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## RE-RETHINKING IRAQ

# Obama's War

*Peter Wehner*

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THROUGHOUT HIS dramatic campaign to win his party's nomination for the presidency, Senator Barack Obama has tended to ignore the specifics of policy in favor of the generalities of emotion, centering his appeal to voters on vague promises of "change" and "unity." But on one issue, above all others, Obama has remained fixated from the campaign's first moment, and that is the war in Iraq. By Obama's own account, the consistency of his stand on this war demonstrates more than anything else that he, a one-term United States Senator who arrived in Washington in 2005 with no foreign-policy experience, after an uneventful eight-year stint in the Illinois state senate, possesses the wisdom, the clear-sightedness, and the judgment to assume the responsibilities of the nation's commander-in-chief.

Obama calls Iraq "the most important foreign-policy decision in a generation." By the word "decision," presumably, he means to refer at once to President Bush's decision to invade Iraq, Congress's decision to authorize that policy, and his own early decision to oppose any such action.

Indeed, Obama was not yet in the Senate, and the Senate had not yet voted to authorize the war, when, in a speech delivered in Chicago on October 2, 2002, he announced his view of the matter.

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Granting forthrightly that the Iraqi despot Saddam Hussein had "repeatedly defied UN resolutions, thwarted UN inspection teams, developed chemical and biological weapons, and coveted nuclear capacity," and that he "butchers his own people," Obama nevertheless held that, despite all these well-proven crimes, Saddam posed no "imminent and direct threat to the United States or to his neighbors." What is more, he added, "I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences."

Nine days later, the Senate passed its resolution granting George Bush the authority to use force to remove Saddam Hussein from power. In the Senate that day were four of Obama's rivals in this year's Democratic contest for the presidency—Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Christopher Dodd, and Joseph Biden—and all four voted in favor.\* A fifth rival, Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico, also spoke out in support of the war.

Alone among this year's major Democratic candidates, then, Obama can claim an unspotted record of opposition to American involvement in Iraq and even a kind of prescience as to the subsequent course of events there. In any account of his electoral success so far, this factor must weigh as heavily as his natural eloquence and his ingratiating personality.

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\* So, for that matter, did John Kerry, the party's nominee for President in 2004.

But Obama's thoughts on the war in Iraq did not begin and end with that one speech in October 2002. In fact, an examination of both his statements and his Senate votes over the intervening years demonstrates something very different from the consistency that he and his supporters have claimed for him. It demonstrates instead a record of problematically ad-hoc judgments at best, calculatingly cynical judgments at worst. Even if, for the sake of argument, one were to stipulate that Barack Obama was right in 2002, what does this subsequent record say about his fitness to serve?

ALMOST AS soon as the war began in March 2003, Obama had second thoughts about his opposition to it. Watching the dramatic footage of the toppling of Saddam's statue in Baghdad, and then the President's speech aboard the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln*, "I began to suspect," he would write later in his autobiographical *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), "that I might have been wrong." And these second thoughts seem to have stayed with him throughout the entire first phase of the occupation following our initial combat victory. As he told the *Chicago Tribune* in July 2004, "There's not that much difference between my position and George Bush's position at this stage."

This is hardly to say that he had suddenly metamorphosed into a hawk, let alone a supporter of the President's broader freedom agenda. Indeed, one would search long and hard for any words from this apostle of hope and change about the palpable benefits that democracy might bring to the Arabs and Muslims of the Middle East. Rather, he seems to have sensed a political weakness in his blanket opposition to a venture still enjoying broad support in the country, and one in which tens of thousands of American soldiers were risking their lives.

And so, in September 2004, in the heat of his campaign for the U.S. Senate, Obama said (according to an AP report) that even though Bush had "bungled his handling of the war," simply pulling out of Iraq "would make things worse." Therefore, he himself

would be willing to send more soldiers to Iraq if it is part of a strategy that the President and military leaders believe will stabilize the country and eventually allow America to withdraw.

"If that strategy made sense and would lead ultimately to the pullout of U.S. troops but in the short term required additional troop strength to protect those who are already on the ground, then that's something I would support," said Obama.

In November, having won election to the U.S. Senate, Obama once again confirmed his determination to stay the course in Iraq in an interview with PBS's Charlie Rose. "Once we go in, then we're committed," he said, adding:

[O]nce the decision was made, then we've got to do everything we can to stabilize the country, to make it successful, because we'll have too much at stake in the Middle East. And that's the position that I continue to take.

Indeed it was—for about a year. During that time, Obama delivered only one major speech on Iraq, in November 2005. At that point the situation on the ground was still very rocky and showing few if any signs of material improvement, and there was much talk of "exit strategies" in the air. But most liberal critics of the war (outside the rabid Left) were still not quite ready to cut and run. Accordingly, while reiterating that he had strongly opposed the Iraq war before it began, Obama also restated his belief that, having gone in, we had an obligation to "manage our exit in a responsible way—with the hope of leaving a stable foundation for the future, but at the very least taking care not to plunge the country into an even deeper and, perhaps, irreparable crisis."

How were we to accomplish that? The answer was: slowly but surely. In the months to come, Obama said, "we need to focus our attention on how to reduce the U.S. military footprint in Iraq. Notice that I say 'reduce,' and not 'fully withdraw.'" With a hint of greater specificity, he elaborated in January 2006 that "we have a role to play in stabilizing the country as Iraqis are getting their act together."

Presumably what Obama was referring to here was the strategy of training indigenous Iraqi forces to "stand up" so that we could "stand down." This was the same view of the military situation held by other critics of the Bush administration—and by the administration itself, which was in the process of trying to implement just that strategy.\* But as conditions in Iraq worsened over the course of 2006 and polls registered lower and lower levels of support for the President and the war—and as he himself was nearing a decision to run for the presidency—Obama's position shifted again, markedly so.

On October 22, 2006, Obama proclaimed the urgent necessity for "all the leadership in Washington to execute a serious change of course in Iraq." That change was decidedly not in the direction of step-

\* For documentation of this point, see the essay by Peter D. Feaver "Anatomy of the Surge" beginning on page 24 of this issue—Ed.

ping up our war effort by sending additional troops—a shift advocated by some conservative critics of administration policy and at that point being seriously considered by the White House and the Pentagon. Quite the contrary: the change Obama had in mind was to initiate, as quickly as possible, a “phased withdrawal” from Iraq. There was to be no more talk from him about leaving a “stabilized” situation. Nor, for Obama, was the issue debatable. His latest predictive judgment was that “We cannot, through putting in more troops or maintaining the presence that we have, expect that somehow the situation is going to improve.”

ON JANUARY 10, 2007, Bush announced the administration’s change in strategy in Iraq, popularly dubbed the “surge.” That very night, Obama declared he saw nothing in the plan that would “make a significant dent in the sectarian violence that’s taking place there.” A week later, he repeated the point emphatically: the surge strategy would “not prove to be one that changes the dynamics significantly.” Later in the same month, he summed up in these words his impression of the hearings on the new strategy held by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: “What was striking to me, in listening to all the testimony that was provided, was the almost near-unanimity that the President’s strategy will not work.”

Whatever he was listening to, it could not have been “all the testimony.” But the main point is that, within a mere matter of weeks, Obama had moved to align himself with the most extreme critics of the war. This re-positioning coincided with the announcement of his presidential candidacy on February 10, 2007. “It’s time to start bringing our troops home,” Obama said forcefully as he launched his run. “That’s why I have a plan that will bring our combat troops home by March of 2008.”

In May 2007, Obama did something he had never done previously: he voted in the Senate against funding for combat operations, claiming as a reason the fact that the bill included no timeline for troop withdrawal. As the campaign season intensified, his position hardened still more. In September, a mere three months after the final elements of the 30,000-strong surge forces had landed in Iraq, he declared that the moment had arrived to remove all of our combat troops “immediately.” “Not in six months or one year—now.”

By then, though, a fairly substantial drop in violence was already discernible in Iraq. Without exactly denying this fact, Obama insisted that it had nothing to do with the surge, a point he repeated

incessantly during the early months of 2008. In a presidential debate in January, for example, he claimed the reduction in violence was due not to increased American military action but to the attention paid by Iraqi insurgents and al-Qaeda terrorists to the results of America’s midterm elections in November 2006, when control of Congress passed to the Democrats:

Much of that violence has been reduced because there was an agreement with tribes in Anbar province, Sunni tribes, who started to see, after the Democrats were elected in 2006, you know what?—the Americans may be leaving soon. And we are going to be left very vulnerable to the Shiites. We should start negotiating now.

This was an astonishing statement on several counts. For one thing, the “Anbar Awakening”—in which Sunni tribes formerly allied with al Qaeda in Iraq turned on the foreign terrorists who had been making their lives a repressive hell—preceded the midterm election by several months. It had no connection with American electoral cycles and every connection with the brutality of al Qaeda (as internal al-Qaeda communications frankly conceded). For another thing, the prospect of a precipitous American retreat, far from helping along the chances of a negotiated political settlement between warring Iraqi factions, would almost certainly have created the opposite effect, reinvigorating the murderous hopes of the terrorist forces lately on the run and thereby undoing the Awakening altogether. Nor, incidentally, have those forces ever troubled themselves to discriminate between Sunni and Shiite in their frenzied determination to seize control. Finally, the sheikhs of Anbar have themselves testified to the crucially fortifying effect of the U.S. offensive against al Qaeda in Iraq, and there is no reason to doubt their word.

Obama’s corkscrew logic would take an even more bizarre twist in February of this year when Tim Russert of NBC News asked him if, as President, he would reserve the right to go back into Iraq with sizable forces if the American withdrawal he advocated should end by introducing even greater mayhem. Previously Obama had asserted categorically that, on his watch, no permanent American bases would be left in Iraq and that the few American troops remaining there would have only a very limited mission: to protect our embassy and our diplomatic corps and to engage in counterterrorism. But in his answer to Russert he now broadened his options:

As commander-in-chief, I will always reserve the right to make sure that we are looking out for American interests. And if al Qaeda is forming a base in Iraq, then we will have to act in a way that secures the American homeland and our interests abroad.

To wotend illogic this added both ignorance and disingenuousness. By his statement Obama may have intended to project a certain tough-mindedness in dealing with new threats, but as Senator John McCain pointed out in a devastating riposte, al Qaeda is *already* in Iraq. That is why its forces there are called “al Qaeda in Iraq” (or, to use the terrorist organization’s own nomenclature, “al Qaeda in Meso-potamia”). What is more, if Obama had had his way in 2007, our troops would have been out of Iraq by March of this year, leaving it naked to its enemies. If we were to withdraw them in the early months of an Obama presidency, al Qaeda in Iraq could be counted on not only to form “a base” but to take over large swaths of the country. Having overseen such a withdrawal, and having thereby unraveled all the gains of the surge, Obama would face the prospect of ordering them to return under far more treacherous conditions of his own making.

**T**O SAY that Senator Obama has not thought through the implications of his vertiginously shifting positions is to err on the side of charity; in fact they give every appearance of having been adopted without any systematic thought whatsoever. The same, unfortunately, can be said for the other main pillar of his position on Iraq. This is that the way to bring stability to that country is not by winning the war in the first place but rather by striking a “new compact in the region”—one that will include all of Iraq’s neighbors, including Syria and Iran. Such a compact, he says, will “secure Iraq’s borders, keep neighbors from meddling, isolate al Qaeda, and support Iraq’s unity.”

Never mind that Syria and Iran have spent the past years doing everything in their power to violate Iraq’s borders, meddle in its affairs, arm and support the factions that have been killing Iraqis and American troops alike, and fracture its unity. To Obama, all this murderous activity is but the understandable reaction of frustrated governments to the policies of George Bush (and, although he does not say so, every single one of his predecessors going back decades). By contrast, if he himself were elected President, both Iran and Syria would utterly reverse direction.

Obama’s unlimited faith in diplomacy as a means

of resolving deep-seated differences among nation-states is not exclusive to the Middle East. When asked if, during the first year of his presidency, he would meet individually and without precondition with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea, he replied: “I would. And the reason is this, that the notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them . . . is ridiculous.” So enamored is he of this pledge that he has re-stated it regularly in the course of the campaign. Whenever he is asked how he would address a thorny foreign-policy issue, he invokes the need for diplomacy—first, last, and always.

The columnist Charles Krauthammer once characterized this disposition as the “broken-telephone theory of international conflict”—i.e., the belief that if nations fail to get along, the fault is to be found in some misunderstanding, some misperception, some problem of communication that can be cleared up by “talking.” In Obama’s case, the syndrome is compounded by unfeigned confidence in the power of his own personal charm to bridge whatever differences may separate us from those who hate us.

Thus, when it comes specifically to Iraq and its implacably hostile neighbors, he refuses even to entertain the possibility that diplomacy might fail, or to consider what steps would be necessary should that in fact happen. Nor has he deigned to credit or even to notice the strenuous diplomatic efforts undertaken over the last eight years by the allegedly trigger-happy Bush administration to negotiate with Iran, North Korea, and others. Nor, finally, has he absorbed any useful lesson from the disillusioning outcomes of these efforts—let alone other, even more emollient efforts by our European allies and the United Nations. Such willful innocence, in a President, can be lethal.

**I**T IS perfectly legitimate to argue, as Senator Obama does, that the war to liberate Iraq was ill-conceived and has cost us much more than it has been worth. It is also perfectly legitimate to argue, as Senator McCain does, that the war was eminently worth waging but that the Bush administration massively mishandled the phase following the ousting of the Baathist regime.

It is another matter entirely to argue that because the decision to go to war was wrong, we should now simply withdraw and wash our hands of Iraq in hopes of starting over. There is no starting over in world affairs. We are where we are, and the next President will have to play, one can only hope wisely, the hand he will have been dealt. But

by the same token, there is also no way of establishing that, had the decision in 2002 gone the other way—that is, Obama's way—today's security situation would be better for us than it has actually turned out to be, mistakes and all. Especially now, when our prospects in Iraq have greatly improved, indulging in such exercises of revisionist history is wholly fatuous.

In this connection, though, it is also no wonder that Obama describes the war in Iraq as “the most important foreign-policy *decision* in a generation.” His formulation neatly focuses on the moment *before* American and allied troops went into battle in March 2003—a moment when Obama can claim to have seen, with perfect clarity, the entire subsequent unfolding of history. But quite aside from the fact that that moment came and went five years ago, the real question has to do with his vision in the meantime concerning the most important foreign-policy *issue* in our generation.

Unlike his presidential rival John McCain, an early and vocal and truly consistent critic of the Bush administration's counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, Obama, as we have seen, was opposed to doing anything about Iraq even when, like everyone else, he believed Saddam Hussein was a menace who was likely armed with weapons of mass destruction; became a supporter of the war after the fact and remained one even as things were going poorly; and morphed into an aggressive opponent again just as the prospects of an American victory began to brighten. If there is a consistency here, it would appear to be the consistency of one consistently divorced from the facts on the ground and, lately, almost hermetically sealed off from even the possibility of good news. In a politician admired for his supposed open-mindedness and his ready willingness to consider new evidence, this is, to say the least, striking.\*

But perhaps a different kind of consistency is to be discerned in this maze. When Obama opposed the war in 2002, it was clearly in his political interest to do so; according to Dan Shomon, his campaign manager at the time, the key to Obama's

chances in the Democratic race for the Senate nomination lay in his ability to rally the Left to his side.<sup>†</sup> Then, in 2004, when the war was still supported by most Americans, he associated himself with the Bush occupation strategy. In 2005, as Iraq was becoming increasingly unpopular, he temporized by joining those saying we had to reduce but not withdraw our troop presence. By 2006, with the war's unpopularity deepening, he embraced a policy of full-scale withdrawal.

HAVING HITCHED his fortunes to this last position—i.e., that the war is lost and it is time for us to leave—he is in something of a predicament, having either to deny the clear evidence of progress in Iraq or to rewrite and revise his personal history. On the latter front, indeed, he has recently gone so far as to claim that when the surge was announced, he had “no doubt” that “if we place 30,000 more troops in there, then we would see an improvement in the security situation and we would see a reduction in the violence.” In fact, as we have seen, he volubly argued just the opposite.

Like the rest of the story rehearsed here, what all this suggests is that Barack Obama does not represent an authentic new “brand” in American politics; rather, he has shown himself to be an exceptionally adept political animal who can adjust to the prevailing political winds with seamless ease. As the election season progresses, it remains to be seen what tortuously defended new positions will be embraced by this consistently political politician, and what price they will exact in his reputation as a principled and courageous new voice.

\* Obama's position on Darfur offers another striking instance of inconsistency. The very concerns that drive his commitment there—ending genocide and not allowing a failed state to become a breeding ground for terrorism—apply in Iraq. Why, then, does he champion in Iraq a policy that would bring about exactly what he is trying to prevent in Sudan?

<sup>†</sup> In “Cinderella Story” (the *New Republic*, February 27, 2008), Michael Crowley adduces this and other facts pertaining to Obama's record on Iraq.