

## **“When the Arrow Leaves the Bow It Returns No More”**

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In the shadow of the sixth anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, General David Petraeus, the top military commander in Iraq, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, reported to Capital Hill for an update on the war in Iraq. General Petraeus reported that the troop surge begun seven months ago has reduced the number of attacks and sectarian violence. By summer 2008 Petraeus plans to reduce American troops to the pre-surge level of 130,000. One Republican Senator noted of the reductions to “buy time for what?” When pressed, Ambassador Crocker noted that the Iraqi government had done less than it could. One reporter noted that by the end of the hearing there was a pall in the room.

This past week I went to the *Wall Street Journal* for my information on the hearings because I wanted to assess the sentiments of more Republican and conservative American voices. *The Wall Street Journal* editorial pages were full of traditional conservative, but articles within the *Journal*, and reader feedback was remarkably similar, crossing political lines and full of disillusionment and doubt on the war in Iraq. In their article, “Petraeus Pledges Modest Pullout, But Little More,” reporters Greg Jaffe and Neil King, Jr. noted “Mr. Crocker offered few new ideas on how the U.S. intends to use its dwindling leverage to promote political reconciliation,” and “Democratic lawmakers who questioned the current U.S. strategy went out of their way to praise Gen. Petraeus.”<sup>1</sup> Another *Wall Street Journal* article noted “Senate Republicans sharply challenged President Bush’s top military general and ambassador in Iraq . . . during a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee . . . Many rank and file Republicans said they still were uneasy about the lack of political progress.”<sup>2</sup>

A reader’s poll in the *Journal* asked “How will the Iraq situation look a year from now.” I am assuming *Wall Street Journal* readers and responders tend to be more conservative and Republican (which may not be true on my small sample), and of the fourteen responses to this question that I read, one supported our troops, one I did not understand, and twelve essentially said we were in the midst of a disaster. Comments included it’s a “colossal loss of life, limb, and money,” “Groundhog Day,” and “It’s the good, bad, and the ugly (the current strategy is good, the bad news is that it is not sustainable and the ugly will come with troop withdrawal).”

America is at an excruciating moment when many are asking questions, few have answers, and all of us who are thinking are afraid of what comes next. Which is worse, keeping our troops there longer or watching the house of cards fall when they leave? It is the good, bad, and the ugly. *The New York Times* notes that “Baghdad has experienced

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Jaffe and Neil King, Jr. “Petraeus Pledges Modest Pull Out But Little More,” *Wall Street Journal* online (September 11, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press “Senators Voice Skepticism Over Bush’s Iraq War Policy,” *Wall Street Journal* online (September 11, 2007).

modest security gains that have neither reversed the city's underlying sectarian dynamic nor created a unified and trusted national government." One article noted that 35,000 Iraqis have left Baghdad in just the last seven months since the troop surge began because sectarian violence is at intolerable levels. The same article reports that one Shiite militia, the Mahdi Army, has "issued laminated badges to those they deem worthy of entering the [Jihad] neighborhood."<sup>3</sup> Sectarian violence, Sunni vs. Shiite, badges issued to people to enter a neighborhood? This is a civil war. This has been, is, and will be a civil war.

Islamic extremists have been pouring into Iraq since American troops arrived in 2003. The Shiites fear the former Sunni led Baathists and the Sunnis fear neighboring Iran and Shiites. Mixed neighborhoods are disappearing as Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds flee to separate areas. It reminds me of a married couple I knew from Sarajevo in the former Yugoslavia. She was a secular Christian and he was a secular Muslim, and after the war they could never return. There was no place for them in their homeland anymore.

How any government, central or otherwise can be formed out of Iraq's fracture is anybody's guess. Americans have lost enormous credibility in the Middle East and elsewhere for being lone rangers who focused on Iraq and ignored the Palestinian issue and terrorists located in Afghanistan, the ones who really did plot September 11<sup>th</sup>. And floating out there, spoken and not is oil, lots of oil needed for our oil dependent country.

This past week UUA President Reverend Bill Sinkford issued a letter to every Congressman or woman, saying in part

On March 12<sup>th</sup> of this year, I sent you a Moral Balance Sheet, which at the time, mourned the loss of 3,100 soldiers and assessed the \$400 billion dollars spent in Iraq. I urged you not to spend another American dollar on this war until plans were in place for a speedy and just end to the conflict. Such plans were never made

The letter concludes

This September you will hear a report from the administration about the progress in Iraq and you will be asked to appropriate more funding for this continuing tragedy. As you deliberate, please be mindful of the chaos and resentment that grows every day in Iraq, as the death toll continues to break records. Please consider all the urgent needs in our own country that go unmet. And, in memory of our fallen soldiers, please act now to end this hopeless war. I pray that you will find the courage and the will to end this tragedy. Not another dollar. Not another life.

I wish it were that easy. Not another dollar, not another life. I wish. Can I click my heels three times and go home now? It's not that easy. This week I heard a Democratic Congressman, in Congress now and during the Vietnam War remind listeners that Congress only withdrew funding to the Vietnamese government after almost all of the American troops were gone (I believe he said down to 500 troops). I believe he also said that funding was never withdrawn from American troops in Vietnam.

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<sup>3</sup> Damien Cave and Stephen Farrell "At Street Level, Unmet Goals in Iraq" in *The New York Times* (September 9, 2007), 1.

What happens if there is a forced, premature withdrawal, not only for our troops, but for Iraqi citizens in an unmediated civil war provoked by the United States? We didn't have a realistic plan for winning the peace when we entered, what is our realistic plan for leaving? What will we do if there is a humanitarian or refugee crisis? We ripped the band-aid off when we ousted Saddam Hussein. How will we get all our arms and equipment home, or at least away from other people? And let's not lie about the oil. No one walked here this morning. We all drove (except maybe Mr. Carter who came on his scooter). We need Iraq to be stable.

It's not that I don't want our soldiers to leave. I didn't want them to go, and never, ever without a plan taking into account historical, cultural, geographic, political, humanitarian, financial, medical, military, and religious tensions and needs. I was and am afraid for all the human beings involved.

Our reading from this morning was from *Here, Bullet*, a collection of writings from Brian Turner, a seven year army veteran who served a year in Bosnia-Herzegovina and later a year in Iraq. Another poem in the book is entitled *Sadiq*, which is Arabic for "friend."

It should make you shake and sweat,  
Nightmare you, strand you in a desert  
Of irrevocable desolation, the consequences  
Seared into the vein, no matter what adrenalin  
Feeds the muscle its courage, no matter  
What god shines down on you, no matter  
What crackling pain and anger  
You carry in your fists, my friend  
It should break your heart to kill.<sup>4</sup>

"Sadiq" actually begins with a quote by the great Persian poet Sa'di "It is a condition of wisdom in the archer to be patient because when the arrow leaves the bow, it returns no more." Sa'di wrote these words in 1258 after ancient Baghdad was sacked and destroyed by the Mongols who killed hundreds of thousands of residents and what had been the center of Islamic civilization. It's not just a mobilization or demobilization, it is human beings who suffer, live, and die. It is an Iraqi civilian, a father, brother, and husband pulled out of his car for ransom, which although the ransom is paid, is never heard from again. It is Sgt. Randolph and his wife and their four children.

I remember in the spring of 2003 one commentator said "Oh, Americans will win the war but it's not clear if they will win the peace." I wish that America had learned from its meddling in Chile, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Greece, deposing leaders, creating coups, it is hubris and the end of democracy. And yet it was a policy promoted by the Bush Administration for Iraq before September 11<sup>th</sup> ever happened.

In 1997 several conservatives including Elliot Abrams, Jeb Bush, Dick Cheney, Steve Forbes, Zalmay Khalilzad, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, J. Danforth Quayle, Daniel Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz were among twenty-five of the original members of a new group, Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which published its defense strategy document, *Rebuilding America's Defenses*. This report suggested peace through

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Turner, *Here, Bullet* (2005), 56.

strength and encouraged the creation of a greater security perimeter for the United States, improved missile defense, increased defense spending, and direct confrontations with countries like North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. With the election of President Bush and his appointment of several of these members to senior positions, this defense strategy became operational.

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, which had nothing to do with Iraq, were used as a means to enact the PNAC strategy. As late as 2005 PNAC was still maintaining the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, a significant reason used to enter Iraq, evidence for which has never been found. Yet here we are, four years later, with an unknown number of Iraqis dead, almost 4,000 American soldiers dead, almost five hundred billion dollars spent, and terrorism once limited in Afghanistan now on the rise there once again. This was not included in *Rebuilding America's Defenses*. "It should break your heart to kill." That was not included either.

I too want a speedy and just end, but how. Really, really, how? I am alarmed that President Bush has no realistic plan and refuses to give one. I am alarmed at the Pandora's Box that is sectarian distrust and violence in Iraq. But if someone asked me today to sign a petition to immediately pull out our troops I don't know if I would sign it.

This week we are in the Jewish High Holy Days, a time when Jews individually and collectively take a moral inventory of who they have wronged and how to make amends, and I have been taking an inventory of Iraq. I never voted for President Bush and I never advocated sending troops to Iraq, but as an American and a citizen of the world I feel collectively responsible to the vulnerable, the people of Iraq, for sending our troops to Iraq, and making it a nexus for foreign militants.

My major concern is this: How can we do less harm to Iraqis in our withdrawal? I'm talking about life and death, not ideology or democracy, but how many Iraqis are going to die sometime after they walk out their front doors? We are now collectively responsible for caring about this.

We are also collectively responsible for our American soldiers, because they volunteered for service and have become collateral damage. They killed and died for us. We will now carry this responsibility and this wound, some of us much deeper than others, for a long time.

Finally, we are collectively responsible for a more dangerous world. In the past four years we escalated problems that already existed and we will be a long time paying for this cost.

I am not a pacifist because sometimes, fully aware that it breaks my heart to have our soldiers kill for us, military intervention is the best possible solution. I wish that we had sent more troops to Afghanistan and paid more attention there because I believe that we could have won the peace in that country and done much to enhance American credibility in the world while helping a country in desperate political and humanitarian need, instead of watching Afghanistan slide deeper into violence while our military resources were spent elsewhere.

We sent our bow out in 2003. What bow are we going to send out in 2007? Is there any way to make this better or am I just hopelessly optimistic? What do we do with a President who is defying even the members of his own party who believe we are witnessing "Groundhog Day?" My fear is that in a bi-partisan climate we will find a worse way to leave Iraq. There will never be a good way, but I am concerned that our

American political infighting and tendency to descend into slander and name-calling will create a worse way. Is ordering all our troops out now the best way? Is refusing to fund our troops the best way? Is there anything Congress can do to work in a bi-partisan way, even during an election year?

Thank you for listening to me today, especially if you did not agree. I hope you will stay after the service for an 11:45 moderated discussion here in the sanctuary, a chance for us to listen to one another. I know there are many passionate feelings about the war, I ask that you remember your way and feelings are not the only way. I ask you to remember that it is good to get the facts and ask questions before rushing to answers or action. I ask you to keep the debate civil, with no name calling and no character assassination, and open ears for listening. These are trying times and we feel the weight of our national failure. Let us think, listen, talk, and act so that we can try to make a positive difference remembering that when the bow leaves the arrow it returns no more.