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Access Details: [subscription number 783988527]  
Publisher: Routledge  
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## Survival

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:  
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713659919>

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Online Publication Date: 01 December 2007

To cite this Article: Fettweis, Christopher J. (2007) 'On the Consequences of Failure in Iraq', *Survival*, 49:4, 83 - 98

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/00396330701733852

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396330701733852>

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# On the Consequences of Failure in Iraq

Christopher J. Fettweis

On the fourth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush repeated his oft-expressed belief that the consequences of a premature withdrawal would be 'devastating' for American security.<sup>1</sup> Senator John McCain whole-heartedly agrees, although he prefers the words 'catastrophic', 'disastrous' and 'grave'.<sup>2</sup> Few critics of the war seem to question that assessment – those who support an immediate pullout do not doubt catastrophe, but instead seem to be willing to live with the inevitable, dire consequences.

Indeed, if there is one belief that unites all sides of the various arguments about current policy, it is this: were the United States to remove its troops from Iraq, the region would be swept into unprecedented chaos, lawlessness and internecine violence. Sunnis and Shi'ites would fight a genocidal final battle; al-Qaeda, safely out of the reach of justice, would be able to attract recruits by the thousands and go on the offensive; war would spread throughout the region and beyond, arriving eventually at America's own shores. Terrorism would increase and oil prices would skyrocket, alongside an inevitable humanitarian catastrophe of unparalleled intensity. It is little wonder, then, that Bush has redoubled US efforts to bring stability to the region.

Fortunately for a nation on the edge of defeat, none of those catastrophes are particularly likely, even in the wake of a rapid US pullout. There are good reasons to believe that a post-occupation Iraq would not pose the stark dangers to international stability that most seem to expect. Furthermore, even if the worst imaginable scenarios do occur, they are not likely to be as catastrophic as the pessimists would have us believe. The United States could pull out of Iraq without much risk to itself, its allies or the region. Continued occupation should not receive the benefit of the doubt.

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### A brief history of the future

All policy choices are based upon implicit predictions. If, for example, one believed that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime was likely to produce a healthy, market-oriented democracy – say, a Japan – in five years, a nation that presented a shining example for the region and decreased anti-American hostility in the Arab world, the choice to go to war would have been easy. If, on the other hand, one believed that war in Iraq would create an untenable situation, a festering wound of a guerrilla war that would fan the flames of fundamentalism, who in their right mind would have lent support? President Bush's vision of the post-Saddam future was decisive in the process of making the choices that led to war. Evaluating predictions is one of the most important tasks facing the decision-maker.

Those who study prediction in international affairs can offer three simple, practical rules to assist those who carry the awful burden of foreign-policy decision-making. None are absolute, of course, but they do help separate likely outcomes from unlikely, and should allow policymakers to calculate realistic policy risks. All suggest that the outcome in Iraq is likely to be less catastrophic than the current pessimism suggests.

Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, policymakers should keep in mind that *the unprecedented is also unlikely*. Outliers in international behaviour do exist, but in general the past is the best guide to the future. Since the geopolitical catastrophes that pessimists expect will follow US withdrawal are all virtually without precedent, common sense should tell policymakers they are probably also unlikely to occur. Five years ago, US leaders should have realised that their implicit prediction for the aftermath of invasion – positive, creative instability in the Middle East that would set off a string of democratic dominoes – was without precedent. The policy was based more on the president's unshakeable faith in the redemptive power of democracy than on a coherent understanding of international relations. Like all faith-based policies, success would have required a miracle; in international politics, miracles are unfortunately rare. Faith is once again driving predictions of post-withdrawal Iraq, but this time it is faith in chaos and worst-case scenarios.

Secondly, *imagined consequences are usually worse than what reality delivers*. Human beings tend to focus on the most frightening scenarios at the expense of the most likely, and anticipate outcomes far worse than those that usually occur. This is especially true in the United States, which for a variety of reasons has consistently overestimated the dangers lurking in the international system.<sup>3</sup> Pre-war Iraq was no exception; post-war Iraq is not likely to be either.

The most significant consequences to the United States of failure are more likely to be felt in the realm of domestic politics than national security. The third observation about prediction is that *the natural human distaste for defeat distorts rational evaluation of likely outcomes*. No one likes to lose, of course; as long-time baseball manager and amateur philosopher Sparky Anderson is said to have first observed, losing hurts twice as bad as winning feels good. Psychologists have long understood that, as a general rule, human beings are haunted by their failures to a far greater extent than they are inspired by their successes.<sup>4</sup> Policymakers can easily fall into the trap of envisioning war to be a contest of wills rather than politics by other means, which encourages the pursuit of victory for victory's sake, whether or not the interest of the nation is served. States are likely to continue fighting long after the war ceases serving their interest.

Three major catastrophes would follow failure, according to current conventional wisdom: increased Islamist terrorism, regional chaos and humanitarian disaster. But if the three aforementioned observations are correct, it would seem that none of these consequences are particularly likely.

### Increased terrorism

Perhaps the most powerful argument for staying in Iraq is that failure would bring about a large-scale increase in terrorism against the United States and its allies. It is certainly the reason most commonly cited by the Bush administration to justify continued occupation. In his 22 May 2007 commencement address at the Coast Guard Academy and the press conference that followed the next day, Bush used the words 'al-Qaeda' 67 times. Among the terms not mentioned even once were 'civil war', 'insurgency', 'militia', 'guerrilla', 'death squads', 'Sunni', 'Shi'ite' and 'Kurd'. Although al-Maliki, al-Sadr and all other Iraqis whose names are not 'Hussein' went unmentioned, Osama bin Laden earned 14 references.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, the administration sees the war in Iraq as the central front of its 'war on terror', and wants the American people to believe that a precipitous withdrawal would boost the global extremist movement in both symbolic and practical ways. Firstly, a victory would confirm al-Qaeda's repeated claim that the United States is a 'paper tiger' unwilling or unable to prosecute a war to its conclusion, which would serve as a major boost to the group's recruiting efforts. Secondly, al-Qaeda's newly swelled ranks would find a convenient home in chaotic Iraq, which would provide a perfect safe haven for any number of terrorist operations across the region and around the world. Finally, violence would eventually 'follow the US troops home' and bring the jihad to the United

States – a belief the president has expressed, with minor variations, dozens of times, and a virtual article of faith within hawkish circles.

Fortunately, whether taken together or considered separately, these three lines of reasoning do not form a particularly convincing argument.

### *Credibility, paper tigers and jihad*

Our credibility is at stake in the Middle East. There's a lot of Middle Eastern nations wondering whether the United States of America is willing to push back against radicals and extremists, no matter what their religious bases may be.

President Bush, 24 May 2007

It has become quite popular to compare Iraq to Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> Although the analogy falls short in many ways, one clear similarity between the two is the belief in some circles that failure would deal a powerful blow to US credibility, with long-lasting negative implications. Vietnam itself was never particularly important to the United States, but the importance of maintaining credible commitments compelled Washington to remain engaged long after the outcome was clear.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, policymakers today argue that al-Qaeda found great inspiration from the debacles in Lebanon and Somalia. Indeed, al-Qaeda propaganda tells a version of events in Mogadishu that makes the battle seem to have been a glorious victory by the forces of Islam, instead of a rather one-sided affair that pitted hordes of untrained Somalis against elite troops of the world's best military. Somalia and Lebanon seem to have become integral to bin Laden's narrative misinterpretation of history. Would a pullout from Iraq supply Osama and other radicals with an important propaganda coup?

There are good reasons to believe that the answer is 'no', and to doubt the proposition that healthy credibility keeps America safer. First of all, relative levels of US credibility do not seem to have affected terrorist calculations in the past. Islamists have struck when American credibility was presumably high, such as after the successful first Gulf War, the air strikes in Kosovo and the overthrow of the Taliban; and when it has seemed low, after Somalia and during the current Iraq debate. Al-Qaeda hardly seems to need demonstrations of US fecklessness in order to be inspired to act. It is quite a stretch to believe that if US troops had not been pulled out of Lebanon or Somalia, al-Qaeda would have acted any differently throughout the 1990s. For this conventional wisdom about the importance of credibility in the 'war on terror' to be correct, al-Qaeda's behaviour would have to have been different if the United States had not pulled

out of Somalia when it did. If the group would have attacked either way – and it is certainly plausible to think that it would have – then perceptions of US credibility are not particularly relevant. Presumably Islamists are not awaiting a great victory before they can be ‘emboldened’ to strike again. By all accounts, they are sufficiently bold now. If such organisations had the capability to strike, presumably they would do so, post-haste, irrespective of the level of credibility of the their great enemy.

Second, al-Qaeda’s perceptions and descriptions of US credibility are likely to remain largely unaffected by Washington’s attempt to control them. The strategy of a weak actor in extreme asymmetry must always be based on the premise that, although it may not be able to employ tangible assets to win the war, intangible, moral elements will prove decisive. For example, since they lacked the military power to force a retreat, the mujahadeen in Afghanistan needed to preach that the Soviet Union would prove irresolute in order to convince its fighters that resistance was not utterly pointless. Likewise, bin Laden must paint the United States as a paper tiger or no one will rally to his cause. No matter what the behaviour of the strong actually is, the weak are likely to accuse it of irresolution. Since jihadist groups have no hope of success without a degree of superpower vacillation, it is unlikely that any amount of credibility will cause these groups to abandon that belief (or hope).

Would a US withdrawal help bin Laden prove the point he will inevitably make about US irresolution? Probably not, since al-Qaeda and its allies have never shown much interest in the accuracy of their statements. No matter what the United States and its allies do, bin Laden is likely to twist the truth and argue that each succeeding action is further proof of his claims. Many regions of the world have populations quite sympathetic to the argument that, despite its apparent strength, the United States is actually a weak, feminised, immoral, corrupt paper tiger. The Middle East, where conspiracy theories often find wide audiences, is seemingly fertile ground for bin Laden’s interpretation of US irresolution. In other words, US actions are not likely to have direct bearing on the interpretation of US credibility in the region, or on the outcome of the ‘war on terror’, for better or for worse.

Finally, a loss of US credibility is unlikely to lead to a boon in recruiting for al-Qaeda. The Islamist movement is, after all, hardly devoid of potential rallying cries. Ending the war in Iraq may actually prove to be damaging to ter-

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rorist recruiting, since the US occupation appears to be providing inspiration for potential jihadists all across the region. Continued unconditional support for Israel provides better recruiting slogans than withdrawal ever could. It is simply backwards to think that extremist recruiting will improve when the United States leaves Iraq, since a pullout could not be more useful for al-Qaeda than the continuing presence of American troops in Arab lands. If Washington is truly concerned about the numbers of Islamist terrorists, the best move is immediate withdrawal.

A moment's historical perspective may provide a bit of comfort and clarity. Many of the same analysts who warn of post-Iraq catastrophes also held that if the United States failed in Vietnam, the blow to US credibility would have had dire consequences. Henry Kissinger's beliefs were by no means atypical: withdrawal from Vietnam would threaten 'the political stability of Europe and Japan and the future evolution of the developing countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia', and would represent a 'fundamental threat, over a period of time, to the security of the United States'.<sup>8</sup> The Soviets would have been emboldened to fuel more communist fires across the Third World; America's allies would have begun to doubt the sincerity of our commitments, and would have grown vulnerable to Soviet threats and intimidation; and those countries in the middle ground – the neutrals – would have begun to believe that Marxism represented the wave of the future. Dominoes would have fallen, and the United States would have been left far worse off than before.

However, international geopolitical disaster did not follow defeat in Vietnam. Although communist activity did increase somewhat in the 1970s, it only occurred in countries that were even less relevant to the balance of power than Vietnam, such as Cambodia, Angola, Ethiopia and Mozambique. As scholars like Ted Hopf and Robert Johnson have demonstrated, Soviet adventurism did not increase in the 1970s – actions on the periphery were reactions to changing opportunities, such as the collapse of Ethiopia's monarchy and Portugal's empire, not US impotence.<sup>9</sup> It is quite hard to make a convincing case that these extra-regional dominoes were dependent upon a perceived loss of US credibility. Not only did no string of catastrophes follow the collapse of South Vietnam, but the Cold War ended 14 years later. The fears of those making de-escalation decisions proved to be entirely unfounded.

Vietnam was hardly unique. Throughout the Cold War, those obsessed with protecting the credibility of the United States supported the most hawkish options in every policy debate, and warned of preposterously hyperbolic consequences of failure to follow them.<sup>10</sup> This predictable pattern is repeating itself yet again in the debate over what to do following the debacle in Iraq.

Former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird has warned that 'the stakes could not be higher for *the continued existence of our own democracy*'.<sup>11</sup> Kissinger fears that a premature pullout from Iraq would be disastrous for America's position in the world, and that the 'respite from military efforts would be brief before even greater crises descended upon us'.<sup>12</sup> Since defeat in Vietnam did not lead to any of the predicted disasters, perhaps the burden of proof should be on those who today argue that Iraq is different, that unprecedented catastrophe would follow failure. At the very least, the conventional wisdom regarding the inevitable catastrophes that would follow US withdrawal is in critical need of re-examination.

### *Safe havens*

The threats of the twenty-first century seem to turn realpolitik on its head – rather than the strength of other states, today we often fear their weakness. Those states that cannot control their borders, or cannot (or will not) act against non-state actors operating on their territory, seem to be of primary concern to Washington. This helps promote the fear that a US pullout from Iraq would leave behind a lawless, ungovernable, anarchic void, where Islamist activity could thrive. This might be termed the 'Taliban fear', since it is drawn from the chaotic, post-Soviet Afghan precedent, where the Taliban government was too weak to resist the temptations of al-Qaeda money. Thomas Friedman has warned that a pullout would turn Iraq into 'Afghanistan on steroids'.<sup>13</sup>

Putting aside the rather tendentious observation that the United States displaced a fairly strong central government when it decided to invade Iraq, it does not take long to realise that such fears are probably misplaced. Failed states are relatively rare in international politics – the few examples that exist are memorable precisely because they are the exception, not the rule. A post-occupation Iraq might be splintered and all-but-officially partitioned, but it is not likely to turn into Somalia on the Tigris. Power vacuums in Arab societies tend to be filled rather quickly. Temporary chaos in the wake of a US pullout is quite likely, but Afghanistan-like long-term state failure is not. A government – perhaps three – will soon emerge to bring stability to the country, possibly in the wake of civil war. The new government(s) might resemble Iraqi precedents more than Washington would like, but by then all will likely have come to realise that stability and effective governance is in everyone's interest. The stability will be welcome, and overdue.

But even if Iraq does descend into complete chaos without the US military presence, it does not seem to be fertile soil for the weeds of radicalism. As bad as the sectarian violence is, the Iraqi people – Kurd, Shia and Sunni alike – have



shown no eagerness to replace Ba'athist tyranny with fundamentalist Islam. Few in the region seem to have any illusions about how an al-Qaeda-like regime would rule. In poll after poll, Iraqis show no desire to follow an Iranian model of fundamentalism. Bin Laden may arouse sympathy across the Arab world due to his opposition to the United States, but few have demonstrated a wish to have him as their leader. Rising anti-Americanism in the 'Arab street' does not necessarily translate into sympathy for al-Qaeda. While it is not hard to imagine Iraq descending into the kind of chaos that engulfed Algeria in the 1990s, where tens of thousands died during a particularly vicious civil war, it is important to remember what Algeria was not – despite the presence of Islamists, it never became a safe haven for Islamists to export terrorism. Iraq is not Pashtunistan. Its people have always been less conservative, more progressive and hostile to al-Qaeda's brand of Islamic fundamentalism.

The much-publicised post-surge events in Anbar province provide further evidence of al-Qaeda's unpopularity in Iraq. Throughout the so-called 'Sunni Triangle', which had been the hotbed of al-Qaeda activity, local tribes have been

turning against the fundamentalist, often foreign elements in their midst. If al-Qaeda is not welcome among the Sunnis, it will not be able to flourish anywhere. Were US troops to withdraw, nationwide purges of al-Qaeda seem to be more likely than a broad Sunni fundamentalist takeover.

One might be forgiven for wondering why there is such concern about 'safe havens' in the first place. The training a terrorist needs is obviously rather minimal in comparison to that of a soldier in a regular army.

Basic competence with explosives is the only necessary skill, and it is one whose instruction does not require a haven, as Palestinian groups amply demonstrate. A garage is sufficient. Those skills displayed prominently on al-Qaeda propaganda videos, which include recruits swinging from monkey bars and crawling under ropes, are of little utility in the kinds of attacks commonly perpetrated by modern terrorists. Most terrorists throughout history, in fact, seem to have been able to function just fine without much training at all.<sup>14</sup> No safe haven was necessary to perpetrate the 11 September attacks – the cells that planned and perpetrated the hijackings operated clandestinely in Germany, and could have presumably done so whether or not Osama was safe in Kandahar. Sanctuary for terrorists was not necessary to execute the multitude of attacks that have occurred since the deposition of the Taliban, from Madrid to Bali to London, nor are safe havens a *sine qua non* for the daily attacks in Iraq.

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Safe havens do not seem to be helpful – much less necessary – for the perpetration of terrorism.

Thus even if this unlikely worst-case scenario unfolds and Iraq descends into utter lawlessness, the increase in the terrorist threat to the United States is likely to be minimal. Terrorists are likely to be only marginally more effective when given a safe haven thousands of miles away than they are when operating *sub rosa* in a hostile environment. Those who fear the development of a terrorist sanctuary in a post-occupation Iraq must explain why a minor increase in their operational capability justifies a major expenditure of blood and treasure.

### *Following US troops home*

We left Vietnam, it was over, we just had to heal the wounds of war. We leave this place ... and they'll follow us home. So there's a great deal more at stake here in this conflict in my view. A lot more.

John McCain, December 2006<sup>15</sup>

Intelligence assessments should not be required to cast serious doubt upon the idea that a post-withdrawal United States would soon have to 'fight them over here'. Such assessments do exist,<sup>16</sup> but all one should really need is a bit of common sense. The ability of any group to perpetrate acts of terror is a combination of capability and intent; even if such groups had the intent – which is not clear, since there have been very few (if any) incidents of terrorism perpetrated by Iraqis outside of their borders – they certainly would not have the capability. It is immeasurably easier for the average Iraqi to attack US forces 'over there' than 'over here'. Acquiring visas to travel to the United States is going to prove difficult for members of the Mahdi Army. The suggestion that we would soon have to fight terrorists 'over here' is an example of meaningless political theatre, and unworthy of serious rebuttal.

### **Regional chaos**

Without the US presence, a second argument goes, nothing would prevent Sunni–Shia violence from sweeping into every country where the religious divide exists. A Sunni bloc with centres in Riyadh and Cairo might face a Shia bloc headquartered in Tehran, both of which would face enormous pressure from their own people to fight proxy wars across the region. In addition to intra-Muslim civil war, cross-border warfare could not be ruled out. Jordan might be the first to send troops into Iraq to secure its own border; once the dam breaks, Iran, Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia might follow suit. The Middle East

has no shortage of rivalries, any of which might descend into direct conflict after a destabilising US withdrawal. In the worst case, Iran might emerge as the regional hegemon, able to bully and blackmail its neighbours with its new nuclear arsenal. Saudi Arabia and Egypt would soon demand suitable deterrents of their own, and a nuclear arms race would envelop the region. Once again, however, none of these outcomes is particularly likely.

### *Wider war*

No matter what the outcome in Iraq, the region is not likely to devolve into chaos. Although it might seem counter-intuitive, by most traditional measures the Middle East is very stable. Continuous, uninterrupted governance is the norm, not the exception; most Middle East regimes have been in power for decades. Its monarchies, from Morocco to Jordan to every Gulf state, have generally been in power since these countries gained independence. In Egypt Hosni Mubarak has ruled for almost three decades, and Muammar Gadhafi in Libya for almost four. The region's autocrats have been more likely to die quiet, natural deaths than meet the hangman or post-coup firing squads. Saddam's rather unpredictable regime, which attacked its neighbours twice, was one of the few exceptions to this pattern of stability, and he met an end unusual for the modern Middle East. Its regimes have survived potentially destabilising shocks before, and they would be likely to do so again.

The region actually experiences very little cross-border warfare, and even less since the end of the Cold War. Saddam again provided an exception, as did the Israelis, with their adventures in Lebanon. Israel fought four wars with neighbouring states in the first 25 years of its existence, but none in the 34 years since. Vicious civil wars that once engulfed Lebanon and Algeria have gone quiet, and its ethnic conflicts do not make the region particularly unique.

The biggest risk of an American withdrawal is intensified civil war in Iraq rather than regional conflagration. Iraq's neighbours will likely not prove eager to fight each other to determine who gets to be the next country to spend itself into penury propping up an unpopular puppet regime next door. As much as the Saudis and Iranians may threaten to intervene on behalf of their co-religionists, they have shown no eagerness to replace the counter-insurgency role that American troops play today. If the United States, with its remarkable military and unlimited resources, could not bring about its desired solutions in Iraq, why would any other country think it could do so?<sup>17</sup>

Common interest, not the presence of the US military, provides the ultimate foundation for stability. All ruling regimes in the Middle East share a common (and understandable) fear of instability. It is the interest of every actor – the

Iraqis, their neighbours and the rest of the world – to see a stable, functioning government emerge in Iraq. If the United States were to withdraw, increased regional cooperation to address that common interest is far more likely than outright warfare.

Even a Turkish invasion of the north is hardly inevitable. Withdrawal from Iraq would, after all, hardly rob the United States of all its tools with which to influence events. Washington and the rest of NATO still wield significant influence over Ankara; a cross-border invasion would almost certainly doom Turkey's prospects of entering the European Union. It is puzzling why anyone would think that no incentive structure could be devised to convince Turkey not to attack its neighbour.

Should such an assault prove undeterrable, it is not clear that intervention would be in the strategic interest of the United States. One of the worst suggestions that occasionally surfaces in the withdrawal debate is that the United States should 'redeploy' troops to Kurdistan in northern Iraq, in order to 'deter' Turkey and reward its Kurdish allies.<sup>18</sup> Such a move would allow a continuation of what amounts to state-sponsored terrorism, and risk embroiling the United States in yet another local, intractable conflict. The removal of de facto US protection would presumably encourage the Kurds to act more responsibly toward their more powerful neighbours, and may well prove to be good for stability. Clearly, elements in Kurdistan actively support Kurdistan Workers' Party terrorists in Turkey, but that would change if they faced the possibility of paying a price for their behaviour.

A regional descent into the whirlwind following a US withdrawal cannot be ruled out; using that logic, neither can benevolent transitions to democracy. Just because a scenario is imaginable does not make it likely. In fact, most of the chaotic outcomes pessimists predict require unprecedented breaks with the past. Since the United States has historically overestimated the threats it faces, there is every reason to believe that it is doing so again.

### *Persian Gulf oil*

Iraq sits in the middle of the most important resource neighborhood in the world. Major disruptions in the flow of Persian Gulf oil can obviously have immediate, worldwide economic consequences. The economic performance of the global north is inversely related to the price of oil. Therefore, maintaining a healthy flow of oil from the Gulf is high on the list of US priorities. But there is little reason to believe that a US military presence in the region is necessary to ensure the oil supply. It is in the interests of all parties involved – producers, middle-men and consumers – to keep Gulf oil flowing, no matter the political

situation. Oil does no one any good in the ground. No common interest unites the major oil producers more than the need to maintain the stability that assures the spigot will always be on.

Cross-border warfare to control territory containing fossil fuels is exceptionally rare. It is not impossible, as Saddam's Kuwait misadventure demonstrated, and outright conquest is not the only way that the flow of oil can be disrupted. Sabotage, intimidation, terrorism and other kinds of economic warfare all could interfere with the oil trade and cause steep fluctuations at the pump. However, instability has not always resulted in diminutions of supply – even the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War failed to have much of an impact on oil production, despite the fact that much of the fighting occurred within artillery range of major oil terminals and facilities.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, a good case can be made that the cost of temporary reductions in supply would hardly outweigh the long-term benefits in savings that US withdrawal would bring. Would oil-price volatility cost the United States more than the \$2 billion per week currently being spent in Iraq?

No matter who is in charge of Saudi Arabia, or Kuwait, or the UAE, there is every reason to believe that they will have strong incentives to sell oil to the

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industrialised consumer states. Brookings Scholar Shibley Telhami has found that 'a change in regime from moderate to radical in one state does not appear to alter the pattern of that state's foreign trade'.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the Cold War, the nature of Gulf regimes had little or no impact on who they traded with, or how much. Moreover, 2007 is not 1973; boycotts can no longer target individual countries. Modern oil companies control distribution and will

make adjustments to keep their customers satisfied and protect profits. Today market forces, not political machinations, determine price and distribution of oil.<sup>21</sup> Unfriendly dominance of the Gulf, itself unlikely, would not alter the fact that producers of oil must sell in order to benefit. As long as that remains true, the United States will never be cut off from the source of its addiction.

Few events would spur more US investment in both new domestic exploration and alternative sources of energy, both of which are long overdue, than the prospect of a draw-down of US hegemony in the Gulf. Calls for energy independence for logical strategic, economic and environmental reasons have been common since 11 September, but little of substance has been accomplished. Perhaps what is needed is a Cortez approach, where Washington burns its ties to the Gulf to force a reluctant nation on to what might be a long road to energy independence.

## Humanitarian disaster

Without the presence of US troops to bring a measure of stability to the Middle East, we are told, the forces of chaos would be set loose, unleashing all manner of anarchy and bloodshed. Stephen Biddle maintains that 'genocide is a real possibility' in the wake of a US withdrawal, and that the 'risk of mass slaughter is especially high'.<sup>22</sup> James Carafano of the Heritage Foundation has warned of 'Rwanda writ large'.<sup>23</sup>

Predictions of post-defeat bloodbaths are common in arguments to continue fighting, especially among those who refuse to admit failure. After the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, hawks in the British Parliament warned of the thousands of Loyalists who would be slaughtered if the redcoats were withdrawn.<sup>24</sup> No such slaughter occurred. In November 1969, President Richard Nixon warned that a precipitate US withdrawal from Vietnam would be followed by massacres by a victorious North. At a press conference six months later, he said that removing American troops would 'allow the enemy to come into Vietnam and massacre the civilians there by the millions, as they would'.<sup>25</sup>

One often hears echoes of Vietnam in the debate today, warnings that the United States has a moral obligation to prevent a repeat of the post-1975 slaughter of its South Vietnamese allies. That such horrors befell the people of South Vietnam has become an article of faith for those urging perseverance in Iraq,<sup>26</sup> but the vast majority of scholars, journalists and analysts who have investigated this question – from the far right to the far left, official US government sources to non-governmental human-rights organisations – now agree that no such slaughter took place.<sup>27</sup> Ho Chi Minh City was not a pleasant place to live in the decade that followed its name change, and the Hanoi government established a number of 're-education camps' where the suffering was great. And certainly many – perhaps tens of thousands – who fled the country in boats died along the way. But there was no large-scale, genocidal bloodshed of the kind predicted by pessimists. A few revisionist, but manifestly weak, arguments during the 1980s, seem to have been sufficient to give rise to the persistent myth of post-war slaughter.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Vietnam experienced chaos, reprisals and violence after its civil war not dissimilar to the experience of other societies. Reconstruction in the United States after the Civil War, after all, was hardly non-violent.

Today there is little reason to believe that the rather limited number of American troops is all that stands between the Iraqi people and genocide. The bloodletting in Iraq could be worse than it is under the current US occupation, of course, and increased violence not only cannot be ruled out, it is probable. However, the United States should not operate under the old saw 'the devil we know is better than the devil we don't', since the devil we know results in the

deaths of over a hundred Iraqi civilians every day. Short-term paroxysms of bloodshed can be preferable to slow, long-term bleeding.

Fortunately, such paroxysms are probably not very likely to begin with. Predictions of a post-withdrawal bloodbath are likely to prove yet another example of the tendency of Americans to exaggerate threats. In the long run, one of two outcomes is likely in the wake of US withdrawal: political accommodation or a civil war that eventually *someone wins*, putting an overdue end to the bloodshed. Neither can happen as long as US troops are present in Iraq, prolonging its agony.

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Once one decides an adhesive bandage must be removed, there is an unpleasant choice to be made: proceed slowly, ripping it of a little at a time, or act quickly and remove it all at once. The former unnecessarily prolongs the pain and suffering; the latter, while worse in the short term, brings the agony to a quicker end. Only when the bandage is off can healing begin.

While no one likes to lose a war, a good debate on the way ahead cannot take place until the most likely consequences of defeat are separated from the fantastic and the illusory. Policymakers must understand that significant strategic risk would not accompany a withdrawal from Iraq. The unprecedented is also unlikely – region-wide wars, collapsing Middle Eastern regimes and expanding terrorism are all unprecedented events, no matter the outcome in Iraq. And if historical patterns are any indication of future events, Americans are probably overestimating the danger posed by defeat.

To the degree the fear of catastrophe following withdrawal from Iraq is related to the human fear of the unknown, it is understandable; to the degree it is motivated by concern for the Iraqi people, it is noble. Indeed there ought to be no illusions about what would most likely follow a US withdrawal: ethnic cleansing until the various sides are able to come to an agreement, increased short-term regional tension and uncertainty, and bitter domestic discord for a generation. But strategic catastrophe, and damage to tangible US interests, are unlikely, and should not provide the basis for policymaking. The United States must not let fantasies of unprecedented regional disaster drive its decisions about how best to recover from this ill-considered and mismanaged war. One catastrophic error need not beget another.

Complete withdrawal should be the first task of whoever wins the presidency in 2008. By avoiding an agonising, Vietnam-like drawdown, the task of dealing with the real consequences of this administration's mistakes can begin. Since

there is little reason to believe that Iraq will be more ready to stand on its own in one or two or even ten more years of occupation, there is nothing to be gained by delaying the inevitable US departure. Ripping the bandage off all at once, while frightening and painful, will minimise whatever suffering is on its way.

## Notes

- 1 President George W. Bush, Remarks on the Fourth Anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom, 19 March 2007.
- 2 George F. Will, 'America's Moral Duty in Iraq', *Washington Post*, 4 December 2006, p. A19; Glenn Frankel, 'The McCain Makeover', *Washington Post Magazine*, 27 August 2006, p. W12; John McCain, 'The War You're Not Reading About', *Washington Post*, 8 April 2007, p. B07.
- 3 On the enhanced threat perceptions of the United States, see John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994); and Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There In the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Touchstone, 2001).
- 4 Prospect theory is usually said to have been developed by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in the late 1970s. See their 'Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk', *Econometrica*, vol. 47, no. 2, March 1979, pp. 263–91.
- 5 Both the speech and the transcript of the press conference are available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.
- 6 Some of the most useful observations from this growing cottage industry can be found in the essays in Lloyd Gardner and Marilyn B. Young (eds), *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam: Or, How Not to Learn from History* (New York: New Press, 2007). See also Bush's 22 August 2007 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Kansas City, MO, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/08/20070822-3.html>.
- 7 See Robert J. McMahan, 'Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Postwar American Diplomacy', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 15, no. 4, Autumn 1991, pp. 455–71.
- 8 Quoted by Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 375.
- 9 Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994); and Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).
- 10 See Christopher J. Fettweis, 'America's Dangerous Obsession: Credibility and the War on Terror', *Political Science Quarterly*, Winter 2007/08, forthcoming.
- 11 Melvin Laird, 'Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 6, November–December 2005, p. 36, emphasis added.
- 12 Henry Kissinger, 'How to Exit Iraq', *Washington Post*, 19 December 2005.
- 13 Thomas L. Friedman, 'Restoring Our Honor', *New York Times*, 6 May 2004, p. 35.



- 14 For more on this, see John Mueller, 'What if We Leave?', *American Conservative*, 26 February 2007.
- 15 Quoted by Will, 'America's Moral Duty In Iraq'.
- 16 Karen DeYoung and Walter Pincus, 'Al Qaeda in Iraq may not be Threat Here', *Washington Post*, 18 March 2007, p. A20. See also David Froomkin, 'They Won't Follow Us Home', *Washington Post*, 19 March 2007, online edition.
- 17 See Steven Simon, 'America and Iraq: The Case for Disengagement', *Survival*, vol. 49, no. 1, Spring 2007, esp. pp. 66–8.
- 18 Former Ambassador Peter W. Galbraith has led the charge to beatify the Kurds. See his *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
- 19 See C.J. Campbell, 'Running Out of Gas: The Time of the Wolf is Coming', *The National Interest*, no. 51, Spring 1998, p. 48.
- 20 Shibley Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 72–3.
- 21 For an explanation of oil-market dynamics and their relation to political manipulation, see Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, 'Energy Alarmism: The Myths that Make Americans Worry about Oil', *Policy Analysis*, no. 589, 5 April 2007.
- 22 Stephen Biddle, 'Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 2, March–April 2006, p. 5.
- 23 Apparently Rwanda was writ fairly small; its 800,000 deaths would pale in comparison with the bloodbath that would overwhelm Iraq. James Carafano, 'What's Next in Iraq? Leaving Too Early Would Help Terrorists', *Des Moines Register*, 16 March 2006.
- 24 William R. Corson, *The Consequences of Failure* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), p. 51.
- 25 See Tom Wicker, 'Instead of a Bloodbath', *New York Times*, 8 July 1979, and Scott Laderman, 'Iraq, Vietnam, and the Bloodbath Theory', History News Network, 10 April 2006.
- 26 For example, Victor David Hanson wrote that the communist victory 'brought more death and even greater dislocation to the Vietnamese than did decades of war'. Hanson's claims are offered without citation, and seemed to be based on nothing in particular. Victor David Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 425.
- 27 Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 198; Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1979); US Department of State, 1982 *Human Rights Report* (Washington DC: Bureau of Public Affairs, 1983); Elizabeth Becker, 'Vietnam: The Faltering Revolution', *Washington Post*, 23 September 1979; Tom Wicker, 'Instead of a Bloodbath', 8 July 1979.
- 28 In 1985, two academics at Berkeley claimed that 65,000 Vietnamese civilians were killed between 1975 and 1982. Jacqueline Desbarats and Karl D. Jackson, 'Vietnam 1975–1982: The Cruel Peace', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 4, Autumn 1985, pp. 169–82. Their results were called into serious question, to put it mildly, by Gareth Porter and James Roberts in 'Creating a Bloodbath by Statistical Manipulation', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 61, no. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 303–10.