

**Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum**  
*Iraq: Learning Lessons and Exploring Pathways to Peace*  
A discussion with Jonathan Steele, Lisa Schirch and Paul Hughes  
18 March 2008

Moderator: **Susan Collin Marks**

Panelists: **Jonathan Steele, Lisa Schirch and Paul Hughes**

**Jonathan Steele** (author of *Defeat: Why America and Britain Lost Iraq*)

Mr. Steele started his presentation by explaining why America and Britain were defeated in Iraq after toppling Saddam Hussein's regime. It is a critical time, he said, to understand what went wrong, to learn from our mistakes. The reality is: (1) There was no proof that Al-Qaeda insurgents were in Iraq, but now there are many; (2) The occupation was intended to *reduce* Iran's power and influence. Instead it has done the opposite; (3) The war hoped to create a liberal, secular, Western society; (4) Politicians meant to build a sense of solidarity after 9/11, but in doing so undermined the Iraqi government and civil society. The United States and Britain failed to account for Iraqis' long historical memories and nationalist suspicions of Western imperialism, failed to anticipate the intra-Shia conflict or understand Shia anger over previous US policies. All this, says Steele, caused sustained humiliation and death within the civilian population, significantly intensified the sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shias, and forced occupying forces to undertake brutal counter-insurgency campaigns in influential Sunni neighborhoods. We helped form an Iraqi government to satisfy our own national interests – such as oil – while justifying occupation in the name of democracy—pretending to give Iraqis sovereignty while maintaining control over their policy-making.

Mr. Steele moved on to recommend ways to ameliorate the present situation and prevent future attacks. He recommended working to understand the country we invaded. The United States and Britain went into Iraq without a concrete plan and without an exit strategy. Iraqis were ready to tolerate an occupation provided it was short and sweet. Many became opponents when the United States refused to set a time limit on the occupation. Also, the United States and Britain did not understand the history of the people they were invading, and thus failed to get the political analysis right. Mr. Steele ended his presentation by indicating that, not coincidentally, the United States and Britain were the only two countries that since 1991 did not have an embassy in Iraq. Also, he lamented that the United States and Britain quickly moved from seeking integration to a full-blown occupation, which is not very popular for the people being occupied.

**Lisa Schirch** (3D Security)

Ms. Schirch started off by describing her trip to Iraq in 2005, when she worked on a project with Iraqi NGOs. She assured that there is active peace-building within Iraqi civil society, and community leaders are moving peace forward. Many efforts to build community-based NGOs are in place. In this context, the role of 3D Security is to help grow security from the ground up.

Ms. Schirch represented the narratives of many Iraqis by quoting from her interviews: “Security grows from the ground up and not from helicopters,” and “Do Americans realize they have made the situation worst?” Iraqis feel very insecure about the US military presence inside their borders. Overwhelmingly, US attacks on civilians have support from only 1% of Iraqi population.

Furthermore, Ms. Schirch points that the idea of occupation is humiliating to Iraqis, and that Iraqis believe violence will decrease after the US occupation. She indicated that Iraqis feel deeply that the United States is in their country primarily because of oil. Finally, she explained that while she agrees with the content of Steele’s book, she disagrees with its name. She considers the word *Defeat* harsh, and thinks the American people will have a hard time accepting it.

### **Paul Hughes (USIP)**

Mr. Hughes started off his presentation by indicating that the concept of defeat is archaic and irrelevant. He based his conclusions on the Vietnam War experience: “Who really won the Vietnam War?” He pointed out that Vietnamese are presently doing well, that they are in good relations with Americans—despite the bitter war and the subsequent economic impact. Mr. Hughes stated that we aren’t even sure how to define defeat. The globalized world moves continuously, and defeat does not exist in it.

Mr. Hughes moved on to describe his grassroots work in Iraq, where he learned that when you embark on the path of war, you must ask yourself what you are trying to achieve, what you want to see at the end. You must keep in mind that the logical outcome of war should be to establish peace. It is crucial to look at it in the long run. Mr. Hughes affirmed that the Iraq war has definitely divided the country.

Finally, Mr. Hughes drew on several political developments he has come across in his work in Iraq, such as: (1) schools are now opening, and people are not being killed in the streets as much as in previous months and years; (2) police action is still a problem; (3) nobody has a handle of the Iran border; and (4) the politics of Iran are in a transition stage.

Before opening the space for a Q&A session between the panelists and audience, Susan Collin Marks allowed some time for Jonathan Steele to address the question, “Why use the word *defeat* in the title of the book?” Jonathan responded that he has been in the media for a long time, and he likes to tell it like it is. He believes that the war in Iraq has been a total fiasco and it is appropriate and timely to use the D word.