

Withdrawing the Military from Iraq Would Improve U.S. Credibility

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"A rapid reversal of our present course in Iraq would improve U.S. credibility around the world."

Lieutenant General William E. Odom (retired) is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and a professor at Yale University. In the following viewpoint he rebuts many common arguments used to support continued U.S. military occupation of Iraq. According to Odom, U.S. forces in Iraq are already caught in a quagmire that has damaged America's global reputation. Pulling out of Iraq is the only means to repair that damage because it would show critics that America is strong enough to admit its mistakes. Furthermore, freeing the nation from the Iraq nightmare would allow the U.S. government, in Odom's phrasing, to "regain diplomatic and military mobility."

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. Why does Odom contend that Iraq will never be a liberal democracy friendly to the United States?
2. According to the author, how has the U.S. invasion of Iraq encouraged terrorism?
3. In Odom's view, how will a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq possibly help bring stability to Iraq and solutions to larger problems in the Middle East?

Withdraw immediately or stay the present course? That is the key question about the war in Iraq today. American public opinion is now decidedly against the war. From liberal New England, where citizens pass town-hall resolutions calling for withdrawal, to the conservative South and West, where more than half of "red state" citizens oppose the war, Americans want out. That sentiment is understandable.

The prewar dream of a liberal Iraqi democracy friendly to the United States is no longer credible. No Iraqi leader with enough power and legitimacy to control the country will be pro-American. Still, U.S. President George W. Bush says the United States must stay the course. Why? Let's consider his administration's most popular arguments for not leaving Iraq.

Will Withdrawal Encourage Civil War and Terrorism?

If we leave, there will be a civil war. In reality, a civil war in Iraq began just weeks after U.S. forces toppled Saddam. Any close observer could see that then; today, only the blind deny it. Even President Bush, who is normally impervious to uncomfortable facts, recently admitted that Iraq has peered into the abyss of civil war. He ought to look a little closer. Iraqis are fighting Iraqis. Insurgents have killed far more Iraqis than Americans. That's civil war.

Withdrawal will encourage the terrorists. True, but that is the price we are doomed to pay. Our continued occupation of Iraq also encourages the killers—precisely because our invasion made Iraq safe for them. Our occupation also left the surviving Baathists [Saddam Hussein's ruling party in Iraq] with one choice: Surrender, or ally with al Qaeda [the terrorist organization responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks upon America]. They chose the latter. Staying the course will not change this fact. Pulling out will most likely result in Sunni groups' turning against al Qaeda and its sympathizers, driving them out of Iraq entirely.

Before U.S. forces stand down, Iraqi security forces must stand up. The problem in Iraq is not military competency; it is political consolidation. Iraq has a large officer corps with plenty of combat experience from the Iran-Iraq war. Moktada al-Sadr's Shiite militia fights well today without U.S. advisors, as do Kurdish pesh merga [guerrilla] units. The problem is loyalty. To whom can officers and troops afford to give their loyalty? The political camps in Iraq are still shifting. So every Iraqi soldier and officer today risks choosing the wrong side. As a result, most choose to retain as much latitude as possible to switch allegiances. All the U.S. military trainers in the world cannot remove that reality. But political consolidation will. It should by now be clear that political power can only be established via Iraqi guns and civil war, not through elections or U.S. colonialism by ventriloquism.

Will Withdrawal Damage U.S. Morale and Credibility?

Setting a withdrawal deadline will damage the morale of U.S. troops. Hiding behind the argument of troop morale shows no willingness to accept the responsibilities of command. The truth is, most wars would stop early if soldiers had the choice of whether or not to continue. This is certainly true in Iraq, where a withdrawal is likely to raise morale among U.S. forces. A recent Zogby poll suggests that most U.S. troops would welcome an early withdrawal deadline. But the strategic question of how to extract the United States from the Iraq disaster is not a matter to be decided by soldiers. [German military strategist] Carl von Clausewitz spoke of two kinds of courage: first, bravery in the face of mortal danger; second, the willingness to accept personal responsibility for command decisions. The former is expected of the troops. The latter must be demanded of high-level commanders, including the president.

Withdrawal would undermine U.S. credibility in the world. Were the United States a middling power, this case might hold some water. But for the world's only superpower, it's patently phony. A rapid reversal of our present course in Iraq would improve U.S. credibility around the world. The same argument was made against withdrawal from Vietnam. It was proved wrong then and it would be proved wrong today. Since Sept. 11, 2001, the world's opinion of the United States has plummeted, with the largest short-term drop in American history. The United States now garners as much international esteem as Russia. Withdrawing and admitting our mistake would reverse this trend. Very few countries have that kind of corrective capacity. I served as a military attaché in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow during Richard Nixon's Watergate crisis. When Nixon resigned, several Soviet officials who had previously expressed disdain for the United States told me they were astonished. One diplomat said, "Only your country is powerful enough to do this. It would destroy my country."

Now Is the Time to Leave Iraq

Two facts, however painful, must be recognized, or we will remain perilously confused in Iraq. First, invading Iraq was not in the interests of the United States. It was in the interests of Iran and al Qaeda. For Iran, it avenged a grudge against Saddam for his invasion of the country in 1980. For al Qaeda, it made it easier to kill Americans. Second, the war has paralyzed the United States in the world diplomatically and strategically. Although relations with Europe show signs of marginal improvement, the trans-Atlantic alliance still may not survive the war. Only with a rapid withdrawal from Iraq will Washington regain diplomatic and military mobility. Tied down like Gulliver in the sands of Mesopotamia, we simply cannot attract the diplomatic and military cooperation necessary to win the real battle against terror. Getting out of Iraq is the precondition for any improvement.

In fact, getting out now may be our only chance to set things right in Iraq. For starters, if we withdraw, European politicians would be more likely to cooperate with us in a strategy for stabilizing the greater Middle East. Following a withdrawal, all the countries bordering Iraq would likely respond favorably to an offer to help stabilize the situation. The most important of these would be Iran. It dislikes al Qaeda as much as we do. It wants regional stability as much as we do. It wants to produce more oil and gas and sell it. If its leaders really want nuclear weapons, we cannot stop them. But we can engage them.

None of these prospects is possible unless we stop moving deeper into the "big sandy" of Iraq. America must withdraw now.