

An Interview with Richard L. Armitage



State Department

What surprised you taking on the challenges of Afghanistan and Iraq?

Richard Armitage: They're completely different places. I found that Afghanistan was an absolutely necessary war; they struck us, and we had to strike back. What surprised me was how quickly we morphed from a fight against al Qaeda—that is, from foreigners, Uzbeks, Pakistanis, Saudis, even Uighers—to the Taliban after coexisting with the Taliban for so long. The Taliban wasn't really fighting us too

much; they weren't helping us, but they weren't fighting us, either—so again how quickly that morphed was the big surprise.

The second surprise was frankly how successful we were for the first 4 years—almost 5 years—at keeping the ISI [Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence] relatively out of it. They were so shocked with the speed at which we invaded Afghanistan that I think the ISI felt it was only a matter of time until we prevailed. But as we broadened our scope to the Taliban, we both brought out some antipathies that Pashtuns have against foreigners, and we also made it more difficult to be able to accomplish our "objective." So how do you declare victory when you completely change the target?

In what way did we change the objective?

RA: We originally invaded to defeat al Qaeda, and in fact we kept the Taliban relationship with Pakistan. [Former Pakistani President Pervez] Musharraf wanted to break the relationship—break off diplomatic relations. We argued, "No, don't do that please, we have reasons. . . ." We had two NGO [nongovernmental organization] women who were captured. And we were negotiating with the Taliban to get them out. Finally, we got them out with Special Forces, and then we told Musharraf that he could break relations with the Taliban. So although we didn't declare them to be an

Richard L. Armitage was the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State from 2001 to 2005.

enemy originally, we started using terms, which are understandable, that “anyone who harbors a terrorist is a terrorist.” It was the same language that George Shultz used in the mid-1980s; he was thinking of Germany and France at the time, but we never put it into effect, and here we started to put it into effect.

What surprised you about Iraq?

RA: I was surprised initially with the speed at which we were going into Iraq, and I never understood it. I was not opposed to attacking Iraq—I was opposed to the timing. I just couldn’t see it. I was surprised at the low number of forces—which Secretary [Colin] Powell was able to get doubled—but still far too few.

The third thing is that we sent over a memo—using Ahmed Chalabi-like language—that explained why we would not be welcomed as liberators; that might have been true in a certain segment of society, but the idea had a measurable shelf life and wasn’t universally the case. Never to my knowledge, and I’m pretty

we got rushed into this timing by the military, who kept talking about the heat—that if it got to April and May, it would get too hot and we couldn’t operate

sure I’m right on this, did the President [George W. Bush] ever sit around with his advisors and say, “Should we do this or not?” He never did it.

Was the State Department role marginal in the early planning?

RA: The answer depends on whom you ask. We were at every meeting, and we would

raise points. We weren’t necessarily opposed to—particularly after 16 UN [United Nations] Security Council resolutions—the notion of removing Saddam Hussein. Secretary Powell was opposed to the number of [soldiers]; he wanted many more. As I said before, I was more worried about timing. And we got rushed into this timing by the military, who kept talking about the heat—that if it got to April and May, it would get too hot and we couldn’t operate. And I remember thinking and arguing—and it wasn’t just me, but Marc Grossman and others—saying, “Wait a minute, we own the night. We don’t have to fight in the daytime. We’re all-seeing at night—let’s do it! Don’t let the heat be the thing that gets us into war!” So it wasn’t that we were marginalized. We were allowed our voice, but no one wanted to hear it. They were victims of their own prejudices and their own ideology.

Were you surprised by the speed at which the Iraqi army collapsed?

RA: No. The [Iraqi] army was never considered an extremely loyal factor to Saddam. And we had bombarded them with leaflets telling them, “Go home. We’re going to come back and get you and we will reconstitute you as an army,” which was the decision the President made. “And we will use you in the new Iraq.” So that was not what surprised us. If you think back to April 9, when the Saddam statue came down, President Bush looked pretty brilliant. But about 3 days later, once the looting started—which was predicted in the Future of Iraq Project—everything turned out badly.

What could have been a solution to the looting problem?

RA: Having more people, clearly, and there was a time in there when unit commanders were saying, “What are our responsibilities? Tell us what to do. Should we stop this looting?” And [Donald] Rumsfeld said no. I’ll give you an example. I’m very loyal to Secretary Powell for 30 years as my good friend. But in the Panama invasion of 1989—originally called Operation *Blue Spoon*—we sent in the SEALs, we sent in the Airborne, we sent in a division. And the fighting was basically over in a couple of days. We still had [Manuel] Noriega holed up in his house, and we wanted to get him alive and that took a couple of days. But Colin flowed, as Chairman, another division even though the fighting had ended. His staff argued that “we don’t need to do this, it’s expensive when you move 20,000 men and equipment,” but he said, “Look—we don’t know what we’re going to find outside of Panama City. So let’s make sure that whatever it is, we’re better than it is. It’s a lot easier to get these fellows out on our timetable, than to get them in when there’s an enemy.” So he flowed another whole division, which was totally unnecessary as it turned out. But that’s the better part of wisdom. So the lesson of Iraq is not to drink your own bathwater. You can’t be victims of your own prejudice. You have to have someone red team this. Really red team it. We didn’t get around to red teaming really until Jay Garner went out to NDU [National Defense University] and did his famous rock drill.

Was that the meeting at which some State Department people were asked to leave?

RA: No. We may have been asked to leave, but Tom Warrick and Meghan O’Sullivan, they were all there. It was later. Garner said, “These folks know what they are doing.” He wanted them to come with him. And Rumsfeld said, “No, I’ve

got instructions from higher guidance—higher headquarters,” which was the Vice President.

What role could the civilian agencies have played early on in both Iraq and Afghanistan that they did not play?

RA: It’s mixed. In Afghanistan, it’s a somewhat more manageable problem. Because of the regional differences, we could have been heavily involved much earlier on in Mazur Sharif and Herat in relatively safe conditions, and really built a bulwark against expansion of the Taliban. But we were at the State Department—we weren’t seized with the mission; we don’t have enough folks. USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] isn’t the USAID you joined because it has been whittled away so much. So we have to relearn the lessons. It was not in any way a lack of courage among the civilian agencies; in fact, when I give speeches, I’ll say that these fellows—men and women—are out in all these exotic-sounding places—they’re not in canapé lines in London and Paris; they’re in Mazur and Kandahar and other places right alongside the men and women in uniform. Not a bit of difference, except one: they’re not armed. So we have to get more expeditionary, which means we have to get more people. And I like this Civilian Reserve Corps, and all those things.

We’ve got to have access to money. There has to be a limited but readily available fund—I don’t mean without any strings; obviously, we have to get the permission of [Capitol] Hill. But if you knew that you had X amount of funds, you could go in and staunch something. There is also something that I don’t know how to solve. During the 4 years I was Deputy Secretary, I got a lot of money for the

department for everything from IT [information technology] to 1,200 more people, and I got a lot of money in foreign aid.

But the money in foreign aid, outside the PEPFAR [President's Emergency Plan for

perhaps the most effective foreign aid programs, whether in Pakistan or Afghanistan, would be those that bridge ethnic divides

AIDS Relief] program, which was the infectious disease program in Africa, was for necessary and feel-good deliverables, such as clinics, schools, et cetera. Now these things are great. Who doesn't feel good about funding maternity clinics? The U.S. Congress feels good about themselves. They can explain to their constituents. Everyone wants to help some poor Afghan mother. But those very schools depend on several things for their livelihood after the first year or two. A central government, which provides pay for the teachers and the upkeep and all, is very difficult in a developing nation. Number two, they require a certain amount of infrastructure themselves—roads, et cetera. Perhaps the most effective foreign aid programs, whether in Pakistan or Afghanistan, would be those that bridge ethnic divides. Sort of a Kandahar to Mazur Sharif highway, or a great hydroelectric dam that services all the people—gives them buy-in; they all suffer, they all hang together, or hang separately. The same is true of something that brings together the Punjab and Sind, or the Sind and Baluchistan. But those are not popular. The days of the Aswan Dam are gone. There's a road from Peshawar to Islamabad. It used to be a difficult trip, and dangerous.

Now it's a big four-lane highway; it's called the Japanese highway. And for good reason—the Japanese built it.

In the end, you need both project funding and infrastructure development funding. If you're in an emergency situation—a complex operation—you're going to have to have something that staunches a wound. But you're also going to have to simultaneously be thinking about larger infrastructure programs that help cauterize and bring together warring parties or different ethnic grievances or religious divides.

I don't know the answer. This is something that has to be approached head on by an administration. You have to simultaneously have some money available for an emergency. You can't go through the appropriations process to get it. You've got to have certain things that you know you're going to have to have, such as water purification and medicines. That money has to be available for the Secretary of State now. Then you've got to have follow-on "feel-good" items, plus infrastructure programs. I think you can get away with roads pretty well. You know that famous statement, "Where the road ends, the war begins," out of Afghanistan. I think that's more popular.

That raises an almost philosophical question. There was a lot of aversion in the early Bush administration to state-building. Do you think that state-building should be explicitly considered a legitimate national security objective in some cases?

RA: I think I would put it a little differently. It shouldn't be excluded as the Bush administration tried to do. If you look at the Bosnia situation, and what we faced, and if it's true that al Qaeda is morphing into Africa in a bigger way, then we're going to have to be

involved in more of this rather than less. So I don't think it should be excluded. But each of these so-called nation-building exercises is a little different. Afghanistan is an armed nation we're building; it has never been one, so you're trying to arm a nation and build it. In Iraq, you're not so much arming it—they have plenty of weapons—you're trying to hold it together. That's a different situation. So they're all different, and I don't think the term nation-building is sufficient. It doesn't capture the complexity or the difficulty.

What do you think of the notion of the “three Ds?”

RA: Defense, diplomacy, and development? I think that [Secretary of State Hillary] Clinton has done us a service. I assume, by the way, your question has to do with democracy. As far as I know, every President except John Quincy Adams has been involved in the belief that the world is made better by a U.S. that is involved in the protection of human freedoms and human rights across the board, notwithstanding the second inaugural address of President Washington. And certainly all the great architects of our nation—Jefferson, Madison—they believed in this message. The builders—Lincoln, both Roosevelts—they believed in it, too. And every postwar President has believed we have a duty to spread democracy. The question and the difference among all the postwar Presidents had to do with two things: emphasis and a philosophical belief. The philosophical belief had to do with whether democracy is a journey or an end point. I think you and I would agree it's a journey—it never ends. It has taken us a long time to get us to where we are. The Bush administration's push for votes as though voting equals

democracy was wrong-headed because a vote is something that happens inside a democracy, but is not necessary for a democracy. You can have a democratic system without having people raise their hands and have a secret ballot. Loya Jirgas to some extent are these. But it appears that Secretary Clinton is focusing on the necessary preconditions that allow democracy to thrive—the rule of law, transparency, party-building, free press—and, frankly, the development of institutions that can provide goods and services.

In 1986, we had something I was intimately involved with, democracy in the Philippines—getting rid of [Ferdinand] Marcos—and immediately after this great celebration of a relatively bloodless, fantastic demonstration of people power, Cory Aquino became president. We got \$800 million appropriated, which was serious cash back then. The Philippines couldn't spend

you can have a democratic system without having people raise their hands and have a secret ballot

it. And within a year or two, Aquino had six coups. Why? Because the expectations were so heightened by democracy they couldn't be met. And so you couldn't eat it, you couldn't drink it, and it didn't provide any service, anything beyond getting rid of Marcos. And yet peoples' expectations were so much higher and so their disappointment was so much greater.

It's not unlike what you have in Venezuela. By the Bush definition, [Hugo] Chavez is a democrat. He was elected three times—against our wishes—we tried to get a referendum to recall him, but it failed. But he is a populist because he's not willing to do what's necessary

to develop a longstanding democracy. And that's all those things I mentioned before. He has become autocratic and dictatorial.

So I think that President [Barack] Obama certainly is not out of step with every other President. He wants human rights, human freedoms, and democracy. But his general manner, not pushing democracy in the way that Mr. Bush did, is actually a good thing, as long as we concentrate on those necessary preconditions. I've thought a lot about this, and I've been involved in the spread of democracy.

Here's one for the intellectual or academic approach. In the 1980s, I was an Assistant Secretary of Defense, responsible for the Soviet war among other things. That's why every 3 months I would go to Pakistan with my CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] counterpart, and we would sit down with the mujahideen, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the rest of these characters. We would not only sit with them but also divide up the money, divide up the weapons, depending on who was doing what, how many fighters they had, and all this stuff every 3 months. And this was a wildly popular policy. Democrats and Republicans supported it and threw money at it. And yet we knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if we accomplished our objectives, the mujahideen would fall in on themselves, which they did. And we knew this clearly. So what I'm sketching is a policy that was relatively amoral—not immoral but amoral. You look at the other side of the coin, you had the contra policy, which was wildly divisive because of liberation theology and the bad behavior of everyone involved, but its heart was much more moral than the Afghan policy.

Is it possible to meet national security objectives in Afghanistan without making it a functioning democracy or at least

putting it on a trajectory toward being a functioning democracy?

RA: We've clearly lowered our sights in Afghanistan. I don't know if this is a precursor of Mr. Obama concentrating on fighting al Qaeda again, which could be a way that lets him set up for declaring victory and moving on, but I don't know what that does for Pakistan. If you would accept my view that a Loya Jirga is a form of democracy, what's wrong with it? So you could have a sort of light democracy, like the Diwanayah process in some of the Arab countries such as Abu Dhabi and its neighbors. So I think we have got to be more precise and cautious in how we push these things, and we've got to be supple enough to change our emphasis when we run up against a hard point. I was in Saudi Arabia recently with Turki Al Faisal, and he was saying in conversation, "What His Majesty is trying to do is bring about in a generation what it has taken you 200 years to do. And in fact it wasn't until 1965 that you by law enfranchised all your people. So whether we're moving fast enough for present conditions is an open question. I've got my view and you've got yours. We can have an argument, but it took

President Obama certainly wants human rights, human freedoms, and democracy

you 160 years, and that's not wrong." And I particularly like that he acknowledged that we're moving fast enough for present conditions.

So I've really thought a lot about this whole democratization thing, and I feel quite strongly that it is our duty as a nation to do this. It's harder and made more complex when we abuse the writ of habeas corpus here or

when we torture people. And this causes me to wonder—when I was Deputy Secretary, did I make human rights presentations in China? I absolutely did. Did we get some results? Yes, but they were very disappointing! We got individual results. I could get one dissident or another out of jail, but that's retail and that plays to Chinese strengths. I want to do wholesale. But our system puts all the concentration on Rabiya Khadir, so I went and got her out of prison. But that allows the Chinese then to sit back for 6 months and say, "We did it!" And the heat would be off the Congress, and I would go to them and say, "human rights," and they would say, "We gave you Rabiya Khadir." I would rather leave her in prison, frankly, to better the rights of 1.3 billion Chinese.

Do you see a similar situation in Egypt?

RA: The Egyptian situation is a really tough one because it's going the wrong way with the Muslim Brotherhood, and the constipation and sclerotic nature of the regime. Have you read the novels of Naguib Mahfouz? They're great, and through them all you get a couple of things, I think. First, the good humor of Egyptians; they have enormous good humor. Second, patience and long suffering, but you realize that at some point in time you can't joke something away. You can't outwait it. I would be afraid the tipping point is going to come, and particularly now that the strategic center of gravity in the Middle East has shifted to Riyadh and away from Cairo.

Egypt had one tipping point in 1953, and it's possible it could happen again. In the 1980s, USAID was modestly implementing democracy, development, and rule of law programs that were all well

intentioned, and had some small results here and there, but were unable to get the kind of change in the country we hoped for. It remains a real dilemma for us.

RA: It is a dilemma and you could try to move the country in a way that breaks the country and brings about reactions to what you want to do. I've been on both sides of the issue, and I've come to the conclusion that people are best served when we concentrate on good governance and rule of law and move at a pace congenial to them toward full democracy with the institutions that hold up the code of democracy.

people are best served when we concentrate on good governance and rule of law and move at a pace congenial to them toward full democracy

Including traditional institutions such as Loya Jirgas or Diwanis?

RA: Even better. Those are unthreatening democratic institutions.

With Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military was called upon to do so much more than they had done traditionally in diplomacy and development. Do you view that as a threatening development, or to phrase it in the current vernacular, do you have any fear of the "militarization of foreign policy"?

RA: I have a fear of the militarization of all policy. And the reason is not because I fear the military—having come from it—but because there has been a phenomenon I've noticed in 28 years of government service, that for a lot of

different reasons, and I'm not sure I can codify them all, people are less able to do things. The culture of the military is to make chicken salad out of chicken poop. The culture of the military is, "Yessir, three bags full sir. I'll get it done." The culture of the military is embraced as far as I'm concerned in the most positive way by the first general order of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps (different from the Army), which cautions a sentry to take charge of all government property on this post, and that includes people. And that's frankly how Powell and I viewed the State Department—all government property at post. So that's their going-in position, whether they're a private or a colonel. The going-in position for USAID, State, Commerce, or Energy is not to take charge of all government property in sight, but to take charge of "mine." I like to say that this is my little cubicle and I keep it clean, and if there is a light next door that's not there or not on, if you are in the military you are going to go fix it. At least you are supposed to. All government property in sight. You're doing not just your cubicle, whereas the civilians will just take care of their cubicle or space. When I or Secretary Powell would ever swear in an Ambassador, we would tell him he could not be totally responsible for the development of our relationship between the United States and country X. But he would be held 100 percent accountable for the development of all personnel under his command—as officers and as citizens and people. If they have personal problems, they're his. If they have lapses in their behavior, it's his problem. He doesn't overlook it, he works with them, he cautions them, he counsels them, and he does whatever it takes. And this is more the culture of the military.

Is that a cultural barrier that can be overcome and that civilians should try to adopt?

RA: Yes, it is. I've been very heartened the last 3 ½ years that I've been out here, the number of people—many of whom I don't even know—that worked for Powell and me, and to be frank with you, what they've said is, "The Dr. Rice years were terrible. The Powell years were wonderful. But don't worry. We're remembering what you said about taking care of your people. We're remembering what you said about leadership." So that fills me with enthusiasm, and the answer to your question is yes, it can happen. But it has to be inculcated. Unfortunately, I don't think Ms. Clinton is from that mindset. She's very good as Secretary of State, she'll study her brief, but this takes effort from the bottom up. One has to be inculcated with this.

Look at the first general order of the Navy and Marine Corps—again, the Army's general order is a little different—and then look at all the general orders. When you go to boot camp, you have to memorize all this. You'll see, I think, some of the reasons you're having militarization in general. Remember the big hurricane in North Carolina in 1991? Andy Card was Secretary of Transportation and President Bush sent him down to take charge. And this was so funny to me: Andy Card is standing on a chair in North Carolina, and he's yelling in his tent, and there are people milling about—people who had lost their homes. And all these different aid agencies and FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] are running around, even some military guys milling around. And Card's up there yelling, "I'm Secretary Andy Card and I'm in charge here!" Actually, this colonel from the 82^d Airborne stood up and said something like, "Now hear this—I'm Colonel So-and-So from the 82^d Airborne, 19th Battalion, and I'm in charge here, FEMA!" "Yessir!" It was fantastic, but it was someone used to taking charge of all government property in sight.

That's a strong characteristic of the military, and I'm concerned when I see that attitude juxtaposed against the typical civilian attitude.

RA: Then you have to change the civilian attitude. As I say, I'm thrilled with the officers Secretary Powell and I brought in. I'm thrilled with them. I see them at different posts, I always stop at the different Embassies and I get great reports. I know a fellow who just went over to work with Senator George Mitchell, and he sent me an email. He said that he was so impressed with these younger officers. They came in at a time when in their A-100 class that's what they were told. When they went through their Foreign Service training before they went to their post and they came to see Marc Grossman or me, that's what they were told. So they started it. Now whether they will remember it, I can't say, but it's a good base. We just have to do it all the way up. The same is true and it's harder actually in Commerce and some places. It's easier to do at State because it's small enough to get your arms around it, even though there are 48,000 of them with the Foreign Service nationals. But it takes constant—not just repetition—you have to embrace it.

That would be a cultural/behavioral change that you are recommending. Is there an institutional change that you would recommend for the civilian agencies—something like Goldwater-Nichols?

RA: I've looked at what Mr. [Arnold L.] Punaro [Executive Vice President, Science Applications International Corporation] is doing and what other people are doing in Goldwater-Nichols-type stuff. I would like to see a lot more

cross-pollination. That would be healthy. And we've got a fair amount even though Rumsfeld, when he came in, took back all the military officers. Over time, we got them back, we fought like crazy, much to their delight and our delight because it was better for us. I think a lot more of that is good. The Goldwater-Nichols that everyone sings so proudly about in the military is now something that Goldwater-Nichols wouldn't recognize. This military—because jointness itself has changed, requirements have changed, schooling has gone by the board because of the necessities of the war—has changed so much. And I think most of your military colleagues would say, "Yeah, we're more joint. Absolutely, but we're not anywhere near where we need to be." And when you talk to special operations, they'll definitely tell

we need a cadre of leaders who totally embrace the notion of taking charge of all government property in sight

you that. So frankly it gets down more to leadership and less to Goldwater-Nichols. We need a cadre of leaders who totally embrace the notion of taking charge of all government property in sight. And that's why you have a young State officer out on a PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team], no question State lead, depending on the military, consulting with him, giving instructions to the other departments who are less represented about who does what to whom. There's something about just naturally going for the flagpole, standing up and saying, "I'm the alpha dog here," whether you're a male or a female.

With all the ferment in the area of military and even civilian doctrine related to counterinsurgency, irregular warfare,

unconventional warfare, state-building, reconstruction and stabilization, and the building up of a civilian reserve corps, are you concerned that we're gearing up for the last war, and not the next war?

RA: We always have. If you look historically, this is not just a military problem. Twelve years ago in the CIA, what would you be studying as a language? Chinese or Japanese? Now what would you be studying? Arabic? Only 3 percent of the population is Arab. There's a certain inevitability to that. I think that you're going to be a little behind. Very few people, even George Kennan when he wrote his famous article, didn't see what was going on. It's hard to look into the future. But the important thing is to not lose the lessons of the past. And this is what this whole insurgency is. Do you know, by the way, in testimony that I called it an "insurgency"? Dick Myers, General Myers, said, "Oh no. This isn't an insurgency!" I said, "Well, yes it is!" So when you come so late to a realization of it—what we really did wrong was we undervalued the enemy.

We didn't understand that al Qaeda is a flat organization. It's not a hierarchical one. And in a flat organization where there are only cells, we could pick up Osama bin Laden tomorrow and it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference. He could tell us what he knew. He doesn't know that much. When you're a flat organization, you only know a couple of guys in the cell with you. So we never really analyzed the problem we were facing in military terms. In civilian terms, you need the sort of an approach the military commander would take; the commander's estimate of both the friendly forces and the enemy. For a civilian, you need your estimate of what you have in your kit bag. What you might get from local land. And what's the real lack. So take a more analytical approach to these things, à la the military. The military does a lot of things not right, but when they organize for a problem, they generally do it pretty well, and I think you're coming to it. [PRISM](#)