
RE-RETHINKING IRAQ

Nothing Succeeds Like Success

Victor Davis Hanson

AMERICANS HAVE regularly changed their minds in the midst of their ongoing wars—and not just once, but often. War is a volatile enterprise. Tactics, strategies, and commanders must be sorted out amid death and destruction before the proper combination is found to defeat the enemy. In the meantime, the reasons for going to war, the manner in which the war is fought, and the objectives for which it is waged are constantly being weighed at home against the costs of conducting it. As a result, impatient democracies—and Americans are nothing if not impatient—are liable to suffer alternating fits of unrestrained optimism and utter despair.

This volatility has certainly characterized our current engagement in Iraq, but it has been no less true before. In the early days of the Civil War, a confident North was sure of quick victory in a righteous cause. After the slaughters of 1862 at Shiloh, Antietam, and Frederickburg, the North then fell into collective querulousness and despair. By the summer of 1863, the North was ebullient again as its armies won crushing, near-simultaneous victories at both Gettysburg and Vicksburg. A year later, after the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor, Lincoln and all he stood for were reviled. Stalemate or concession seemed imminent—

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until General Philip Sheridan ran wild in the Shenandoah Valley and William Tecumseh Sherman took Atlanta on September 2, 1864.

Lincoln's war aims were largely the same in April 1865 as they had been in April 1861. It was not his policies *per se* that lost, regained, lost, and once more gained public support but rather the perceived progress, or lack thereof, of Union arms. And these mercurial reactions have likewise been the norm in our later history. In World War II, well after the initial gloom of 1939-42 had disappeared with the turnaround in 1943 and 1944, near-shock set in over the horrendous Allied slaughters at the Bulge and Okinawa—only to be set aside within a matter of months when the war ended victoriously.

In the Korean war, to take another example, Seoul changed hands four times. Harry Truman, who had won support for the deployment of American troops in the summer of 1950 and then lost it with the massive Chinese invasion of December, left office in January 1953 with a 22-percent approval rating. But his successor Dwight Eisenhower, without materially changing American strategy or war aims, mustered fresh support for stabilizing the situation once General Matthew Ridgway had succeeded in restoring an autonomous South Korea below the 38th parallel, and in preventing further Communist aggression.

In the first two years of the Vietnam war (1963-65), the struggle was generally deemed to be es-

sential to our national interest and, what is more, winnable. By 1967, however, the war was beginning to be seen as a quagmire; by mid-1968, it had been written off by many as a disaster. Then, five years later, in 1973, it was grudgingly judged to have been settled by the Paris peace accords—before being lost in 1975.

AND IRAQ? Three-quarters of Americans favored the initial decision in October 2002 to remove Saddam Hussein. In the wake of our brilliant three-week victory in April 2003 and the initial, relatively quiet months of the postwar occupation, the public maintained its strong support. This remained the case even after it became clear that we had not found arsenals of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), one of the chief reasons offered by the Bush administration for going to war.

By late 2006, however—after the Abu Ghraib scandal, the pullback from Falluja, the withdrawal of some members of the original coalition, and increased internecine violence between Shiites and Sunnis, and in the face of some 3,000 American combat fatalities—only about a third of Americans still thought the war was worth the price or favored its continuation. By late summer 2007, of the 27 Democratic Senators who had voted to authorize hostilities in October 2002, only one, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, was still on record as supporting the effort. Former President Bill Clinton, who in 2002 had boasted, “I don’t think it will be a big military problem if we do it,” and who reiterated his support in May 2003, announced last year that he had been against the war “from the beginning.”

But we appear to have entered lately into still another cycle of re-interpretation, clearly the result of a new array of converging developments. Among these, the successful “surge” of U.S. troops, the appointment of General David Petraeus as senior theater commander, and the tactical switch from counter-terrorism to counter-insurgency are no doubt the most salient. These days, although there is no great public elation at our improved prospects, or appreciation that al Qaeda by its own admission is in disarray in Iraq, we see or hear very little of antiwar groups like Code Pink or the Cindy Sheehan brigades, and none of Hollywood’s recent antiwar movies—*Lions for Lambs*, *Redacted*, *Rendition*, *Valley of Elab*—has made a dent at the box office. At the very least, many Americans seem tired of being told that the United States is the culpable party in the war.

As we see improved chances for an eventual U.S. victory and a stabilized Iraq, it is therefore worth

returning to the most controversial issues of the war—not in order to re-fight it, but to gain some perspective on the relationship between battlefield developments and perceptions of the worthiness and achievability of American aims.

THE BUSH administration, like Congress in its authorizations of October 2002, advanced many arguments for going into Iraq: Saddam Hussein’s possession of WMD, his links with al Qaeda, his genocidal actions at home and abroad, his harboring of terrorists, his non-stop violations of UN mandates and of the accords struck after the first Gulf war from 1991 onward. Of these, we may begin with the first two, the only ones to become issues mired in acrimony.

Upon their arrival in Iraq, U.S. forces found no arsenals of WMD. Accordingly, when the occupation took a deadly turn, a new slogan emerged: “Bush lied, thousands died.” The United States, in other words, had gotten itself into a hopeless and vastly destructive war over a nonexistent cause. Yet now that things are improving in Iraq, does that verdict hold up or can we look back and see larger considerations at stake?

The case of Libya offers the most compelling reason to view the question afresh. Only upon our invasion of Iraq did we learn about Libya’s own nuclear-weapons programs, the existence and dangerous extent of which had not been previously discovered by our intelligence services. Instead, we learned about them thanks to Muammar Qaddafi’s sudden promise to give them up. Was Qaddafi’s precipitous action the consequence, as diplomats boasted, of a longstanding Western effort to isolate Libya diplomatically and economically, or was it rather the consequence of the recent and unexpected demonstration of victorious American might in Iraq? The timing of the announcement—in December 2003, a week after the much-photographed capture of a haggard and bedraggled Saddam Hussein—suggests the latter.

Nor was this the only coincidence of timing. Take the case of Iran, which, according to the National Intelligence Estimate of 2007, may have halted elements of its own nuclear-weapons program in the fall of 2003. If that is true—the accuracy of the NIE as a whole is highly questionable—we have here another instance of the inhibiting effect of vigorous American action on the nuclear ambitions of rogue states.

This is not to suggest that the Iraq war was fought in order to pressure Libya and Iran into desisting from their quest for WMD. But had we *not*

gone into Iraq, it is all too easy to envision a scenario in which Libya and Iran would now be proceeding to process weapons-grade uranium and we would still be as unsure about Iraq itself as we and the international community had been throughout the 1990's. And this is to say nothing of a related development in Pakistan—where, at almost the same moment as Saddam's capture, Dr. A.Q. Khan was abruptly detained and subsequently confessed to having been involved in the covert international proliferation of nuclear-weapons technology to Libya, Iran, and North Korea.

IN THIS connection, we might also pause to consider another "lesson" of Iraq that only yesterday was thought to have been resolved for all time. In the heyday following the quick removal of the Taliban and preceding the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration released a National Security Strategy document embracing the doctrine of preemptive war against suspected enemies, especially those with the capability of developing WMD. "We will not wait," George Bush declared in his March 6, 2003 address to the nation, "to see what terrorists or terrorist states will do."

But then, after we failed to find WMD in Iraq, and the violence in that country escalated, preemption, too, was added to the growing indictment sheet of the administration's supposed record of arrogance and incompetence. Does that charge, in light of where we are today, still stand?

Retrospectively, the legitimacy of preemption can be confirmed (if not precisely in the terms its backers expected) by the Libyan announcement, the possible cessation of enrichment in Iran, and the detention of A.Q. Khan. All three are examples of changes in the balance of power that did not require the direct application of preemptive American force but were the results of its preemptive application elsewhere.

Prospectively, as we ponder Iran's ongoing violations of the international inspection regime and the failure of diplomatic efforts to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, preemption seems to have become once again thinkable, winning to its side such unlikely converts as French President Nicolas Sarkozy and NATO ministers who recently declared their own willingness to embrace preemptive strategies, including nuclear options, against states that threaten NATO members with state-sponsored terror and deadly new weapons. And as for Pakistan, which already has a sizable nuclear arsenal, political figures as diverse as Barack Obama and Mike Huckabee have sug-

gested preemptive incursions in order to find Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants—a proposal scarcely conceivable just two years ago when our "unnecessary preemptive war" in Iraq had allegedly landed us in a quagmire.

WHICH BRINGS us back to the second highly controversial reason adduced for the war in Iraq—namely, the existence of links between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. A loose affinity between the two men was widely accepted as canonical in late 2002. In the words of the joint congressional authorization, bin Laden's operatives were "known to be in Iraq," and Senator Hillary Clinton confirmed that "intelligence reports show that Saddam Hussein . . . has given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaeda members." Buttressing this assurance were a number of established facts: Saddam's knowledge of or assistance to the al-Qaeda affiliate Ansar al-Islam in Kurdistan; the presence in Baghdad of Abdul Rahman Yasin, one of the architects of the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center; and the flight to Iraq of one of bin Laden's followers, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, after the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

But when intra-Iraq violence increased in 2004-5, and when the 9/11 commission found no evidence of formal cooperation between al Qaeda and Saddam, the "link" was pronounced another fabrication—more proof that our presence in Iraq had nothing to do with defeating the people who had killed thousands of Americans on September 11. Instead, the new narrative had it that, simply by being in Iraq, we had *created* an army of terrorists who would have otherwise never existed or never have been drawn there.

Today, the issue is being slowly re-framed. True, there may never have been a formal working relationship between Saddam and al Qaeda, but some natural affinity there was. Certainly, once Saddam's Baathist remnant found itself without an army, it had no difficulty looking to al Qaeda to import one post-haste. Since 2003, al-Qaeda fighters have operated in conjunction with the Saddamist insurgents. Only now, and with the help of former Baathist and Sunni extremists whom we have persuaded to turn against their erstwhile allies, are American soldiers on the verge of inflicting a thorough defeat on al Qaeda in Iraq—a development with major strategic implications for the war against Islamic terrorists and one, moreover, that is taking place, as originally intended, at a safe distance from our own shores.

STILL ANOTHER point of reexamination relates to the status and image of the U.S. military. If the spectacular three-week victory over Saddam in 2003 led to a kind of temporary triumphalism, the four years of hard fighting, long rotations, and casualties that followed it prompted a deep-seated revisionist pessimism. Our military was said to be worn out, poorly led, and prone to crimes like Abu Ghraib and the Haditha “massacres.” The Pentagon was indicted as having been fatally blindsided by the ingenuity and ferocity of enemy attacks. Enlistments were said to be falling below manpower targets, with no end in sight.

Today’s perception is once again different. Thanks to the success of our counter-insurgency tactics and the consequent drop in violence—during 2007, ethnic fighting in Baghdad decreased by over 90 percent—ordinary Americans are beginning to grasp that our military forces, and especially the Army and Marine corps, are within sight of accomplishing a task that is still confidently pronounced impossible by some prominent public figures.

As of December 2007, enlistments in the four services have exceeded manpower goals, and entirely new combat brigades are being created. Our officers and their troops, however weary they may be from repeated tours, are now acknowledged to be the world’s most sophisticated practitioners of counter-insurgency warfare. Their competence is on display not only in Iraq but also in Afghanistan, where American veterans of the Iraq war have proved far more adroit against the Taliban than their unseasoned NATO allies. Like the emergence of Sherman’s Army of the West in the autumn of 1864, which renewed the North’s faith in its military prowess and in the wisdom of Lincoln’s war planners, the Petraeus command in Iraq has prompted a new appreciation of our military’s talents.

What about troop deployments, an issue much agitated among supporters of the war no less than among opponents? If the 2003 lightning strike on Saddam was tendered as confirmation of the efficacy of Donald Rumsfeld’s “revolution in military affairs,” the subsequent bloody occupation was taken as a rebuke not just to the Rumsfeld doctrine, but also to the entire notion of an expeditionary war conducted with a small local footprint. For much of 2004, former generals, antiwar politicians, and some proponents of the war insisted that too few troops had been committed in 2003 and far too few allotted for the subsequent occupation. Initial calls for a corrective surge in 2004, voiced by stalwarts like John McCain, stipulated reinforcements in numbers ranging from 80,000 to 100,000 troops.

But by mid-2007 a much smaller compromise figure of 30,000 was reached—the maximum number considered to be politically palatable, sufficient to support a change in tactics, and, given other American military deployments around the globe, just barely doable.

So we have gone from a general feeling in 2003 that 200,000 was the right number to execute our brilliant defeat of Saddam Hussein, to a subsequent consensus that it was veritable insanity to commit a mere 150,000 troops to pacify a country of 26 million, to an acknowledgment that, after four years of fighting, a surge to 160,000 was large enough. The point is hardly to suggest there is no correct answer to the question of numbers or that manpower needs do not change with the pulse of battle, but rather, in the light of today’s good news, to cast doubt on the fiercely held revisionist orthodoxy of 2004-06 that the total size of the needed deployment of American occupiers lay in several hundreds of thousands.

FINALLY, THERE is the future. As early as April 2003, some observers had begun to speak of an unstoppable American juggernaut, which, having already destroyed two extremist regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, and on the brink of establishing stable reform governments in those countries, could now quickly shift its attention to such other terrorist-sponsoring states as Syria and Iran.

This confidence, dashed by the insurgency and sectarian strife in Iraq, was soon supplanted by a new conventional wisdom. Far from being able to decapitate other enemy nations, it was said, we had further empowered them. Iran in particular, its regional ambitions no longer checked by Saddam, and newly emboldened by perceived American setbacks, was declared the real “winner” of our folly, carving out a rump Shiite state in southern Iraq, boldly exporting jihadists all over the region from Iraq to Lebanon, and on the verge of acquiring the bomb. Syria under Bashar Assad was proceeding methodically to choke Lebanon to death.

Now all this has begun to be rethought once more. By the end of 2007, Moqtada al-Sadr, the chief local surrogate of the Ayatollahs, evidently sensing a change in the local balance of power, had prudently withdrawn from his violent anti-American and anti-Sunni activity. Meanwhile, the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad was beginning to restore domestic funding to Sunni communities in Anbar province and to be inching toward a more genuinely representative system. Perhaps, it was being whispered, Iraqi Shiites valued their Iraqi

and Arab identity over their sectarian Shiite allegiance after all, and might be prepared to resist Iranian encroachments on their sovereignty. Regionally, too, there have been signs, however halting and uncertain, of a growing Arab desire to contain Iran. Could it be that, provided the nuclear threat can be disposed of, the long-running grip of Khomeinism might be better challenged in the landscape of a post-Saddam Iraq?

SO FAR, none of these gradual reversals of opinion has affected overall judgments of the Bush administration, whose approval ratings, according to most polls, still hover around 35 percent. This continued unpopularity has prompted some among the President's supporters to compare his tenure with that of Harry Truman, who as we have seen exited office in 1953 with even lower ratings. Only later, with the dramatic turnabout in Korea and the gradual emergence of a successful South Korea, did Truman achieve his lasting reputation as the executor of the cold-war strategy of containment and a hugely consequential President.

Such positive revisionism can take years to develop. Assessments from the battlefield must be digested, partisan distortions rectified, and volatile news cycles balanced by the more measured perspective that comes only with time.

The optimism of 2003, it is good to remember, was itself not just a product of the spectacular removal of Saddam and the Taliban, but a dividend of other successful interventions dating back decades: Grenada, Panama, the first Gulf war, the successful Balkan bombing campaign against Slobodan Milosevic, and the rapid removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. By the turn of the

millennium, an almost antiseptic notion of American war-making had been created in the public mind. In turn, the bitterness over Iraq, whose symptoms peaked last year in the attempt by congressional Democrats to force a precipitous withdrawal of American troops, resulted from four years of unrelievedly pessimistic reporting from Iraq—reporting that itself owed much to a media template forged decades earlier in Vietnam. If the success of the surge continues through 2008, and culminates in a stable Iraqi government, we can assume the gradual emergence of a new consensus, and perhaps, with time, even a change in the current low public regard for the administration and its war aims.

It would be folly to think, however, that one can sit by and wait for history to deliver a smiling verdict. Shifting judgments about the causes, conduct, and consequences of America's conflicts are indeed the norm in American history. These ongoing swings depend in large part on whether the United States is thought to be winning or losing, and are finally codified only at war's end or well afterward. But for the cycle to play out, there must be a persistence of spirit and a willingness to see a war through *to* the end, as well as a bedrock confidence in both the capabilities of America's armed forces and the righteousness of the American cause.

After our aberrant defeat in Vietnam, we may have collectively forgotten that even successful wars of long duration undergo many incarnations, with accompanying swings of mood that alternately damn and support aims, methods, costs, and benefits. But this is in fact the pattern, and it has once again been discernible in Iraq. The road to defeat lies only in the willful denial of this elementary fact.