



Myths of the Current War

By Frederick W. Kagan

The debate about American policy and strategy in Iraq has veered off course. A number of myths have crept into the discussion over the past two years that distort understanding and confuse discussion. It is possible and appropriate to question the wisdom of any particular strategy proposed for Iraq, including the Bush administration's strategy, and there is reason to be both concerned and encouraged by recent events there. But constructive dialogue about how to choose the best way forward is hampered by the distortions caused by certain myths. Until these myths recede from discussions about Iraq strategy, progress in those discussions is extremely unlikely.

Myth 1: The Bush administration intends to keep substantial U.S. forces in Iraq for a long time and must be pressured to bring them home quickly.

Those members of Congress like Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) and Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), who have demanded timetables for the rapid withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, implicitly argue that the administration would otherwise desire to keep U.S. troops in Iraq indefinitely. The idea behind these demands is that only external pressure will force the administration to hand Iraq over to the Iraqis and to withdraw American soldiers. In a recent interview, Murtha claimed that his pressure had changed administration policy in this regard, by driving the Pentagon to announce plans for rapid cuts in troop strength in Iraq.¹

This assertion is false. The American strategy in Iraq from the very beginning of hostilities in March 2003 has been to remove all U.S. forces from the country as rapidly as possible. That was the basis of the "small footprint" idea under which the military fought the war with too few troops to prevent the rise of the insurgency. As the insurgency began, the military consistently

underreacted in the deployment of troops and pursued a series of strategies to avoid increasing the number of troops in the country. Since mid-2004, the administration has stuck to a single determined strategy to train a large Iraqi army to wage the counterinsurgency and to withdraw American forces as that army becomes able to take over responsibilities in Iraq.²

The senior leaders in the administration, both civil and military, have made it plain from the beginning of the conflict that they believe that the U.S. presence in Iraq is an irritant, that it should be kept as small as possible, and that it should be withdrawn as quickly as possible. At no time has the administration indicated any goal other than withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq as rapidly as circumstances permit. The only caveat has been that the administration would not withdraw troops if such withdrawals would jeopardize the establishment of a peaceful and stable regime in Iraq.³

The insistence on the establishment of arbitrary timetables diverges from administration policy in one respect only: Murtha, Pelosi, and others who advocate this course must accept the possibility that withdrawals on a given timetable may lead to the collapse of the Iraqi state. If they are unwilling to accept that result—if they would want to suspend the withdrawal if the situation

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began to collapse, for instance—then there is no material difference between their position and the president's. This so-called debate over timetables, therefore, is a debate over whether the United States should remain committed to trying to succeed in Iraq or whether America should be willing to lose there in order to retreat rapidly.⁴

Myth 2: The presence of U.S. forces in Iraq is the major source of the conflict there. Peace will return to Iraq as Americans leave.

Ironically, this myth was first expounded by the U.S. military, which used it as the basis for arguing that American forces in Iraq must be as small as possible, interact as little as possible with the population, and leave as quickly as they can, consistent with ensuring success. The underlying assumptions are that Iraqis are a proud people unwilling to tolerate “invaders” and that the American presence has galvanized disparate elements of the population to take up arms to repel the invasion.⁵

There is a certain amount of truth here, of course: a significant portion of the Sunni Arab insurgency is devoted to attacking Americans and driving them from Iraq, and a few elements of the Shiite community have joined in such attacks for their own reasons. The logical leap from that fact to the assertion that if only the Americans would leave, the insurgency would die down and peace would ensue, however, is baseless and indefensible.

In the first place, a significant goal of the Sunni Arab insurgency has always been to prevent the establishment of a Shiite government in Baghdad with power over the Sunni lands. For this reason, alongside attacks on American troops, there has always been a steady drumbeat of attacks against Shiites and against Sunni Arabs seen as collaborating with the regime either by taking leadership positions or by volunteering to serve in its police and armed forces. In 2005, a number of insurgent groups decided to prioritize attacking collaborators and members of the Iraqi Security Forces over hitting coalition troops. Insurgent literature regularly distinguishes between “civilians,” who are not to be targeted, and “traitors” or “collaborators,” who are legitimate targets. This differentiation and refocusing of target priorities clearly shows that the presence of coalition forces is by no means the only—or even the main—catalyst driving the insurgency.⁶

It is too easy in this regard to emphasize the current focus of insurgent propaganda without reflecting on its

deeper roots, aims, and purposes. The Iraqi insurgents are united to a considerable extent in their desire to expel the United States from Iraq. It does not follow that their success in that goal would lead to peace. On the contrary, it is clear from their writings that the main insurgent groups have been intentionally putting off expositions of their ultimate aims in order to pursue a fragile harmony during the occupation. The withdrawal of coalition troops will remove the need for the insurgent groups to hold back.⁷

The results of such a rapid withdrawal will be primarily negative. Insurgent groups may initially begin to struggle with one another, both arguing and fighting over their future visions of the country. All will almost certainly attack the Iraqi government and security forces with renewed vigor. The absence of coalition forces will embolden some to increase sectarian violence in the hope of igniting a civil war. The likely result will be either chaos or the further weeding-out and merging of insurgent groups into larger organizations capable of posing a significant challenge to a very weak central regime. The prospects for the success of that regime in such a scenario are very dim.

There is considerable evidence, furthermore, that the insurgents are already sensing victory in the repeated statements of the American intention to withdraw rapidly and are biding their time in anticipation of a more propitious moment to strike the regime. The establishment of a timetable for withdrawal will only add momentum, swelling the ranks of the rebels and encouraging more and more serious attacks.⁸

Focusing on the “irritating” presence of coalition forces is therefore extremely shortsighted and reveals a real lack of imagination about how events are likely to unfold once those forces have been removed. It is nearly certain that coalition forces are all that is now standing between Iraq and sectarian civil war, and the premature withdrawal of those forces on some fixed timeline will probably open the floodgates of chaos.

Myth 3: The war in Iraq is a distraction from the war on terrorism.

Opponents of the war in Iraq have argued from the beginning that because Saddam Hussein was not directly tied to the 9/11 attacks or al Qaeda, as the administration at times has claimed, the war in Iraq is a distraction from the war on terror. They have argued that the diversion of resources from Afghanistan to Iraq has allowed Osama

bin Laden to remain at liberty and has prevented the United States from following up on its successes during Operation Enduring Freedom to finish off al Qaeda.⁹

Claims of Saddam's prewar involvement with al Qaeda certainly seem to have been exaggerated—although it is known that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi trained soldiers under the aegis of the Taliban alongside al Qaeda fighters and then moved into Iraq before the U.S. attack.¹⁰ This question, however, is no longer relevant to the problem of determining U.S. strategy in the war on terror. Al Qaeda's "second-in-command," Ayman al-Zawahiri, has repeatedly said that he now sees Iraq as the central front in the struggle with the West.¹¹ Zarqawi has linked his ideological program with that of Zawahiri and bin Laden to make plain that he has no intention of stopping with success in Iraq, should he attain it. Above all, the key question is: will chaos in Iraq help or hinder al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations in their struggle with the United States and the West? The answer is, of course, that it will help them.

The Bush administration's strategy in Iraq may or may not succeed. Certainly it has received a great deal of criticism from all sides. But those who argue for an immediate (or rapid) withdrawal of American forces to "refocus" them on the war on terror have the burden of showing that such a withdrawal will not lead to the sort of chaos in which terrorist organizations thrive. There can be no question of the inability now and for some time of the Iraqi government to control its territory fully. Nor is there any question of the resources potentially available to terrorists in Iraq—as they were not readily available in impoverished and war-torn Afghanistan. Those resources include not only money and weapons, but access to military specialists, technology, and scientists who had been working on Saddam's WMD programs. This is a recipe for catastrophe on a greater scale than September 11, and there is every reason to believe that a premature withdrawal of American forces would precipitate such a catastrophe. Whatever the relevance of Iraq in the war on terror in 2003, it is a critical front in that war today.

Nor is it at all clear how withdrawing from Iraq would help reallocate resources to the sort of struggle most people have in mind when they think of the fight against al Qaeda. The conventional forces in Iraq would certainly be of little use in chasing bin Laden and his colleagues around the Pakistani mountains. More Special Forces troops might help, but even so, the United States can hardly flood the Pakistani tribal areas where most of the al Qaeda leadership seems to be hiding with thousands of Special Forces warriors. Deploying more

U.S. soldiers to Afghanistan is a good idea and essential to maintaining that state's fragile progress toward stability, but, again, the main al Qaeda bases are no longer in Afghanistan. It is simply very hard to see how withdrawing from Iraq would directly support better resourcing of the war on terror, even if success in Iraq were not so vital to success in the larger struggle.

Myth 4: The wisdom of invading Iraq in 2003 should be an important part of the discussion about what to do in Iraq today.

When John Kerry made criticism of Bush's decision to go to war—rather than of current administration strategy in Iraq—the centerpiece of his campaign, he helped ensure that future debates over policy there would be fruitless. From the standpoint of American policy today, it simply does not matter whether attacking Saddam in 2003 was the right decision or not. The question must be: where do we go from here?

From the standpoint of American domestic politics, criticizing the decision to go to war is, of course, perfectly valid and may even have been essential. The American public was certainly entitled to make up its mind whether or not Bush had made a mistake and to fire him if it felt that he had done so. The electorate chose not to do so, implicitly accepting either the administration's rationale for invading or the irrelevance of the discussion to the matter at hand. Either way, the wisdom of the invasion is now purely a matter for historians.

In May 1950, Korea was an irrelevant peninsula not many people could locate on a map. Truman administration officials did not find it necessary to include Korea among the list of places in Asia that the United States would have to defend. Yet on June 25, 1950, Korea became a central battlefield in the Cold War. The United States committed hundreds of thousands of troops to its defense, and the war has affected the American military, U.S. national security policy, and U.S. domestic politics ever since. It is impossible to say in advance whether a specific region is or is not going to be vital to a particular struggle. The centrality of a battle in a larger conflict arises from its circumstances and the likely consequences of success or failure. As it was in Korea—and, in a more negative sense, another "irrelevant" struggle fought in a "meaningless" backwater, Vietnam—so it is in Iraq. It does not matter now why we went into Iraq, only what will happen if we do not succeed there.

Myth 5: Most Iraqis “want us out,” and we have lost the battle for “hearts and minds.” Therefore, we cannot succeed.¹²

Human beings are peculiarly constructed so that each believes that he is the center of the universe. It is too easy to allow this belief to invade the realm of practical policy. Success in Iraq does not rest on Iraqi attitudes toward the United States. It rests on attitudes toward the Iraqi government. The Iraqi people can dislike America and resent the invasion, but still support their government and make the transition to democracy and stability. It is easy to imagine circumstances in which hatred of the United States diminishes and democracy perishes. For example, if coalition forces withdraw prematurely, civil war breaks out, and Shia army, police, and militia begin massacring Sunni Arabs, the victims may well come to think that the U.S. presence was really a good thing and that their demands for the coalition’s departure were unwise. Such thoughts may come too late, however, to avoid widespread conflict and killing and the collapse of the Iraqi state.

The real issue about the popularity of American forces is the degree to which their presence fuels the fighting or contains sectarian conflict. As we have already seen, the evidence that the U.S. presence is the key driving force in the insurgency is thin, and the evidence that that presence is an essential precondition for avoiding civil war is strong. Iraqi attitudes about that presence only really matter if they change this calculation in some important way. These attitudes are therefore worth monitoring, but should not be allowed to drive coalition strategy by themselves.

Above all, it is essential to keep in mind that it is not the United States that has the task of winning the “hearts and minds” of the Iraqis, but the Iraqi government. The current Iraqi government has by no means yet succeeded in that task, and it may fail to do so. But we can judge the progress of the counterinsurgency only on the basis of the Iraqi government’s success or failure in this regard, not our own.

Myth 6: Setting a timetable for withdrawal will “incentivize” the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own country.

This is an idea frequently promoted by Murtha and others who advocate an immediate or rapid withdrawal.¹³ It rests on two assumptions: that the Iraqis are or shortly

will be capable of taking responsibility for their country, and that they are not doing so now because they do not feel the need. If coalition forces withdraw, so the argument goes, then the Iraqis will have to sink or swim and, implicitly, they will probably swim.

Both of these assumptions are contradicted by the facts on the ground. The Iraqi government is demonstrably unable to control its state, and the Iraqi Security Forces and, still more, the Iraqi police are inadequate to fight the insurgency. Recent estimates suggest that as many as 60,000 Iraqi Security Forces troops may be fit to undertake operations entirely on their own.¹⁴ Counterinsurgency operations to date have required between 130,000 and 160,000 American troops *in addition* to those 60,000 Iraqis to maintain the current unacceptably low level of security and stability in the country. Training soldiers takes time. Gaining experience in combat and in command takes time. However hard we push, the Iraqis can only go so fast. It is unlikely in the extreme that 2006 will see the deployment of enough Iraqi troops to relieve all of the coalition forces and maintain security even at the current level. The Iraqi police are, by all accounts, lagging even further behind.

There is much to criticize in the administration’s strategy in the counterinsurgency struggle in Iraq, and debate over the best course for that strategy is healthy. But this debate can only help the formulation of sound policies if it is based on reality and focuses on the issues at hand.

Telling the Iraqis to “sink or swim” soon, therefore, is tantamount to telling them to drown. Nor have the Iraqis shown any unwillingness to fight for their country. On the contrary, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have volunteered for the most dangerous duty in their land, fighting insurgents with inadequate training and equipment. Those volunteers have frequently come under attack at recruiting stations and in their barracks, yet their numbers have not flagged. Iraqi units no longer shirk combat or run from battle. They have fought toe-to-toe with insurgents on many occasions, have been

badly bloodied, and have returned for duty the next day. Iraqi government officials have persevered despite improvised explosive devices (IEDs), mortar and rocket attacks, kidnappings, and assassination attempts. It is difficult to see how it might be necessary to “incentivize” people fighting bravely in the face of greater danger to themselves and their families than Americans have faced since the Civil War.

Toward a More Reasoned Debate

There is much to criticize in the administration’s strategy in the counterinsurgency struggle in Iraq, and debate over the best course for that strategy is healthy. Honest debate about the value of continuing to try to win in Iraq is also an important part of the American democratic system and should not be shut down or attacked. But this debate can only help the formulation of sound policies if it is based on reality and focuses on the issues at hand.

The deep polarization of American politics, particularly over this issue, has distorted the discussion, however. U.S. policy in Iraq is too important to allow such distortions to persist. It is time to put away the ideological and rhetorical cudgels and begin to reason again about the best course to choose. The reestablishment of such an objective and rational discourse is the only hope of avoiding disaster.

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Notes

1. Representative John Murtha, interview by Diane Rehm, *Diane Rehm Show*, WAMU Radio, February 13, 2006.

2. See Frederick W. Kagan, “Blueprint for Victory,” *The Weekly Standard*, October 31, 2005; Frederick W. Kagan, “Fighting to Win: With the Proper Strategy, Victory in Iraq Is Far More Likely Than People Think,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 19, 2005; Frederick W. Kagan, “Risky Business: The Biggest Danger in Iraq Now Is Drawing Down Too Quickly,” *The Weekly Standard*, January 23, 2006.

3. The Bush administration’s publicly released strategy for Iraq declares: “Coalition troop levels, for example, will increase where necessary to defeat the enemy or provide additional security for key events like the referendum and elections. But troop levels will decrease over time, as Iraqis

continue to take on more of the security and civilian responsibilities themselves”; and “As Iraqis take on more responsibility for security, Coalition forces will increasingly move to supporting roles in most areas. The mission of our forces will change—from conducting operations and keeping the peace, to more specialized operations targeted at the most vicious terrorists and leadership networks. As security conditions improve and as Iraqi Security Forces become increasingly capable of securing their own country, our forces will increasingly move out of the cities, reduce the number of bases from which we operate, and conduct fewer patrols and convoy missions.” President George W. Bush, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (National Security Council, Washington, D.C., 2005), emphasis added. President Bush has repeatedly declared that “as the Iraqis stand up, we’ll stand down.” See, for example, Office of the White House Press Secretary, “Bush Media Availability with Donald Rumsfeld and Lieutenant General David Petraeus,” news release, October 5, 2005.

4. For example: “The United States will immediately redeploy—immediately redeploy. No schedule which can be changed, nothing that’s controlled by the Iraqis, this is an immediate redeployment of our American forces because they have become the target.” See John Murtha “Murtha Calls for a ‘Change in Direction,’” *New York Times*, November 17, 2005.

5. See Frederick W. Kagan, “Blueprint for Victory,” and “Fighting to Win,” for discussion and analysis of the military’s attitude toward this issue. Murtha repeated this line of argument in “Murtha Calls for a ‘Change in Direction.’”

6. See the excellent recent report on the nature of the insurgency: “In Their Own Words: Reading the Iraqi Insurgency,” in *Middle East Report* no. 50 (Washington, D.C.: International Crisis Group, 2006); and Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White, “Assessing Iraq’s Sunni Arab Insurgency,” *Policy Focus* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005).

7. “In Their Own Words: Reading the Iraqi Insurgency.”

8. According to “In Their Own Words”: “The insurgents’ perspective has undergone a remarkable evolution. Initially, they perceived and presented the U.S. presence as an enduring one that would be extremely difficult to dislodge; they saw their struggle as a long-term, open-ended jihad, whose success was measured by the very fact that it was taking place. That no longer is the case. Today, the prospect of an outright victory and a swift withdrawal of foreign forces has crystallised, bolstered by the U.S.’s perceived loss of legitimacy and apparent vacillation, its periodic announcements of troop redeployments, the precipitous decline in domestic support for the war and heightened calls by prominent politicians for a rapid withdrawal. When the

U.S. leaves, the insurgents do not doubt that Iraq's security forces and institutions would quickly collapse."

9. See, for example, Senator Robert C. Byrd, "America the Peacemaker Becomes America the Warmonger," (remarks, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., March 11, 2003), available at http://byrd.senate.gov/speeches/byrd_speeches_2003march/byrd_speeches_2003march_list/byrd_speeches_2003march_list_1.html (accessed February 16, 2006); and "Bob Graham on War and Peace," On the Issues, available at http://www.ontheissues.org/2004/Bob_Graham_War+_Peace.htm (accessed February 16, 2006).

10. Nimrod Raphaeli, "The Sheikh of the Slaughterers: Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi and the Al-Qa'ida Connection," in *Inquiry and Analysis Series* no. 231 (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Media Research Institute, July 1, 2005).

11. "I want to be the first to congratulate you for what God has blessed you with in terms of fighting battle in the heart of the Islamic world, which was formerly the field for major battles in Islam's history, and what is now the place for

the greatest battle of Islam in this era," quoted in Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi," news release no. 2-05, October 11, 2005.

12. This has been the mainstay of arguments by Murtha, Kerry, Joseph Biden, and others for rapid withdrawal. John Murtha, "Murtha Calls for a 'Change in Direction'" ; John Kerry, "Senator John Kerry Lays out Path Forward in Iraq: If Administration Acts Responsibly, We Can Stabilize Iraq and Reduce Combat Forces," (speech, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., October 26, 2005); Joseph R. Biden, "Time for An Iraq Timetable," *Washington Post*, November 26, 2005.

13. John Murtha, "Murtha Calls for a 'Change in Direction'" and interview on the *Diane Rehm Show*.

14. Kenneth M. Pollack, "A Switch in Time: A New Strategy for America in Iraq," (analysis paper no. 7, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 2006).