

Remarks to the Security Policy Working Group Forum on Iraq
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*“You can’t win and you can’t break even; you can’t get out of the game.
You shouldn’t stay but--you ain’t leaving, for your luck might change again...”*

This is an old story. It has to do with the enthusiasm many feel at first for military solutions to international problems, and with the way wars have of getting out of hand, of inventing new justifications for themselves as they go along, of continuing far longer and of costing far more than anyone thought they would. The story also has to do with the way wars sometimes end, when the side with less will to sacrifice finally quits. That was us in Vietnam. It may be us in Iraq. But not for a long time.

I opposed the Iraqi war, even though, given my brother Peter’s direct knowledge of the crimes against the Kurds, I could have no illusions about Saddam Hussein. But I took what I thought should be an economist’s view, and asked, what could we gain, and what would it cost?

On November 15, 2002, I responded to a request from an old friend, former Senator Gary Hart, for a memorandum on current issues. I chose to weigh in on Iraq:

It is important to approach this issue *practically* – which is to say, from an economic standpoint. One way is to point out that while the impending war on Iraq may prove to be fairly easy..., the post-war occupation is certainly going to be ugly. Iraq is a huge country. The oil fields, the cities and the ports will need to be protected. The protectors will need to be protected. Saddam has 150,000 secret police who will not physically disappear. There is a large Shi’a population with whom our relations could deteriorate quickly if their leaders don’t like our rule.. Worst of all there is Al Qaeda. They are not in Iraq right now, but they will be. And they will find plenty of fresh targets in occupied Iraq. Algeria comes to mind; does anyone remember?...

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Once we have invaded, getting out again is not going to be easy. On the contrary, it will be very easy for Al Qaeda and others to guarantee just enough turmoil to ensure that it is *never* quite safe to leave. The choice will therefore become one of staying and bleeding, or of accepting an ignominious retreat – think the Israelis from South Lebanon but on a much larger scale. People need to understand is that a decision to invade Iraq is, in effect, a decision to establish what will be, for practical purposes, a *permanent* zone of occupation there.

Just before our troops entered Baghdad, I wrote some things in *The American Prospect online* which I came to regret. I did not anticipate that resistance would seem to collapse. But my underlying worry was the war would not end with the fall of Saddam Hussein:

The fact remains that a very effective armed gang, numbering in the scores of thousands, presently governs Iraq. That gang will continue to offer stiff resistance first to occupation and later to reconstruction, until it is destroyed, root and branch, by a far superior force. And, as it is now clear, the application of that force, if it can succeed at all, must entail a horrific level of violence.

Then, six months into the occupation, in November 2003, still down-beat but by this time (like others who opposed the war) wholly on the sidelines of any remaining national debate, I proposed bench-marking our progress.

...We should set some clear targets. By next summer, either there will be security or there won't be. The electricity and water will be fixed, or not. Oil will be flowing, or it won't be. And Iraqis will be down the road toward their own government—or they won't be...

The point of these excerpts is not to demonstrate prescience but to show that key elements of the Iraq problem were accessible, in good time, to distant observers with no privileged access to information. By extension, policymakers should have known. And the press *could* have presented a balanced debate over the war, something that obviously did not happen. A second point is that the economic reasoning can be useful. Counting costs is mundane in comparison with grand strategy and high moral purpose, but it is the ground on which historical decisions to go to war are often finally judged.

So, let me stretch my luck with some words on where things stand today.

This is a war of occupation. And a striking fact about wars of occupation is that while they were often successful until 1945, they have seldom succeeded in the years since. Up until the end of World War II, occupations, also called empires, were routine. Today, they are very rare (the last really big one, in Eastern Europe, ended in 1989 with no fight). And so one must ask, what is changed about the world in the past 60 years? Let me suggest six things that have changed irreversibly.

– First, there is urbanization. A century ago, the industrial world was urbanized, but the colonial countries for the most part were not. A dispersed, impoverished rural population is much easier to control than a packed-in, urban middle class. This is partly architecture: Cityscapes favor the defender; so the Germans learned at Stalingrad. When, in *The New Yorker* in early February, Seymour Hersh quoted an intelligence source responding to his telephone call, “Welcome to Stalingrad,” that was the meaning of the reference.

– Second, there is what the Soviets used to call the “correlation of forces.” Around 1898 following the battle of Omdurman, Hilaire Belloc immortally wrote, “Whatever happens, we have got/The Maxim Gun. And they have not.” Now they have got it, along with the booby trap, the car bomb, and most recently the suicide attacker. These weapons are simple but effective. They impose, at a minimum, a focus on force protection that gets in the way of everything else.

– Third, self-government became the political norm. In the age of empire, successful imperialists governed through local rulers, and the costs of administration were accordingly small. Today, people everywhere expect sovereignty, an expectation more universal and stronger than that of democracy or freedom in most cases. Why is there no terrorism in Kurdistan? Because the Kurds are self-governing, under a government formed under our protection but without our physical presence. The insurgency is effective in central Iraq in part because government there lacks the people's confidence. They may actually dislike it. Or perhaps they might actually like it to succeed, but reasonably fear that it won't. Either way, we are denied the most important instrument of governance, the active cooperation of the governed.

– Fourth, there is the worldwide media and the attention it gives to atrocity. A century ago one could massacre with impunity. Well into the 20th century, terror and torture were accepted features of conquest and occupation. For example, the British killed 20,000 in Iraq in the early 1920s and few complained. A few decades earlier the Belgians had killed some ten million in the Congo, and almost no one even knew about it; similarly our Indian wars in the 1870s were wars of extermination. But the horrors of World War II, in particular, changed perceptions, as the French learned in Algeria and we in Vietnam. Since that time television has radically raised the visibility of violence, and the political price associated with it.

– Fifth, thanks to circumstance and the Heritage Foundation, war today marches with the free market. When our troops went in, Iraq lost control of its frontiers. The resulting flood of imported cars clogged the streets, making security patrols difficult while it has become easy for insurgents to move around and to conceal bombs. Meanwhile a flood of electrical appliances drains the power grid, so that even heroic measures to increase electrical capacity cannot keep pace with demand. Subsidized fuel is now easily exported, so fuel is short. Yet if subsidies are reduced or eliminated, popular tolerance for the occupation falls. And all the imports destroy local jobs, creating a pool of frustrated and angry unemployed.

– Sixth, there is the fact that an army of occupation nowadays is a rotating force. Soldiers come and go, because jet aircraft make that possible. This is necessary, under modern conditions, for the survival of a volunteer army. But it is corrosive to stable intelligence relationships in the theater of operations; every new rotation of forces must relearn local conditions and rebuild trust in the local population.

These are facts that one has to deal with, and the question, of course, is this: Is there a strategy that can deal with them under the present circumstances in Iraq?

The answer lies, if anywhere, with Iraqi self-government and the development of an effective permanent local national security force. This is obvious to everyone; and the recognition of this fact has already produced a government that--in its alignment with Tehran in particular--may prove quite different from the reliable diplomatic ally our neo-conservative visionaries had hoped for. Will this government be capable to muster an army and police capable of defeating the insurgency and bringing the population into cooperation? Perhaps. It is prudent nevertheless to remain skeptical.

Yes, the news on *Iraq's* election day, January 30, 2005, was encouraging – the insurgency failed to affect voting outside of the Sunni regions. But does it mean success is now within reach? Are we in position to set a realistic deadline -- perhaps the 18 months recently named by interim Interior Minister Falah Al-Naqib--to finish the job? And, especially, would a timetable help or hurt in the pursuit of that goal?

This is truly a difficult question. Eighteen months is not a long time. Make it one year after the *next* elections – that is, December 2006 – and you buy a little more. The advantage is that a timetable *might* force the hand of the Iraqi leaders now in place. They *might* be able to bring into being, in that time, a successful security force. Previous timetables – for sovereignty, and for the elections – were apparently quite effective in forcing decisions and action. Perhaps a timetable for Iraqi takeover of internal security would be equally so.

As a timetable is implemented, the security of Kurdistan can be guaranteed. It seems clear that a clear authority--religious, to be sure--can take power in the South. Iraq, like Gaul, can be divided in three parts. It's in the center, as the world knows, that the hard problem is.

In Central Iraq, it is possible that military success could be made *more* likely by making it known that we intend to get out. The choice facing Iraqis will be stark. They can either support the government just elected, or face the possibility of life under the insurgents. Perhaps this will concentrate minds, improve military efficiency and the intelligence flow. Perhaps it will reduce the fatal temptation for the government to rely indefinitely on U.S. forces to do the hard fighting and take the blame for the serious damage.

But it is also possible that a timetable would not have this effect. Two objections would have to be weighed very carefully. The first is that a timetable could cause the collapse of existing intelligence channels on insurgent activity. The second is the risk that a timetable for our withdrawal might also become a timetable for the *de facto* independence of Kurdistan, implying eventual Kurdish withdrawal from the Iraqi security forces. Since Kurds form the backbone of the New Iraqi Army right now, the question is whether, without them, Shiite Arabs alone can possibly construct an effective counter-insurgent force.

To answer that question, one must ask: an effective counter against what? Unfortunately, it now seems--and I believe this is the informed view of our forces in Iraq--that we are not actually fighting merely a loose confederation of remnants, dead-enders, criminals and jihadis. The "insurgency" is, it now appears, at its heart the work of Saddam Hussein's internal security force, the Mukhabarat--the "very effective armed gang" that governed Iraq for 35 years. And it is pursuing a campaign planned, equipped and financed well in advance of our invasion.

That's a tough opponent. It can't prevail against us, surely. But it may be also that it can't be defeated by our Iraqi allies, or by us with the level of violence we are prepared to inflict. And if that's so, what is our real choice? Is it between a war continuing for ten or twenty years, with a thousand or more American dead every year and no assurance of success, and on the other side of the coin the return of the secret police and a massacre of tens of thousands of Shiites, Kurds

and unreliable Sunni in Central Iraq? If that is the choice, which alternative would you pick? And if you set a timetable in order to discover the truth--something that may still, in spite of the horrific character of this dilemma, be a sensible idea--what do you do if the timetable fails?

I have no answer to that question. In the debate over the Iraq war, those of us who opposed the war from the beginning have been, largely, on the sidelines for two years. Since the war began, our views have rarely been considered worthy of national exposure. And now, as we are offered a few cautious microphones, the price of admission appears to be an answer to the question, "what is your solution to the problem of Iraq?"

Well, excuse me for not paying that price. Here's my view: *Morally*, we are committed to protect the Iraqi Arabs from the return of their old tormentors. (The Kurds, mercifully, can protect themselves.) *Ideally*, we'd like a military victory against Saddam's secret police, followed by a political reconciliation between the Sunni and Shi'a in the Arab areas of Iraq. *Practically*, the pursuit of that goal will cost us our present deployment, and present rate of losses, for the indefinite future. And the *best result* will be a weak, theocratic Shiite government in Arab Iraq, rendered unstable indefinitely by Sunni Arab opposition.

In *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam*, Robert Mann quotes Francis Valeo, an Asia scholar and aide to Senator Mike Mansfield, on U.S. involvement in Vietnam in 1963, at the end of the government of Ngo Dinh Diem. It makes the essential economic point:

"We would eventually have to find that the cost of what we were doing, in terms of lives and in terms of money, would be so ridiculously out of proportion with any national interest that we had in that area, that we would have to pull out. I think Diem understood that. We did not. We were still confusing the technique and the machinery with the purpose. And we were good, and we knew we had great equipment, and we knew we had a very professional military force. But that was not the answer in that situation."

After we left Vietnam, tens of thousands fled that country, and many more were imprisoned, or worse, for a long period of time. The same could happen in Iraq. In Iraq, however, it may be worse. For Iraq, unlike Vietnam, has a recent history of mass murder, bordering on genocide. In Iraq, whole populations could be at risk.

It's possible that things will work out. So long as we are present, the insurgency does not have an unlimited capacity to inflict damage, as its failure to disrupt the elections showed. Perhaps, under some level of pressure, it will collapse. But, as the low turnout of Sunni Arabs also showed, this is not something the population expects to happen soon.

Thus it may develop that the issue facing the American policymakers will become, merely, how long do you want to delay the ending? And at what price in American blood? At what cost, as well, to the effectiveness of the United States Army and the National Guard?

These are questions for those who chose this war. Let them explain how it happened that the prevention of genocidal chaos in Iraq came to require the sacrifice of a thousand American lives a year, indefinitely. Let them remember that the risk of genocidal chaos in Iraq was being contained successfully, two years ago, by the inspections, oil-for-food program and no-fly zones, at no cost in American life. This they gave up. One can admit freely that good things have come out of the war, that we chose the side of the Iraqi people, that the government now in place is vastly preferable to what was there before. And yet it is still pertinent to ask: would we have taken on this mission if we'd had a full and honest appraisal, in advance, of the cost?

Our method, as we think through the choices before us, should be one of intense scrutiny of the worst cases, and effort to discover the course of action best calculated to avoid them. We should not underpin plans for action – any action, including contemplation of withdrawal – with favorable assumptions that are not strongly supported by evidence. Nor should we reject unfavorable possibilities until we can convince ourselves they are wrong. It's true that we would never have launched this war. It's true that our goal is to bring it to an end. It's true that in our view no compelling national interest requires an indefinite U.S. presence in Iraq. But strategic interests are not the only considerations here. Having made the potentially catastrophic mistake of going in, we are not free to leave until the potential for a true catastrophe on our exit is plausibly contained. That is, of course, plainly not the case right now, and for all we know, it may not be the case for many years.

And here's a question for our future. Will Iraq teach us anything--finally--about the usefulness of diplomacy, the value of patience, and the need for the most extreme caution in using U.S. military force? Will the press permit *this* question to be discussed in front of the American people? The President yesterday in Brussels stated that our basic values were a “vibrant opposition, a free press, shared power and the rule of law.” Could we start behaving in *this* country as though that were true? Can those of us who opposed this war—for what have now turned out to be exactly sensible reasons—discuss it, and not as fringe-end dissidents but in the mainstream of public discourse? Will this happen in time to change the balance of the debate *over Iran*? Let's hope so. For real security will elude us all, so long as reckless men and women can stampede the country into reckless wars.

As for a time-table for withdrawing from Iraq--yes, by all means let's also discuss that tactical option. Let's not rule it out. It *might* be the right move. And there are not that many good moves on the chessboard, just now.

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