Dominican Republic, with the same result, and again in Nicaragua. Though the head of the Nicaraguan military was a Sandinista, Nicaragua sent troops as well. Sometime later, I visited the Central American and Dominican troops in Iraq. They constituted part of the Spanish brigade. The troops really had it good; they were served wine with their meals.

In any event, I saw the joint Spanish-American effort as—in the immortal final lines of *Casablanca*—the beginning of a long friendship. And then came the Madrid bombings in March of 2004 that ended our short-lived joint effort. Newly elected Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero had a totally different attitude to the war in Iraq and announced that Spain would withdraw its troops from that country. Our joint search for additional Coalition forces for Iraq came to an abrupt end. Nevertheless, I am convinced that eventually the short-lived “special relationship” between Spain and the United States will be revived, to the mutual benefit of both countries.

My basic point about all of the foregoing international relationships is that we cannot work alone in a highly demanding contingency. And if we are not going to work alone, we had better not expect our closest allies to toe our line every time, because we certainly won't toe their line every time. We need to work in unison. Taking an “I'll do it myself” approach tends not to succeed any more.

#### JERRY BREMER AND THE COALITION PROVISIONAL AUTHORITY IN IRAQ

Permit me a word about the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq. I dealt directly with Ambassador Bremer, who was somebody I had known and liked for many years. I still like him, but he simply was not the right person for Iraq at that time. As the late Harvey Sicherman wrote in a wonderful piece in *The American Interest* magazine, “Jerry” Bremer had no background in the region, and did not really understand its culture.

Bremer also apparently tried to approve most things by himself, creating bottlenecks that stalled some of CPA's efforts. One major bottleneck involved a program in Iraq that seemed to be going well. It was called CERP—the Commanders' Emergency Response Program. Colonels would be given \$50,000, 60,000, \$100,000 in walking-around money that they would use to pay local contractors to fill holes in the roads, build schools, build houses and so on. The program was a classic example of how policy could be implemented successfully.

It could have been even better. I had been tracking CPA funds on a daily basis, and I had noticed there was about \$2 billion that was just not being spent, nor even being allocated. It was just sitting there every single day. I thought, “Great! Let's use that money for CERP.” I put the idea to Paul Wolfowitz, and received an enthusiastic response. I approached OMB, and won its support. I went to my colleagues at State, who also liked the idea. Bremer did not agree, and the proposal stalled.

When I was next in Iraq, I went to see Bremer about CERP. I told him that everyone supported the idea of using some or all of CPA's two billion for CERP. He replied that he was the custodian of the Iraqi people and would not be dictated to by Washington. Bremer denies that he ever said any such thing, and in fairness to him I have footnoted his denial in my book. But I have also quoted from another book by one of his immediate subordinates that asserts that Bremer pronounced, “I am the law,” which of course was of a piece with what I heard him say.

#### AFGHANISTAN: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

I would like to conclude with some thoughts about what we might now do in Afghanistan. To begin with, we really cannot leave. That is not to say that we should stay with 100,000 troops. We should instead have our forces continue to train the Afghan military. I also think we need to have Special Operations Forces there. We have to convince the other side that we are in Afghanistan to stay as long as we are wanted. That is not exactly our policy today.

General David Petraeus's success in Iraq with the “surge,” and the fact that he did not achieve the same degree of success in Afghanistan, was due in no small part to the fact that no one announced during the Iraq surge that we would be leaving that country in a couple of years. Yet the President announced that we were to leave Afghanistan at the very time that he announced the surge of forces to that country. Well, if you were Hamid Karzai, whom I have met a couple of times, and you know the Americans have abandoned Afghanistan once before, and you hear the President then announce that we are getting out again, wouldn't you hedge your long-term bets?

You would certainly do all you could to avoid a major quarrel with the Pakistanis because they will be your neighbors for a long, long time. And you certainly will be very careful about the Pashtuns because they will be living in your country for a long, long time. In fact, you happen to be a Pashtun. So you start trimming your sails. I think most of us would do the same in that situation.

Priority number one for the United States is therefore to convince everybody, our Afghan allies, the Taliban and their

henchmen, Pakistan, India and all other regional actors that we may be pulling out 50,000-60,000 troops, but that we will still have enough people in Afghanistan to keep Al Qaeda out, keep the Taliban down, and keep training the Afghan security forces.

Priority number two is to make clear to Karzai that we are not going to push him under a bus. We may not like him all the time, but we cannot allow the region to speculate about Karzai's fate the way Middle Easterners and others have said about Mubarak: that we pushed Mubarak under the bus. We also pushed the Shah under the bus. And we pushed Musharraf under the bus. If you are Karzai, you are just waiting for the bus to show up. We have not only to convince everyone that we are staying in Afghanistan, we also have to convince everyone that we will not push Karzai under that bus.

While I was comptroller I created an office that dealt with international finances. It was disbanded when I left, something I consider to be a huge mistake. We need such an office to help negotiate basing agreements, all of which involve money, cost-sharing agreements, all of which involve money, and other international arrangements that often involve money. We need to support the Defense Department with financial expertise at the negotiating table.

We had that expertise when we helped put together a plan to reimburse the Pakistani military for its operations in support of our efforts in Afghanistan. Our plan eventually became known as the Coalition Support Fund, which Congress recently froze due in large part to a lack of oversight regarding the ultimate destination of the funds we sent to Islamabad. While I was comptroller, we would carefully check where the money was going to before we transferred funds to Islamabad. Pakistani invoices were vetted by Central Command. They were vetted by Doug Feith's policy office. They were vetted by the office that was then called "Program Analysis" and they were vetted by my comptroller staff. The Pakistanis were not always happy because they would get only 80 or 85 cents for each dollar, and often had to wait months for payments to be made. The vetting process and that portion of my staff that dealt with international financial matters and participated in that process, both appear to have been left by the wayside after I departed the Pentagon.

Freezing funding for the Pakistani military is no way to get the only institution in Pakistan that can keep the country together to be on our side. But we have done that before! As a very senior officer recently put it, "There is not a single junior officer in the Pakistani Military who does not know who Larry Pressler was, and there is not a single junior officer in the American military who knows who he is." Larry Pressler was a Senator who authored his eponymous amendment that cut off assistance to Pakistan. Pakistan turned elsewhere for assistance. If we persist with our freeze, the Pakistanis will have other states, not all of them friendly to the United States, to whom they can and will turn.

I do not have a problem cutting back on economic assistance to Pakistan; Europeans can bear that economic burden. They actually are better at nation-building than we are. The only time we successfully build a nation is if we flatten it first, as we did Japan and Germany, or if we let dictators flourish, as we did in South Korea and Taiwan. Otherwise, we're terrible at it. We have never had a colonial office. We had a Bureau of Insular Affairs for managing the Philippines and other territories captured in the Spanish-American War, but that was a long time ago. We can certainly help the Europeans, but we should let them take the lead when it comes to revitalizing Pakistan's economy. Military support is another matter, and in that sphere we should remain engaged with Pakistan and not cut off our financial support.

**FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684**

**For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105, email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org), or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).**