George W. Bush’s presidency is drawing to an end in a diminuendo that will not do much for his poll ratings but may someday boost his historical standing. The war in Iraq seems finally to have turned around. Victory there may yield some of the beneficial effects that Bush promised when he ordered American forces into Iraq. One result is Bush being viewed in a softer light. Summing up some recent magazine essays, the Washington Post muses that “history may treat The Decider much more gently than many of his critics imagine.”

The president’s defenders point hopefully to the example of Harry Truman, who also left office deeply unpopular but has since come to be seen as one of our great presidents. But if Bush eventually finds vindication in Iraq, that victory will have come too dear, and not only in the coin of his popularity. My own view, therefore, to use a metaphor from the sport in which Bush worked before turning to politics, is that he will be recalled as a big swinger who belted his share of home runs but also struck out too many times to be voted into the Hall of Fame alongside Truman.

His most solid hit was his declaration of war against terrorism. Until September 11, 2001, Bush had evinced little interest in international affairs, either

Joshua Muravchik is resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He is the author of a forthcoming book on Arab liberals.
while campaigning for president (causing him to lose my vote in 2000, although I lean Republican) or during his first eight months in office. Within days of 9/11, however, he realized that the challenge presented in these attacks had to be the focus of the rest of his presidency. He stuck with this tenaciously and quite courageously, except for a brief moment after his reelection in 2004 when he wandered off into the mists of Social Security reform in the momentary illusion that he had “capital” to spend on anything other than his central mission.

Further to his credit, although lacking natural eloquence, Bush found words (and wordsmiths) to rally and reassure the nation in the aftermath of the worst attack ever on the American homeland. His speeches continued to inspire Americans and keep their focus on the core issue for a couple of years thereafter until our occupation of Iraq turned into a debacle, shattering the national consensus.

While Bush garnered broad domestic support for the war on terror, there were dissenters from the beginning. Many in the Democratic Party argued that we should respond to terrorists with the methods of criminal justice rather than of war—the advantage of this approach being that it would avoid dignifying terrorists as soldiers. But even if the long arm of the law could stretch to terrorist haunts in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, our judicial system is geared to punishing crimes once committed, whereas the principal goal in this case was to prevent future attacks. What could we do juridically about the thousands of young men in al-Qaeda’s training camps mastering the skills with which to murder us? Issue restraining orders?

Francis Fukuyama exemplified another version of this criticism when he said that Bush “overstate[d] the scope of the problem. . . . Before the Iraq war we were probably at war with no more than a few thousand people around the world who would consider martyring themselves and causing nihilistic damage to the United States.”

This estimate seems low, but whether there were thousands or tens of thousands, they were backed by several Middle Eastern governments and by millions
of sympathizers prepared to aid and abet them. In addition to resources and sanctuary, this pool of supporters furnished an apparently inexhaustible supply of volunteers to replace the “shahids” who had gone on to enjoy the comforts of their heavenly virgins. Even if Fukuyama was right that there were “only” thousands at the spearhead of the jihadist movement at any one time, how much solace ought we take from these numbers? How many “martyrs” does it take to do a great deal of harm? On 9/11, there were 19 in the airplanes and perhaps a handful of others helping with their logistics. Armed with, say, biological weapons, what damage might a few thousand do?

Fukuyama’s numbers imply an additional criticism that became increasingly insistent as the insurgency bloomed in Iraq, namely that Bush’s aggressive actions had multiplied the number of terrorists or would-be terrorists. True, the war on terrorism fed anti-Americanism globally, including in the Middle East, and this hostility probably impels some people to take up arms against the United States. But it remains an open question whether the inspiration for terrorism may be found more often in rage than in the vision of a victorious cause. The terrorists who attacked the West a few decades ago were mostly from Marxist groups, and, despite the rhetoric about the downtrodden, these were people motivated less by anger than by the intoxicating idea that they were history’s chosen agents. Likewise, it was the heady conviction that he and his jihadist brethren had defeated one superpower (the Soviet Union, in Afghanistan) that was the launching pad for Osama bin Laden’s campaign to bring down the other.

Perhaps we could have held down the growth of terrorism by avoiding any actions that would further antagonize the Muslim world. But there was already enough anger or other motives to have generated 9/11 and dozens of earlier deadly attacks. Bush was right to conclude that a more definitive way to discourage present and future volunteers for the terror cause would be to show them that they play on the losing side.

Whether or not more terrorists exist today, America has suffered no attack in the seven years since 9/11, although virtually all commentators at the time expected that more would follow. No doubt, much of the credit must go to defensive measures, including domestic counter-terrorism, but surely Bush’s strategy of confronting the terrorists in their own backyard has helped to keep them over there rather than here.

A different criticism of the war on terror was voiced by, among others, Daniel Pipes, who said that it was senseless to speak of a war against a tactic, a war without an enemy. The real enemy, Pipes said, is Islamism. I agree with Bush, not Pipes. A spectrum of Muslims call themselves Islamists, some of whom even profess to
believe in democracy. I’m skeptical that Islamism and democracy can go togeth-
er, but certainly some self-declared Islamists eschew violence. As long as they do
that, I may want to debate with them, but I certainly don’t want to make “war” on
them. They invite a warlike response only when they themselves engage in vio-
ience. Moreover, just
as not all Islamists
are terrorists, so too
not all terrorists are
Islamists—not even
all Muslim terrorists.
Many Americans have
been killed by Middle
Eastern terrorists who
professed various strains of secular leftism. Terrorism tends to be transnational,
so we have been denied the simplicity of declaring war on a country. Sure, it may
be awkward to declare war on a tactic, but it remains less awkward than Pipes’s
alternative, which requires declaring war on an idea.

Bush deserves applause not only for declaring war on terrorism but also
for recognizing that this war must rest on a political strategy. As things stood on
9/11, terrorism enjoyed wide acceptance within the Middle East. The Organiza-
tion of the Islamic Conference consistently blocked any blanket condemnation
of terrorism by the UN on the grounds that terror on behalf of a worthy cause,
such as “national liberation,” qualified as legitimate. We needed to try to change
the mindset of Middle Easterners so that they would come to judge such acts
as Westerners do: as a repellent and inadmissible method of pursuing even a
worthy cause.

In undertaking this goal, Bush rejected the counsel of various European and
UN officials and the editorialists of the New York Times, who held that the “root
cause” of terrorism was poverty. This explanation was always implausible. The
terrorists never mentioned economic issues in their various proclamations and
manifestos. Regions poorer than the Middle East did not produce terrorism.
And the master terrorist—Osama bin Laden—was the spoiled heir to his father’s
billions. Since 9/11, a wealth of empirical research on the disconnect between
terrorism and poverty has been summarized this way by Princeton University
professor of economics Alan B. Krueger:

“Whether or not more terrorists exist
today, America has suffered no attack
in the seven years since 9/11, although
virtually all commentators at the time
expected that more would follow.”
Although there is a certain surface appeal of blaming economic circumstances and lack of education for terrorist acts, the evidence is nearly unanimous in rejecting either material deprivation or inadequate education as an important cause of support for terrorism or of participation in terrorist activities. . . . Instead of being drawn from the ranks of the poor, numerous academic and government studies find that terrorists tend to be drawn from well-educated, middle-class or high-income families.

A second school of thought located the source of global terrorism in the Arab-Israeli conflict. If only Washington could solve that, the argument went, then Middle Eastern anger would abate. To be sure, extremists, such as those of al-Qaeda, reviled Israel, but they also made clear that they regarded Israel as only a symptom of a deeper problem, namely that the Christian West was more powerful than the Muslim world, thereby confounding the word of the Prophet. This injury would not be healed even by the disappearance of Israel, much less by a peace agreement that would add the insult of giving this alien “entity” a permanent place in the midst of Arab land.

Numerous attacks against the U.S. were carried out during the Clinton years—on the USS Cole, on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, on the housing compound Khobar Towers, and more—while Clinton and his deputies were busily engaged in negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, and Israelis and Syrians. It was also during this period of intense diplomacy that the plotting of 9/11 commenced. Moreover, those who pointed to the Arab-Israeli conflict as the “root cause” usually meant that they wanted the United States to wring more concessions from Israel. But there were limits to what the U.S. could extract from Israel, and according to Clinton, the failure of American mediation at the end of the Oslo process resulted from the refusal of the Palestinians, not the Israelis, to offer adequate concessions.

“Bush deserves applause not only for declaring war on terrorism but also for recognizing that this war must rest on a political strategy . . . In undertaking this goal, Bush rejected the counsel of various European and UN officials and the editorialists of the New York Times who held that the ‘root cause’ of terrorism was poverty.”
In contrast to these two bankrupt ideas—that terror resulted from material deprivation or from an insufficiency of U.S. diplomatic activity in the Middle East—Bush concluded that the “root cause” of terrorism lay in the authoritarian, zero-sum political habits of the region. He hypothesized that the Muslim world’s acceptance of civil violence as a method of international protest grew out of the fact that civil violence was common in the domestic politics of these countries. If you will torture or kill your brother over a difference of opinion or a power struggle—as Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, Libyans, Sudanese, Egyptians, Palestinians, Iranians, Somalis, and Algerians had done promiscuously—what mercies will you show to an outsider? Bush supposed that if Middle Easterners absorbed the methods of democracy, they might also more readily embrace peaceful compromise as the means to resolve disputes with foreigners. Hence, his “forward strategy of freedom.”

This policy may still fail, either because American efforts to foster democratization in the Middle East will come to naught or because democratization will not be the solvent that it has been elsewhere. Still, the approach has more to recommend it than the alternatives. The Middle East is modernizing rapidly. Technological change outpaces intellectual change, as symbolized by “Salafists” who use the Internet and text messages to spread the word that we should all live exactly as the Prophet did in the seventh century. Meanwhile, the whole world has been democratizing. The system of government once found only in Western Europe and the English-speaking world has taken hold in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and even swaths of sub-Saharan Africa. It seems only a matter of time until the Middle East feels the impact of this trend. Is it possible for the United States to hasten such a development? Why not? We have done as much in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Already, Freedom House has recorded small gains for freedom in the Middle East after decades of stagnation. Further gains will likely also come slowly. Secretary Rice’s talk of the need for “a generational commitment” to the political transformation of the region makes sense. Is it possible we could get democracy without an abatement of extremism? Conceivably, but that would be something new under the sun.

A further success to Bush’s credit has come in Afghanistan, notwithstanding the fact that guerrilla war and terrorism have been intensifying there recently. Seeing the Taliban make gains in its insurrection still counts as a far cry from having the Taliban in power. The Taliban benefits from sanctuaries in Pakistan,
but until Bush acted, it was the Taliban that was providing sanctuary to other terrorists, notably al-Qaeda.

In 2004, John Kerry gibed that Bush had “outsourced” the war in Afghanistan by relying on the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance to do most of the ground fighting. Had Bush done the reverse—ignored the indigenous opponents of the Taliban and dispatched a massive U.S. force to that country—no doubt Kerry’s speechwriters would have furnished him with some sarcastic quip. Although bin Laden and his number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, remain at large, and terrorists have taken advantage of recent gains by Pakistani radicals, most knowledgeable observers agree that al-Qaeda has been severely weakened since 9/11.

Some Democrats, starting with Al Gore in 2002 and now echoed emphatically by Barack Obama, manufacture credentials as tough guys by claiming that Bush took his eye off the ball in Afghanistan. Rather than sending U.S. troops to Iraq, said Gore, Bush ought to have sent more to this critical battleground. Trying to demonstrate his hawkish side, Obama now says that he would withdraw quickly from Iraq in order to send more troops to Afghanistan.

We have heard the likes of this argument before and it remains worse than foolish: the conceit it creates—that liberals who have criticized the war against terrorism on many counts have simultaneously been straining at the leash to fight the “good war” in Afghanistan—is wholly disingenuous. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the Cold War revolved in large part around a race in armaments, and debates about U.S. policy revolved around which weapons systems to build, doves were defined by their willingness to cut defense budgets. They rarely, however, claimed they were opposed to defense spending in general. Rather, they couched their opposition in whatever weapon was currently at issue by arguing that they would support instead some other, better weapon that had not yet been invented or adequately developed. Finally, in an unusually frank albeit jocular moment, Les Aspin, the most thoughtful and knowledgeable of congressional doves who later became Bill Clinton’s secretary of defense, conceded: “We liberals seem always to support whatever weapons systems are far off in the future and to oppose whatever ones are available today.”

Much the same can be said about the pseudohawks who today claim they oppose the Iraq War only because they wish to bring more firepower to bear in Afghanistan. If Bush had kept the bulk of our troops in Afghanistan, these same critics would now be demanding their withdrawal from there in order to face the threat in Iraq. The ball on which they keep their eye tightly focused is partisan advantage, not national security.
Compared to Iraq, Afghanistan holds little strategic significance. Why should we shed blood to assure the success of the central government there? First, a victory by the Taliban would bolster the jihadi cause worldwide. Second, the country might again become a haven for foreign terrorists. Third, the humiliation of the United States would hearten its enemies everywhere. Fourth, America’s departure would invite chaos and, with it, humanitarian tragedy. But, of course, every one of these arguments applies, in spades, to Iraq.

The political significance of Afghanistan derived from the presence there of al-Qaeda. But al-Qaeda no longer resides in Afghanistan. It has melted away to Pakistan, just as it would have done if a President Gore had sent a million men to blanket the country. Accordingly, in another display of *faux* toughness, Obama has declared that as president, he would, upon receiving real-time information of the presence of bin Laden in a particular building in Pakistan, order an air strike to take him out. The hypothesis, of course, is silly. The problem is not what to do if we know exactly where bin Laden will be at a given moment. The problem is that we do not know. In his acceptance speech, Obama twitted John McCain for allegedly being unwilling to “follow bin Laden . . . to the cave where he lives,” thus implying that he, himself, as president, would invade Pakistan to hunt down al-Qaeda’s chieftain. It beggars belief that Obama would send whole armies to chase a single individual, even were Pakistan not a nuclear-armed ally and the world’s second-largest Muslim country. In sum, to present oneself as a fearless warrior against terrorism in far-fetched hypothetical scenarios while opposing the actual battle with terrorists being waged in the flesh counts as nothing more than a posture.
Nonetheless, if the criticism of Bush that counterposes Afghanistan to Iraq rings hollow, that still does not mean that Bush was right about Iraq. I supported Bush strongly on Iraq because I supported the war against terror, and this was the next front on which he decided to wage it after denying al-Qaeda its base in Afghanistan. The choice was never self-evident, given that Iran was a larger sponsor of terrorism than Iraq. In both world wars, debates raged within and between allied governments over whether to attack the enemy centrally or on his flanks. By going after Iraq, Bush seemed to be choosing the “indirect” approach propounded by such strategists as B. H. Liddell Hart. In retrospect, we have reason to wonder whether Bush made the right move.

Why he chose to focus on Iraq remains unclear. His opponents have floated fanciful and malicious interpretations, and it will be some time before Bush and his top advisers tell the story in their own words. The closest we have to that comes from former Undersecretary of Defense Douglas J. Feith’s account, which rehearses the odious features of Saddam Hussein’s rule. He calls these “WMD and the three T’s—terrorism, threats to neighbors, and tyranny.” This certainly seems like a fair description, but it applies as well to several other regimes in the region. Therefore it raises the question: why focus on Iraq before the others?

Feith acknowledges that the regimes of Syria and Libya were similar to Iraq’s, but he says that he and his colleagues believed that “coercive diplomacy” might induce them to change their behavior. Libya indeed was persuaded to give up its stocks of WMD, and it had already given up the first and maybe the second “T,” although it remains a tyranny. Syria, however, reinforced in its malign ways by its close alliance with the bigger, stronger Iran, has only gotten worse in all three of the dimensions Feith says were decisive to the Bush administration.

As for Iran and North Korea, which also fit his rubric of the “three T’s,” Feith explains that two features distinguished them from Iraq and made them less inviting targets. One was that the administration could plausibly claim that it had exhausted all options short of force with Baghdad but not with Tehran and Pyongyang. The other was that the administration hoped that these regimes might be toppled from within, whereas there was no prospect of an internal threat to Saddam Hussein.

The first of these reasons comes across as unconvincing. To be sure, we or our proxies were (and are) still negotiating with North Korea to uncertain effect and with Iran to no effect whatever. But Saddam would have negotiated with us, too, if we had offered. And many of our critics believed we had not exhausted all options with Iraq, but should have allowed UN inspectors to continue their work.
As for the presence of internal dissent—Feith’s second reason—this makes sense with respect to Iran, although not with North Korea. But even if it was plausible to hope for internal upheaval in Iran in the early 2000s, that in itself does not answer the objection that Iran posed a greater danger than Iraq. Yes, the mullahs were more likely than Saddam to be overthrown. But how likely? Surely the chances were considerably less than even. So the decision to target Saddam necessarily meant leaving the problem of Iran to a hope and a prayer. Or at least for another day.

Two reasons for going after Iraq rather than (or before) Iran presented themselves that Feith does not mention. One was that international law allowed a more reasonable case for the former. The accusation that in proposing to stretch
Joshua Muravchik

the definition of preemptive war to include preventive war the Bush administration was disdainful of international law seems unfair. Bush’s reasoning was certainly open to challenge, but it did constitute a legal argument. In addition to the principle of preemption, the administration cited previous UN resolutions and the terms of the 1991 ceasefire as a legal basis for confronting Saddam without specific Security Council authorization. Right or wrong, this too was a serious brief. To construct such a case regarding Iran would have been more difficult.

A second reason was simply that Iran would have been a tougher nut to crack militarily. Its population and its national income dwarf Iraq’s. Moreover, while many of its citizens may resent the theocracy, their discontent can hardly be likened to the alienation of Iraq’s Kurds and Shia from the Saddam regime. Had the administration chosen to focus on Iran as the next front in the war on terror, it probably would have had to content itself with deploying various political, economic, and military pressures short of an all-out invasion, therefore making a definitive result harder to achieve.

Despite these difficulties, however, two powerful reasons suggest that the administration’s focus should indeed have been on Iran rather than Iraq. First, Iran turns out to have had a bigger WMD program than Iraq’s degraded and dormant one. Second, Iran was a far more active sponsor of terrorism. Saddam supported a variety of terrorist groups, any of which might have been the next to strike us. Nonetheless, his sponsorship of terror was minimal compared to that of Tehran. This second point had profound implications for our credibility and for the credibility of the war on terror. If our goal was to eliminate terrorism, Iran would have been our next logical target. Iraq seemed like a sideshow, and focusing on it magnified distrust of our motives.

We now know that, as part of advance planning, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had his staff draw up a list of “horrible” things that could go wrong in Iraq, including that “the United States could become so absorbed in its Iraq effort that we pay inadequate attention to other serious problems.” That this danger was foreseen makes it all the more inexcusable that the force dispatched

“Saddam supported a variety of terrorist groups, any of which might have been the next to strike us. Nonetheless, his sponsorship of terror was minimal compared to that of Tehran.”
to Iraq was too small to pacify the country. Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki testified to the Senate in the weeks before the launch of the Iraq war that “something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers . . . probably . . . would be required [for] post-hostilities control . . . with the kinds of ethnic tensions that could lead to other problems.” Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz sharply contradicted him, but the general proved to be right.

Presumably, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz recalled that the force deployed for the first Gulf War proved excessive. But they and the commander in chief ought to have borne in mind as well that while too large a force can lead to a loss of resources, too small a force can lead to the loss of a war. Bush and Rumsfeld’s stubborn refusal to send more troops brought us to the very brink of defeat until the success of the surge in 2007 demonstrated that they had been wrong all along.

Clearly, the president’s executive team was unequal to the challenge. Colin Powell opposed the first Gulf War and was the driving force behind its prema-
ture end; he opposed intervention in Bosnia and Rwanda. Mystifyingly, the one use of force that Powell apparently masterminded was our ill-fated intervention in Somalia. In public accounts of Rumsfeld, what we see is a quirky, imperious, abrasive man, much too sure of himself. With poor leaders at State and Defense, we were operating under a serious handicap.

Second, even as his policies sowed anger and distrust abroad, Bush’s administration gave short shrift to public diplomacy, which might have helped others to understand, if not to approve of, our actions, and thereby blunted the force of anti-Americanism. Initially, Bush filled the position of Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy with an advertising executive whose qualification, so Colin Powell explained to the Senate, was that she had designed commercials that led him to resume eating Uncle Ben’s rice. She announced that her goal was to “rebrand” America, and toward that end produced “promos” featuring sheikhs who turned out to be advocates of terrorism. His subsequent three appointees to this position did no better.

Even if Bush has snatched victory from the jaws of defeat in Iraq by ordering the surge, and even if this brings important ancillary gains in the region, our missteps in Iraq have been terribly costly. More than 4,000 American soldiers have died and thirty thousand have been injured. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have perished. In addition, other problems have been neglected, perhaps fatally. The best-case scenario for the future of Iraq will be dwarfed in its strategic significance if a messianic Iran succeeds in developing nuclear weapons.

The price of having bungled Iraq for so long also came into view when Russia invaded Georgia this summer. Having taken a day or two to get his bearings, Bush responded courageously, sending soldiers to help distribute relief, thereby forcing the Russians to come through Americans, albeit not deployed for combat, if they wanted to take Tbilisi. It is likely that the Kremlin intended to do exactly that had the West responded passively. It might then have absorbed Georgia whole or, more subtly, installed a puppet regime, leaving Georgia a status akin to that of Poland or Hungary in Soviet times.

By standing up to Russia, however, Bush left his Iran strategy in shambles since it depended on economic sanctions adopted by the UN Security Council, which requires Moscow’s acquiescence. The West now will have to sacrifice Georgia—which would be a moral shame as well as inviting peril in the rest of the former Soviet empire—or go back to the drawing board on Iran. Of course, the
UN sanctions were never going to work in any case, so perhaps Russia did us a favor by blowing away that cloud of illusion.

If Bush leaves office with a nuclear Iran on the horizon, then it will be hard to judge his presidency a success. Quite deliberately after 9/11, Bush made the war against terror his legacy. He must have realized that this struggle stood no more chance of being brought to conclusion on his watch than the Cold War could have been on Truman’s. Like Truman, he did what he thought right for the country, with little regard for the political consequences to himself. The Iraq War, which, despite the slanders about his motives, he launched for no other reason than to advance the larger war against terror, wrecked his popularity. In the long run, the victory in Iraq that now seems within reach may deal a fatal blow to al-Qaeda and catalyze progress throughout the region. But this will have little meaning, indeed will be unlikely to happen at all, if the region’s most radical, messianic, anti-American, terror-supporting regime acquires nuclear weapons. Consumed by the war in Iraq, Bush lost his handle on the larger problem of Iran, which can only be thwarted in its nuclear ambitions by military strikes. If history is to judge him more kindly than today’s polls, Bush may have to hit one more home run—right into Iran’s nuclear facilities.