
How Not to Get Out of Iraq

Max Boot

THE CURRENT build-up of American forces in Iraq—universally known as the “surge”—was unveiled by President Bush on January 10. The earliest units shipped out in the middle of February, and the full complement of roughly 160,000 troops arrived only in June. Yet, by then, a vociferous chorus of voices back home—consisting mainly of Democrats but also of a growing number of middle-of-the-road Republicans—was already pronouncing the entire operation a failure and demanding a “change of course,” a “new strategy,” a “Plan B.”

Such a new strategy would of course involve not more troops on the ground but fewer, in response to the overwhelming impetus of public opinion to start bringing soldiers home. Nevertheless, while increasingly eager for an end to American involvement in the Iraq war, most legislators have continued to endorse what Senator Richard Lugar, in a much-heralded June speech, declared to be “four primary objectives” in Iraq. These are: “preventing Iraq or any piece of its territory from being used as a safe haven or training ground for terrorists or as a repository or assembly point for weapons of mass destruction”; “preventing the dis-

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order and sectarian violence in Iraq from upsetting wider regional stability”; “preventing Iranian domination of the region”; and “limiting the loss of U.S. credibility.”

That is a very tall order. And so, all summer long, and even as reports surfaced attesting to initial successes of the surge, the search has been on for a plan that could accomplish these goals with a smaller commitment of resources. Does such a plan exist? It is worth surveying the major proposals to see if any of them offers a credible way forward.

THE MOST dramatic option is simply to leave Iraq—i.e., to bring all the troops home as soon as possible. This is the course advocated by, for example, the *New York Times* and Democratic presidential candidate Bill Richardson. But even the *Times* admits that the consequences would likely be unpleasant:

Iraq, and the region around it, could be even bloodier and more chaotic after Americans leave. There could be reprisals against those who worked with American forces, further ethnic cleansing, even genocide. Potentially destabilizing refugee flows could hit Jordan and Syria. Iran and Turkey could be tempted to make power grabs. Perhaps most important, the [American] invasion has created a new stronghold from which terrorist activity could proliferate.

In any case, there is no simple or safe way rapidly to remove 160,000 troops, 64,000 foreign contractors, 45,000 vehicles, and millions of tons of equipment from a war zone. Estimates from within the American military suggest that an orderly departure would take, at a minimum, 12 to 20 months to accomplish. (In Vietnam, our withdrawal was conducted over four years.) To leave faster than that would require a precipitous abandonment of allies and equipment. U.S. forces would have to fight their way out of the country along Route Tampa, the main supply line to the south, with insurgents determined at every inch of the way to inflict a final humiliation on the defeated superpower. The pell-mell scramble would likely produce traumatic images akin to those of the last helicopter lifting off from a Saigon rooftop in 1975.

In light of this grisly prospect, most advocates of withdrawal suggest a timeline that, they hope, would make our retreat somewhat more orderly. The leading legislation along these lines, co-sponsored by Carl Levin and Jack Reed in the Senate and Ike Skelton in the House, would begin troop withdrawals within 120 days of passage and complete the process by next April. This legislation passed the House in July but was blocked in the Senate by Republicans seeking to give the administration, and General David Petraeus, time to meet the September 15 deadline for an assessment of the surge's progress.

Under the terms of the Levin-Reed bill, the President would still have the option, even after April 2008, to retain a "limited presence" of troops for various missions yet to be specified.* In this, the legislation's sponsors were following the work of the Iraq Study Group (ISG), whose December 2006 report has become a touchstone for many critics of the war. The ISG, too, called for a general pullout, to culminate if possible by next spring. But even after the withdrawal of "all combat brigades not necessary for force protection," other U.S. forces, according to the ISG, could be deployed "in units embedded with Iraqi forces, in rapid-reaction and special-operations teams, and in training, equipping, advising, force protection, and search-and-rescue."

The ISG made no attempt to estimate how many soldiers would be required to carry out all of the missions in this long wish-list. Neither have most of the politicians who have embraced the ISG's recommendations. These include Senators Ken Salazar and Lamar Alexander, who have sponsored legislation to implement the findings of the ISG report; two leading Democratic presidential candi-

dates, Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama; and numerous others, among them centrist Republicans like Senators Olympia Snowe, Pete Domenici, and George Voinovich. The Democrats, in particular, even while assuring their supporters that they will "end the war," have left themselves wiggle room to keep some troops behind.

Some politicians and analysts have proposed another use for American forces beyond the advisory and commando functions envisioned by the ISG. This is to safeguard Iraq's borders in the likely event that a civil war erupts following a U.S. withdrawal. As part of such a containment policy, Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution have suggested stationing 50,000 to 70,000 troops on Iraq's borders. A version of their idea has been endorsed by retired generals Anthony Zinni of the Marine Corps and Charles Wald of the Air Force—and reportedly even by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in a leaked memorandum that he wrote before leaving office.

ASIDE FROM leaving behind an unspecified number of troops, most advocates of a U.S. draw-down want to find some diplomatic or political means of lessening the shock of transition. Here again many follow the ISG, which urged the United States to undertake a "new diplomatic offensive" in partnership with a "support group" made up of other states and the United Nations. Senator Hagel, for one, would appoint a UN special envoy to mediate among contending Iraqi factions—advice that the administration is acting upon. Others place the emphasis on reaching an accommodation with neighboring states, especially Syria and Iran. Wesley Clark, the retired general and former Democratic presidential candidate, suggests this could be done by our renouncing the idea of "regime change" in the Middle East.

In the realm of political solutions, a commonly voiced opinion is that Iraq should no longer be conceived of as a single country but partitioned into three entities reflecting Iraqi ethnic divisions: a Kurdish north, a Shiite south, and a Sunni middle. A plan along these lines has been developed by Senator Joseph Biden and Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, and has been backed with various qualifications by Senators

* A more draconian amendment, introduced by Senator Russell Feingold with the support of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, would stop funding for any further combat operations after March 2008. Senators Chuck Hagel and James Webb have been trying to achieve the same objective through the back door by cutting off the pipeline of personnel needed to maintain operations in Iraq at a high level.

Sam Brownback, Barbara Boxer, and Kay Bailey Hutchison, as well as by commentators like Michael O'Hanlon, Peter Galbraith, and David Brooks.

Further political recommendations have issued from sources associated primarily but not exclusively with the "realist" school of foreign policy. The Middle East scholar Daniel Pipes, *Time* columnist Joe Klein, former Israeli intelligence officer Yossi Alpher, and a few others have proposed ending our support for the current democratically elected government in Baghdad and backing a strongman or junta instead. The strategic analyst Edward Luttwak has suggested that, rather than continuing to police Iraq, we should stand back and allow it to have its civil war, as a necessary and unavoidable prelude to future peace. In order to exercise some influence on the outcome of that struggle, Nikolas Gvosdev, the editor of the *National Interest*, and Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations have advocated that we side openly with the Shiites, "the party that is likely to win the civil war."

FOR THE most part, these "ways forward" are not mutually exclusive. All are predicated on a substantial reduction in American troop levels. In evaluating which, if any, is likely to work, we may begin in reverse order by looking at the proposed diplomatic solutions, since they are among the most popular.

It is easy to see why. Who could be against diplomacy and dialogue, as compared with roadside explosions and body bags? Unfortunately, however, even the world's greatest negotiator would be hard-pressed to resolve the internal conflicts that beset Iraq today. Simply finding interlocutors who can reliably deliver on their promises has been, so far, beyond the capabilities of our most experienced diplomats.

Among Iraq's major groups, only the Kurds are relatively united, with two major political parties that have been able to work closely together. The Shiites, by contrast, have three major parties that are often at odds (and each of which has its own mutually suspicious factions), while among the Sunnis' three "moderate" parties and numerous radical groupings, none possesses true credibility as a communal representative. Moreover, even if some kind of deal to end the fighting could be reached with the various leaders in Baghdad, many armed groups operating around the country would almost certainly refuse to abide by its terms.

As if Iraq's internal divisions were not bad enough, the country's neighbors, in particular Iran

and Syria, have contributed greatly to the current unrest. This is the challenge that the ISG's "diplomatic offensive" proposes to meet. But how? Iran, according to the ISG report, "should stem the flow of arms and training to Iraq, respect Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and use its influence over Iraqi Shiite groups to encourage national reconciliation." Syria, for its part, "should control its border with Iraq to stem the flow of funding, insurgents, and terrorists in and out of Iraq."

Well, all that would surely be nice. But how exactly are we to convince Syria and Iran that they should do what the Iraq Study Group thinks they should do? The "United States," says the ISG somewhat redundantly, "should engage directly with Iran and Syria." There is, however, little reason to think that such talks would yield progress in the desired direction.

In the Iranian case, one indicator of interest—or, more accurately, lack of interest—in negotiations is that on May 28, even as talks were in fact being held in Baghdad between the American and Iranian ambassadors, the Tehran regime was detaining four Iranian-Americans on fabricated charges. Another is that the Iranians have been stepping up the flow of funds, munitions, and trainers to support terrorism in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Both Syria and Iran are also deeply complicit in backing Hamas, Hizballah, and other radical groups working to undermine two other democracies in the Middle East: namely, Israel and Lebanon.

The ISG report suggests that Syria and Iran have an interest in an "Iraq that does not disintegrate and destabilize its neighbors and the region." That may be so—but not if it means that Iraq emerges as a democratic ally of the United States and an active partner in the war against terrorism. For a terrorism-sponsoring Iranian regime, that would be the worst outcome imaginable. Much better, from the strategic perspective of both Syria and Iran, to continue fomenting chaos in Iraq so as to prevent the emergence of a unified state capable of threatening *them*.

Syria and especially Iran have been waging a proxy war against the United States in Iraq that could well end with Iran as the dominant player in most of the country. By means of the Jaish al Mahdi and other front groups, Tehran is doing in Iraq what it has already done with Hizballah in Lebanon: expanding its sphere of influence. Why should Ayatollah Khomeini and his inner circle voluntarily put a stop to a policy that appears to be achieving their objectives at relatively low cost?

Tehran might veer from its belligerent course if

it feared serious military and economic retaliation, ranging from an embargo on refined-petroleum imports to air strikes against the ayatollahs' nuclear installations. But with a few brave and prophetic exceptions like Senator Joseph Lieberman, who has continued to call attention to Iranian aggression, there is scant political support in the United States for such a tough policy, however justified it may be.

Nor, for that matter, is there significant support for the opposite policy—that is, in paying the substantial bribes that might induce Iran and Syria to change their behavior. That would probably involve, at a minimum, giving the Syrians a free hand to dominate Lebanon and the Iranians a free hand to develop nuclear weapons. The ISG report shied away from recommending such unpalatable concessions. Instead, it proposed a number of incentives that were either insufficient (increased trade and diplomatic relations with the U.S., which Tehran has shown no interest in pursuing) or unobtainable (the unilateral return of the Golan Heights to Syria, which the Israeli government has shown no interest in granting).

The kind of negotiated solution with Iraq's neighbors envisioned by the ISG and by political figures like Senators Lugar and Clinton would depend on a combination of very enticing carrots *and* very big sticks. Neither is in the offing.

WHAT ABOUT partitioning Iraq, either into three separate states or into some sort of confederation of regional authorities? Does that offer a better solution?

A degree of federalism in Iraq is obviously a good idea, and one that has been embraced by almost everyone involved in the debate over the war. But the status quo already gives virtually complete autonomy to the Kurdish region and a lesser but still significant amount of autonomy to other provinces. Going significantly beyond this would create major problems, some of which were aptly summarized by the ISG:

Because Iraq's population is not neatly separated, regional boundaries cannot be easily drawn. All eighteen Iraqi provinces have mixed populations, as do Baghdad and most other major cities in Iraq. A rapid devolution could result in mass population movements, collapse of the Iraqi security forces, strengthening of militias, ethnic cleansing, destabilization of neighboring states, or attempts by neighboring states to dominate Iraqi regions.

To these well-founded warnings, two points

should be added. First, most Iraqis do not support partition: in an April poll, only 36 percent said they believed the country would be better off if divided into three or more separate entities. Not unexpectedly, the strongest support for the idea comes from the Kurdish region, while among Iraq's Arab population there is a countervailing desire to keep the country whole. Even proposals for greater regional autonomy meet a mixed response, with some Shiites in favor but many joining the Sunnis in opposition. It would be hard to impose on Iraqis a solution they do not themselves favor.

Furthermore, even if we could somehow partition Iraq—and no one has put forth a credible plan for splitting up multi-sectarian metropolises like Baghdad and Mosul—it is not at all clear that the resulting mini-states would be any more peaceful or stable than today's (nominally) unitary polity. At present, there is considerable turmoil in southern and western Iraq even though the former region is almost exclusively Shiite and the latter almost exclusively Sunni. We could expect even tougher struggles for power within individually constituted "Iraqistans," not to speak of war among the three mini-states themselves. To cite just one potential source of discord: absent some kind of ironclad outside guarantee, no Sunni state, lacking its own natural resources, could possibly trust a Shiite-dominated government to share its oil wealth equitably.

There is one set of conditions under which a partition might indeed make sense and even be stable: if it were to come about as a result of negotiations among the major participants, and if it were enforced by a sizable foreign-troop contingent. The model is Bosnia. But the Dayton Accords ending that conflict were struck only after years of terrible bloodletting that exhausted all of the parties, and even so the agreement depended on a NATO troop presence and a quasi-colonial structure of international governance that are still in place over a decade later.

We are nowhere near such a solution in Iraq, and even if it could be struck it would not accomplish what most advocates of partition want, which is a withdrawal of American troops. On the contrary, a serious partition plan of this kind would require an indefinite, long-term presence by our forces—at least 450,000 soldiers, if we are to have the same troop-to-civilian ratio as in Bosnia. Despite claims to the contrary by Henry Kissinger and others, it is hard to imagine that nations like India or Indonesia would volunteer sizable numbers of their own troops to lessen our burden. They certainly have

not done so in the past, notwithstanding considerable American pleading and arm-twisting. Yet without such outside supervision, any de-facto partition would result not in less violence but in a great deal more, at least in the short run.

WHAT ABOUT a new strongman in Baghdad? In the abstract, such a proposal—call it Saddam Lite—cannot be ruled out on moral grounds: a soft authoritarianism would be preferable to today’s violent chaos. But it hardly seems practicable. By definition, a dictator requires the support of a strong army and police force. The Iraqi Security Forces, however, are too weak and too divided to control the country even on behalf of a representative government. Would they be more effective fighting on behalf of a dictator drawn from a single one of Iraq’s sectarian communities? And how would such a strongman gain their allegiance?

The one candidate who has been mentioned for this position is Ayad Allawi, who in 2004-2005 served as Iraq’s (appointed) prime minister. But Allawi appears to enjoy greater support among neighboring Sunni states than in Iraq itself, and there are no grounds for supposing he would be able to win the loyalty of the Iraqi Security Forces, much less use them to impose his *diktat* on the rest of the country. However ineffectual the Maliki government may be, we would be foolish to repeat the mistake we made in South Vietnam, where the American-sanctioned overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 resulted in a succession of rulers who proved even less satisfactory.

Then there is the more cold-blooded approach: accepting that nothing can prevent a civil war after most of our troops are gone and, instead of trying to limit the carnage, simply picking a side in the hope that it will prevail. This is indeed practicable, though many Americans might find the consequences hard to stomach. One need only recall the Sunni captives who in 2005 were allegedly tortured in the basement of Iraq’s interior ministry before being rescued by U.S. and Iraqi troops. In a real civil war, such stories would multiply a thousandfold, except that there would be no hope of rescue for those who fell into the hands of sectarian foes. If the U.S. were to back the more numerous Shiites—which in practice would mean backing not only the government but also militias like the Jaish al Mahdi and the Badr Brigade—we would assume a measure of moral complicity in whatever atrocities they might commit.

Moreover, even if the Shiites were to win decisively and rapidly, the outcome, at least in the short

term, would likely empower the most radical elements among them, men of the gun like Moqtada al Sadr rather than men of peace like Ayatollah Ali Sistani. It would also signal a major increase in Iranian influence.

But in any case there can be no guarantee of a rapid and decisive victory. As I mentioned earlier, the Shiites, numerous though they are, are split among competing factions that may not cooperate effectively even against a common foe like the Sunnis. For their part, Iraq’s Sunnis possess great skill at unconventional warfare—as we have seen over the past four years—and would enjoy virtually unlimited access to arms and financing from neighboring Sunni states intent on blocking a Shiite takeover.

A CYNICAL DECISION to throw in our lot with the Shiites might thus eventuate in a civil conflict that could drag on for years without resolution, and that would have dire consequences for the entire region. In their Brookings study, Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack surveyed three decades’ worth of recent civil wars from Congo to Lebanon. None, they found, was confined within the borders drawn neatly on maps. Such wars export refugees, terrorists, militant ideologies, and economic woes. This fallout destabilizes neighboring states, which in turn usually intervene to limit the damage or to expand their own spheres of influence. In the worst case, Byman and Pollack conclude, such spillover “can have truly catastrophic effects,” and in their opinion Iraq has “all the earmarks” of a worst case. That is easy enough to understand: with its vast oil wealth, there is far more to fight over in Iraq than in Congo or Chechnya.

Instead of backing one side in a civil war, Byman and Pollack therefore advocate a containment approach, to be effectuated by stationing forces along Iraq’s borders. This would presumably be a means of limiting American casualties while still averting the worst consequences of the carnage to come.

But this approach, too, has problems. Even if U.S. troops moved to the periphery, they would have to maintain logistical links to the outside world and undertake patrolling around their bases. Both activities would leave them vulnerable to insurgent attacks. And, as we have seen in the Green Zone in Baghdad, insurgents are becoming adept at “indirect fire”—mortars and rockets—that can surmount the highest walls. As long as U.S. troops remained in Iraq, they would continue to suffer casualties.

If the downside of the containment scenario is

clear, its potential benefits are murky. Can we really expect sizable numbers of U.S. troops to remain in Iraq and do nothing while, a few miles away, ethnic cleansing and possibly even genocide are occurring? The “CNN effect”—the impact of lurid pictures of violence being broadcast continually around the world—could be devastating both for the morale of our armed forces and for Americans at home, to say nothing of what it would do to our international standing. In the Islamic world, it would only further reinforce the impression that we care nothing for Muslim lives and that we invaded Iraq only for its oil—the same myths that have fed terrorist recruiting.

A second problem concerns what exactly our troops would do to contain the civil war. Of course they could keep neighboring states from sending conventional troop formations into Iraq. But that is not very likely to happen in any case. Much harder to handle would be the kind of infiltration that already occurs, disguised as part of the normal commercial and tourist traffic in and out of Iraq. If we have not succeeded in stopping terrorists from entering the country today, or from leaving it to train in Iran and then return, smaller troop contingents would have a commensurately smaller chance of success.

And how would this rump U.S. force deal with massive refugee flows? Would it actively intervene to prevent Iraqi civilians from exiting to safety? If not, nearby states—including such American allies as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan—could be swamped with “displaced persons.” But if we stop Iraqis at the border, we would be assuming responsibility for their fate. If we intend to avoid a Srebrenica-style horror, we would have to set up, administer, and protect giant refugee camps—what Byman and Pollack call “catch basins.” Such camps tend to become breeding grounds of extremism and terror. How would our forces react to attempts to organize terrorist groups in them? Would we police the camps from within even while protecting them from without? In that case, we would be forced to undertake exactly the same kind of urban counterinsurgency in which our combat forces are engaged today, from Baquba to Baghdad.

FINALLY, THERE is the ISG’s plan, incorporated in the proposed legislation before the Senate, to use a scaled-down U.S. force for counterterrorist and training missions. As I noted at the outset, advocates of this approach rarely come up with a figure, and when they do it tends to be very small—5,000, 20,000, possibly as many as 40,000

troops. But if such a strategy is to amount to more than a tissue-thin rhetorical cover for a rush to the exits, implementing it would require a much more substantial commitment.

The Center for a New American Security, a centrist Democratic think tank, has released a “phased transition plan” by James Miller and Shawn Brimley that calls for 60,000 troops to remain in Iraq at the end of 2008 to carry out the tasks in question over the next three or four years. The figure would reflect a big decrease in combat strength and a big increase in adviser strength, with the latter climbing from today’s level of fewer than 5,000 embedded advisers to 20,000 or so.

Creating that many advisers would require breaking up at least eight Brigade Combat Teams (out of the Army’s total of 43) in order to make use of their officers and NCO’s—something that cannot be done while the surge is going on and every available brigade is needed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Those advisers, in turn, would need a substantial support structure to keep them fed and supplied; aircraft to provide firepower as well as a means of transportation, surveillance, and medical evacuation; doctors and nurses to tend to their injuries; and Quick Reaction Forces to bail them out of trouble. The figure of 60,000 personnel would thus appear to be a very bare-bones estimate indeed.

Bing West and Owen West, a father-son team of distinguished Marine veterans, have come out with their own, slightly more robust version of this plan. They write in *Slate*:

A full-fledged Plan B would leave about 80,000 U.S. troops in Iraq in 2009, about half as many as will be in-country at the height of the surge. The adviser corps would nearly quadruple, to 20,000 troops, with another 25,000 in four combat brigades and special-forces units, plus 30,000 logistics troops. Another 5,000 Americans will live on the grounds of the new U.S. embassy in Baghdad, where they will rarely venture out. A comparative handful of American diplomats, called Provincial Reconstruction Teams, currently live with U.S. brigades. Far more are needed. Another 15,000 American contractors would provide security and training functions, up from 10,000 today. In addition, the number of foreign contractors who provide food and logistics to the U.S. military would remain steady at 90,000, or drop.

The Wests propose to maintain this deployment for at least a decade.

The West plan assuredly provides a greater margin of safety than the proposal from the Center for

a New American Security. But it also dramatically underlines the fact that a realistic Plan B focused on counter-terrorism and advising cannot at the same time achieve the departure of “all” or “almost all” or perhaps even “most” U.S. troops any time soon, as is demanded by a large section of the American public.

Even if implemented along the Wests’ tough lines, moreover, such a strategy would remain a very iffy proposition in Iraq’s current security environment. Rapidly downsizing from today’s 160,000 troops to 80,000 or fewer would risk a collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces and indeed of the country’s entire government. Over the past several years, in one form or another, we repeatedly tried to implement a strategy of “as the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down,” and just as repeatedly we learned that the Iraqis on their own were incapable of standing up. Even with advisers to help them, they found themselves hopelessly outmatched by the world’s most deadly and depraved terrorists. That is why in 2006, before the surge, Iraq was on the brink of all-out civil war.

Adviser strategies work best in countries, like El Salvador in the 1980’s or the Philippines in the 1950’s, where longstanding and robust military services already exist. That has not been the case in Iraq ever since we demolished the Iraqi security infrastructure in 2003. In such a situation, leaving behind a small number of American advisers would place both them and the Iraqis in real jeopardy, no matter how many Quick Reaction Forces were standing by. Advisers, after all, would not be able to stay on giant bases. To do their job properly, they would have to operate alongside Iraqi troops in the field. Casualties would be inevitable, perhaps even as many as we are suffering today.

The use of Special Operations Forces (SOF) under these conditions—included in the ISG plan and vigorously advocated by Congressman Jack Murtha and others—would also run high risks, again with uncertain payoffs. Such forces have had little enough success against terrorists in unfriendly states like Iran and Syria, or even in politically ambivalent states like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In order to be effective, special operators must have access to good intelligence that can only be generated on the ground. They also need a permissive political climate, allowing them to swoop in without worrying about diplomatic ramifications, plus a relatively high degree of assurance that substantial rescue forces are available to bail them out of a jam.

All of those fortuitous conditions exist today in

Iraq, allowing our SOF raiders to roll up more jihadist desperados there than anywhere else in the world. But even so there are heavy limitations on what the most skilled special operators can accomplish. The presence in Iraq of the Joint Special Operations Command—comprising Delta Force, SEALs, and other “Tier 1” operators—has not prevented terrorists at various times from turning cities like Falluja and Baquba into redoubts of horror.

A recent *Los Angeles Times* article summarizes what U.S. troops found in Baquba when our forces finally stormed the city:

For more than a year, hundreds of masked gunmen loyal to al Qaeda cruised this capital of their self-declared state, hauling Shiite Muslims from their homes and leaving bodies in the dusty, trash-strewn streets.

They set up a religious court and prisons, aid stations and food stores. And they imposed their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam on a population that was mostly too poor to flee and too terrified to resist.

If Special Operations Forces could not prevent the establishment under their noses of a Taliban-style “Islamic state” in Baquba during the past year, how much luck would they have operating from Kuwait or the Kurdish region, as suggested by proponents of this approach? It would be like trying to police Boston from Washington, D.C.

IF NONE of these strategies holds out a serious hope of success, what, then, does? Time and again in Iraq, we have seen that substantial ground forces, if properly employed, can indeed rout terrorists. Consider the success of offensives since 2004 in Falluja, Najaf, Tal Afar, Qaim, Hit, Ramadi, and Baquba. In the past, the problem with many of these operations was that we lacked enough troops to sustain a long-term presence after taking the city. Now, as a combined result of the surge, greater cooperation from Iraqi tribes, and more effective Iraqi fighting forces, we may finally have gathered enough strength to execute, at least in some critical locales, all phases of the “clear, hold, and build” approach that is at the heart of successful counterinsurgency warfare.

It would be extremely short-sighted if, as a result of war-weariness, we were to abort this classic strategy before it has had a chance to be fully implemented. As I noted at the outset, early signs have been positive: U.S. and Iraqi troops have been reducing violence in Baghdad and surrounding areas. In late July, returning from an eight-day visit

to the front lines, Kenneth Pollack and his Brookings colleague Michael O'Hanlon, both of whom have been harshly critical of the administration's "miserable handling of Iraq," reported in a widely cited *New York Times* op-ed that they were "surprised by the gains" being made. "We are finally getting somewhere in Iraq, at least in military terms," they wrote.

But counterinsurgency operations cannot be concluded as swiftly as an armored blitzkrieg. This is not a three-day or three-week or three-month offensive. It will take up to a year to see if current operations are bearing fruit.

The strain on U.S. forces, especially the army, is great. Nevertheless, the current force level can be maintained through at least the spring of next year. Thereafter, we could begin to draw down troops at the rate of one brigade a month until August, when we would be down to a pre-surge force of 15 Brigade Combat Teams or about 140,000 troops. This, assuming we stick with the current schedule of 15-month tours of duty, could then be maintained through 2009, with adjustments up or down at the recommendation of General Petraeus.

While soldiers in Iraq naturally yearn for home, morale remains high, reenlistment rates are at record levels, and troops in the field often express to visitors their desire to "finish the job." Advocates of withdrawal who claim to speak for the men and women in camouflage are not listening to what most of them actually say. Nor do they consider the implications of pulling them out in defeat. Coming on the heels of so many years of hard work and sacrifice, a political decision to give up the fight would have a devastating impact on morale in the armed forces, no doubt leading, as it did after the Vietnam war, to an exodus of veteran NCO's and junior officers. That could negate one of the supposed benefits of withdrawal—namely,

an immediate improvement in our military readiness to deal with other crises around the world.

THIS IS NOT an argument for staying in Iraq at current levels indefinitely. Sooner or later, we will have to draw down our forces. It therefore makes sense to undertake now the kind of detailed planning that will be needed to effect a transition to a smaller force, perhaps 80,000 to 100,000 strong. Assuming sufficient political support at home—and that is by no means inconceivable, if the situation on the ground continues to improve—such a force could remain in Iraq for many years, focusing, as the ISG proposed, on tasks like advising local security forces and hunting down terrorists. But while the ISG approach makes sense in the long term, moving to a smaller force right now, as so many critics of the administration urge, would constitute an unacceptable risk.

The more security that our "surge" forces create and consolidate today, the greater the probability that a transition will work tomorrow. If we start withdrawing troops regardless of the consequences, we will not only put our remaining soldiers at greater risk but, as things inevitably turn nastier, imperil public support for *any* level of commitment, whether at 160,000 or 60,000.

Notwithstanding some positive preliminary results, the surge might still fail in the long run if Iraqis prove incapable of reaching political compromises even in a more secure environment. But, for all its faults and weaknesses, the surge is the least bad option we have. Its opponents, by contrast, have been loudly trying to beat something with nothing. If they do not like President Bush's chosen strategy, the onus is on them to propose a credible alternative that could avert what would in all probability be the most serious military defeat in our history. So far, they have come up empty.

—August 8, 2007