

# Escaping the Trap: The Case for Withdrawal from Iraq

President Bush vetoed a bill that called for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq by March 2008, but the debate over the exit strategy for U.S. forces in Iraq continues. On March 14 Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for foreign policy and defense studies at Cato; Steven Simon, senior fellow for Middle East studies at the Council on Foreign Relations; and Lt. Gen. William Odom, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and former director of the National Security Agency, addressed whether and how the United States should leave Iraq.

**TED GALEN CARPENTER:** It is human nature to be reluctant to admit that an enterprise in which one has invested a great deal of time, effort, and money is doomed to fail. Americans have that characteristic in special abundance. We do not like to admit failure. In most aspects of life, that is a very good thing. But in foreign policy, that normal virtue can become a serious defect. It can cause a government to cling to policies long after any hope of success has evaporated. That is what we are doing in Iraq today.

The United States needs to withdraw from Iraq and needs to do so in a matter of months, not years. This is a venture that has failed, is failing, and has no reasonable prospect of success. Therefore, the wisest course of action is to cut our losses.

Why do we need to leave Iraq? The broadest metric is the amount of violence and chaos in that country. In Iraq approximately 120 people a day are dying as a result of political violence. One must put that in context: Iraq is a country of barely 26 million people. A comparable figure for the United States would be between 1,400 and 1,500 people a day, or something close to half a million people a year. If that were happening in the United States, there would be little discussion about whether or

not we were involved in a civil war.

Another metric is the complexity of the violence. The National Intelligence



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Estimate that came out in early February noted that it was only partially correct to refer to the situation in Iraq as a civil war

because the situation is vastly more complex than that. This was not simply a civil war in which two or three well-defined factions face off. This is almost a Hobbesian struggle of all against all—a fight among various factions within the Sunni and Shiite communities and criminal gangs that have no particular ideology but are taking great advantage of the violence.

What the United States is being asked to do militarily at this point is to referee a complex multisided civil war. I cannot think of a more utterly futile and thankless task than that. Yet that is the situation in which we find ourselves.

I will be the first to concede that withdrawing from Iraq is not going to be without cost. Opponents of withdrawal constantly bring that up. They advance a variety of horrors, ranging in plausibility from the extremely unlikely to the rather likely, that are going to occur.

One allegation is that, if we leave Iraq, al-Qaeda is going to gain a safe haven, and it will be just like Afghanistan before 9/11. That is actually the least likely danger. Al-Qaeda, according to the Iraq Study Group, has a grand total of about 1,300 fighters in Iraq today, compared to the thousands it had in Afghanistan before 9/11. In addition, in Afghanistan the al-Qaeda units had the protection of an entrenched friendly government.

In Iraq they will have nothing of the sort. The government is dominated by Kurds and Shiites who are almost unanimous in their hatred of al-Qaeda. A poll conducted by the University of Maryland in September 2006 found that better than 99 percent of Shiite and Kurdish respondents had a negative view of al-Qaeda. But what was surprising about that poll and other indications is that al-Qaeda does not have a good reputation even among Sunnis, its supposed allies in the country. That same poll found that 94 percent of

Sunnis had a negative view of al-Qaeda.

Where is al-Qaeda going to gain protection when the organization is so widely hated in Iraq? At best, al-Qaeda would have a harried existence in a few isolated areas of Iraq, where it might find a handful of allies among Sunnis who are still willing to support the organization after its indiscriminate violence against Muslim civilians.

A second allegation, which has a little more truth to it, is that radical Islamists worldwide will take heart if the United States withdraws from Iraq with something other than a definitive victory. There is no question that al-Qaeda and its allies will portray a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq as a triumph.

We can mitigate that somewhat by redoubling our effort in Afghanistan, still the main headquarters of al-Qaeda, and completing our effort to disrupt its operations in that country, which we have largely forgotten about during our obsession with Iraq. But there is no question that radical Islamists are going to be gratified by anything less than a U.S. victory in Iraq. They will say, with some justification, that they have defeated the U.S. superpower.

Unfortunately, that cannot be helped. It is a problem whether we withdraw from Iraq six months from now or 10 years from now if we have not achieved a definitive victory. That is why any country, and particularly the United States, ought to be hyper-cautious about getting involved in elective wars in the first place. Even a superpower will pay a price for a stupid commitment.

Some of the people who advocate that we stay in Iraq point to how radical Islamists took heart from our withdrawals from Lebanon and Somalia. But what are they recommending—that we should have stayed in Lebanon and Somalia? We could have enjoyed everything we have experienced for the last four years in Iraq in Lebanon two decades ago or in Somalia a decade ago. Those are classic examples of the kind of harebrained missions that the United States should not undertake. Iraq is merely the latest in an unfortunate series.

The third allegation, which has the greatest degree of truth, is that, if we leave, there is a serious danger that the war could

intensify and spread and become a Sunni-Shiite proxy war, perhaps drawing in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other neighboring states.

Unfortunately, there is some danger of that happening. But again, the prospect of a wider war is likely to be a problem if we withdraw six months from now or 10 years from now. Iraq is a totally unstable, fragile entity, and its neighbors have a tremendous interest in what goes on in that country. They also have a tremendous temptation to meddle.

“Every day we stay we spend more in blood and treasure for what we have already achieved.”



I think we should try to mitigate meddling to the extent we can. What that means is trying to get together with Iraq's neighbors to formulate a mutual nonintervention policy and making it clear to them that if they meddle, they risk this war spiraling out of control, something that would ultimately not be in the best interest of any of Iraq's neighbors. There is certainly no guarantee that a U.S. effort to quarantine the violence would succeed. But I think it would be worthwhile to at least confront Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the other neighbors with the very real danger of uncontrolled escalation.

Again, I stress that the United States is going to pay a price whenever it withdraws from Iraq, because we are never going to achieve a definitive victory there. But that cost has to be measured against the cost of staying—something that the supporters of the current policy never, ever talk about.

Our presence in Iraq has weakened our overall position in the war against radical Islamic terrorism. An earlier National Intelligence Estimate conceded that Iraq had become both the inspiration for radical Islamic terrorists and a perfect training ground to hone their murderous craft. Occupying Iraq was a strategic blunder on the part of the United States, and the sooner we end it the better.

Then there are the tangible costs. This war has already cost us well in excess of \$350 billion in direct outlays. That is not even taking into account indirect costs such as the long-term care of the thousands of American soldiers who have been wounded, often severely, in this elective war. Some estimates put the ultimate figure at between \$1 trillion and \$3 trillion. The truth is that nobody really knows, but it is a lot of money, even by Washington, D.C., standards.

Finally, the most important cost is the loss of life. Almost 3,200 U.S. soldiers have been killed in this war. Many others have been so severely wounded that, if the medical care that had existed even at the time of the first Gulf War had been in effect, we would be talking about 6,000 or 8,000 dead in Iraq, not 3,200.

If the nation's security were at stake, if our vital interests had to be protected, 3,200 lives, as tragic as that would be, would be a price that we would have to pay. But for an elective war, it is a price that should never have been paid. We need to end this tragedy. The notion of Iraq as a stable, united, secular, pro-Western democracy that would be a model for the Middle East was always an illusion. We should not ask any more Americans to die for that illusion.

**STEVEN SIMON:** The reason for leaving Iraq is that we have accomplished everything we are going to accomplish. Arguably, we have given Iraq a shot at democracy. I am not

one to think that the Iraqis had a chance of exploiting that opportunity, at least in a meaningful time frame from the kickoff of the war, but, nevertheless, they have had a shot at doing that. Whatever feverish dreams some Iraqis may have had about acquiring weapons of mass destruction have probably been foreclosed by the war for a long time to come. And Saddam Hussein is dead. So, to the extent that he was an issue for Iraqis, well, the Wicked Witch is dead.

So those are the major accomplishments. I do not think that they can be improved upon, which means that every day we stay we spend more in blood and treasure for what we have already achieved.

As long as we are there, we are culpable but not capable—which is to say, we will be held responsible for what happens in Iraq without having the capability to shape events in a positive direction. That is not a great place to be. It leaves us as a bystander to pogroms and ethnic cleansing, large-scale murder, terrorist attacks, and so forth, which accounts in part for the wall-to-wall agreement among Iraqis, including Kurds, that the United States ought to get out.

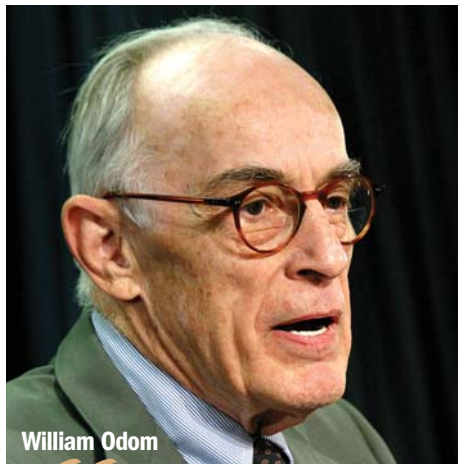
One of the problems with tying up your army is that troops are not available for other uses. So, if the United States needed to coerce other adversaries or potential adversaries, the means of doing so simply would not be available.

There is a similar crowding-out effect at the level of national decisionmaking. If you have a crisis like Iraq happening, decision-makers—the cabinet, the National Security Council, departments, and agencies—simply do not have the time to focus on other issues. That is bad because the world is not getting any simpler.

The war in Iraq is siphoning resources away from Afghanistan. That raises the prospect of two strategic defeats in south-west Asia instead of one.

One reason for staying that the administration has put forward is that a U.S. withdrawal would hand a strategic victory to Iran and al-Qaeda. That argument stems from one particular way of diagnosing Iraq's problems.

There are two paradigms that have been used to explain what is going on in Iraq. On the one hand, there is the outside paradigm. In this paradigm you have responsible nationalist Iraqis of sound mind and body who want to create a post-Baathist state in a democratic fashion, but they are being undermined at every turn by outsiders—Iran on the one side, al-Qaeda on the other. In this view, if those Iraqis are deserted militarily by the United States, then Iran and al-Qaeda will be handed a victory.



William Odom

“We have gone to war, not in our own interests, but primarily in the interests of Iran and al-Qaeda.”

But there is another paradigm for understanding what is going on in Iraq. In this paradigm, you have had 37 years of Baathist rule, during most of which civil society, that essential transmission belt between society and the establishment of a democracy, was stamped out. It was extirpated by the Baathists. Then you had 12 years of UN sanctions, which gutted the middle class, chased it out of the country or impoverished it. A middle class is essential for normal politics. And then there was the decapitation of the Iraqi government by the U.S.-UK invasion, which did not replace any of the lost governmental capac-

ity, and that in turn gave rise to militias.

So in this paradigm, the problem is not outsiders. The problem is an environment that cannot produce normal politics. In a situation like that, opportunists move in, not just from inside like the militia leaders but from outside like Iran and al-Qaeda. But as the new National Intelligence Estimate has said quite explicitly, the violence in Iraq is now internal and self-sustaining, and outsiders have very little to do with it.

Another fear is regional chaos. This is something that National Security Advisor Steve Hadley has spelled out in a number of places, most recently in the *Washington Post*. The idea is that, if the United States withdraws from Baghdad, it will be the end of the world as we know it. If you look historically at the experience of the Middle East, though, civil wars do not turn into regional wars. If you look at Algeria, Yemen—even Lebanon, where the Israeli and Syrian piece of it was very carefully controlled by both governments—you did not get a regional war from a civil war.

**WILLIAM ODOM:** I remember the Vietnam War in which I was one of the pacification development planners, much engaged in counterinsurgency. I would like to talk about what Iraq looks like through the Vietnam prism. Sure, there are huge differences, but historical analogies are always imperfect. The question is whether they are instructive. I find a very instructive analogy if you break the Vietnam War into three periods.

The first period was 1961 to 1965, when the United States was trying to decide what its strategic objective was. What was our strategic purpose? What were our war aims?

They became sloganeered into preventing the dominos from falling or containing China. Anyone who knew the area well knew that the Vietnamese were going to contain China. By 1961 or 1962 we knew that the Soviets and the Chinese were not cooperating. By 1965 it was very clear that a major Soviet objective was to limit China's influence in the region.

So we went to war essentially in support

of the interests of the Soviet Union in the containment of China—not a wise thing to do. The rationale for doing that was phony intelligence about what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin. Phony intelligence and the wrong strategic purpose were the key features of this first period.

The same thing has happened in Iraq. We have gone to war on phony intelligence, and we have gone to war, not in our own interests, but primarily in the interests of Iran and al-Qaeda.

The second phase was from 1965 to about 1968 or 1969. It was no longer possible in the United States in those years to discuss the strategic purpose. That was off limits. Nobody wanted to talk about that. We could only talk about how to fight better. So we forgot the strategy and we went to the tactics. Those of you who lived through it remember all the new counterinsurgency doctrines that we went through. They were not going to change the basic strategic structure of the situation.

That period ended as the Congress

turned against the president. That president, unlike this one, had the grace to yield and to more or less concede that he had it wrong. When the Nixon administration came in, it pretended to follow that change but expanded the war. The slogans were Vietnamization and diplomacy to get us out, assuming the Russians and the North Vietnamese would help us out in negotiations in Paris.

So that period was characterized by phony diplomacy in Paris. There was no reason for the Soviets to help us out. We were self-destructing on our own. We were drawing down from NATO and weakening the alliance. Almost every major Soviet foreign policy objective was being helped by our staying in Viet Nam.

The other part was Vietnamization—standing up the Vietnamese army so we could stand down the U.S. Army. Well, eventually, we flew out of the embassy in helicopters.

In Iraq we are at the end of the second period and beginning to move into the third. The question now is not whether we are going to get out. It is whether we are

going to stay and fly out of the Green Zone in helicopters. Given the path we are on, we will probably fly out of the Green Zone, because we have Iraqization, with all the flaws that has, and we have phony diplomacy in Baghdad over a deal between two sectarian groups and one ethnic group on a constitutional order. A constitutional system requires agreement among the elites on the rules for deciding who rules, on the rules for making new rules, and on the rights the ruler cannot abridge.

Can you imagine that those three groups are going to decide on that? And who are the elites? Anybody with enough guns or money, or both, to violate the rules with impunity.

Constitutional orders have been rare. We have only about two dozen of them right now. The idea that we can go in and create a constitutional order by ventriloquy in this part of the world defies the wildest imaginings about how these things come about. I do not think Americans have a clue as to how constitutions come about. In fact, we do not even talk about constitutions anymore. We talk about democracy.

## CATO PUBLICATIONS

### Book Challenges Federal Role in Education

In 2002 Secretary of Education Rod Paige stood in front of a quaint, picture-perfect schoolhouse, complete with slanted roofs and bell towers, and proclaimed, “We do not serve a faceless bureaucracy or an unchangeable system. We serve an ideal. We serve the ideal of the little red schoolhouse.”

But inside that little building was not what one would expect: simple desks and chalkboards. Instead, inside was the hulking mass of a building that is the Department of Education. The little red schoolhouse was not a schoolhouse at all; it was merely a façade erected in front of the large building to celebrate the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act.

For Neal McCluskey, policy analyst at Cato’s Center for Educational Freedom, the fact that this idealistic symbol was a fake is appropriate. As he argues in his new book *Feds in the Classroom: How Big Gov-*

*ernment Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education*, No Child Left Behind is the latest and worst policy in a recent trend that has empowered faceless bureaucracies and cheated parents and students. His book takes us from the very beginning of education in America up to the present day in which Washington can dictate to most of the schools in this country what will be taught, when, and by whom.

Two centuries ago the Founders rejected federal participation in education and even rejected George Washington’s plan to establish a national university. It should be no surprise, then, that the term “education” appears nowhere in the Constitution. Few early Americans would have considered providing education a proper function of local or state governments, much less some distant federal government.

But history is only part of McCluskey’s book. He navigates the maze of federal education programs to document their increasing cost to taxpayers and then argues that there has been little or no improvement in education as a result of that spending, even if one uses the federal government’s own measurements of achievement. The final chapters of the book provide ways out of this morass, including one that has been with us all along: follow the Constitution, which never gave the federal government any authority over education in the first place. McCluskey outlines for readers the steps America should take so parents and children will no longer have to accept the education that higher powers and experts decide is right for them.

You can order *Feds in the Classroom* at [catostore.org](http://catostore.org) for \$19.95 paperback.

