

## How We Leave Matters



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### In Brief

**“Our extraordinary military will be asked again to protect American security and enable the other elements of our national power. Accordingly, the manner in which we leave Iraq is as important now as how we invaded.”**

- Vice Admiral Lee Gunn

I hate this war and believe we should not have invaded Iraq. But this war, and the way we end it, will have profound implications for America’s future use of force and our exercise of political will in the world. When we leave Iraq, we must do so in a way that protects American military power and manages other’s perceptions of that power in order to avoid unintended – and potentially bloody – consequences in the future.

Instead of seeking to draw lessons from the Iraq experience that we may apply to future conflicts, my goal is to consider how we can apply what we already know to the current situation in Iraq in order to ensure that we draw this conflict to a close in a way that does not further endanger U.S. security.

There are four critical points to consider. First, America’s military is the strongest, most flexible, hardest hitting, and most compassionate the world has ever known. Second, until Operation Iraqi Freedom, the excellence of America’s military was almost universally acknowledged and its capabilities feared. Third, this respect remains but our enemies have exposed some vulnerabilities to tactics for which we should have prepared. And fourth, this respect (and fear) must be preserved as we wind down our involvement in the war.

Our extraordinary military will be asked again to protect American security and enable the other elements of our national power. Accordingly, the manner in which we leave Iraq is as important now as how we invaded. We must emerge from Iraq with armed forces that continue to be seen around the world as “...your best friend and your worst enemy.”

We must learn from our experiences, and our experience in Iraq is not new. We fought and mismanaged a similar war within the lifetimes of the people who decided to wage this one. It seems that we learned little along the way.

In the midst of the Cold War, we engaged in combat in Vietnam that showed – individual courage and determination aside – that the vaunted U.S. military and its political masters could be fought to a standstill under certain circumstances. I believe that many of us who served in the armed forces then feared, during the decade-long rebuilding of our military, that we would be tested again and found to be wanting.

Notwithstanding the above, it's safe to say that the United States military emerged from the Cold War with a reputation for unmatched competence, admirable restraint, and crushing capability. As if to demonstrate that the reputation was deserved, the United States succeeded both politically and militarily in the 1990s; preparing for the first Gulf War, then winning in the desert; later prodding Europe into belated action and then leading the way in the Balkans. Later still, the U.S. saved hundreds of thousands of lives in East Africa where we and our allies – despite later portrayals to the contrary – accomplished a daunting humanitarian mission in Somalia. In all that busy time, the men and women of our armed forces added in many ways to their aura of invincibility.

American and Coalition forces quickly seized the planned initial military objectives in the Iraq war. Shortly afterward, things changed in unexpected and unplanned ways. Since then, the war in Iraq has exposed our forces to surprising threats and a degree of instability that neither our defense investments in equipment nor training had prepared them to face.

As in Vietnam, enemies have shown that U.S. forces are vulnerable to low tech, irregular warfare. Insurgents and Iraqi terrorists have shown that there are at least temporary limits to America's military power. In a sense, we have ceded to them the ability to define for the world our military capabilities and limitations.

Candid answers to important questions might help us avoid this situation in the future, assuming we are prepared to win on the battlefield. Are we ready to manage the aftermath? Can we understand and shape the post event consequences? Will we learn and adapt to meet subsequent risks? Ultimately, will we emerge a stronger nation, militarily and politically? We must assess military engagements—and disengagements—in terms of their long-term impact on American power and influence, as well as immediate security objectives.

### **“Finishing what we've started in Iraq.” What does that mean?**

Our war in Iraq, and the way we end it, will have profound implications in setting the stage for future American political and military influence and operations. Discussions today of the “way forward” in Iraq fall mostly into two classes. In the first it is argued that U.S. and dwindling coalition forces must put in place conditions that permit the Iraqi army and police, under the central government, to assume responsibility for security. Only when this state is achieved can we leave Iraq. In the second case observers argue that the American investment in lives and treasure is as great as it should have ever been and that the military should



begin to withdraw now. In both cases it is generally accepted that an orderly withdrawal from Iraq will require at least 12-14 months once it has begun.

The critical question then is this: how will America's image and leadership position fare because of our actions on Iraq in the coming months and years? Of course we hope to be able to choose, with the Iraqis, the resolution that's good for them. But nearly as important is that our actions position us beyond Iraq most favorably to pick our future fights, select our battlegrounds, and choose the timing and pace of combat in the battles to come.

I propose a new look at the possible gains and losses of these next couple of years as we make choices and take courses in the Iraq war. We should begin by following these two simple suggestions. First, avoid spending more precious time on simplistic allegations about culpability in the decision to invade Iraq. We have more important things to do. Second, change the tenor of the discussions about withdrawal. Focus on what's important: achieving an acceptable level of stability quickly; removing Iraq as a future battlefield for us insofar as possible; and emerging from this war with America's image as a restrained but impossibly overwhelming foe improved.

There is no magic in these ideas. The solution lies in America's leaders working together among themselves and with others. The reality is that there must be a political accommodation at home as well as in Iraq. Overseas, Iraq's neighbors, as well as our friends and allies, have serious stakes in salvaging this tough situation. They must be involved. To involve them, we must talk with them.

If we need more talented American leaders working on this than those who have the responsibility today, we should be able to come up with them. America is the world's strongest and most powerful nation and we require leaders who measure up to our principles and work to advance the country's interests. That's what elections are for.

We must have a strong, capable, agile, well-trained, and equipped military. It has to be prepared for all the relevant fights: against terrorists, drug cartels, pirates, nuclear proliferators, and against other nations, when our national security demands. The military must be multi-lingual, culturally attuned, disciplined, temperate, restrained, and ferocious at the appropriate times.

Our military today is as fearsome an instrument of national power as has ever existed. When necessary in the future it should specifically be feared. So leaving Iraq without considering the future military power and image of the United States would be a serious mistake. Iraqi and foreign insurgents must not be allowed to define the limits of American power for years to come.

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*What is IRAQ: Lessons Learned?*

Five years into the Iraq war, Americans are left groping for answers. Are we safer? Can America's image be repaired? What are the lasting implications for our Constitution? Historians will spend decades examining this conflict, its causes, its conduct, and its consequences, but those left to grapple with the immediate policy implications must do so without the benefit of the perspective that time can often provide. What lessons should we draw from Iraq today so that we, as a nation, learn from this painful experience? Iraq: Lessons Learned is an initiative to begin answering those questions. The American Security Project asked some of the nation's best minds—military, policy, academic, political, business, religious, media and community—to ponder this question and provide insights from which we can all benefit.

