



HOW IRAQ WAS WON AND LOST

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The Iraq War was an absolute disaster – a historic mistake.

That’s probably what most Americans – not to mention most people around the world – would say. But is it true?

President George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003 is subject to fair debate. But it’s important to recall that, at the time, the war had overwhelming bi-partisan support in the House and Senate. Dozens of allied countries joined the coalition. That support, however, quickly faded as casualties mounted and the war started to bog down.

Criticism then turned to blame when the weapons of mass destruction that were expected to be found were not. Nothing seemed to be going right. I know – I was there, serving as a lieutenant in the United States Army.

As 2007 dawned, President Bush faced a near total collapse in both public and political support for the war. He had to make an impossibly difficult decision: accept strategic defeat and leave Iraq in chaos, or send even more troops into battle. He chose the latter, a decision that came to be known as “The Surge.”

The Democrats predicted disaster. Senator Harry Reid, the majority leader at the time, said, “This war is lost and the surge is not accomplishing anything.” Senators Joe Biden, John Kerry and Hillary Clinton agreed.

They were all wrong.

Led by General David Petraeus, and supplemented by 30,000 additional troops, American forces and their Iraqi counterparts reversed the course of the war. It was one of the most stunning and successful turnabouts in modern military history.

In 2008, I returned to the country to see for myself. I had seen the “before.” I could hardly believe the “after.”

Attacks on US forces were down 90%. American casualties were rare. Baghdad’s most dangerous neighborhoods were secure. Al Qaeda in Iraq was decimated. The oil was flowing again. Iraqis were rebuilding. And new elections were held.

This was the Iraq that President Barack Obama inherited when he took the oath of office on January 20, 2009.

Now, Iraq was certainly no Western-style democracy, but it was—as General Petraeus dubbed it—a functioning “Iraqracy.” So much so that, in a February 2009 speech to Marines at Camp Lejeune, President Obama said: “The relative peace and strong participation in January’s provincial elections sent a powerful message to the world about how far Iraqis have come.”

Vice President Joe Biden was even more enthusiastic a year later, when he said in February 2010: “I am very optimistic about Iraq. I think it’s going to be one of the greatest achievements of this administration.”

To put it mildly, it wasn’t.

So, what went wrong?

It started when the Obama Administration got into a dispute with the Iraqi government over something called a “Status of Forces Agreement.” The Iraqis said they wanted to be able to prosecute American soldiers who broke Iraqi law. Appropriately, the Obama Administration said no; we will prosecute our own law-breakers. But instead of continuing to work towards an agreement, the president, against the advice of his own generals, ended negotiations.

President Obama had said during his campaign that he would bring all the troops home, and the status-of-forces dispute gave him the perfect excuse to do just that.

On Dec. 18, 2011, the last U.S. soldiers crossed the border into Kuwait. The United States military was out of Iraq. The Iraq War was over for America, but it was about to begin again for Iraqis.

Islamist terror, which U.S. soldiers had successfully crushed, returned with a new vengeance, most prominently in the form of ISIS. And the fragile peace between Sunnis and Shia fell apart.

With America nowhere to be seen, Iraq’s neighbor to the east and America’s mortal enemy, Iran, filled the political vacuum while ISIS brutally exploited the security vacuum.

Initially dismissed by President Obama as the “jayvee team,” ISIS took control of a large part of the country. Its black flag soon flew over Mosul, Fallujah, Ramadi, and many other cities that American troops had secured at such great cost.

The war that George W. Bush had won, Barack Obama had lost.

The painful lesson is this: resolve works, and retreat doesn’t. When America commits to military victory, as it did during the Surge, it can defeat its enemies. But when America retreats for political reasons, it loses. And so do millions of others.

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