

Policy Analysis

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Routing

Escaping the Trap *Why the United States Must Leave Iraq*

by Ted Galen Carpenter

Executive Summary

The U.S. military occupation of Iraq has now lasted longer than U.S. involvement in World War II. Yet there is no end in sight to the mission.

Staying in Iraq is a fatally flawed policy that has already cost more than 3,000 American lives and consumed more than \$350 billion. The security situation in that country grows increasingly chaotic and bloody as evidence mounts that Iraq has descended into a sectarian civil war between Sunnis and Shiites. Approximately 120 Iraqis per day are perishing in political violence. That bloodshed is occurring in a country of barely 26 million people. A comparable rate of carnage in the United States would produce more than 1,400 fatalities per day.

That reality is a far cry from the optimistic pronouncements the administration and its supporters made when the war began. We were supposed to be able to draw down the number of our troops to no more than 60,000 before the end of 2003, and Iraqi oil revenues were to pay for the reconstruction of the country.

Even worse, Iraq has become both a training ground and a recruiting poster for Islamic extremists. U.S. occupation of Iraq has become yet another grievance throughout the Muslim world and has exacerbated our already worrisome problem with radical Islamic terrorism.

It is time to admit that the Iraq mission has failed and cut our losses. The notion that Iraq would become a stable, united, secular democracy and be the model for a new Middle East was always an illusion. We should not ask more Americans to die for that illusion.

Withdrawal will not be without cost. Radical Islamic factions will portray a withdrawal as a victory over the American superpower. We can minimize that damage by refocusing our efforts on al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and elsewhere, but there is no way to eliminate the damage. Even superpowers have to pay a price for wrongheaded ventures.

Whatever price we will pay for withdrawing from Iraq, however, must be measured against the probable cost in blood and treasure if we stay. That cost is already excessive. We are losing soldiers at the rate of more than 800 per year, and the financial meter is running at some \$8 billion per month. With President Bush's announcement of a "surge" of 21,500 additional troops, the pace of both will increase.

Worst of all, there is no reasonable prospect of success even if we pay the additional cost in blood and treasure. We need an exit strategy that is measured in months, not years.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of seven books on international affairs and a coauthor of *Exiting Iraq: Why the U.S. Must End the Military Occupation and Renew the War against Al Qaeda* (2004).*

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Introduction

Optimism about the U.S. mission in Iraq has faded dramatically in the past few months. Even President George W. Bush now says that he is “not satisfied” with developments in that country. The report released on December 6, 2006, by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, chaired by former secretary of state James Baker and former congressman Lee Hamilton, conceded that the situation in Iraq was “grave and deteriorating.”¹ The Pentagon’s report to Congress in November 2006 paints a similarly dismal picture, with attacks on U.S. troops, Iraqi security forces, and Iraqi civilians at record levels.²

Yet neither the Bush administration nor the Iraq Study Group contemplates anything more than a modest course correction. Supporters of the war cling stubbornly to the notion that “victory” in Iraq can still be salvaged. They remain strongly resistant to any suggestion of a definite timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. More strident hawks even call for escalation, and they induced President Bush to send an additional 21,500 troops in January 2007.

The Bush administration and much of the American foreign policy community are simply in a state of denial. Proponents of the war refuse to admit what is becoming increasingly obvious: Washington’s Iraq occupation and democratization mission is failing, and there is little realistic prospect that its fortunes will improve. Something much more dramatic than a modest course correction is needed. The adoption of different tactics on behalf of the same old strategy will not suffice.

We Were Promised a Rose Garden

It is clear in retrospect that the administration and its supporters miscalculated badly about the Iraq intervention.³ President Bush’s May 1, 2003, speech aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* beneath a large “Mission Accomplished” banner was the perfect symbol

for the misplaced optimism about Iraq that pervaded the administration and its hawkish political allies. Kenneth Adelman, a member of the Defense Policy Board, an informal advisory group to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, famously predicted that the mission would be “a cakewalk.” Other advocates of the war were equally ebullient. It would be like Paris in 1944, with the Iraqis greeting American troops as liberators, not occupiers. In December 2003 pro-war syndicated columnist Mark Steyn predicted that “in a year’s time Baghdad and Basra will have a lower crime rate than most London boroughs.” Furthermore, there would be “no widespread resentment at or resistance of the Western military presence.”⁴

Warnings about the deep ethno-religious divisions in Iraq were summarily dismissed. On April 1, 2003, *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol opined that “there’s been a certain amount of pop sociology in America. . . . that the Shi’a can’t get along with the Sunni, and the Shi’a in Iraq just want to establish some kind of Islamic fundamentalist regime. There’s almost no evidence of that at all.”⁵ A month later, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer stated confidently that “the United States is in a position to bring about a unique and potentially revolutionary development in the Arab world: a genuinely pluralistic, open and free society.”⁶ Other proponents of the war assumed not only that Iraq would be a collegial democracy at home but that it would have an extremely friendly policy toward both the United States and Israel. Some proponents of the mission, citing the Bush administration’s favorite Iraqi exile figure, Ahmed Chalabi, even predicted that the new Iraqi government would construct an oil pipeline with a terminus in Israel.⁷

According to that rosy scenario, the transition to a democratic Iraqi government would be swift and easy. Defense Department planners assumed that U.S. troop levels would be down to 60,000 or perhaps even fewer by the end of 2003. *Washington Post* reporter Tom Ricks noted that some Pentagon officials had hoped to have troop levels down to perhaps 25,000 to 30,000

by September 2003.⁸ Some military experts, though, warned that such optimism was unwarranted.⁹ Gen. Eric Shinseki, the Army chief of staff, predicted that the occupation would require “several hundred thousand troops” for a period of “many years.” Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz flatly rejected Shinseki’s assessment in congressional testimony. For his pains, Shinseki was rendered a lame duck when reports of his retirement were leaked to the press.

Wolfowitz also scoffed at notions that the occupation would be a financial drain. He predicted that Iraq’s oil revenues would pay for the entire costs of reconstruction.¹⁰ Andrew Natsios, the administrator of the Agency for International Development, stated that costs of the reconstruction effort to the United States “will be \$1.7 billion. We have no plans for any further-on funding for this.”¹¹ Again, officials who dared sound discordant notes were shown the door. Lawrence Lindsey, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, warned that the cost could exceed \$200 billion. He was pressured out of his post soon thereafter. Of course, in one sense, Lindsey was wrong. The Iraq war did not cost \$200 billion; it has cost \$350 billion and counting.

Uneasy officials were not the only ones to warn that the administration’s optimistic scenario was unwarranted. In January 2002, more than a year before U.S. troops entered Iraq, I cautioned that “no matter how emotionally satisfying removing a thug like Saddam may seem, Americans would be wise to consider whether that step is worth the price. The inevitable U.S. military victory would not be the end of America’s troubles in Iraq. Indeed, it would mark the start of a new round of headaches. Ousting Saddam would make Washington responsible for Iraq’s political future and entangle the United States in an endless nation-building mission beset by intractable problems.”¹²

As war grew nearer, other experts echoed such warnings.¹³ On September 26, 2002, 33 prominent foreign affairs scholars published an advertisement in the *New York Times* with the headline “War in Iraq Is *Not* in America’s

National Interest.” Among the points they made was that the administration of George H. W. Bush “did not try to conquer Iraq in 1991 because it was understood that doing so could spread instability in the Middle East. . . . This remains a valid concern today.” They added: “Even if we win easily, we have no plausible exit strategy. Iraq is a deeply divided society that the United States would have to occupy and police for many years to create a viable state.” Experts who signed that ad included University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer, MIT professor Barry Posen, Columbia University professors Richard K. Betts and Kenneth Waltz, and the dean of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, Stephen M. Walt.¹⁴ In February and March 2003, Boston University’s Andrew Bacevich and Texas A&M University’s Christopher Layne added their voices to the chorus warning of disaster, with Layne correctly predicting a “post-Saddam quagmire.”¹⁵

Not only did the administration and other proponents of war ignore warnings from experts before the United States launched its invasion, they refused to recognize growing evidence later on that the mission was going badly.¹⁶ Even as the security environment deteriorated, the chorus of optimism scarcely diminished.¹⁷ In May 2005 Vice President Dick Cheney asserted confidently that the insurgency was in its “last throes.”¹⁸ When the Iraqi parliament approved the Islamist-leaning government of Nouri al-Maliki in April 2006, the editors of *National Review* hailed the development as the triumph of democracy and stated that the “purveyors of doom now have some explaining to do.”¹⁹

By late 2006, though, it was clear to all but the most obtuse individuals that the Iraq mission was not going well. By virtually every measure, the Bush administration’s expectations for Iraq were being dashed. On the economic front, reconstruction programs were far behind schedule and riddled with corruption. On the legal and social front, Iraq appeared to regress, with religious zealots running roughshod over their fellow citizens, enforcing edicts on such matters as alcohol

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consumption and standards of grooming and dress. The small Christian minority endured an upsurge in persecution, with tens of thousands forced to flee the country.²⁰ Iraqi women fared very badly, often losing rights and privileges that were routine under Saddam's regime.²¹ On the political front, the rise of Islamic hard liners accelerated. Instead of electing moderate, nonsectarian candidates for the new Iraqi government, voters had empowered stridently sectarian parties, with Shiite political factions friendly to Iran exhibiting especially impressive strength. Moreover, the stark divide among Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias was clearly reflected in the balloting. Parties and candidates that sought to bridge that sectarian divide were routed. Most crucial of all, the evidence of massive disorder in Iraq became irrefutable as the security environment, which was bad even during the initial period of the occupation, sharply deteriorated.

The Dire Security Situation in Iraq

Even the most tenacious optimists now concede that the level of violence has become alarming. Whether Iraq is now engulfed in a civil war is debated, but that is largely a matter of semantics. If one adopts a strict enough definition, Iraq probably does not fit the category. Former Central Intelligence Agency director James Woolsey tried to apply an absurdly narrow standard when he disputed notions that Iraq was in a civil war, noting that "we don't have Antietam and Fredericksburg and large armies clashing."²² By that definition, there have been only four or five civil wars in the past four centuries.

The Extent of the Chaos

Most experts, though, have far less rigid definitions of civil war. They use the term when two or more ethnic, ideological, or religious factions use violence on a large scale to pursue their political ends. The conflict in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s is an

example, and virtually all experts consider that episode a civil war. The situation in Iraq today seems very similar.

Whatever term one uses, the security situation in Iraq is extraordinarily violent and chaotic. Moreover, the nature of the violence in that country has shifted since the February 2006 bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of Shia Islam's holiest shrines. The Sunni-led insurgency against U.S. and British occupation forces and the security forces of the U.S.-sponsored Iraqi government is still a significant factor, but it is no longer the dominant one. The growth in turmoil is now primarily in explicit sectarian violence between the Sunni and the Shiite communities. Baghdad is the epicenter of that strife, but it has erupted in other parts of the country as well. The Iraq Study Group noted that 4 of Iraq's 18 provinces are "highly insecure." Those provinces account for about 40 percent of the country's population.²³

A July 2006 UN report highlights the extent of the growing carnage. More than 14,000 Iraqi civilians died violently in the first six months of 2006, mostly in insurgent attacks or sectarian strife. And the trend is becoming even more worrisome. The death toll in January 2006 was 1,778; in June it was 3,149. The November UN report noted that 3,709 Iraqis had perished in October.²⁴ Put another way, the carnage is now running at approximately 120 victims each day.²⁵

We must remember that this is occurring in a country of barely 26 million people. A comparable pace in the United States would be a horrifying 1,400 deaths per day—or nearly 500,000 per year. If violence among warring political or ethno-religious factions was consuming that many American lives, there would be little debate about whether the United States was experiencing a civil war.

In addition to the casualties in Iraq, there are other human costs. The United Nations estimates that some 1.6 million people have been displaced inside Iraq (i.e., they are "internal refugees") as a result of the fighting. Another 1.8 million have fled the country entirely, mostly to Jordan and Syria.²⁶ Moreover, the pace of

the exodus is accelerating. Refugees are now leaving Iraq at the rate of nearly 3,000 a day.²⁷ Most of those refugees are middle- and upper-class families, the very professionals needed for the creation of a vibrant civil society. Indeed, there are affluent neighborhoods in Baghdad and other cities that now resemble ghost towns.

Some of the refugee flight amounts to ethnic cleansing. Both Sunnis and Shiites have left, or have been driven out of, areas where they are in the minority and relocated to neighborhoods where their coreligionists are in the majority.²⁸ In Kirkuk and Mosul a more complex form of ethnic cleansing is taking place as Kurds seek to drive out Arabs (both Sunni and Shiite) to establish Kurdish majorities in both cities. Turkmen and other minorities have also been victims of that campaign.

The Complex Nature of the Violence

The mounting chaos in Iraq is not simply a case of Sunni-Shiite sectarian violence, although that is the dominant theme. The Iraq Study Group notes the complexity of Iraq's security turmoil. "In Kirkuk, the struggle is between Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen. In Basra and the south, the violence is largely an intra-Shia struggle." Implicitly rejecting the arguments of those who contend that the violence is primarily a Sunni-Shia conflict confined to Baghdad, the members of the study group point out that "most of Iraq's cities have a sectarian mix and are plagued by persistent violence."²⁹ Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki warns that conflicts in the various regions could be "Shi'ite versus Shi'ite and Sunni versus Sunni."³⁰

The armed clash between rival Shiite factions in al-'Amarah, the capital of the southern Maysan Province, in October 2006 indicated that such fears were well-founded. The trouble began with the assassination of a senior police official who was a member of the Badr Brigade, the militia of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Leaders of the Badr Brigade suspected followers of Moqtada al-Sadr and arrested four members of Sadr's Mahdi Army. That action in turn led to a series of firefights that left at least 30 people dead.³¹

A few weeks earlier, Iraqi government forces (with a heavy Badr Brigade component) had clashed with the Mahdi Army in the city of Diwaniyah.³² Such struggles are all the more peculiar, since Sadr is an important player in the Maliki government.³³ There are even independent players in the intra-Shiite struggle. In May 2006, for example, the Fadhila party, a locally strong entity in the port of Basra, defied the national government and basically held most of the country's vital oil exports hostage until it obtained meaningful concessions from Baghdad.³⁴

Intra-Shiite fighting is not the only example of growing divisions. Sunni tribes in Anbar Province are bitterly divided about whether to support the Sunni-led insurgency against U.S. occupation forces. They are also divided about whether to support or oppose al-Qaeda elements and other foreign fighters.³⁵ And then there are the struggles between rival tribes and clans and the growing impact of violent crime organizations that are not especially motivated by religious or ideological considerations.

All of those developments underscore the point that the United States is in danger of being entangled not merely in a civil war but in a multisided civil war. Added to that factor is the mounting evidence that the majority of Iraqis no longer want U.S. troops in their country. One poll, conducted by the highly regarded Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland in September 2006, indicated that 71 percent of Iraqis wanted their government to ask American forces to leave within a year. Even more startling, 61 percent approved of attacks on U.S. forces. Those figures, as bad as they are, understate the precarious nature of the U.S. occupation. The Kurds (some 20 percent of Iraq's population) largely support the U.S. military presence, which means that massive majorities of Arabs (both Sunni and Shia) do not. While only 35 percent of Kurds wanted to see U.S. forces leave within a year, 74 percent of Shiites and a whopping 91 percent of Sunnis did. A similar pattern was found regarding attacks on U.S. troops. Only 16 percent of

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Kurds thought that such attacks were justified, but 62 percent of Shiites and 92 percent of Sunnis thought they were.³⁶

The bottom line is that the United States is mired in a country that is already in the early stages of an exceedingly complex, multisided civil war, and where all significant factions save one (the Kurds) want American troops to leave. That is an untenable situation.

Illusory Solutions

As frustration with the lack of success in Iraq has grown, the search has redoubled for strategies that might extricate the United States from its predicament. That search reaches across the ideological spectrum, involving hawks who believe the Bush administration has not been aggressive enough in its pursuit of victory and moderates and mild doves who propose measures for a gradual exit from the Iraqi morass without conceding a U.S. failure. Although a number of options have been put forth, three have gained special prominence in the past few months. All of them, unfortunately, are seriously deficient.

The Iraq Study Group's Prescriptions

The Iraq Study Group's report released in December 2006 was widely viewed as a last chance for the Bush administration to take outside advice—in this case from a blue-ribbon panel of political elders—and change course in Iraq. Given the report's policy recommendations, any expectations of change were unrealistic.

Although the report issued 79 policy prescriptions, the bulk of them can be grouped into four categories. The first is the goal of withdrawing all combat forces (some 70,000 troops) from Iraq by early 2008. The remaining troops would stay in that country for an indefinite period of time focusing on the training of Iraqi security forces. In fact, the panel recommended that most of those personnel be embedded in Iraqi units.

There are two major problems with such recommendations. One is that the goal of a

limited withdrawal is explicitly predicated on conditions in Iraq permitting that withdrawal. But that approach is not substantively different from what the Bush administration has been trying to do for more than three years. Indeed, as noted above, the original goal was to have U.S. troop levels down to a maximum of 60,000 by the end of 2003. The security environment never permitted such a draw-down—or at least would not permit it so long as the administration remained wedded to the goal of a stable, united, democratic Iraq. There is no credible evidence that conditions in the next 18 months or so will improve so that the withdrawal of combat units can take place and still preserve the illusion of victory.

In addition, the proposal to withdraw combat forces while leaving behind other personnel places the latter in even more danger than they are in now. They would be wholly dependent for their security on Iraqi security forces whose capabilities and loyalties are both suspect. The Iraqi army has had a spotty and generally unimpressive record when it has taken on insurgent forces without extensive U.S. participation. Moreover, it is an open secret that the army and the police forces are riddled with elements loyal to the insurgency. Other portions of the security forces owe their primary allegiance to sectarian militias, not the amorphous concept of an Iraqi national government. Indeed, military and police units often *are* the sectarian militias.³⁷ American training and logistical personnel would be at the mercy of such “allies” for their security and their very lives. Assignment to the units left behind in Iraq once the withdrawal of U.S. combat units took place would not be enviable.

A second category of Iraq Study Group recommendations focuses on reviving and accelerating economic reconstruction efforts. That attitude reflects a burgeoning conventional wisdom among supporters of the Iraq war that “victory” cannot be achieved by military means alone.³⁸ The underlying assumption is that if infrastructure projects can be completed and the economy revived, all except the hard-core insurgents and jihadis will decide

that they can gain more from peaceful participation in the new Iraq than they can gain from fighting. That is dubious logic, because it minimizes the potent religious and ideological motives that drive the various factions in that country. Economic factors may have some relevance, but it is naive to assume that if the unemployment rate dropped, the various Iraqi factions would necessarily agree to live in harmony.

Moreover, a focus on economic reconstruction is hardly new thinking. Reconstruction efforts have been a major component of the Bush administration's strategy since the beginning of the occupation. Yet for all the specific examples of success that advocates of the mission cite (new schools, power plants, roads, etc.), those achievements have made little difference to the overall situation in the country. Even by purely economic measures, Iraq is not in good shape. Oil production remains mired at or below prewar levels (which were themselves depressed from earlier periods), electric generation likewise has struggled to exceed prewar levels,³⁹ and unemployment is estimated at anywhere from 20 percent to 50 percent. Reconstruction efforts continue to fall behind schedule.

The common reason for the various failings is the dreadful security environment. Insurgents are adept at intimidating Iraqis who would work with foreign reconstruction personnel. They are even more adept at sabotaging ongoing or completed reconstruction projects. The bottom line is that, unless the security environment improves dramatically, the economic goals outlined by the Iraq Study Group are fanciful.

The third category—political recommendations—is no more realistic. The study group calls on Iraqi political leaders to bridge the sectarian divide and to marginalize the various militias. That ignores the underlying political reality in Iraq. The Shia faction in the current government depends heavily for its support on sectarian parties and the militias they sponsor. It is unlikely that any Iraqi prime minister would risk his political future (and perhaps his life) by seriously trying to undercut those

forces.⁴⁰ And the Kurds have no intention of relinquishing their hold on the Peshmerga forces that maintain order and security in northern Iraq. In fact, the Peshmerga units, although nominally part of the Iraqi army, owe their allegiance entirely to the regional government in Kurdistan, not the government in Baghdad.⁴¹ In the north, the Kurds fly their own flag, not the Iraqi flag, and use their own currency rather than the Iraqi national currency. Although Jalal Talabani, Iraq's president, is a Kurd, he seems to focus primarily on protecting Kurdish interests from being eroded by the national government, not on fostering any real sense of Iraqi national unity.

Calling for a true government of national unity may be noble in principle, but operationally it is an oxymoron. Iraq leaders, whether Sunni, Shia, or Kurd, have their own agendas, and creating a united country with an equitable distribution of power among the three groups is not a high priority. The reality is that if Iraqi leaders were both capable of forging such a system and inclined to do so, they would already have taken major steps toward that goal. That they have not done so explains why the Iraq Study Group's goal of political reconciliation will not be attained. Retired Lt. Gen. William Odom, former director of the National Security Agency, summarizes the situation well:

Truth No. 1: No "deal" of any kind can be made among the warring parties in Iraq that will bring stability even temporarily. Ever since the war began to go badly in the summer of 2003, a myth has arisen that a deal among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds could bring stability to Iraq. First, the parliamentary elections were expected to be a breakthrough. When peace and stability did not follow, the referendum on a constitution was proclaimed the panacea. When that failed, it was asserted that we just had not yet found the proper prime minister. Even today, the Iraq Study Group is searching for this holy grail. It does not exist.⁴²

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Finally, the study group proposes dialogue with all of Iraq's neighbors—explicitly including Iran and Syria—to help create a stable and free Iraq. As noted below, there may be some opportunity for gaining the cooperation of Tehran and Damascus on preventing the current strife in Iraq from becoming a regional war, but there is little prospect that either Iran or Syria will help the United States achieve its political objectives in Iraq. The principal reason is that U.S. success in Iraq is not in the interest of Iran or Syria.

The members of the study group labored mightily, but they have come up with policy prescriptions that are largely impractical. Moreover, although they acknowledge the dire state of affairs in Iraq, their policy prescriptions are a vain effort to put a gloss on an impending U.S. defeat. Columnist George Will's assessment of the report's implicit message is on the mark. "By what the [Iraq Study Group] did *not* recommend—e.g., many more troops and much more money—it recognized that the deterioration is beyond much remediation."⁴³

Send More Troops

Instead of conceding that their previous advice has led America into disaster, the intellectual architects of the Iraq venture have redoubled their efforts to give advice about proper future strategy. Their most prominent proposal is to increase U.S. troop levels in Iraq.⁴⁴ The increasingly shrill neoconservatives argue that the Bush administration launched the mission with too few troops to begin with.⁴⁵ Yet most of the lobbyists for war argued exactly the opposite at the time.⁴⁶ (Indeed, some of them, including Wolfowitz, proposed going in with an even lighter force—no more than 50,000 or 60,000 troops.) Now, they insist that even the existing force of 140,000 is insufficient.

However, the hawks have a range of views about how many additional troops would be enough. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) proposes sending another 20,000 to 30,000, a view echoed by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC).⁴⁷ Former West Point military historian Frederick W. Kagan suggests deploying an additional seven combat

brigades (approximately 35,000 troops), primarily to eradicate insurgents in the Sunni neighborhoods of Baghdad and the center of the Sunni insurgency, Anbar Province.⁴⁸ Others contend that at least 50,000 will be needed, and the editors of the hawkish *Washington Times* advocated 50,000 to 80,000.⁴⁹

In his speech to the nation on January 10, 2007, President Bush endorsed a scaled-down version of the Kagan plan, ordering an additional 21,500 troops into the Iraqi theater, primarily to suppress violence in Baghdad—but in both Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods, a more ambitious undertaking than Kagan proposed.⁵⁰ The underlying logic of the "surge" is that, if the capital can be stabilized, the levels of violence elsewhere in Iraq will begin to ebb—a forlorn hope at best.

The hawks also have a range of views about how long the buildup will be needed. Some argue that it will be only a short-term mission (a few months) to stabilize the security environment in Baghdad (where the disorder is most severe). Others hint that the buildup might have to last a year or even several years, suggesting a "surge and sustain" policy.⁵¹

Unfortunately, those ideas are being taken seriously, even though some of the authors are the same people whose advice on Iraq to this point has been badly off the mark. Increasing the number of troops in Iraq is a futile attempt to salvage a mission that has gone terribly wrong. In all likelihood, it will merely increase the number of casualties—both American and Iraqi—over the short term and have little long-term impact on the security environment. Moreover, the buildup embraced by President Bush in January 2007 falls far short of the numbers needed to give the occupation forces a realistic prospect of suppressing the violence. Experts on counterinsurgency strategies have consistently concluded that at least 10 soldiers per 1,000 population are required to have a sufficient impact.⁵² Indeed, some experts have argued that in cases where armed resistance is intense and pervasive (which certainly seems to be the case in Iraq), deployments of 20 soldiers per 1,000 may be needed.⁵³

Given Iraq's population (26 million), such a counterinsurgency mission would require the deployment of at least 260,000 ground forces (an increase of 120,000 from current levels) and probably as many as 520,000. Even the lower requirement may well be beyond the capability of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps. Unless we plan to keep those troops in Iraq for the duration of the conflict, the requirements associated with rotating personnel in and out of theater would strain both branches to the breaking point absent a mobilization of all reserve units. The higher figure could not be achieved even with total mobilization. America simply does not have sufficient ground forces available for such a mission. And a lesser deployment would have no realistic chance of getting the job done. A limited "surge" of additional troops is the latest illusory panacea put forth primarily by the people who lured us into Iraq in the first place.

Partition Iraq and Withdraw to the Kurdish Region

The belated recognition among members of the U.S. political and policy elite that the bitter divisions separating Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shia Arabs make Iraq a rather artificial and fragile country has led to a surge of proposals to partition the country. Advocates of extensive decentralization that would amount to partition in all but name include Leslie Gelb, former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, and senators Joe Biden (D-DE) and Sam Brownback (R-KS).⁵⁴ Author and former ambassador Peter W. Galbraith embraces a strategy of explicit partition. Indeed, Galbraith argues that Iraq's unity has already shattered and that partition would merely acknowledge and ratify the facts on the ground. He also suggests that the United States withdraw its forces from most of Iraq and operate instead from bases in the de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq.⁵⁵

Galbraith may well be right that a unified Iraq is no longer a realistic option, but a political divorce is likely to be messy and extremely violent.⁵⁶ Although Iraq is geographically split along ethno-religious lines, with the

south largely Shia Arab, the center and west largely Sunni Arab, and the north largely Kurdish, that is true only in a very rough sense. There are significant minority pockets in every region, and some of the major cities, such as Mosul and Kirkuk, are ethnically mixed. Most significant, the capital, Baghdad, has large populations of both Sunnis and Shias. Finally, the Shia Arab, Sunni Arab, Kurd breakdown does not take into account the position of smaller minorities, such as the Turkmen, which is a serious issue in Kirkuk and some other places. Partition of Iraq would likely be as violent as the partition of India in the late 1940s or the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Peaceful partitions, such as that of Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s, are definitely the exception, not the rule. Although partition of Iraq may ultimately prove to be the best available political solution for the country, it is hardly an appealing prospect.

Most important, if Iraq divides along ethno-religious fault lines, that outcome needs to be the result of Iraqi, not American, action. Washington dare not have its fingerprints on the demise of the Iraqi state. Otherwise, that would become yet another grievance for Sunnis throughout the Middle East and beyond. America already has more than enough problems on that front.

Retaining military bases in Kurdistan is also a bad idea. Granted, American troops would not be under incessant attack as they have been elsewhere throughout Iraq, since the U.S. presence is favored by most Kurds. Nevertheless, any long-term U.S. military presence anywhere in Iraq is likely to inflame the passions of Muslims who believe that the United States plays an imperial role in their region and is determined to perpetuate the occupation of Iraq. Maintaining even a limited number of bases in the Kurdish north would seem to validate that allegation and further damage America's standing in the Muslim world. A U.S. military presence could also entangle the United States in Kurdistan's probable struggles with Arab factions in Iraq over control of Mosul and Kirkuk—especially

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the latter's oil riches. It could even entangle the United States in the murky and potentially very contentious relationships between the de facto independent Kurdistan and its neighbors, especially Iran and Turkey.⁵⁷

Consequences of Leaving

Proponents of staying in Iraq offer several reasons why a prompt withdrawal would be bad for the United States. Those arguments vary in terms of plausibility. Some are thoroughly far-fetched while others have at least some superficial validity. All of them, though, are ultimately deficient as a reason for keeping U.S. troops in Iraq.

Allegation: Al-Qaeda Would Take Over Iraq

Administration officials and other supporters of the war have warned repeatedly that a "premature" withdrawal of U.S. forces would enable al-Qaeda to turn Iraq into a sanctuary in which to plot and from which to launch attacks against the United States and other Western countries. In late 2005 Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld warned of that danger explicitly. "They [al-Qaeda leaders] would turn Iraq into what Afghanistan was before 9/11—a haven for terrorist recruitment and training and a launching pad for attacks against U.S. interests and our fellow citizens." In a speech to the U.S. Naval Academy on November 30, 2005, President Bush made a similar argument. Pointing to al-Qaeda's stated objective of gaining control of Iraq, he predicted, "They would then use Iraq as a base to launch attacks against America." Nearly a year later he repeated the same refrain. "If we were to leave before the job is done, in my judgment, the al Qaeda would find a safe haven from which to attack."⁵⁸ White House chief of staff Joshua B. Bolten was even more apocalyptic, saying that "any premature withdrawal of U.S. forces" would "lead to a terrorist state in control of huge oil reserves."⁵⁹

But al-Qaeda's taking over Iraq is an extremely improbable scenario.⁶⁰ First of all,

even the U.S. government estimates that there are fewer than 2,000 al-Qaeda fighters in Iraq, and the Iraq Study Group put the figure at only 1,300.⁶¹ Indeed, such foreign fighters make up a relatively small component of the Sunni insurgency against the U.S. and British occupation forces. It strains credulity to imagine 1,300 fighters (and foreigners at that) taking over and controlling a country of 26 million people. In Afghanistan, by comparison, al-Qaeda had some 18,000 fighters and enjoyed the protection of an entrenched, friendly government.⁶²

The challenge for al-Qaeda would be even more daunting than those raw numbers suggest.⁶³ The organization does have some support among the Sunni Arabs in Iraq, but opinion even among that segment of the population is divided. The September 2006 poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes found that 94 percent of Sunnis had a somewhat or highly unfavorable attitude toward al-Qaeda.⁶⁴ As the violence of al-Qaeda attacks has mounted, and the victims are increasingly Iraqis, not Americans, many Sunnis have turned against the terrorists. There has been a growing number of reports during the past year of armed conflicts between Iraqi Sunnis and foreign fighters.

Sunni support for al-Qaeda is feeble; Kurdish and Shiite support is nonexistent. Almost to a person they loathe al-Qaeda. The Program on International Policy Attitudes poll showed that 98 percent of Shiite respondents and 100 percent of Kurdish respondents had somewhat or very unfavorable views of al-Qaeda.⁶⁵ The notion that a Shiite- and Kurdish-dominated government would tolerate Iraq becoming a safe haven for al-Qaeda is improbable on its face. And even if U.S. troops left Iraq, the successor government would continue to be dominated by the Kurds and Shiites, since they make up more than 80 percent of Iraq's population and, in marked contrast to the situation under Saddam Hussein, they now control the military and police. At best, al-Qaeda forces could hope for a tenuous presence of its forces in Anbar Province and other predominantly Sunni areas of the coun-

Sunni support for al-Qaeda is feeble; Kurdish and Shiite support is nonexistent.

try, and even there, they would be incessantly stalked and harassed by government forces. That doesn't exactly sound like a reliable safe haven. Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-NE.) states, "I have never been persuaded to believe that whether we stay there six months, a year, or two years, that if we would leave, that somehow Iraq would turn into a haven for terrorists."⁶⁶ He is right to be skeptical of such arguments.

Allegation: The Terrorists Would Be Emboldened Worldwide

In a September 2005 speech insisting that the United States must "stay the course" in Iraq, President Bush warned that an early military withdrawal would encourage al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. Weak U.S. responses to challenges over the previous quarter century had emboldened such people, Bush argued. "The terrorists saw our response to the hostage crisis in Iran, the bombings in the Marine barracks in Lebanon, the first World Trade Center attack, the killing of American soldiers in Somalia, the destruction of the U.S. embassies in Africa and the attack on the USS *Cole*. The terrorists concluded that we lacked the courage and character to defend ourselves, and so they attacked us."⁶⁷ Vice President Cheney returned to the same theme in early 2006. "If we have learned anything in the last 25 years—from Beirut, to Somalia, to the USS *Cole*—it is that terrorist attacks are not caused by the projection of power; they are invited by the perception of weakness."⁶⁸ A year later, he had not altered his opinion in the slightest. "Bin Laden doesn't think he can beat us. He believes that he can force us to quit. . . . He believes after Lebanon and Somalia, the United States doesn't have the stomach for the fight in this war against terror."⁶⁹

Hawkish pundits have made similar allegations for years. In April 2004 *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol noted that the deaths of American Army Rangers in a fire-fight in Mogadishu "triggered, in a few months, the withdrawal of American troops from Somalia, and victory for those who killed our soldiers." The effects were dire, he

contended. "Mogadishu encouraged Osama bin Laden in his judgment that America was a 'weak horse,' a nation that could not take casualties."⁷⁰ Similarly, pundits Lee A. Casey and David B. Rivkin Jr. warned that a withdrawal from Iraq "would encourage and embolden the Islamists, just as the withdrawals from Somalia in 1994 and Lebanon in 1984 informed bin Laden's calculations about U.S. staying power in the Middle East."⁷¹

That is a curious line of argument, especially with respect to the Lebanon and Somalia episodes, and it has ominous implications. President Bush and his supporters clearly assume that the United States should have stayed in both countries, despite the military debacles there. The mistake, in their opinion, was not the original decision to intervene but the decision to limit American losses and terminate the missions. That is a classic case of learning the wrong lessons from history.

Even hawkish Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), who served on the Reagan White House staff in the early 1980s, admits that the decision to send troops into Lebanon was a mistake.⁷² The United States promptly found itself in the middle of a civil war as a de facto ally of the Christian-dominated Lebanese government. American troops soon became entangled in skirmishes with Muslim militias, and U.S. battleships off the coast proceeded to shell Muslim villages. The disastrous intervention culminated with an attack by a suicide truck bomber against a barracks in Beirut that left 241 Marines dead. A few months later, President Reagan cut his losses and pulled out of Lebanon.

The Somalia intervention was equally ill-starred. Although President George H. W. Bush sent troops into that country on a humanitarian relief mission, President Clinton soon signed on to the UN's far more ambitious nation-building project. The United States then became entangled in another multisided civil war. One faction, headed by warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed, increasingly regarded the U.S. forces as an obstacle to its

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The cost of staying on indefinitely in a dire security environment is even worse than that of accepting a blow to America's credibility by withdrawing forces now.

goals. When Washington decided to carry out the UN's edict to arrest Aideed and his followers, Aideed's militias struck back with a vengeance. The skirmishes culminated in an ambush in the capital city, Mogadishu, which left 18 elite Army Rangers dead. Shortly thereafter, President Clinton withdrew U.S. forces.

Both Reagan and Clinton made the right decision. It was not a mistake to withdraw and limit our losses. The real mistake was the decision to intervene in such strategically and economically irrelevant places in the first place.

Those who argue that the United States should have stayed the course in Lebanon and Somalia apparently have a masochistic streak. Both countries were in massive disorder. Staying on after the initial disasters would have entangled the United States in multiyear ventures that likely would have cost thousands of American lives. Indeed, it is entirely possible that we would still be bogged down in those places.

Yes, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups apparently concluded that the Lebanon and Somalia episodes showed that U.S. leaders and the American people have no tolerance for enduring murky missions that entail significant casualties. They are likely to draw a similar lesson if the United States withdraws from Iraq without an irrefutable triumph. That is why it is imperative to be cautious about a decision to intervene in the first place.

Military missions should not be undertaken unless there are indisputably vital American security interests at stake. No such interests were at stake in Lebanon and Somalia, nor are they in Iraq. Once the missions turned sour, U.S. policymakers were left with a choice between a bad option and a worse one. The bad option was to withdraw, even though the move might embolden America's adversaries. But it would have been worse to have persisted with foolish and unnecessary ventures at the cost of far more American lives and with no realistic prospect of success.

The Bush administration confronts a similar choice today in Iraq. A decision to withdraw

and leave Iraq to its own fate is not without adverse consequences. America's terrorist adversaries will portray a pullout as a defeat for U.S. policy. Washington can mitigate that adverse effect by refocusing its efforts on eradicating the principal al-Qaeda stronghold, which is still in Afghanistan and western Pakistan.⁷³ If radical Islamic fighters can be routed there, the satisfaction they experience because of a U.S. retreat in Iraq may be substantially diminished. Nevertheless, the United States cannot avoid some damage to its credibility and its aura of military invincibility if it withdraws from Iraq without accomplishing its mission. Even superpowers must pay a price for ill-conceived and overly ambitious ventures.

But the cost of staying on indefinitely in a dire security environment is even worse than that of accepting a blow to America's credibility by withdrawing forces now. President Bush and his advisers need to consider the possibility that the United States might stay in Iraq for many years to come and still not achieve its policy goals. And the costs, in both blood and treasure, continue to mount.

As in Lebanon and Somalia, it would have been better if the United States had never launched the ill-advised nation-building crusade in Iraq. Unfortunately, that is not the case, and we face a choice between bad alternatives.

Allegation: The Conflict Will Spill Over Iraq's Borders and Create Regional Chaos

That concern also has some validity. Former CIA analyst Michael Scheuer has warned that Iraq might become the cockpit for a regional Sunni-Shiite armed struggle.⁷⁴ The ingredients are certainly there for that outcome. Predominantly Shiite Iran has already taken a great interest in political and military developments in its western neighbor. Tehran has close ties with the two dominant Shiite political parties, Dawa and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and has supported the even more radical Moqtada al-Sadr. Washington has repeatedly accused Tehran of interfering in Iraq.⁷⁵ There

is little doubt that Iran wants to see a Shiite-controlled government in Baghdad and would react badly if it appeared that Iraq's Sunni minority might be poised to regain power and once again subjugate the Shiite majority. The current Iraqi government is quite friendly to Iran, and Tehran can be expected to take steps to protect the new-found influence it enjoys in Baghdad.⁷⁶

But Iraq's other neighbors are apprehensive (to put it mildly) about the specter of a Shiite-controlled Iraq.⁷⁷ Saudi Arabia, in particular, regards the prospect of such a state on its northern border as anathema, worrying about the impact on its own Shia minority, which is concentrated in the principal oil-producing region. The Saudis are complaining to Washington that a Shiite "state within a state" exists inside Iraq and that that development is extremely worrisome.⁷⁸ There are indications that wealthy Saudis are already providing funds to Sunni forces in Iraq.⁷⁹ (It should also be noted that the distinction between private money and government money among members of the Saudi ruling class is hazy at best.) In November 2006 the top security adviser to the Saudi regime, Nawaf Obaid, warned that if the United States did not take steps to protect the Sunni community in Iraq, Riyadh would intervene directly to do so.⁸⁰ Although the Saudi government disavowed that statement and terminated its relationship with Obaid, it is hard to believe that he would have issued such a warning if discussions about that option had not been taking place within the political elite. A senior U.S. official reportedly told NBC News in mid-January that the Saudi government had informed Washington that it was prepared to move its own troops into Iraq if the new U.S. surge strategy failed and the violence in that country grew worse.⁸¹

Syria retains significant ties to Baathist elements in Iraq and has, at the very least, looked the other way as fighters and military hardware have crossed the Syrian border to enhance the insurgency in Iraq. Turkey has its own policy priority, namely, to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish republic

in northern Iraq—a scenario that becomes much more likely if the rest of Iraq is engulfed in civil war.

A regional Sunni-Shiite proxy war in Iraq would turn the Bush administration's mission there into even more of a debacle than it is already. Even worse, Iraq's neighbors could be drawn in as direct participants in the fighting—a development that could create chaos throughout the entire Middle East. Washington needs to take steps now to try to head off those dangers. The Iraq Study Group's recommendation that the United States open a dialogue with all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria, is a worthwhile step.

Probably the best approach would be for the United States to convene a regional conference that included (at a minimum) Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, and Turkey. The purpose of such a conference should be to make all parties confront the danger of the Iraqi turmoil mushrooming into a regional armed struggle that ultimately would not be in the best interests of any country involved. Washington should stress the point that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq's other neighbors risk events spiraling out of control if they do not quarantine the violence in Iraq. Ideally, that realization would lead to a commitment by the neighboring states to refrain from meddling, or at least limit the extent of meddling, in Iraq's escalating chaos.

Realism about the role of Iraq's neighbors, especially Iran and Syria, is essential. Altruism is not about to cause Tehran and Damascus to help the United States out of its dilemmas in Iraq. Indeed, both governments undoubtedly take a perverse pleasure in Washington's self-inflicted wounds. Our only feasible chance of gaining their cooperation is to convince them that allowing the Iraq turmoil to spiral out of control threatens their own well-being and may provoke direct intervention by the Saudis, Turks, and other rivals. For that reason, among others, a regional conference must focus solely on preventing the violence in Iraq from spreading. It should not attempt to address other issues such as the Iranian nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian dis-

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pute, or democratic reforms in the Middle East. Broadening the agenda would be a recipe for failure.

Even with a restrained, realistic agenda, there is, of course, no guarantee that such a conference would be successful. All of Iraq's neighbors have significant incentives to try to prevent a victory by one Iraqi faction or another. The temptation to meddle, therefore, is powerful. A regional conference is somewhat of a long-shot possibility for heading off a looming conflagration. But it would be wise for Washington to make the attempt, because the possible alternative is a calamity for the region and, given America's extensive involvement in that part of the world, a major headache for this country as well. Ultimately, though, maintaining a U.S. military occupation of Iraq to forestall a regional proxy war is simply too high a price to pay, in both money spent and American lives sacrificed.

Allegation: Leaving Iraq Would Betray a Moral Obligation to the Iraqi People

In addition to their other objections, opponents of withdrawal protest that we will leave Iraq in chaos, and that would be an immoral action on the part of the United States.⁸² Even some critics of the war have been susceptible to that argument, invoking the so-called Pottery Barn rule: "You broke it, you bought it." According to that thesis, by overthrowing Saddam Hussein's government, the United States created a moral obligation to stabilize the security environment and to leave Iraq a better place than it was when we arrived.

There are two major problems with that argument. First, unless some restrictions are put in place, the obligation is seemingly open-ended. There is little question that chaos might actually increase in Iraq after U.S. forces leave, but advocates of staying the course do not explain how the United States can prevent the contending factions in Iraq from fighting the civil war they already seem to have started. At least, no one has explained how the United States can restore the peace there at anything resembling a reasonable cost in American blood and treasure.

Leaving aside the very real possibility that the job of building a stable democracy might never be done, the moral obligation thesis begs a fundamental question: What about the moral obligation of the U.S. government to its own soldiers and to the American people? There is clearly an obligation not to waste either American lives or American tax dollars. We are wasting both in Iraq. Staying the course is not a moral strategy; it is the epitome of an immoral one.

The Consequences of Staying in Iraq

Leaving Iraq is clearly not cost free, but the costs (both tangible and intangible) of a prompt exit must be measured against the costs of staying the course. Perhaps the greatest intangible cost is the toll on America's morale and unity. The massive social wounds that the Vietnam War inflicted on our society, which took decades to heal, have been ripped open. Our country is once again bitterly divided over a murky war. And those divisions grow steadily worse as support for the administration's Iraq policy continues to ebb.

The tangible costs are already substantial and will get more so the longer U.S. leaders perpetuate the occupation. Moreover, even if the United States absorbs the costs of a prolonged mission, there is no certainty that anything resembling victory resides at the end of that effort. Indeed, most of the indicators suggest that we would be merely delaying defeat.

Damage to America's Standing in the World

Even the National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, leaked to the media in September 2006, conceded that the U.S. occupation of Iraq had served as a focal point and inspiration for Muslim extremists. Equally worrisome, the occupation also served as a training arena for such militants to hone their military and terrorist skills.⁸³ An al-Qaeda letter intercepted by the U.S. military indicates that the organiza-

tion itself regards a continued U.S. military presence and, consequently, a long war in Iraq as a boon to its cause.⁸⁴

A December 2006 Zogby poll of populations in five Arab nations reveals just how much anti-U.S. sentiment there is throughout that region. Opinions of the United States, which were already rather negative, have grown significantly worse in the past year. When asked whether their opinion of the United States was better than, the same as, or worse than a year ago, 72 percent of respondents in Egypt, 62 percent in Saudi Arabia, 57 percent in Morocco, 76 percent in Jordan, and 47 percent in Lebanon answered “worse.” The overall “unfavorable” views of the United States were disheartening. Those figures were 85 percent in Egypt, 89 percent in Saudi Arabia, 64 percent in Morocco, 62 percent in Jordan, and 60 percent in Lebanon.⁸⁵

The Zogby poll also provides further evidence that anger at the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq (along with U.S. policy on the Palestinian issue) is a major factor underlying the rising hostility. When respondents were asked whether they had positive or negative views of U.S. policy in Iraq, the breakdown was as follows: Saudi Arabia, 2 percent positive, 96 percent negative; Egypt, 26 percent positive, 50 percent negative; Morocco, 6 percent positive, 93 percent negative; Jordan, 7 percent positive, 86 percent negative; and Lebanon, 16 percent positive, 73 percent negative.⁸⁶

Outside the Arab world, there also has been a hardening of attitudes toward the United States, although the hostile sentiments are not as pronounced. Even among long-standing friends and allies of the United States (in such places as Europe and East Asia), the United States is viewed in a significantly more negative light than it was even a few years ago.⁸⁷ The longer we stay in Iraq, the worse will be the negative impact on America’s reputation.

Straining the All-Volunteer Military

Even some hawks are concerned about the negative impact of the Iraq mission on the all-volunteer force (AVF). Senator McCain,

for example, concedes, “Sending more troops to Iraq [which he recommends] would, at the moment, threaten to break our nation’s all-volunteer Army and undermine our national security.”⁸⁸

The Army and Marine Corps are so concerned about the steady erosion of readiness that they are reportedly determined to seek a permanent expansion in the size of their forces. Although the proposed increase in the active duty component is relatively modest (only a few thousand in each case), the Army also wants “full access to” (i.e., the authority to mobilize at any time) the 346,000-strong Army National Guard and the 196,000-strong Army reserves. In January 2007 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced that he would ask Congress to expand the active duty force by 92,000.⁸⁹

The reason for those requests is apparent. As one high-level official stated (on condition of anonymity), given the extent of the commitment in Iraq and the military’s other obligations, “the strategy exceeds the capability of the Army and Marines.”⁹⁰ In December 2006 Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, the Army’s chief of staff, bluntly told a House committee that the active duty Army “will break” unless there is a permanent increase in force structure.⁹¹ And that was before any contemplated additional deployments to Iraq.

The military leaders are not exaggerating. Already the Army has struggled to meet its recruiting goals, even though it has diluted the standards for new recruits, including the issuance of waivers in cases where there is evidence of criminal behavior or mental illness.⁹² Indeed, the Iraq occupation has been sustained to this point only through extraordinary exertions, including an unprecedented number of “stop loss” orders, which prevent military personnel from returning to civilian life when their terms of enlistment are up, and recalling members of the reserves, including some people in their 40s and 50s.⁹³ All of those measures are signs that the AVF is already strained to the breaking point. The longer the United States stays in Iraq, the worse those strains will become.

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At the current pace, the costs of the Iraq war will surpass the costs of the Vietnam War in inflation-adjusted dollars sometime in late 2008.

Costs in Blood and Treasure

President Bush has emphasized that U.S. forces will not withdraw from Iraq while he is president. That means that the occupation will continue until at least January 20, 2009. An article in the July 17, 2006, *Washington Times* revealed that some U.S. military commanders believe American troops will need to remain in Iraq until at least 2016.⁹⁴

Let's be clear about what staying in Iraq until 2016 might mean. More than 3,000 American troops have already perished in the Iraq conflict—an average of more than 800 a year. If that pace does not slacken, and there is no evidence it will, there will be another 8,000 dead Americans by 2016. At that point, U.S. fatalities in Iraq will exceed the number the Soviet Union suffered during its ill-fated occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The financial cost would be staggering as well. The tab for the Iraq mission is already more than \$350 billion, and the meter was running at approximately \$8 billion a month even before President Bush announced his decision to send more troops in January.⁹⁵ At the current pace, the costs of the Iraq war will surpass the costs of the Vietnam War in inflation-adjusted dollars sometime in late 2008.⁹⁶

Another decade in Iraq would mean an additional *one trillion* taxpayer dollars down the drain, bringing the total cost of Washington's Persian Gulf intervention to more than \$1.3 trillion. And that figure does not include the long-term indirect costs—for example, the continuing medical care and rehabilitation expenses for the more than 22,000 service personnel who have been wounded (many severely). Former representative Lee Hamilton, co-chairman of the Iraq Study Group, has stated that the costs could certainly exceed \$1 trillion in the near term.⁹⁷ Another estimate by Columbia University economist Joseph Stiglitz and Harvard University economist Linda Bilmes in January 2006 concluded that the direct and indirect costs of the Iraq war would be some \$1.2 trillion, assuming that the United States began to withdraw its troops in 2006 (which, of course, Washington did not do), and could reach \$2 trillion.⁹⁸

The U.S. mission in Iraq has now lasted longer than America's involvement in World War II. It is time to insist that the administration and its supporters be specific about their strategy. Vacuous statements such as "we will stand down when the Iraqis can stand up" or "we must stay until the job is done" will not suffice.

Except when the survival of the nation is at stake, all military missions must be judged according to a cost/benefit calculation. Iraq has never come close to being a war for America's survival, and the connection of the Iraq mission to the larger war against radical Islamic terrorism was always tenuous, at best. For all of his odious qualities, Saddam Hussein was a secular tyrant, not an Islamic radical. Indeed, the radical Islamists expressed nearly as much hatred for Saddam as they did for the United States. Iraq was a war of choice, and a bad choice at that.

It is essential to ask the Bush administration and its hawkish backers at what point they will admit that the costs of this venture have become unbearable. How much longer are they willing to have our troops stay in Iraq? Five years? Ten years? Twenty years? How many more tax dollars are they willing to pour into Iraq? Another \$300 billion? \$600 billion? \$1 trillion? And most crucial of all, how many more American lives are they willing to sacrifice? Two thousand? Five thousand? Ten thousand?

Proponents of the mission studiously avoid addressing such unpleasant questions. Instead, they act as though victory in Iraq can be achieved merely through the exercise of will power.⁹⁹ President Bush epitomized that attitude during his November trip to East Asia, when he asserted that the United States would definitely win in Iraq—unless we decided to quit before the job was done. A worrisome indicator of Bush's thinking is that he did not regard America's long and bloody war in Vietnam as a mistake. The mistake, in his view, was that the United States did not stay the course until victory was achieved. If that is the governing attitude regarding the Iraq conflict, we are in for a prolonged and horrifically costly mission.

Perpetuating a flawed mission does not increase the prospects of success. The situation in Lebanon did not improve the longer the United States stayed; it got worse. The situation in Somalia did not improve the longer the United States stayed; it got worse. The situation in Vietnam most certainly did not improve the longer the United States stayed; it got a lot worse. That pattern is being repeated in Iraq.

Deciding to Leave

Washington already achieved its basic security objective in Iraq, dubious as it was, by getting rid of Saddam Hussein's regime. We have given the Iraqi people a chance to establish a democratic future, and it is now up to them to show whether they can do so.¹⁰⁰ It is neither constructive nor desirable for the United States to engage in an open-ended, or even a prolonged, military occupation of Iraq.

The United States needs to adopt a withdrawal strategy measured in months, not years. Indeed, the president should begin the process of removing American troops immediately, and that process needs to be complete in no more than six months.¹⁰¹ A longer schedule would simply prolong the agony. It would also afford various Iraq factions (especially the Kurds and some of the Shia political players) the opportunity to try to entice or manipulate the United States into delaying the withdrawal of its forces still further.

Emotionally, deciding to leave under current conditions will not be easy, for it requires an implicit admission that Washington has failed in its ambitious goal of creating a stable, united, democratic, secular Iraq that would be a model for peace throughout the Middle East. But that goal was unrealistic from the outset. It is difficult for any nation, especially America, to admit failure. However, it is better to tacitly admit failure when the adverse consequences are relatively modest than persist in a futile strategy. Failure in Iraq would assuredly be a setback for the United States, particularly in terms of global clout and credibility.

But one of the advantages to being a superpower is that the country can absorb a setback without experiencing catastrophic damage to its core interests or capabilities. Failure in Iraq does not even come close to threatening those interests or capabilities. Most important, a withdrawal now will be less painful than withdrawing years from now when the cost in blood, treasure, and credibility will prove far greater.

The mechanics of executing an orderly withdrawal will be complex and delicate. The specifics must be left up to the experts in the Pentagon and throughout America's military apparatus. But retreat and withdrawal tactics are taught at West Point and Annapolis, not to mention the Army's Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, the Army and Navy War Colleges, the National Defense University, and countless other military schools and training centers. In short, the American people should have a high level of confidence that our military leaders can orchestrate a withdrawal while minimizing casualties. The withdrawal needs to be comprehensive, not partial. The only troops remaining in Iraq should be a modest number of Special Forces personnel who would work with political factions in Iraq that are inclined to eradicate the al-Qaeda interlopers in their country. It must be clear to Iraqis and populations throughout the Muslim world that Washington has no intention of trying to maintain a military presence in Iraq.

Above all, U.S. policymakers need to absorb the larger lesson of the Iraq debacle. Launching an elective war in pursuit of a nation-building chimera was an act of folly. It is a folly they should vow never to repeat in any other country.

Notes

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The United States needs to adopt a withdrawal strategy measured in months, not years.

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6. Charles Krauthammer, "The Critics Are Wrong Again," *Townhall.com*, May 2, 2003.
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11. "Project Iraq," *Nightline*, ABC News, April 23, 2003, transcript, p. 2.
12. Ted Galen Carpenter, "For the U.S., Taking Out Saddam Is No Panacea," United Press International, January 15, 2002.
13. For examples of accurate predictions, see Sonni Efron, "They Told Us So," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 2006.
14. Advertisement, *New York Times*, September 26, 2002.
15. Christopher Layne, "The Post-Saddam Quagmire," *LA Weekly*, March 20, 2003.
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17. Examples include Richard Lowry, "What Went Right: How the U.S. Began to Quell the Insurgency in Iraq," *National Review*, May 9, 2005, pp. 29-37; and Karl Zinsmeister, "The War Is Over and We Won," *American Enterprise Online*, June 20, 2005. Administration optimism during this period can be gauged by the comments of Paul Wolfowitz. See U.S. Department of Defense, Prepared Statement for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, May 18, 2004, <http://www.defenselink.mil/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=24>.
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