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The Iraq Syndrome

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The Iraq Syndrome

John Mueller

THE WAR AND THE PUBLIC

AMERICAN TROOPS have been sent into harm's way many times since 1945, but in only three cases—Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq—have they been drawn into sustained ground combat and suffered more than 300 deaths in action. American public opinion became a key factor in all three wars, and in each one there has been a simple association: as casualties mount, support decreases. Broad enthusiasm at the outset invariably erodes.

The only thing remarkable about the current war in Iraq is how precipitously American public support has dropped off. Casualty for casualty, support has declined far more quickly than it did during either the Korean War or the Vietnam War. And if history is any indication, there is little the Bush administration can do to reverse this decline.

More important, the impact of deteriorating support will not end when the war does. In the wake of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the American public developed a strong aversion to embarking on such ventures again. A similar sentiment—an “Iraq syndrome”—seems to be developing now, and it will have important consequences for U.S. foreign policy for years after the last American battalion leaves Iraqi soil.

DROWNING BY NUMBERS

THE PUBLIC gave substantial support to the military ventures in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq as the troops were sent in. In all cases, support

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The Iraq Syndrome

decreased as casualties—whether of draftees, volunteers, or reservists—mounted. In each case, the increase in the number of people who considered the venture to be a mistake was steep during the war's early stages, as reluctant supporters were rather quickly alienated; the erosion slowed as approval was reduced to the harder core. (The dramatic early drop in support for the war in Korea reflected the large number of casualties suffered in the opening phase of that war.)

The most striking thing about the comparison among the three wars is how much more quickly support has eroded in the case of Iraq. By early 2005, when combat deaths were around 1,500, the percentage of respondents who considered the Iraq war a mistake—over half—was about the same as the percentage who considered the war in Vietnam a mistake at the time of the 1968 Tet offensive, when nearly 20,000 soldiers had already died.

This lower tolerance for casualties is largely due to the fact that the American public places far less value on the stakes in Iraq than it did on those in Korea and Vietnam. The main threats Iraq was thought to present to the United States when troops went in—weapons of mass destruction and support for international terrorism—have been, to say the least, discounted. With those justifications gone, the Iraq war is left as something of a humanitarian venture, and, as Francis Fukuyama has put it, a request to spend “several hundred billion dollars and several thousand American lives in order to bring democracy to ... Iraq” would “have been laughed out of court.” Given the evaporation of the main reasons for going to war and the unexpectedly high level of American casualties, support for the war in Iraq is, if anything, higher than one might expect—a reflection of the fact that many people still connect the effort there to the “war” on terrorism, an enterprise that continues to enjoy huge support. In addition, the toppling of Saddam Hussein remains a singular accomplishment—something the American people had wanted since the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

When one shifts from questions about whether the war was a “mistake” or “worth it” to ones about whether the United States should get out, much the same pattern holds for Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq: relatively steep declines in support for continuing the war in the early stages, slower erosion later. However, it is close to impossible to judge how many people want to get out or stay the course at any given time

because so much depends on how the question is worded. For example, there is far more support for “gradual withdrawal” or “beginning to withdraw” than for “withdrawing” or “immediate withdrawal.” Thus in August 2005, *The Washington Post* found that 54 percent of respondents favored staying and 44 percent favored withdrawing when the options were posed this way: “Do you think the United States should keep its military forces in Iraq until civil order is restored there, even if that means continued U.S. military casualties, or, do you think the United States should withdraw its military forces from Iraq in order to avoid further U.S. military casualties, even if that means civil order is not restored there?” But in the same month, a Harris poll tallied only 36 percent in support of staying and 61 percent in support of withdrawing when it asked, “Do you favor keeping a large number of U.S. troops in Iraq until there is a stable government there or bringing most of our troops home in the next year?” Still, no matter how the questions are phrased, all the polls have logged increases in pro-withdrawal sentiment over the course of the war.

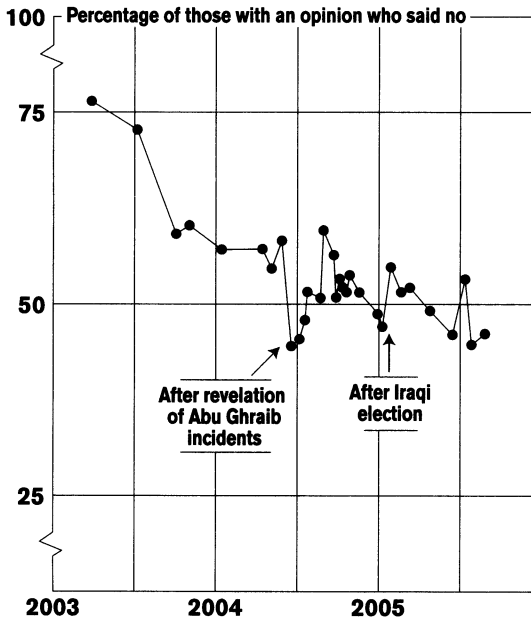
Many analysts have tried to link declining support to factors other than accumulating combat deaths. For example, the notion that public opinion sours as casualties increase has somehow turned into “support drops when they start seeing the body bags”—a vivid expression that some in the Bush administration have apparently taken literally. As a result, the military has worked enterprisingly to keep Americans from seeing pictures of body bags or flag-draped coffins in the hope that this will somehow arrest the decline in enthusiasm for the war effort. But such pictures are not necessary to drive home the basic reality of mounting casualties.

Growing opposition to the war effort also has little to do with whether or not there is an active antiwar movement at home. There has not been much of one in the case of the Iraq war, nor was there one during the war in Korea. Nonetheless, support for those ventures eroded as it did during the Vietnam War, when antiwar protest was frequent and visible. In fact, since the Vietnam protest movement became so strongly associated with anti-American values and activities, it may ultimately have been somewhat counterproductive.

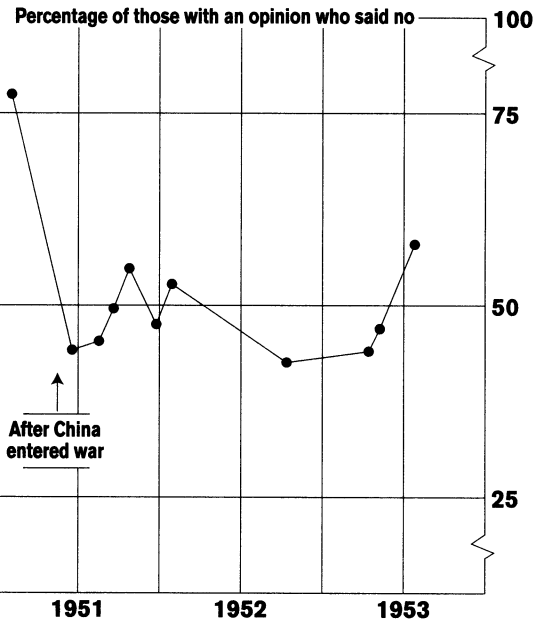
Moreover, support for the war declines whether or not war opponents are able to come up with specific policy alternatives. Dwight Eisenhower

U.S. Public Opinion on the Wars in Iraq, Korea, and Vietnam

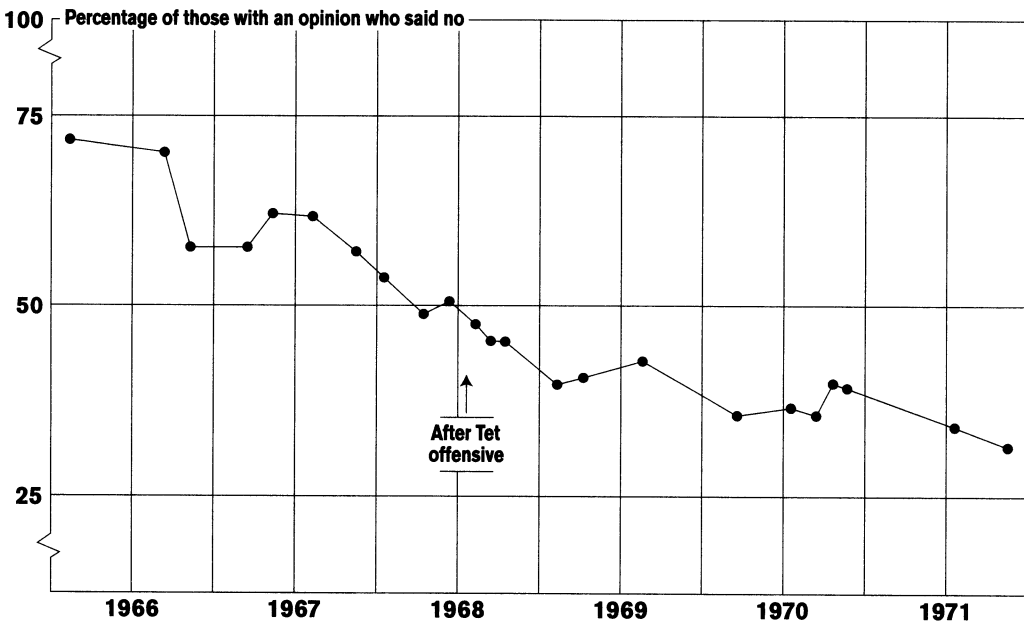
IRAQ - *In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq, do you think we made a mistake in sending troops?*



KOREA - *In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Korea, do you think we made a mistake in sending troops?*



VIETNAM - *In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Vietnam, do you think we made a mistake in sending troops?*



John Mueller

never seemed to have much of a plan for getting out of the Korean War—although he did say that, if elected, he would visit the place—but discontent with the war still worked well for him in the 1952 election; Richard Nixon’s proposals for fixing the Vietnam mess were distinctly unspecific, although he did from time to time mutter that he had a “secret plan.” Wars hurt the war-initiating political party not because the opposition comes up with a coherent clashing vision—George McGovern tried that, with little success, against Nixon in 1972—but because discontent over the war translates into vague distrust of the capacities of the people running the country.

The impact of war discontent on congressional races is less clear. Democrats attempted to capitalize on the widespread outrage over Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia in 1970 but were unable to change things much. And subsequent developments, including campaign reform legislation, have made incumbents increasingly less vulnerable.

DAMAGE CONTROL

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH, like Lyndon Johnson before him, has made countless speeches explaining what the effort in Iraq is about, urging patience, and asserting that progress is being made. But as was also evident during Woodrow Wilson’s campaign to sell the League of Nations to the American public, the efficacy of the bully pulpit is much overrated. The prospects for reversing the erosion of support for the war in Iraq are thus limited. The run-ups to the two wars in Iraq are also instructive in this regard: even though both Presidents Bush labored mightily to sell the war effort, the only thing that succeeded in raising the level of enthusiasm was the sight of troops actually heading into action, which triggered a predictable “rally round the flag” effect.

Although the impact of official rhetoric is limited, favorable occurrences in the war itself can boost support from time to time. In the case of the war in Iraq, for example, there were notable upward shifts in many polls after Saddam was captured and elections were held. These increases, however, proved to be temporary, more bumps on the road than permanent changes in direction. Support soon fell back to where it had been before and then continued its generally downward course. The same is true of negative occurrences: a drop in support after the disclo-

The Iraq Syndrome

sure of abuses at Abu Ghraib in 2004 was in time mostly reversed.

Some scholars have argued that support for war is determined by the prospects for success rather than casualties. Americans are “defeat-phobic” rather than “casualty-phobic,” the argument goes; they do not really care how many casualties are suffered so long as their side comes out the winner. For example, the political scientists Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi have calculated, rather remarkably, that Americans would on average be entirely willing to see 6,861 soldiers die in order to bring democracy to Congo.

There never were periods of continuous good news in the wars in Korea or Vietnam, so there is no clear precedent here. But should good news start coming in from Iraq—including, in particular, a decline in American casualty rates—it would more likely cause the erosion in public support to slow or even cease rather than trigger a large upsurge in support. For support to rise notably, many of those now disaffected by the war would need to reverse their position, and that seems rather unlikely: polls that seek to tap intensity of feeling find that more than 80 percent of those opposed to the war “strongly” feel that way. If you purchase a car for twice what it is worth, you will still consider the deal to have been a mistake even if you come to like the car.

Also relevant is the fact that despite the comparatively mild-mannered behavior of Democratic leaders in the run-up to the Iraq war, partisan differences regarding this war, and this president, are incredibly deep. Gary Jacobson, a political scientist at the University of California, San Diego, has documented that the partisan divide over the war in Iraq is considerably greater than for any military action over the last half century and that the partisan split on presidential approval ratings, despite a major narrowing after the attacks of September 11, 2001, is greater than for any president over that period—greater than for Clinton, Reagan, or Nixon. This means that Bush cannot look for increased Republican support because he already has practically all of it; meanwhile, Democrats are unlikely to budge much. There may be some hope for him among independents, but their war-support patterns more nearly track those of the almost completely disaffected Democrats than those of the steadfast Republicans.

Moreover, it is difficult to see what a spate of good news would look like at this point. A clear-cut victory, like the one scored by George H.W.

John Mueller

Bush in the Gulf in 1991, is hugely unlikely—and the glow even of that one faded quickly as Saddam continued to hold forth in Iraq. From the start of the current Iraq war, the invading forces were too small to establish order, and some of the early administrative policies proved fatally misguided. In effect, the United States created an instant failed state, and clambering out of that condition would be difficult in the best of circumstances. If the worst violence diminishes, and Iraq thereby ceases to be quite so much of a *bloody* mess, the war will attract less attention. But there is still likely to be plenty of official and unofficial corruption, sporadic vigilantism, police misconduct, militia feuding, political backstabbing, economic travail, regional separatism, government incompetence, rampant criminality, religious conflict, and posturing by political entrepreneurs spouting anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric. Under such conditions, the American venture in Iraq is unlikely to be seen as a great victory by those now in opposition, over half of whom profess to be not merely dissatisfied with the war, but angry over it.

In all of this, what chiefly matters for American public opinion is American losses, not those of the people defended. By some estimates, the number of Iraqis who have died as a result of the invasion has reached six figures—vastly more than have been killed by all international terrorists in all of history. Sanctions on Iraq probably were a necessary cause of death for an even greater number of Iraqis, most of them children. Yet the only cumulative body count that truly matters in the realm of American public opinion, and the only one that is routinely reported, is the American one. There is nothing new about this: although there was considerable support for the wars in Korea and Vietnam, polls made clear that people backed the wars because they saw them as vital to confronting the communist threat; defending the South Koreans or the South Vietnamese per se was never thought of as an important goal.

THE POLITICS OF DEBACLE

IN IRAQ, as they did in Vietnam, U.S. troops face an armed opposition that is dedicated, resourceful, capable of replenishing its ranks, and seemingly determined to fight as long as necessary. In Vietnam, the hope was that after suffering enough punishment, the enemy would reach its “breaking point” and then either fade away or seek accommodation.

The Iraq Syndrome

Great punishment was inflicted, but the enemy never broke; instead, it was the United States that faded away after signing a face-saving agreement. Whether the insurgents in Iraq have the same determination and fortitude is yet to be seen. The signs thus far, however, are not very encouraging: the insurgency does not appear to be weakening.

Many people, including President Bush, argue that the United States must slog on because a precipitous exit from Iraq would energize Islamist militants, who would see it as an even greater victory than the expulsion of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. A quick exit would confirm, the thinking goes, Osama bin Laden's basic theory: that terrorists can defeat the United States by continuously inflicting on it casualties that are small in number but still draining. A venture designed and sold as a blow against international terrorists would end up emboldening and energizing them.

The problem is that almost any exit from Iraq will have this effect. Bin Laden, as well as huge majorities in Muslim countries and in parts of Europe, believe that the United States invaded Iraq as part of its plan to control oil supplies in the Middle East. Although Washington has no intention of doing that, at least not in the direct sense that bin Laden and others mean, U.S. forces will inevitably leave Iraq without having accomplished what many consider to be Washington's real goals there—and the terrorist insurgents will claim credit for forcing the United States out before it fulfilled these key objectives. Iraq has also, of course, become something of a terrorist training—and inspiration—zone.

When the United States was preparing to withdraw from Vietnam, many Americans feared that there would be a bloodbath if the country fell to the North Vietnamese. And indeed, on taking control, the Communists executed tens of thousands of people, sent hundreds of thousands to “reeducation camps” for long periods, and so mismanaged the economy that hundreds of thousands fled the country out of desperation, often in barely floating boats. (What happened in neighboring Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took over makes even the word “bloodbath” seem an understatement.)

There is a similar concern this time around: Iraq could devolve into a civil war after the Americans leave. Thus, U.S. officials have updated “Vietnamization” and applied it to Iraq. They are making strenuous

efforts to fabricate a reasonably viable local government, police, and military that can take over the fight, allowing U.S. forces to withdraw judiciously. In Vietnam, of course, communist forces took over less than two years after the United States installed a sympathetic government. Although the consequences of a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq are likely to be messy, they may be less dire. The insurgency in Iraq, albeit deadly and dedicated, represents a much smaller, less popular, and less organized force than the Vietcong did, and it does not have the same kind of international backing. Moreover, many of the insurgents are fighting simply to get U.S. troops out of the country and can be expected to stop when the Americans leave. The insurgency will likely become more manageable without the U.S. presence, even if there is a determined effort by at least some of the rebels to go after a government that, in their eyes, consists of quislings and collaborators. It is also impressive that efforts by the insurgents to stoke a civil war between the Shiites and the Sunnis have not been very successful thus far; most Shiites have refused to see the insurgents as truly representative of the Sunni population.

Even if Iraq does turn out to be a foreign policy debacle—by declining into a hopeless quagmire or collapsing into civil chaos—history suggests that withdrawing need not be politically devastating (unless, perhaps, failure in Iraq leads directly to terrorism in the United States). As it happens, the American people have proved quite capable of taking debacle in stride; they do not seem to be terribly “defeat-phobic.” They supported the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Lebanon in 1984 after a terrorist bomb killed 241 Americans in the civil war there; the man who presided over that debacle, Ronald Reagan, readily won reelection a few months later. Something similar happened to Bill Clinton when he withdrew troops from Somalia in 1994: by the time the next election rolled around, people had largely forgotten the whole episode.

The most remarkable, and relevant, precedent is the utter collapse of the U.S. position in Vietnam in 1975. The man who presided over that debacle, Gerald Ford, actually tried to use it to his advantage in his reelection campaign the next year. As he pointed out, when he came into office the United States was “still deeply involved in the problems of Vietnam, [but now] we are at peace. Not a single young

The Iraq Syndrome

American is fighting or dying on any foreign soil tonight.” His challenger, Jimmy Carter, apparently did not think it good politics to point out the essential absurdity of Ford’s declaration.

Moreover, even if disaster follows a U.S. withdrawal—as it did in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia—the people dying will be Iraqis, not Americans. And the deaths of foreigners, as noted earlier, are not what move the public.

INDISPENSABLE NATION?

AFTER THE war in Vietnam, there was a strong desire among Americans never to do “that” again. And, in fact, there never was “another Vietnam” during the Cold War. Due to this “Vietnam syndrome,” Congress hampered the White House’s ability to pursue even rather modest anticommunist ventures in Africa and, to a lesser extent, Latin America (though there was bipartisan support for aiding the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan). Meanwhile, the genocide in Cambodia was studiously ignored in part because of fears that paying attention might lead to the conclusion that American troops should be sent over to rectify the disaster; over most of the course of the genocide, the three major networks devoted a total of 29 minutes of their newscasts to a cataclysm in which millions died.

No matter how the war in Iraq turns out, an Iraq syndrome seems likely. A poll in relatively war-approving Alabama earlier this year, for example, asked whether the United States should be prepared to send troops back to Iraq to establish order there in the event a full-scale civil war erupted after a U.S. withdrawal. Only a third of the respondents favored doing so.

Among the casualties of the Iraq syndrome could be the Bush doctrine, unilateralism, preemption, preventive war, and indispensable-nationhood. Indeed, these once-fashionable (and sometimes self-infatuated) concepts are already picking up a patina of quaintness. Specifically, there will likely be growing skepticism about various key notions: that the United States should take unilateral military action to correct situations or overthrow regimes it considers reprehensible but that present no immediate threat to it, that it can and should forcibly bring democracy to other nations not now so blessed, that it has

John Mueller

the duty to rid the world of evil, that having by far the largest defense budget in the world is necessary and broadly beneficial, that international cooperation is of only very limited value, and that Europeans and other well-meaning foreigners are naive and decadent wimps. The United States may also become more inclined to seek international cooperation, sometimes even showing signs of humility.

In part because of the military and financial overextension in Iraq (and Afghanistan), the likelihood of any coherent application of military power or even of a focused military threat against the remaining entities on the Bush administration's once-extensive hit list has substantially diminished. In the meantime, any country that suspects it may be on the list has the strongest incentive to make the American experience in Iraq as miserable as possible. Some may also come to consider that deterring the world's last remaining superpower can be accomplished by preemptively and prominently recruiting and training a few thousand of their citizens to fight and die in dedicated irregular warfare against foreign occupiers.

Evidence of the Iraq syndrome is emerging. Already, Bush has toned down his language. When North Korea abruptly declared in February that it actually possessed nuclear weapons, the announcement was officially characterized as "unfortunate" and as "rhetoric we've heard before." Iran has already become defiant, and its newly elected president has actually had the temerity to suggest—surely the unkindest cut—that he does not consider the United States to be the least bit indispensable. Ultimately, the chief beneficiaries of the war in Iraq may be Iraq's fellow members of the "axis of evil." 🌐