Analysis

US policy on Iraq: past, present and future[1]

by Marcin Zaborowski

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[1] This Analysis is based on a Chapter of my forthcoming *Chaillot Paper* on 'Bush's Legacy and US Foreign Policy'.

Introduction

George W. Bush will be remembered first and foremost for starting the war in Iraq and the destabilisation of the country that ensued. This means that, unless there is a dramatic improvement in Iraq before 2009, which appears highly unlikely at the present time, Bush will not be remembered as a successful President. Bush took his country into this war although he did not have to – as argued by Zbigniew Brzezinski, this was a 'war of choice'. The decision to go to war was not authorised by the United Nations and it was thus considered illegal and opposed by the majority of world opinion. The war significantly eroded America's 'soft power'. It also did untold damage to its international image. From being universally admired and emulated around the globe, the US is now considered by world opinion to be one of the most dangerous nations on earth.

Despite some success in the 'surge' policy, which Bush adopted in the wake of the Congressional elections won by the Democrats in November 2006, the human and material cost of the war continues to climb and the instability in the region continues unabated. America's regional adversary, Iran, has been strengthened and its allies, moderate Sunni states, weakened. Most importantly, the war in Iraq did not diminish the terrorist danger. On the contrary, since the invasion of Iraq the activity of al-Qaeda cells has been on the rise with some terrorist attacks, such as those in Madrid in March 2004 and in London in July 2005, being explicitly motivated by the war.

George W. Bush created this situation but it will be his successors who will have to find the way forward, or rather the way out of Iraq. This will be an extremely difficult task, given that Americans are still haunted by the images of the frenzied evacuation of the US embassy in Saigon on 30 April 1975. No future American President can afford to be remembered as the one who 'abandoned' Iraq, equally no President can continue to spend vast resources and risk lives with little chance of success. Following the Congressional elections in November 2006, the goalposts of the debate have moved. Since their victory in the Congressional elections the emboldened Democrats have tabled several resolutions demanding a timetable for the troops' withdrawal without being seen by the public as 'unpatriotic'.

No heavyweight candidates for the 2008 elections speak uncritically about Bush's Iraq record. The Republican frontrunner, John McCain, supported the decision to go to war against Saddam but he has been consistently critical of the President's conduct of the war and especially of the decision to invade Iraq with a comparatively small force. McCain has also been one of the staunchest critics of Guantanamo and the practice of treating prisoners outside the remits of the Geneva Convention. On the Democratic side, both frontrunners Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama want to pull out of Iraq, although not unconditionally and with certain caveats. If a Democrat wins in November 2008 there is likely to be a change of course in Iraq. But realities on the ground may make it very difficult if not impossible for future President to take a radical and quick decision on the future of the US military presence there.

This chapter deals with the past, present, and the future of America's Iraq policy, and is accordingly divided into three parts. Part one discusses US-Iraq relations prior to 9/11 and the run-up to the invasion following al Qaeda's attack on the US. Part two addresses the situation in Iraq after the invasion. Part three discusses the prospects for the US's Iraq policy in the context of the 2008 Presidential elections.

The War

Much has been written on the subject on the war in Iraq, its regional and domestic contexts and its implications for international law. Two essential points have to briefly sketched out here for the purpose of illustrating the background to what follows: the origins of the war and the official and unofficial rationale of the Bush Administration for invading Iraq.

The Prelude

There would have been no invasion of Iraq in 2003 without the first Gulf War and especially had it not been for its inconclusive end. Following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, the 41st President of the US, George Bush (the current president's father) successfully assembled a broad international coalition and secured a mandate of the UN Security Council to respond to the Iraqi aggression. The operation 'Desert Storm' lasted only over a month, from 17 January 1991 till 28 February 1991, and involved the participation of 34 allies with Saudi Arabia and Egypt being among the biggest troop contributors. The Allies quickly overwhelmed the Iraqi forces and there was no doubt that they could overthrow Saddam's regime. However, the UNSC resolution had authorised the allied response only to liberate Kuwait and not to invade Iraq.[2] In addition, many of America's allies, especially the Sunni Arab states, were vehemently opposed to regime change in Baghdad. Respecting the international consensus, President Bush ordered US forces to halt their advance 240 km from Baghdad. This decision was destined to become one of the most controversial ones in US history. It split Bush's Administration, with some of its members, such as the then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, calling it a mistake. In subsequent years the exhortation to 'finish the job in Iraq' became a rallying cry among the conservatives.[3]

- 1991 – Conclusion of the Gulf War. Measures against the regimes of Saddam Hussein include: economic sanctions, no-fly zones in northern Iraq and UN inspections.

- August 1998 – Iraq stops cooperating with UNSCOM inspectors.

- October 1998 – The US Congress passes and President Clinton signs the 'Iraq Liberation Act'.

- November 1998 – Operation 'Desert Fox' – the US and the UK bomb selected sites in Iraq to counter a suspected Iraqi WMD programme.

- November 2000 – George W. Bush elected President. His team includes Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfwowitz, all 'hawks' and known advocates of invading Iraq.

- 11 September 2001 – terrorist attacks on the US. .Bush's Administration begins to prepare the invasion of Afghanistan and, shortly after, of Iraq.

- September 2002, Security Strategy – doctrine of pre-emption.

- October 2002 – US Congress passes a 'Joint Resolution to Authorise the Use of the United States Armed Forces Against Iraq'. 8 November 2002 – UN Security Council unanimously passes the resolution 1444 offering Iraq 'a final opportunity to comply with its disarmaments obligations'.

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[2] For a full discussion of this topic see: http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3448336.html.
[3] 'Project for the New American Century', http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm.

- February 2003 – Secretary of State Colin Powell addresses the UN General Assembly presenting alleged evidence of WMD programmes in the US. Following the address, the US, UK and Spain propose a UN Resolution authorising the use of force in Iraq. The proposal is withdrawn amidst the lack of international support.
- 18 March 2003 – the US and its allies invade Iraq without the mandate of the UN.

George H. Bush's successor, President Clinton, initially maintained his predecessor's approach of containing Iraq. This policy involved economic sanctions, the patrolling of Iraqi no-fly zones imposed to protect Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south and inspections to prevent Iraqi development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The UN inspectors (UNSCOM) did indeed uncover a massive programme to develop biological and nuclear weapons and a large amount of equipment was confiscated and destroyed. Most prominently, the Al-Hakam germ warfare centre, which specialised in weaponising biological agents, was blown up by UNSCOM in 1996.[4]

However, by 1998 Clinton's containment policy found itself under double pressure. In Iraq Saddam was progressively limiting the inspectors' access to suspected facilities and demanding the lifting of the sanctions. At home, Clinton's Iraq policy was increasingly criticised for lacking effective instruments and for its excessive reliance on the sanctions. On 26 January 1998 a group of conservatives from the Project for the New American Century, including Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol, Zalmay Khalizad, Donald Rumsfeld and Francis Fukuyama, issued a letter to President Clinton calling for a policy change *vis-à-vis* Iraq. The letter called for a new strategy and military action against Iraq, with its ultimate objective being the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. The authors contended that the existing UN resolutions gave the US sufficient authority to pursue a military option. In any case, argued the letter, 'American policy cannot continue to be crippled by a misguided insistence on unanimity in the UN Security Council.'[5]

By August 1998 Iraq had hardened its restrictions on the movement of inspectors and stopped co-operating. In response to this, Clinton's Iraq policy started to shift from containment towards the 'regime-change' option. In October 1998, the US Congress passed and President Clinton signed the 'Iraq Liberation Act'. The legislation provided $97 million for Iraqi opposition groups and stood in sharp contrast to the UN Security Council resolution 687, which focused on the weapons programme and did not mention regime change.[6] Amidst controversy, the UN ordered UNSCOM to leave Iraq on 16 December 1998. Within few hours of the withdrawal of UNSCOM, the US and the UK launched a bombing campaign against Iraq called Operation Desert Fox, which lasted only three days and concluded on the first day of Ramadan. However, the operation did not weaken Saddam, nor did it satisfy the American conservatives who criticised it as a typical Clinton half-measure.

In the run-up to the 2000 Presidential elections, Republicans accused Clinton of 'doing too little, too late' *vis-à-vis* Iraq. The Republican Platform 2000 called for the full implementation of the Iraq Liberation Act and an active policy aimed at removing Saddam Husain from power.[7] However, before 9/11 Bush's Iraq policy differed only marginally from his predecessor's and there was no particular push towards 'regime change' or indeed towards empowering the Iraqi exile groups. The only meaningful change was to replace the existing sanctions with the so-called smart sanctions that allowed for greater flexibility in trading civilian goods, but tightened control on military goods.

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[4] Ben Arnoldy and David S. Hauck, 'The Inspections Maze', *The Christian Science Monitor,* November 2002. See: http://www.csmonitor.com/specials/inspections/suspicions.html. See also 'United Nations Special Commission': http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UNSCOM.
[5] 'Project for the New American Century', http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm.
[6] 'Clinton Signs Iraq Liberation Act', http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/11/01/981101-in.htm.
[7] http://edition.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/conventions/republican/features/platform.00/#53.

In other words it is very unlikely that the war in Iraq would ever have taken place without the al-Qaeda attacks on 11 September 2001.

Run-up to the war

The events of 9/11 altered Bush's views on Iraq to the point that he allied himself overnight with the radical 'regime change' rhetoric preached by the conservatives from the Project for the New American Century, most of whom by now were serving in his Administration. Bush was careful not to blame Iraq explicitly for 9/11 and he continued to stress his preference for a diplomatic solution. However, there is ample evidence now suggesting that the President embarked on the path to war soon after 9/11 and before the diplomatic route had been exhausted.

Although lacking evidence, members of Bush's Administration – including Vice-President Cheney – continued to link Iraq to al-Qaeda and the terrorist attacks on the US. The Administration's propaganda on this issue was so effective that as late as two years after the 9/11 attacks seven out of ten Americans still believed that Saddam Husain was behind the attack.[8] Bush himself was careful not to explicitly raise such a claim but in his speeches he often juxtaposed Iraq and al-Qaeda in a way that suggested a link between the two. For example, his victory speech aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, in which he (erroneously as it turned out) announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq, was in fact predominantly focused on the war on terror with 9/11 firmly in the background. During his speech Bush declared: 'The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on 11 September 2001 and still goes on (…) The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We have removed an ally of al-Qaeda and cut off a source of terrorist funding'.[9]

Clearly, words like these have contributed to the public's view of the war as being directly linked to 9/11. This was further reinforced by claims by Vice President Cheney who accused Iraq of cooperating with al-Qaeda on preparing the attacks. In late 2001 Cheney said that it was 'pretty well confirmed' that attack mastermind Mohammed Atta, who died in the 9/11 attack, met with a senior Iraqi intelligence official in Prague. A leading neo-conservative, Richard Pearle, who was chairman of the Pentagon's Defence Policy Board, argued that the evidence of Iraqi involvement was 'overwhelming'. Claims like these were mostly rejected by the intelligence community, yet little of this official scepticism actually filtered through to public opinion, whilst Cheney's claims and Bush's allusions, fitted in with the general perception that Iraq was behind the attacks.[10]

Still, the evidence on Iraq's link with al-Qaeda was too thin to serve as the official justification for the war, although Bush again alluded to this issue in his letter to Congress on the day of the invasion.[11] Ultimately, however, it was Iraq's alleged possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and the possibility that these weapons could be transferred to terrorists that was put forward by the Administration as the reason why the US had to go to war. In his State of the Union address in January 2003, which was largely dedicated to making the case for invading Iraq, the President said 'With nuclear arms or a full arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, Saddam Hussein could resume his ambitions of conquest in the Middle East and create deadly havoc in that region. Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al-Qaeda. Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could bring a day of horror like none we have ever known

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[8] 'Hussein Link to 9/11 lingers in many minds', *Washington Post*, 6 September 2003.

[9] 'Bush makes historic speech aboard warship',1 May 2003. http://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/05/01/bush.transcript/ .

[10] 'Hussein Link to 9/11 lingers in many minds', *Washington Post*, 6 September 2003.

[11] 'Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate', 18 March 2003, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030319-1.html.

(…) Imagine those 19 hijackers with other weapons and other plans – this time armed by Saddam Hussein.'[12]

That Iraq possessed WMDs and was unwilling to disarm was a universally shared view which was supported by former President Clinton, the CIA and American Congress, which authorised the President to go to war against Iraq on those grounds in its resolution on 2 October 2002. This resolution was endorsed by the majority of Democrats, including the future Presidential contenders John Kerry, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards.[13] In fact, even the critics of the war, Germany and France, did not dispute that Iraq possessed WMDs and this claim was well grounded in the reports of International Atomic Energy Agency and the findings of weapons inspectors who found evidence of WMD programmes before they left Iraq in 1998. It seems with hindsight that Saddam was indeed effective in deceiving the international community, not in hiding his WMD programmes but in letting the outside world believe that he had them.

After the War

'Freedom's Untidy' – Donald Rumsfeld, April 2003

The invasion of Iraq lasted from 18 March to 1 May 2003 and it was led by the US (120,000 troops), backed by the UK (45,000 troops) and smaller contingents from Australia, Denmark and Poland. The US and the UK forces managed to topple the Iraqi government and take control of large cities in only 21 days whilst suffering minimal losses (mostly in fact from 'friendly fire') and avoiding large Iraqi civilian casualties or even a high number of dead Iraqi soldiers. The invasion was by all account a remarkable military success, which was achieved with a relatively small force. The much larger Iraqi forces (350,000) practically disintegrated in the face of the US-led assault, with many of the Iraqi units surrendering without putting up a fight, sometimes even seeking out US and UK forces to whom they could surrender and entire units disbanding and disappearing into the civilian population.

- 9 April 2003: The fall of Baghdad only three weeks after the invasion. The statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad is toppled by the Iraqis.

- 21 April 2003: Retired Lt. Gen. Jay Garner arrives in Baghdad to head the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA).

- 1 May 2003: President Bush delivers his 'mission accomplished' speech.

- 6 May 2003: Garner is replaced by Paul Bremer III who leads a new administrative entity – the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).

- 23 May 2003: after announcing deBaathification, the CPA disbands the Iraqi army.

- July 2003: the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr begins preaching against the US occupation. His militia – the Mehdi army – gains strength.

- 19 August 2003: Truck bomb destroys UN Headquarters.

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[12] President Delivers "State of the Union", Office of the Press Secretary, 28 January 2003. http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html.
[13] US Congress, 'Joint Resolution to Authorise the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq', 2 October 2002: http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021002-2.html.

- 13 December 2003: Saddam Hussein Captured.

- 6-9 April 2004: Fallujah offensive

- 27 April 2004: The Abu Ghraib scandal erupts.

- 28 June 2004: CPA Transfers Sovereignty to the Iraqi Governing Council, Bremer leaves Iraq.

- November 2004: the most deadly month for US forces: 137 US soldiers die.

- 12 January 2005: The WMD search in Iraq is declared over. No WMD were found

- 22 February: Golden Mosque in Samarra damaged in a bomb attack that fuels sectarian violence.

- 25 May 2006: Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki forms Iraq's first permanent government since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

- August 2006: the deadliest month for Iraq civilians: 3,438 die .

- 7 November 2006: with public discontent over Iraq a major factor, Democrats win the Congressional elections. Rumsfeld resigns as Secretary of Defense..

On 1 May 2003, President Bush landed on the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* to declare the end of major combat operations in Iraq. Bush spoke against the background of a banner that proclaimed 'Mission Accomplished'. But even as the President spoke, the looting and civilian unrest continued. It soon became apparent that the small size of the occupation force, whilst sufficient to win the war against the demoralised Iraqi forces, was totally inadequate to maintain law and order in Iraq. The US forces were also not trained to deal with civilian unrest and did not even have clear rules of engagement. As a result, they stood by while the looting continued. Matters were only made worse by the decisions of Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) who dismantled Saddam's Baath Party, banned top party members (between 30,000 and 50,000 people) from positions of authority and disbanded the Iraqi army, sending troops home with no pay.[14] The result of these decisions was catastrophic. Iraq was left with no security force of its own and a huge number of disgruntled ex-military with no jobs and no means of livelihood. The move was protested against by the chief of the Baghdad CIA office who, when Bremer informed him of his intention to disband the military, said 'that's 350,000 Iraqis you're pissing off, and they've got guns'. However his warning was to no avail.[15] There is little doubt now that Bremer's instructions fuelled the growing insurgency.

Within weeks of the invasion, it became clear that the US was completely unprepared for the so-called 'Phase IV' of the war – the post-Saddam reconstruction and stabilisation of Iraq. The post-war planning was conducted entirely by the Pentagon, which played down negative reports on the actual situation, aware that a gloomy picture of the post-Saddam reality could serve as a possible impediment to going to war. Warnings from the State Department, such as 'The Future of Iraq' report which had been completed before the war in 2002 and which cautioned about the possible unrest after the fall of Saddam, were dismissed by the White House and the Pentagon as painting an overly-pessimistic picture of the situation on the ground.[16] The Pentagon planners evidently assumed that the occupation force would be welcomed by the population and that the US-backed

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[14] Interview with Paul Bremer, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/yeariniraq/interviews/bremer.html

[15] Quoted in Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound. The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (New York: Wiley : 2005), p.176.

[16] On the state department report see: http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/index.htm.

exiles from the Iraqi National Congress and especially Ahmad Chalabi would be able to take control of the country and turn it into a democracy and an ally within a short space of time. This optimism still prevailed in the early days after the invasion. For example, the head of the US invading force, General Tommy Franks, told the troops on 16 April 2003 to prepare for a takeover by a new Iraqi government within 60 days and a US withdrawal by September 2003.[17]

However, although the majority of Iraqis were happy to see the end of Saddam's regime, the widespread lawlessness and the near total lack of basic provisions soon turned the Iraqis against the occupation force. Two weeks after the end of the invasion the looting escalated beyond Bagdad, kidnappings and armed robberies became the norm whilst the occupation force did little to prevent them. The situation was aggravated by severe shortages in the supply of electricity and water, which hit the population of Baghdad (five million people) in the middle of the summer heat. By the end of the summer, the lawlessness had given way to a full-blown insurgency, with car bombs and suicide attacks becoming a daily occurrence.

Soon the US force was faced with a double challenge, with a violent Sunni insurgency in the Al-Anbar province and a Shiite insurgency led by the radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mehdi army. The centrepiece of the Sunni insurgency – the city of Fallujah – also became a safe haven for the growing legion of mostly non-Iraqi al- Qaeda fighters and the stronghold of al-Qaeda's regional leader Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. The November 2004 US offensive against Fallujah, also called the second battle of Fallujah, was effective in as much as the insurgents lost control of the city, but Al-Zarqawi was not captured and it is believed that most foreign fighters managed to escape the city before the US assault. Most importantly, the relentless pounding of the city led to many civilian deaths and a massive population exodus as well as extensive damage to the city's infrastructure, including its mosques – 60 of which were completely destroyed. Whilst the US forces were confronting the Sunni rebellion, in August 2004 they were also confronted by the Shia insurgency in Najaf and the Sadr City in Bagdad. By this point it was becoming clear that the US strategy in Iraq was not working and that the US military presence was a part of the problem.

Still, by the time of the next presidential elections, in November 2004, the gravity of the deteriorating situation in Iraq had not yet fully registered with the majority of the American public and Iraq remained perceived as George W. Bush wanted it to be perceived – as a frontline in the war on terror. The fact that Bush's Democratic contender, John Kerry, was a decorated war veteran did not help to boost the Democrats' national security credentials, which were weak since the war in Vietnam. Kerry's inconsistent stance on Iraq (he voted for the war but then campaigned against it) and his avoidance of security issues on the campaign trail only contributed to the view that the Democrats were unprepared to lead the nation at a time of war. Consequently, in November 2004 George W. Bush won a decisive victory and the Republicans took control of both houses of the Congress.

However, from the beginning of Bush's second presidency, the public rapidly began losing its confidence in the war's rationale and in the President's ability to manage the crisis. In January 2005 US inspectors ended their search for weapons of mass destruction. It was official now that the rationale for starting the war was built on false evidence. From 2005 on support for the war among the American public began to decline dramatically, collapsing to less than 30% in 2006. Following the bombing of the Samarra mosque in February 2006, Iraq was thrown into a maelstrom of spiralling sectarian violence prompting top US commanders, including the head of US forces in Iraq, General John Abizaid, to warn that civil war was now possible.[18]

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[17] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/yeariniraq/cron/.
[18] 'Head of U.S. command: Iraq civil war possible', CNN. Com. International:
http://edition.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/08/03/iraq.hearing/.

The Baker/Hamilton Report and the 'Surge'

In January 2007 the number of American casualties reached 3,000. The war costs escalated to \$8 billion per month, with the overall bill reaching \$2 trillion. Iraq disintegrated into civil war, with Iraqi deaths surpassing 2,000 a month (and reaching 3,014 in February). The economy remained stagnant. The American public turned against the war and Bush's own approval ratings declined sharply. Discontent with the situation in Iraq had proved a major factor in the Congressional elections on 7 November 2006, which returned a Democratic majority in both Houses.

Both parties and the Administration recognised that a change of policy was needed. In March 2006 the Congress supported the creation of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG) co-chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, which delivered its recommendations shortly after the Congressional elections on 7 December 2006.[19]

The ISG report proposed fundamental changes in the four following areas:

- *Introduction of Milestones/Benchmarks* – the continuation of US support for the Iraqi government should be made conditional on Baghdad meeting a number of 'milestones' concerning, among others, reconciliation, sharing of oil revenue and dismantling of sectarian militias.

- *US Military Presence* – progressive scaling down of the US military presence, replacing combat with training units and delegating the initiative to the Iraqis. All combat units could be withdrawn in 2008.

- *Iran and Syria* – The US should involve Iraq's neighbours, including Iran and Syria, in finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

- *Arab-Israeli Conflict* – A renewed US commitment to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts, including a two-state solution, as well as dealing with Lebanon and Syria.

One month after the publication of the Baker/Hamilton report, on 10 January 2007, President Bush announced his own programme for Iraq which, while adopting some selected recommendations of the Baker/Hamilton proposal, differed from it both in spirit and in the majority of its policy proposals. The Baker/Hamilton report was painfully realistic, even gloomy and at its heart there was a tacit acknowledgment that this war could be lost.[20] In order to avoid defeat and an implosion of the region into even a bigger crisis, the ISG recommended that the US change its policy in fundamental ways.

In contrast to this, Bush's review was based on the assumption that victory was the only option – reforms and modifications were needed but not a fundamental policy change. Bush's plan took on board the idea that the Iraqi government should be pushed to tackle domestic violence and it also set some *Milestones/Benchmarks* but, in contrast to the ISG, it did not threaten to withdraw US support (finance, etc) if these were not met. On the question of the *US Military Presence*, Bush's plan completely contradicted the ISG recommendations. Rather than scaling down it proposed a 'surge', deploying an additional 21,500 troops (17,000 of them to Baghdad) and it did not set any

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[19] James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton (co-chairs), *The Iraq Study Group Report. The Way Forward – A New Approach* (New York: Vintage Books, December 2006).
[20] In their introduction, Baker and Hamilton write 'No one can guarantee that any course of action in Iraq at this point will stop sectarian warfare, growing violence, or a slide towards chaos'.

time limits.[21] Bush's proposal mentioned engaging other regional powers but it specifically rejected talking to *Iran and Syria*. In fact, rather than a *rapprochement* Bush offered only new threats to Tehran and announced a greater military US presence within close proximity to Iran.[22] Finally, the Administration's plan made no mention of the Arab-Israeli conflict or the idea of America's engagement in the peace process.

Bush's plan also announced a number of modifications regarding co-operation with Iraqi forces and the management of reconstruction efforts, including:

- *Pairing of Iraqi and American Units* to protect population centres, starting with Baghdad. Once so protected, these population centres would become sites of increased economic activity buttressed by US- and Iraqi-sponsored investment and extensive job-creation programmes.

- *Doubling of PRTs*. The US would enhance the number and the outreach of its civilian presence through the expansion of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). The American civilian personnel would double in number and would operate outside the green zone. For example, in Baghdad the number of PRTs was planned to grow from one to six and in the Anbar province from one to three.[23]

The plan was not well received. A considerable majority of public opinion (61%) opposed it and only 36 % supported it.[24] Expert opinion, whilst not uniformly critical, was not enthusiastic either. Kenneth Pollack from Brookings was one of the rare supporters of the plan. He praised the renewed emphasis on reconstruction and job-creation efforts and he agreed that sending an additional 21,500 troops would help in implementing these ideas. But he also raised a number of caveats, arguing that it might be too late for the plan to work and that this Administration had proved incompetent in handling Iraq before.[25] Zbigniew Brzezinski (National Security Adviser under President Carter) was far more critical. Brzezinski argued that committing an additional 21,500 troops amounted to a 'political gimmick of no strategic benefit'. He also argued that the idea of imposing benchmarks on the Iraqi government would leave the Administration with two options 'blame and run' when these benchmarks were not met (which, according to Brzezinski, was inevitable), or 'widen the conflict' by taking military action against Iran or Syria. Brzezinski suggested that the latter option was being pushed for by some neocons.[26]

Congress also did not endorse Bush's idea. All leading Democrats expressed deep disappointment with the President's proposal, calling the troops increase an 'escalation' rather than a 'surge' as referred to by Bush's team. Some Republicans were also critical and very few heavyweight GOP Congressmen came out unreservedly in support of the plan. In February 2007 the House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution opposing Bush's troop surge by a vote of 246-182, which marked the first time ever that Congress had defied Bush's Iraq policy.[27] However, the subsequent moves to force a change in Iraq were successfully stalled by the White House. In April 2007 the House and the Senate passed legislation ordering troops withdrawal to be completed

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[21] There was no mention of a timeframe for the increase in the number of troops in the President's announcement and at a press briefing Defense Secretary Robert Gates admitted that 'no one has a really clear idea of how long that might be'; see 'Briefing on President's Strategy', *Washington Post*, 11 January 2007.

[22] 'To Counter Iran's Role in Iraq, Bush Moves Beyond Diplomacy', *NYT*, 11 January 2007.

[23] 'Briefing on President's Strategy', *Washington Post*, 11 January 2007. 'Highlights of the Iraq Strategy Review', National Security Council, January 2007.

[24] 'Most Americans Opposed to Bush's Iraq Plan', *Washington Post,* 11 January 2007.

[25] Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Last Chance in Iraq', *The Brooking Institution*, 11 January 2007.

[26] Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Five Flaws in the President's Plan', *Washington Post*, 12 January 2007.

[27] 'House Rebukes Bush on Iraq', *Washington Post,* 25 January 2007.

within a year. However, this bill was successfully vetoed by the President.[28] The subsequent attempts to tie Congress's approval of government's spending to the decision to withdraw from Iraq also failed, not least, because none of the heavyweight presidential candidates – including Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama – were prepared to support a motion that could be seen as unsupportive of the troops in Iraq.[29]

In the face of the Democrats' inability to impede or even modify Bush's plan, the 'surge' went ahead as planned. In fact, the change has been even more substantial than the President had initially outlined, with the number of US troops going up by more than the 21,500 figure that he had spoken about at the end of 2006. Between January 2007 and November 2007 the number of US troops grew from 132,000 to 162,000, reaching a peak in September with 168,000 US troops in Iraq. As part of the new strategy, the US forces begun arming the same Sunni tribes who had recently fought against them but who promised now to fight militants linked to al-Qaeda. At the same time the Coalition and Iraqi forces led a security operation in Baghdad (Enforcing the Law), which was managed by the Iraqi government.

Towards the end of 2007, to the surprise of many Democrats and other critics of the war, it became clear that the 'surge' had delivered improvements in several crucial areas. The number of civilian Iraqi casualties dropped from its most deadly level of 3,450 in November 2006 to 650 in November 2007 and 228 in January 2008. The number of US and coalition military personnel casualties have more than halved since summer 2007, as well as the number of attacks on the US and Iraqi forces. The overall level of violence is down to the level of 2004-5, before the explosion of sectarian violence that followed the bombing of the Samarra mosque in February 2006.[30] The daily conditions of the Iraqi population are also improving. Oil production is up to 2.4 million barrels per day – the highest level since the invasion and only marginally lower than the pre-invasion levels. Electricity production is now above the pre-war levels and the economy is picking up.[31] Iraqi refugees are returning in a steady numbers – around 1,600 every day cross the border with Syria, although the flow is still far too slow to make up for the 2 million Iraqis who have left since the invasion.[32]

The reasons for these developments remain disputable. For example, according to some war critics, such as Ivo Daalder, the improvements in Iraq have less to do with the change in the US military tactics and the 'surge' and more with the internal Iraqi situation. Certainly, one of the chief reasons for the waning of the insurgency is the shift in the policy of Sunni tribal leaders who decided to turn against al-Qaeda, creating an inhospitable environment for the terrorists. The second reason is the 'success' of the sectarian and ethnic cleansing – with Shiites being expelled from the Sunni areas and Sunnis from the Shiite areas.[33] However, whatever the reasons for the change in Iraq, there is no doubt that at the begging of 2008 Iraq no longer looks beyond hope. This, no doubt, will have an impact on the unfolding presidential campaign.

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[28] 'Senate Passes Iraq Withdrawal Bill; Veto Threat Looms', CNN. International. Com, 26 April 2007, http://edition.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/04/26/congress.iraq/index.html.
[29] 'Iraq Funds Approved in Senate Budget Bill', *Washington Post*, 19 December 2007.
[30] Iraq Coalition Casualties, http://icasualties.org/oif.
[31] See: Jason H.Campbell and Michael E. O'Hanlon, 'The State of Iraq: An Update', *New York Times*, 22 December 2007.
[32] Iraqi refugees 'returning home', Al-Jazeera Net, 22 November 2007, http://english.aljazeera.net/News/aspx/print.htm.
[33] Ivo Daalder, 'Iraq After the Surge', 8 December 2007, http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2007/1208_iraq_daalder.aspx.

Iraq in the 2008 elections

On 28 January 2008 President Bush delivered his last State of the Union address. Faced with the downturn in the housing market following the subprime mortgage crisis, an unstable stock market and the prospect of recession, the American public's attention has been increasingly shifting to the economy. In December 2007 36 percent of Americans judged Iraq to be their top concern against 16 percent who named the economy. By mid-January 2008 this trend had been reversed, with 29 percent of voters seeing the economy as the top issue in the 2008 elections, compared with 20 percent who cited Iraq.[34] The President's address focused, however, more on Iraq than on any other issue, including the economy. This was unsurprising, especially as for the first time since the war the news from Iraq has not been universally bleak and there have been some signs of improvement.

Citing the progress made in several crucial areas – especially the drop in the level of violence and Iraqi reconciliation – Bush outlined some plans for the future. Most importantly, the President confirmed that he accepted the recommendation of the Commander of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, General David H. Petraeus, to draw down the level of US force presence by July 2008 to the pre-surge level of 130,000 troops. By January 2008 the drawdown had already started, with some combat units (one Army Brigade Combat Unit and one Marine Expeditionary Unit) returning without replacement and additional 20,000 troops being scheduled to return by July 2008. The units that would remain would increasingly shift their tasks from leading operations to partnering with Iraqi forces and progressively withdraw from combat operations.

Bush warned, however, against rushing into any further drawdown, which, according to the President, should be based on a clear assessment of the conditions in Iraq and the recommendations of military commanders. The President argued that a too rapid US pullout would embolden extremists and strengthen Iran. Moreover, a failed Iraq would become a safe haven for al-Qaeda, allowing the terrorists to prepare another attack on US soil.[35] In other words, Bush urged his successor to stay the course that he has pursued. The US should not set a timetable for pulling out and it should maintain a sizeable military presence in Iraq for the foreseeable future.

In addition to stating his case for maintaining his course in Iraq, Bush also moved on to forging a security agreement with the government of Prime Minister Maliki that potentially could commit his successor to a long term defence relationship with Baghdad.[36]

Iraq in the Presidential race

Bush's message is not universally accepted in the US and according to opinion polls at the start of 2008 it actually represents a minority view.[37] Iraq is by far the most polarising issue for the two parties and if it comes back to dominate the campaign the choice for Americans will be pretty clear, with all leading Republicans advocating staying in and all Democrats wanting to pull out, albeit on various terms.

On the right, John McCain has certainly gained a lot of credibility on the issue. He argued in favour of investing more troops in Iraq from the very beginning and the perceived success of the surge policy looks to many as a vindication of his position. No friend of Bush, whom he challenged during the 2000 race for the Republican nomination, McCain has been one of the harshest critics of Bush within his own party. Despite this, in 2007 McCain became one of the staunchest supporters

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[34] 'Economy, War To Dominate State of Union', *Washington Post*, 28 January 2008. 'Iraq, Economy, Health care, Immigration Top Vote Issues' Gallup Polls, 10 2007.
[35] http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080128-13.html.
[36] 'Democrats Attack Iraq Security Proposal', *Washington Post,* 29 January 2008.
[37] 'AP Poll: Few Americans expect victory in Iraq', *IHT*, 6 December 2006.

of the 'surge' and an opponent of the idea of developing a timetable for the withdrawal from Iraq. During the Presidential campaign McCain said: 'it would be fine with me' if the US stayed in Iraq even for hundred years.[38]

On the Democratic side, the two contenders for the nomination, Hillary Clinton and Barrack Obama, have developed quite elaborate and also different ideas for the future of America's involvement in Iraq; however, both of them have essentially argued in favour of pulling out of Iraq. Hillary Clinton is more conservative on Iraq and generally on national security than Obama. In 2002 she voted in favour of the war and unlike John Edwards she never apologised for her vote. Her plan for pulling out is quite cautious and contains some caveats. Clinton has promised that if elected she will ask Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense and the NSC to draw up a plan of withdrawal from Iraq within 60 days of taking office, with the goal of having most troops out by the end of 2013. The pullout would not include the specialised units targeting al-Qaeda and the US would retain a military presence in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. Some units would also stay with the purpose of deterring Iranian aggression and possibly to support the Iraqi military.

The pullout would be followed up by an intensive diplomatic initiative in the region. Clinton would like to draw Iran and Syria into the process and convene a regional stabilisation initiative composed of all states bordering Iraq, key allies and global powers. Leaving Iraq would also allow the US to pursue a renewed effort in promoting a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue.[39]

Unlike Hillary Clinton, her opponent for the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama, opposed the invasion from the beginning, although, as he was still a State senator in Illinois in 2002, he actually never had to vote on the issue. After joining the US Senate in 2004, Obama supported funding for US troops but he opposed the 2007 surge. Obama's ideas for the future of America's role in Iraq are consistent with the recommendations of the Baker/Hamilton Iraq Study Group Report. As recommended by the ISG, Obama called for the phased withdrawal of all combat brigades by 31 March 2008. With this goal having been rejected by the Administration, Obama now argues in favour of a phased withdrawal – one or two brigades a month – to be completed within 16 months. He would leave limited forces to combat terrorism but no troops would be involved in deterring Iran. US forces would be involved in training the Iraqi army only if there was a political reconciliation. Obama has also explicitly ruled out the possibility of establishing permanent US bases in Iraq.[40]

Whilst in terms of actual policy implementation, a change from a Republican to a Democrat President could well be less revolutionary than commonly believed, for the time being the candidates for both sides use diametrically opposed rhetoric. The growing focus on the economy traditionally favours the Democrats. However, should Iraq come to look winnable and should the Republicans succeed in bringing it back as the main issue of the campaign, they would be able to put up a decent fight in a race whose outcome initially looked like a foregone conclusion.

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[38] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFknKVjuyNk.
[39] Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'Security and Opportunity for the Twenty-first Century', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007.
[40] Barack Obama, 'Renewing American Leadership', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007.

Conclusion

At the outset of the 21st century, Iraq appears to be the issue that will define US foreign and security policy for decades to come. Most Americans now consider the war in Iraq to have been a grave mistake for which they blame President Bush.[41] But whilst the Americans do not like this war, even more they do not like losing, especially after all the human and economic sacrifices that have been made. What can plausibly constitute a success in Iraq?

Only a few diehards still believe that the kind of victory that the neocons spoke about in 2002-2003 is still possible. By no stretch of the imagination is Iraq likely to become in the foreseeable future what West Germany and Japan became after the Second World War. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein did not lead to the spread of democracy around the region nor did it promote the Arab-Israeli reconciliation. The theocratic regime in Tehran was only strengthened and certainly has not been weakened by the end of Saddam. In short, nothing has come out of the neoconservative dream and, although this invasion was not pursued in the name of these goals, the neocon ideology's impact and credibility have probably been damaged for generations.

What the optimists hope for now is no longer victory or even a 'mission accomplished' scenario, but some kind of stability in Iraq. Few believe now that Iraq can become a true democracy in the near future, but it can continue to build a constitutional system and the institutions of the rule of law. Real reconciliation is a distant prospect but a drop in the sectarian violence is already taking place. A thorough and comprehensive integration of the Sunnis into the political process in Iraq would certainly constitute a success. Finally, the emergence of a robust and united Iraqi security force capable of leading operations and taking on al-Qaeda would allow the Americans to reduce their military presence without worsening the security situation in Iraq.

Would the continuation of Bush's policy, as advocated by the Republican candidates, or a change of course, as argued by the Democrats, be more likely to bring about such a stabilisation? Certainly a rapid pullout from Iraq could destabilise this country at a time when some progress is being achieved. But – although this is denied by the Republican propaganda – none of the leading Democrat candidates has actually argued in favour of such a policy. In actual fact, although both Obama and Clinton talk about drawdown, neither of them advocates a complete and rapid withdrawal. In any case, as the developments in late 2007 demonstrated, the progress in Iraq will first and foremost depend on the internal dynamics in this country and the Iraqis' own willingness to oppose al-Qaeda and other radical elements.

3 February 2008

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[41] In the summer 2007, 57 percent considered the war a mistake against 37 percent who thought it was the right decision. In the same poll 72 percent disapproved of the President's handling of the situation in Iraq. http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq2.htm.