

## The Lessons of Iraq



U.S. Army soldiers cross from Iraq into Kuwait on August 15, 2010.

**Instructions:** People have often debated whether the study of history can provide useful lessons to guide future behavior. The philosopher George Santayana warned that “those who cannot remember the lessons of the past are condemned to repeat it.” In contrast, the inventor and father of the assembly line, Henry Ford, declared that “history is bunk!” Just as people can learn from their experiences, so countries, some argue, can learn lessons from history.

In the days after President Obama’s speech marking the end of combat operations in Iraq, many commentators have written articles about what lessons the United States should draw from its experience in Iraq. Your teacher will assign you an article to read.

As you read, mark words or phrases that you don’t understand, and the 3-5 sentences that you think are most important.

Answer the following questions for each article. Be prepared to share your answers with your classmates.

### Questions

1. According to your article, what are the lessons of Iraq?
2. If the lessons are followed, how would U.S. behavior change in the future?
3. Explain why you think these lessons are valid or invalid.
4. Are there any foreign policy issues today in which these particular lessons may be a useful guide?

**Extra challenge:** Does the article relate the lessons from Iraq to the situation the United States faces in Afghanistan? How?

## 1. “What Have We Learned from Iraq?”

*By K.T. McFarland. Kathleen Troia “K.T.” McFarland is a Fox News National Security Analyst and host of FoxNews.com’s DefCon-3.*

President Obama’s speech tonight announcing the end of combat activities in Iraq will be greeted with a national sigh of relief rather than a flag-waving hurrah. And it is driven more by Election Day 2010 than the Iraq-U.S. mandated withdrawal date of December 2011.

But putting aside politics and public opinion, let’s turn to the military realities on the ground. It is an ironclad rule of the American armed forces that immediately after a military engagement, those involved write something called an “After Action Review (AAR),” analyzing what happened, why it happened, and how it can be done better. If it’s a thorough AAR, it concludes with a section on the “lessons learned.”

So how should we write the AAR on the Iraq War? The maddening thing is, we can’t. It’s not over. The U.S. combat phase may be ending, but we’re not sure the war is over. Some well respected experts argue that it’s far too soon for U.S. forces to leave, the Iraqis aren’t ready and the country will once again descend into chaos and civil war; that our politically driven withdrawal means we will snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Other, equally respected experts argue that it’s time to take the training wheels off the bike. The Iraqis are ready to ride, even if the bike is a little wobbly at first. And, just in case, we are keeping enough American troops in country to help with the steering.

Others say enough is enough; we just want a graceful exit for ourselves, no matter what happens to Iraq. To them it is a war we should never have started and the sooner we leave, the better.

But even if we can’t agree on the failure or success of the Iraq War, we can come to some conclusions on the lessons we have learned.

We have known for a long time that

President Bush and the Neocon’s vision of a peaceful, democratic, pro-American Iraq may never happen, or at least not for a very long time. At best it will be “Iraqracy,” as General David Petraeus calls it, two steps forward and one step back.

At worst it will be a broken state, and America will have spent nearly a trillion dollars and untold human sacrifice on a failed experiment.

We have learned the enormous difficulties of trying to force a country into a political system that the majority of its citizens neither want nor are prepared to sustain on their own.

But we have also learned, or re-learned, some lessons about committing U.S. combat forces overseas.

First, we must have a clear idea of their mission, what it is we expect them to accomplish. In Iraq, we fell into the trap of mission creep. Our initial *casus belli* was to find and eliminate Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. When we didn’t find any, we stayed to topple Saddam Hussein’s government and dismantle his political party, military and government services. Once we had destroyed a brutal but none-the-less functioning government, we set up a U.S.-led Provisional Authority to replace it. And then we stuck around to help write them a constitution, hold democratic elections, form a government, and train new military and security forces.

The problem was, even though our mission grew, our resources didn’t keep pace, opening up a gap between what we wanted to accomplish and what we could realistically hope to accomplish. Without intending to, we set up a situation that was bound to fail. A civil war broke out, and we were caught in the middle.

Once President Bush committed to a surge in forces and narrowed the mission, we were able to get to the point we are today. Iraq is now a stable nation state, but it’s still a fragile situation. The surge has given us better odds at

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success, but doesn't guarantee it.

And, we've learned it's a helluva way to fight a war. It's not a plan we want to repeat as we figure out how to deal with the nuclear threat posed by an expansionist, potentially nuclear Iran, or the spread of terrorism through the Horn of Africa.

With the Iraq War we have relearned the lessons we learned and forgot after Vietnam:

- Have a clear mission going in.

- Make sure the resources are adequate to achieve that mission.

- Be honest with the American people about the costs in lives and treasure.

- Be prepared to adjust these as this war will go as all wars go – which is NOT according to plan.

Yet, the one lesson we should not take away from the Iraq War is that we can retreat into an era of isolation. Tempting as it may be, we cannot ignore new threats on the horizon in hopes they will go away. We no longer live in a world that will allow us to come home, pull up the drawbridge and retreat behind the moat. In today's world those threats will seek us out, not just knocking, but kicking down our door.

*(This article was published on August 31, 2010 at <<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2010/08/31/kt-mcfarland-iraq-war-aar-lessons-learned-petraeus-america-troops-military/>>.)*

## 2. "Obama Wants Us to Forget the Lessons of Iraq"

*By Andrew J. Bacevich. Andrew J. Bacevich is professor of history and international relations at Boston University.*

The Iraq war? Fuggedaboudit. "Now, it is time to turn the page." So advises the commander-in-chief at least. "[T]he bottom line is this," President Obama remarked last Saturday, "the war is ending." Alas, it's not. Instead, the conflict is simply entering a new phase. And before we hasten to turn the page—something that the great majority of Americans are keen to do—common decency demands that we reflect on all that has occurred in bringing us to this moment. Absent reflection, learning becomes an impossibility.

For those Americans still persuaded that everything changed the moment Obama entered the Oval Office, let's provide a little context. The event that historians will enshrine as the Iraq war actually began back in 1990 when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Iraq's unloved and unlovable neighbor. Through much of the previous decade, the United States had viewed Saddam as an ally of sorts, a secular bulwark against the looming threat of Islamic radicalism then seemingly centered in Tehran. Saddam's war of aggression against Iran, launched in 1980, did not much discomfit Washington, which offered the Iraqi dictator a helping hand when his legions faced apparent defeat.

Yet when Saddam subsequently turned on Kuwait, he overstepped. President George H.W. Bush drew a line in the sand, likened the Iraqi dictator to Hitler, and dispatched 500,000 American troops to the Persian Gulf. The plan was to give Saddam a good spanking, make sure all concerned knew who was boss, and go home.

Operation Desert Storm didn't turn out that way. An ostensibly great victory gave way to even greater complications. Although, in evicting the Iraqi army from Kuwait, U.S. and coalition forces did what they had been sent to do, Washington became seized with the notion merely turning back aggression wasn't enough: In Baghdad, Bush's nemesis survived

and remained defiant. So what began as a war to liberate Kuwait morphed into an obsession with deposing Saddam himself. In the form of air strikes and missile attacks, feints and demonstrations, CIA plots and crushing sanctions, America's war against Iraq persisted throughout the 1990s, finally reaching a climax with George W. Bush's decision after September 11, 2001, to put Saddam ahead of Osama bin Laden in the line of evildoers requiring elimination.

The U.S.-led assault on Baghdad in 2003 finally finished the work left undone in 1991—so it appeared at least. Here was decisive victory, sealed by the capture of Saddam Hussein himself in December 2003. "Ladies and gentlemen," announced L. Paul Bremer, the beaming American viceroy to Baghdad, "we got him." Yet by the time Bremer spoke, it—Iraq—had gotten us. Saddam's capture (and subsequent execution) signaled next to nothing. Round two of the Iraq war had commenced, the war against Saddam (1990–2003) giving way to the American Occupation (2003–2010). Round two began the War to Reinvent Iraq in America's Image.

With officials such as Bremer in the vanguard, the United States set out to transform Iraq into a Persian Gulf "city upon a hill," a beacon of Western-oriented liberal democracy enlightening and inspiring the rest of the Arab and Islamic world. When this effort met with resistance, American troops, accustomed to employing overwhelming force, responded with indiscriminate harshness. President Bush called the approach "kicking ass." Heavy-handedness backfired, however, and succeeded only in plunging Iraq into chaos. One result, on the home front, was to produce a sharp backlash against what had become Bush's War.

Unable to win, unwilling to accept defeat, the Bush administration sought to create conditions allowing for a graceful exit. Marketed for domestic political purposes as "a new way forward," more commonly known as "the surge," this modified approach was



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the strategic equivalent of a dog's breakfast. President Bush steeled himself to expend more American blood and treasure while simultaneously lowering expectations about what U.S. forces might actually accomplish. New tactics designed to suppress the Iraqi insurgency won Bush's approval; so too did the novel practice of bribing insurgents to put down their arms.

Yet as a consequence the daily violence that had made Iraq a hellhole subsided—although it did not disappear.

Meanwhile, once hallowed verities fell by the wayside. U.S. officials stopped promising that Saddam's downfall would trigger a wave of liberalizing reforms throughout the Islamic world. Op-eds testifying to America's enduring commitment to the rights of Iraqi women ceased to appear in the nation's leading newspapers.

Respected American generals—by 2007, about the only figures retaining a shred of credibility on Iraq—disavowed the very possibility of victory. In military circles, to declare that “there is no military solution” became the very height of fashion.

By the time Barack Obama had ascended to the presidency, this second phase of the Iraq war—its purpose now inverted from occupation to extrication—was already well-advanced. Since taking office, Obama has kept faith with the process that his predecessor set in motion, building upon President Bush's success. (When applied to Iraq, “success” has become a notably elastic term, easily accommodating bombs that detonate in Iraqi cities and insurgent assaults directed at Iraqi forces and government installations.)

Which brings us to the present. After seven-plus years, Operation Iraqi Freedom has concluded. Operation New Dawn, its name suggesting a skin cream or dishwashing liquid, now begins. (What ever happened to the practice of using terms like Torch or Overlord or Dragoon to describe military campaigns?) Although something like 50,000 U.S. troops remain in Iraq, their mission is not to fight, but simply to advise and assist their Iraqi counterparts. In another year, if all goes well, even this last remnant of an American military pres-

ence will disappear.

So the Americans are bowing out, having achieved few of the ambitious goals articulated in the heady aftermath of Baghdad's fall. The surge, now remembered as an epic feat of arms, functions chiefly as a smokescreen, obscuring a vast panorama of recklessness, miscalculation, and waste that politicians, generals, and sundry warmongers are keen to forget.

Back in Iraq, meanwhile, nothing has been resolved and nothing settled. Round one of the Iraq war produced a great upheaval that round two served only to exacerbate. As the convoys of U.S. armored vehicles trundle south toward Kuwait and then home, they leave the stage set for round three.

Call this the War of Iraqi Self-Determination (2010–?). As the United States removes itself from the scene, Iraqis will avail themselves of the opportunity to decide their own fate, a process almost certain to be rife with ethnic, sectarian, and tribal bloodletting. What the outcome will be, no one can say with certainty, but it won't be pretty.

One thing alone we can say with assurance: As far as Americans are concerned, Iraqis now own their war. “Like any sovereign, independent nation,” President Obama recently remarked, “Iraq is free to chart its own course.” The place may be a mess, but it's their mess not ours. In this sense alone is the Iraq war “over.”

As U.S. forces have withdrawn, they have done so in an orderly fashion. In their own eyes, they remain unbeaten and unbeatable. As the troops pull out, the American people are already moving on: Even now, Afghans have displaced Iraqis as the beneficiaries of Washington's care and ministrations. Oddly, even disturbingly, most of us—our memories short, our innocence intact—seem content with the outcome. The United States leaves Iraq having learned nothing.

*(This article was published on August 31, 2010 at <<http://www.tnr.com/blog/foreign-policy/77356/obama-wants-us-forget-the-lessons-iraq>>.)*

### 3. “The Surge and Afghanistan”

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*By John McCain. John McCain is a Republican senator from Arizona.*

Today President Obama will deliver a major speech to mark the draw down of U.S. forces in Iraq to 50,000 troops.

He will likely point out, as his administration has rightly argued, that Iraq still faces major challenges—foremost its inability to form a government—and that neither American sacrifice nor our commitment to Iraq’s success is ending today. Yet our troops are returning with honor, which makes this a fitting time to reflect on the causes of their victory and on what lessons from Iraq can help us win the war in Afghanistan.

Though most Democrats still cannot bear to admit it, the war in Iraq is ending successfully because the surge worked. In 2007, President George W. Bush finally adopted a strategy and a team in Iraq that could win. He worked constantly to build public support for the policy. Just as important, the surge worked because it was clear that success was the only exit strategy: U.S. troops would meet their objectives, and then they would withdraw.

This policy was savaged by Democrats in Congress—including then-Sens. Barack Obama, Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton—all of whom called for withdrawing U.S. forces regardless of the conditions or consequences. It would be nice if President Obama could finally find it in himself to give his predecessor the credit he deserves.

Whether they admit it or not, the administration’s Afghanistan policy suggests they have learned some lessons from Iraq—some, but not all. We finally have a counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan with increased levels of troops and resources. The architect of the surge in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, is now leading the war in Afghanistan.

This strategy is good and can succeed, but it is undercut by the president’s plan to begin withdrawing U.S. forces in July 2011—no matter what conditions are on the ground. None of

our military leaders recommended this approach.

The effect of this is self-defeating. The key actors are hedging their bets, making it less likely that regional powers will stop supporting the insurgency or that our Afghan partners will fully embrace the fight against corruption. Meanwhile, our enemies take comfort in knowing that fewer U.S. troops will be fighting them next year than this year.

According to Gen. James Conway, Commandant of the Marine Corps, the July 2011 deadline is “probably giving our enemy sustenance.” Or, as the famous Taliban saying goes: “You’ve got the watches, we’ve got the time.” The ambiguity of our policy is only playing into the hands of our enemies.

Our Afghanistan strategy is now being tested, just as the surge in Iraq was tested during 2007. Slow progress, rising casualties, and concerns about the weakness and reliability of our local partners are all decreasing public support for the war. A mood of defeatism is growing about Afghanistan, just as it once did with Iraq. Indeed, many of the same critics that would have delivered failure in Iraq are back again with calls for unconditional troop withdrawal, partitioning the country, a retreat to large bases and so on.

At this critical stage in Afghanistan—as was the case at a similar point in Iraq—there is no substitute for presidential leadership. President Obama was right to call success in Afghanistan a “vital national security interest” in his West Point speech last December. But that interest does not become any less vital in July 2011.

The president needs to state unequivocally that the conduct of the war, including decisions about troop strength, will be based on conditions on the ground. Furthermore, U.S. withdrawals should follow from a definition of success in Afghanistan that is broadly analogous to the success now emerging in Iraq—a country that is increasingly able to defend and

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govern itself.

We can succeed in Afghanistan, but we need to give this policy the necessary time to work. That's the best and fastest way for our troops to come home, as they are now from Iraq.

*(This article was published on August 31, 2010 at <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703618504575459983690019468.html>>.)*

## 4. "The Lesson of Iraq"

*By Don Kraus. Don Kraus is the chief executive officer of Citizens for Global Solutions.*

President Obama, speaking from the Oval Office, told the nation (and the world) that it is time to "turn the page" now that U.S. combat operations have officially ended in Iraq. And while he talked about what we learned from the last "page," the President missed an important part of the Iraq war's lesson. If we learned anything in Iraq, it's that our nation is most successful when we work in close cooperation with other nations as opposed to going at it alone. Our greatest strength is when we convince nations to join together and play by a common set of rules that we are also willing to adhere to.

President Obama correctly told us that: "...one of the lessons of our effort in Iraq is that American influence around the world is not a function of military force alone. We must use all elements of our power—including our diplomacy, our economic strength, and the power of America's example—to secure our interests and stand by our allies."

This is true, and I'm proud to hear our president say this. But it's not just about "our power." During World War II, the U.S. initiated the creation of the United Nations system. The organization was built on a foundation of mutual security in response to a shared threat. In the Korean War, the U.S. participated with sixteen U.N. member states that provided troops under a United Nations Joint Command.

In early 2003, opposing the run up to the Iraq war, I wrote that while: "...the evils of George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein are not in the same league ... what makes the two leaders equally problematic is that they both rely on national interest and national sovereignty to legitimize their use of military might and coercive force to achieve their aims. Both threaten to act outside of international law, thereby decreasing human security while increasing the potential of global warfare. ... Unfortunately, the Bush Administration's new preemptive policy of acting against 'emerg-

ing threats before they are fully formed' undermines the basic principles of the United Nations and collective security. "

President Bush's invasion of Iraq did indeed fan the flames of "global warfare." In Iraq, Afghanistan, parts of Africa, and around the world, religious fundamentalism now spawns violence that threatens the stability of all nations. President Obama identified "our fight against al Qaeda "as the U.S.'s greatest security challenge. He also said:

"Throughout our history, America has been willing to bear the burden of promoting liberty and human dignity overseas, understanding its link to our own liberty and security."

But we don't and shouldn't have to bear the burden alone. This is the true lesson of the Iraq war. Looking forward, it's time to focus on how we can work to make the United Nations a more perfect tool to share this burden.

In Iraq and Afghanistan the UN has done an admirable job of supplying humanitarian aid and organizing elections. But there is an opportunity now to empower the organization with robust peacekeeping forces, including U.S. personnel, to assist Iraq and other nations as they strive to build peaceful societies.

The end of combat in Iraq does not mean the end to violence. Rather than engaging in a perhaps decades long deployment to backstop the Iraqis—as we are still doing in Germany and Japan after WWII and in Korea after that war—we should invest our energies into a UN system that can truly end the scourge of war. The UN was created to fight fascism. It then blocked the spread of communism. With U.S. support it could prevent fundamentalist-induced terrorism.

At the core of American ideals and international law is the belief that no group or nation should use violence to impose its will on others. We will have truly turned the page after Iraq if the United States' goal is a world



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where nations unite and work together to  
make this a reality.

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don-kraus/the-lesson-of-iraq\\_b\\_702706.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/don-kraus/the-lesson-of-iraq_b_702706.html)>.)*