

Politics of National Security: Generals, Civilians, and the Framing of The Iraq War

NAKAYAMA TOSHIHIRO

TSUDA COLLEGE

Introduction

This paper will examine the impact and implications of the Iraq War on U. S. domestic politics after the 2006 midterm elections. It will also shed light on how the Iraq War was reframed by the George W. Bush administration to serve its political purposes. Although the focus here will be on domestic reactions, it should be noted that since they have huge implications for U. S. policy towards Iraq and beyond, these reactions should be understood as constituting an important element of the international environment.¹ Here we can see the recurring tendency to see foreign policy as an extension of domestic policy. And quite often, this is the source of gap between the United States and the world.

Protracted war has divided the country and accelerated the politicization of the foreign policy debate within the United States.² Many experts were confident that the 2008 presidential election was going to be a “national security election,” in which foreign policy and national security issues would become an issue on the front burner.³ The Washington foreign policy community was clearly gearing up towards that end, some even launching a national security think tank such as Center for New American Security (CNAS). Although CNAS was officially non-partisan, many understood it to be a vehicle of “hard power,” a new national security concept for the Democratic Party articulated by Democratic foreign policy experts.⁴ A book of the same name begins with a chapter titled “It’s the War, Stupid: Why National Security Is the Essential Electoral Issue.” Back then, no one questioned the primacy of the war in Iraq.

However, since the invisible primary started back in the early part of 2007, and particularly after the fall of that year, it became more and more evident that the electorate’s interest was shifting towards the failing economy. Polling results were a clear indication of people being worried more about the economy than the war in a foreign land. A study came out in the January of 2008 showing that the economic problems topped the public’s list of concerns, with 34% citing economic problems as the nation’s gravest problem, compared with 27% who said the war in Iraq was the biggest problem facing the nation. This represented a

reversal from a year before, when 42% cited Iraq as the most important problem in the wake of President Bush's proposal to increase the number of troops.⁵

This shift may have been triggered by the "subprime shock," but the problem lies deeper with the fear of recession and the soaring gas prices making American people uneasy about the economy. The rising importance of "pocketbook issues" has yet to completely marginalize the national security agenda but have clearly reduced the power to arouse emotional reactions among the electorate. While the liberal base of the Democratic Party may still see Iraq as the most important issue, the political climate has changed compared to the period when midterm elections of 2006 were held. However, it is important to note that this was not merely an automatic response to the rising awareness of the failing economy, but is partly a result of deliberate attempts by the Bush administration to marginalize the Iraq War as an electoral issue. Democrats may have misread the public perceptions of the war and this might have accelerated the marginalization as well.

The prolonged war in Iraq is often compared to Vietnam, a popular formulation among the war critics.⁶ The "Vietnam analogy" is a powerful rhetorical tool. While in both cases, public disillusionment with the war increased as the war entered a difficult phase, the political nature of the opposition differs. In the case of Vietnam War, being against the war was a conviction. The widely held conviction against the war culminated in the anti-war movement and anti-war demonstrations. This was largely a result of the political atmosphere of the progressive decade, opposition to military conscription, and the existence of student activism such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The case we see today is quite different. Although the public is clearly weary of the war, sentiment toward the war is much more ambivalent and partisan. It is probably safe to say that while most American people see the invasion of Iraq as a mistake, they are divided about the current course of the war and where to go from here.

The fact that the issues other than Iraq War are rising in prominence does not necessarily mean good news for the Republican Party. Some Republican strategists still consider the fight over Iraq to be the strongest ground for Senator John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, to fight on, since it pulls the campaign away from the domestic issues that voters want addressed but which favor the Democrats. When there is a recession, the party in the White House is sure to be seen unfavorably by the voters. Furthermore, Senator McCain has admitted in the past that the economy is not his favorite subject. However, the marginalization of negative sentiment towards the war as an election issue will no doubt benefit the Republicans. Adverse conditions in the 2006 election is something the Republicans would desperately want to avoid this time. The Republican political machine that operated so effectively in the 2002 and 2004 elections were dysfunctional in 2006. The main cause was the Iraq War. The "surge policy," which had the effect of marginalizing the war as an election issue, may have been Bush administration's last gift to the GOP. The policy had the effect of reducing media coverage on Iraq in the United States.⁷

I. The Impact of 2006 Midterm Elections

The Democratic Party won back control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives in the midterm election in November 2006. 12 years have past since Democrats were the majority in both houses. Although many races were won by narrow margins, the results were a “clear victory” for the Democrats. Some called it a “sweep,” and president himself described it as a “thumping.” Right after the Democratic defeat in the 2004 election, not a few Republican strategists and even some Democrats were proclaiming the possibility of “permanent Republican majority.” However, in 2006, the Democrats successfully pushed back the Republican tide, which many saw as a sign that the conservative ascendancy since 1994 was coming to an end. At the center of all this was the rising discontent with the overall situation in Iraq. There were other aspects that helped the Democrats, such as the low approval rating of the President and series of political scandals involving Republican lawmakers. Many saw Hurricane Katrina as a turning point for the Bush administration. Although these helped the Democrats, negative sentiment toward the war in Iraq provided a strong underpinning for the Democratic offensive.

In the 2004 presidential election, despite the drop in approval ratings, President Bush obtained 11 million more votes than in the previous election, being elected with a majority of votes for the first time in years. The Bush campaign defied the common wisdom that an increase in voter turnout would benefit the Democrats. The Republican strategy was to divide the electorate and then focus solely on solidifying the conservative wing of the party. The idea was to minimize the clout of the political center and stress the ideological cohesiveness of the right flank. The Democrats were conversely defined by the Republican strategy of polarization so that the liberal wing became more agitated, which in turn energized the conservative base of the Republican Party. The energy and passion of the “Dean movement” was most symbolic in this context. The fact that this movement erupted so quickly and resulted in a major debacle could have been seen as a warning sign that excitement within the base of the Democratic Party does not necessarily mean victory time for Democrats. After all, America is still a center-right nation.⁸ The lesson of the Dean campaign was that political energy has to be well controlled and sustained.

Since the election became a battle to solidify one’s own base rather than targeting the center of the electorate, the better-organized and ideologically coherent Republican Party led by the conservative wing of the party had an advantage to the diverse and less-ideologically coherent Democratic Party. The effects of the strategy of polarization were clearly envisaged by Bush campaign strategists such as Karl Rove, Ed Gillespie, Matthew Dowd, Mark McKinnon, Ken Mehlman, and I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby.⁹ They treated the so-called “swing voters” as a political myth and focused solely on the “base.” This was the only

way in which an incumbent president with a below the 50 percent approval rating could get reelected. In *So Goes the Nation* (2006), a documentary film of the 2004 election battle in Ohio, Paul Begala, a former advisor to President Bill Clinton, says that there were twenty ways in which Sen. John Kerry could have won the election whereas the president had only one critical path to victory and he executed it perfectly.¹⁰ The Republican victory clearly showed how effective the Republican machine was, and as a consequence, fatalistic sentiment pervaded the Democratic Party. If you couldn't win in a 2004 political environment, it was difficult to imagine winning in any other election. If the first priority of a political party was to win an election, the defeat in 2004 put into doubt the legitimacy of the Democratic Party.

However, mere two years later, Democrats won back both houses of Congress. Taking the extremely high rate of incumbent reelection into account, it was not an exaggeration to describe the results as a "sweep" or a "thumping." Nevertheless, the Democratic victory was not a result of the electorate responding to the party's message. With the *Contract with America* (1994) in mind, Democrats, under the leadership of Rep. Nancy Pelosi, did come out with *New Direction for America* (2006).¹¹ In it, Democrats addressed six priorities for America, "Six for '06." To be fair, some do dispute the actual effect of the *Contract with America*.¹² But it no doubt became a symbol of the 1994 Republican victory. *New Direction for America* was no such document. Rather, it was the rejection of the Republican President and the Republican-led Congress, which led to Democratic victory. In this sense, the 2006 election was about "Republican defeat" rather than about "Democratic victory." And Iraq was no doubt the strongest political headwind for the Republicans.¹³

A day after the election, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld resigned. The ousting of Rumsfeld seemed to suggest that the president was well aware of the public's frustration with the Iraq War. Many in the Republican camp just wished that Rumsfeld had resigned before the election rather than after. On December 6, just one month after the election, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG), co-chaired by the two foreign policy wise men, James Baker and Lee Hamilton, released its recommendation on a new path for the U. S. in Iraq.¹⁴ The President seemed ready to embrace the report and appeared in front of the media with the co-chairs on the day of the release. The report recommended "phased withdrawal" of the U. S. troops from Iraq and it seemed almost inevitable that some sort of troop reduction would take place.

The report was 190 pages long with 79 specific recommendations, but the essence of the report could be summed up in a single word, "bipartisanship." The report was not really about Iraq but about the way in which U. S. approached the war in Iraq. Moreover, the Baker-Hamilton Commission, whose official mandate was to consider U. S. Iraq policy, was expected to play a larger role of "bipartisan wise men council" whose implicit mandate was to bring the country together to pursue a "vital center foreign policy" with a realist-internationalist perspective.

Taking this tacit role seriously, the Commission criticized the central theme of Bush foreign policy since 9–11. It was a major repudiation of “go it alone” unilateralism. The underlying notion of the report was that unless the U. S. could correct its course in a major way, it would negatively affect the strategic position the U. S. had maintained over a generation in global politics.

To maximize the impact of the recommendation, the Commission released the report not prior to but after the election. If it had been released before the election, the recommendation would have easily been consumed as a political document and the bipartisan tone of the report would have been lost amidst the heated rhetoric of the election. Indeed, many moderate and centrist Republicans fully endorsed the ISG report, increasing the potential for it to become a bipartisan platform for a new Iraq policy. The fact that James Baker, the former Secretary of State during the George H. W. Bush administration, who is still personally close to the former president, was co-chairing the Commission was seen as a sign that the former president was not in agreement with the route his son took. It was a stark repudiation both of the ideologically motivated neoconservatives and the hawkish conservative nationalists. The former President never criticized his son in public. However, his disagreement seemed quite clear. It is ironic that one of the reasons the son pursued an aggressive foreign policy was not to follow the footsteps of his father’s perceived lack of a “grand vision.” For the President, the “vision thing” was what separated his “consequential presidency” from his father’s unsuccessful presidency. Looking back, it is clear what was in need at the time was not the “vision thing” the president so proudly embraced with missionary emotion, but “prudence,” which is precisely what the former president excelled at.¹⁵

The political atmosphere being such, the 110th Congress started in January 2007 with a strong expectation that the president had to in one way or another redirect the course in Iraq. The new Democratic Congress, led by Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, was expected to aggressively pursue president’s Iraq policy. The Democrats were elected precisely for this reason.

II. 110th Congress and Iraq War: The “Surge”

Despite all the expectation for a change of course in Iraq, President Bush, firmly believing that the conduct of war is President’s prerogative, announced “A New Way Forward in Iraq” on January 10, 2007, just a week after the new session opened in Congress. The new plan would increase the number of American troops deployed to Iraq to provide security.¹⁶ It seemed at the time that this was a total repudiation of what voters had demanded in the election held just two months before. The administration tried to avoid the word “troop increase” and Democrats did try to dub the new policy as an “escalation,” but the latter never stuck. The term that would most often be used would be the “troop surge.”

Technically, the Democratic Congress could have stopped the surge by exerting the power of the purse but this option was never seriously pursued. If the Democrats had taken that route, it is doubtful whether there would have been substantial support from the American public. It would most likely have aroused harsh criticism that Democrats were abandoning the troops.

Although the Democrats held majorities in both houses, they did not have enough votes to overturn the President's veto power. In the Senate, Democrats needed ten or more Republican lawmakers to cross party lines to stop the filibuster. As a result of major losses in the midterm elections not a few Republicans were becoming critical of the administration's Iraq policy. However, this uneasiness was not enough for them to fully cooperate with the Democrats in pressing for a reduction of troops in Iraq. The new Democratic Congress, although energized as ever, was not able to actually redirect the American course in Iraq.

The "surge policy" was said to have been adopted from the report published by the Iraq Planning Group (IPG) at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) titled, "Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq." Fredrick Kagan, a resident military historian at AEI, and Jack Keane, a retired Army general, wrote the report.¹⁷ It was made available to the public on January 5, 2007, just a few days before President's "A New Way Forward in Iraq" was announced. However, the draft of the report was made available on December 14, 2006, a little more than a week after the ISG report was made public. The timing suggests that the Kagan-Keane report was intended as a counterbalance to the recommendation outlined in the ISG report.

The composition of IPG was in clear contrast to the ISG. IPG consisted of eight AEI Scholars, four retired Army officers, and five scholars from other institutions. ISG members were carefully selected to achieve bipartisanship. The co-chairs not simply focused on the balance but more on the tone of the discussion. People such as former Senator Chuck Robb, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, among other, were selected as members of the ISG. Institutional support for the ISG was provided by the Congressional-funded non-partisan United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Although AEI is one of many influential conservative public policy institutes in the field, it stood out as being the intellectual backbone of President's Global War-on-Terror (GWOT), particularly on the war in Iraq. In this context, AEI was different from other conservative institutions such as Heritage Foundation. AEI was tied at the hip to the administration's Iraq policy. An AEI participant in the IPG was one of the founders of the Project for New American Century (PNAC), known to be an intellectual clearinghouse for the neoconservative foreign policy. The objective of IPG was to aggressively pursue the "right war" in midst of an "irrational defeatist wave."

When the IPG report was being prepared, it was seen as an attempt by a "bad

loser” to engage in a useless intellectual resistance. Almost everyone thought at the time that restoring legitimacy to the Iraq War was a futile attempt. Many Republicans at the time were expressing concern about the war. Although the two parties were not in agreement on the war, by this time the debate was on how to construct a viable “exit strategy.” Whereas many in the Democratic camp favored immediate or speedy withdrawal, the Republicans pushed for cautious and slower withdrawal. To be sure, the Kagan-Keane report was not about reinstalling the “legitimacy (with a capital L)” of the Iraq War. They were not neoconservatives. Rather it was about a military strategy calling for a large and sustained surge of U. S. forces to secure and protect critical areas of Baghdad. The President seemingly accepted the more heavyweight ISG and gave it lip service, accommodating some of the 79 proposals recommended in the report. However, it soon became clear that President’s “A New Way Forward in Iraq” was more in sync with IPG’s “Plan for Success in Iraq” than with ISG’s “The Way Forward.” Consequently, some have even called IPG the “Real ISG.”¹⁸

It is worth noting that at the launching event of the IPG report, two of the fiercest defenders of the surge policy in Congress, Senator John McCain, a presumptive Republican presidential nominee, and Senator Joe Lieberman, an Independent Democrat who supports Sen. McCain for the 2008 presidential election, were present, participating as panelists.¹⁹ Just around this time, Senator McCain was losing his position as frontrunner in the Republican presidential contest. It was mainly because of his unrelenting support of the war in Iraq. His popularity would plunge several months after. However, Senator McCain did not swing as many of his Republican colleagues. Looking back, partly because of his unwavering support for the war, he is where he is today, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee.

The new policy that President Bush announced was carefully constructed to avoid the impression of a “troop escalation.” The preferred term was a “surge,” which the media and most of the pundits eventually ended up using. The word “surge” indicates a short-term increase in force that would naturally go back to its previous level. It gives the impression that the troops are not “based,” and that troops come in to do a job that can be done quickly, and then leave.²⁰ Whether the framing strategy worked or not is beside the point. Less than two months after the thumping defeat and a month after the bipartisan ISG report, and whatever one may think about presidential prerogatives, President Bush surprised the country with a plan to increase the troops in the midst of strong opposition. Since the ISG report is still cited as a starting point for bipartisan cooperation, if Democrats win the White House in the 2008 presidential election, President Obama may restore the Report as the backbone of his new Iraq policy. In the meantime, the only visible effect the Report and the “thumping loss” had on President Bush was that he stopped using the word “victory” and started using the word “success” to describe the American objective in Iraq.

On January 10, 2007, President Bush addressed the Nation from the White

House Library and stressed the need to deal with the security situation on the ground. Although the term “surge” was yet to appear, the message was quite clear:

This is a strong commitment. But for it to succeed, our commanders say the Iraqis will need our help. So America will change our strategy to help the Iraqis carry out their campaign to put down sectarian violence and bring security to the people of Baghdad. This will require increasing American force levels. So I've committed more than 20,000 additional American troops to Iraq.²¹

The fact that Robert Gates, who was a member of the ISG and a confidante of the President's father was appointed as the new Secretary of Defense replacing Donald Rumsfeld; that the President seemed in public to embrace the ISG's long-term objective; that the “surge” according to the President was at least temporary, had the overall effect of keeping down the frustration level of the suspicious American public. But most importantly, the role played by General David Petraeus, who would be appointed Commanding General of the Multi-National Force in Iraq in February 2007, was critical in the overall implementation of the surge policy. Indeed, the “Petraeusization” and the “de-Bushification” of the Iraq War was what made the “surge policy” acceptable in the American domestic political context.

Democratic objection to the surge policy was mostly ignored by the White House, leaving Democrats without a choice but to set the next timing of the political offensive in September 2007. In September, General Petraeus was to appear before the Congress to review the achieved results of the “surge.” For the September testimony to be the climactic event that Democrats had hoped there were several assumptions that had to be met.²² The first assumption was that the “surge” would result in a total failure. It was perceived that the first phase of the war, which started with a U. S. attack in March 2003, was over and that the ground situation was shifting to a different battle, namely the civil war. The U. S. troop presence in this situation would only increase instability. The second assumption was that if this were the case, U. S. troop casualties would continue to rise without a strategic rationale, resulting in a continuation of the political atmosphere that brought about a huge victory in the 2006 midterm elections. Heightened anti-war sentiment was sure to bring about a political atmosphere conducive to Democratic offensive. As a result of all this, the Republican support base of the war would start to collapse, prompting major defections on the issue related to the war effort. This was the third assumption. Republican lawmakers from purple states or northeastern states with moderate electorates were worried that the party's stance on Iraq would jeopardize their positions in the next election.

No doubt, the defeat of a moderate Republican Senator from Rhode Island, Lincoln Chafee, in the 2006 election crossed their minds. Before the election, Senator Chafee's approval rating was over 60 percent and he was the only

Republican senator to oppose the authorization of the use of force in Iraq. Nevertheless, he was defeated simply because he was Republican. Recurrence of the “Chafee shock” was something they would desperately want to avoid.²³ Moreover, seasoned Republican Senators such as Richard Lugar, a ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and John Warner, ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee both reserved their positions when the “surge” was announced in January. They withheld any policy decisions up until the summer. However, many expected that the senior senators would part ways with the president in September. Democrats were convinced that “unsuccessful surge policy,” “rising anti-war sentiment,” “collapse of the Republican support base,” and the “lame duck presidency” would have a combined effect of putting Democrats in a strategically advantageous position.

III. “Petraeusization” of the Iraq War²⁴

For Democrats, testimony by General Petraeus and Ryan Crocker, U. S. Ambassador to Iraq, in September 2007 was supposed to be a “decisive moment” where Democrats would take control of the Iraq debate. It would be a moment in which Democratic-led Congress with strong backing from the American public would redirect the course in Iraq, coinciding with the nation plunging into the political season of a presidential election. Testimonies would kick off the Republican defection. Hence, it would not just be a Democratic offensive but a bipartisan vital center offensive. No longer able to make a convincing argument on Iraq, it would signal a *de facto* end of the Bush presidency. The 2008 presidential primaries started extremely early with the “invisible primary” starting right after the election in 2006. It was expected to enter a whole new phase after the Labor Day weekend. The primary dynamic would go full force with debate on Iraq being at the center stage. Petraeus testimony would come just at the perfect time.

However, contrary to the expectations of many, things did not turn out as Democrats hoped. The results of the surge were mixed. Anti-war sentiment did not skyrocket. The exodus never happened. It was nothing but an anticlimax. What the Bush administration had done during this period was to selectively implement the specific recommendation of the Baker-Hamilton Report while at the same time shelving the spirit and the essence of Commission’s proposal. Indeed, at times, it seemed as though the White House was embracing the ISG Report but the fact may be that ISG report was always a fallback position in case the “surge” failed.

At the time of the September testimony, it was difficult to clearly determine whether the troop surge had been a success or a failure. The goal was to achieve political reconciliation between the various Iraqi factions. In this respect, it was not a success. However, when President Bush announced the “surge,” he stated that the primal objective was not to win the war, but to secure a “breathing space”

so that Iraqi government could take action. The final goal of the war was political reconciliation but the short-term military objective was to achieve security on the ground and provide “breathing space.” Data showed that the security situation had improved. Therefore, although the “surge” was not a full brown success, neither was it a failure.

As Democrats were forced into accepting the lukewarm evaluation of the “surge,” their message of withdrawal lost its vigor and they reluctantly retreated to a “wait and see” position. Although the Democratic rhetoric remained the same, there were nothing much they could do. Bush administration knowingly shifted the purpose of the deployed forces in Iraq from an agent of grand strategic vision in the “Greater Middle East” to a counter-insurgency force with a limited objective to achieve security in the confined area in the country. Through this, Bush administration successfully controlled and limited what to expect from the troop surge. In the actual testimony, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker were pressed very hard by the lawmakers from both parties. Petraeus himself didn’t present any rosy scenario to the Committee and sometimes even admitted the grim situation on the ground. Asked by Senator John Warner whether the fighting in Iraq made America safer, the general answered that he did not know. Nevertheless, both men were treated by the committees with extreme respect. Whatever the exchange, it did not have the effect of altering the overall dynamic of the Iraq debate in Washington. Ultimately, the Petraeus-Crocker testimony was a great success for the administration because it contained the argument for withdrawal. Washington’s expectation was always much higher than the reality in Iraq but the testimony was successful in delaying the clock in the capital. The clock in Washington was always moving much faster than the clock in Baghdad. This gap had to be controlled in order for the American people to accept the “surge.” As the war prolonged, controlling of the expectation would become a major component of the war policy in Iraq.

Most of all, the biggest strategic blunder by the Democrats was that they could not resist the discursive strategy to make General Petraeus, the front man for the war effort. For the general, both Washington and Baghdad were critical battlefields. Until then, the war in Iraq was always, either “Bush’s war” or “Bush and his gang’s war.” The “gangs” could be Vice President Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, or neoconservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, or Richard Perle. Either way, they were all civilians. They were the ones who not only prepared and provided the tactical aspect of the war but the strategic meaning of the war. In other words, they were the “architects” of war. Today, though, all but the vice president have left office. As long as the war remained “Bush and his gang’s war,” it would be extremely difficult to steer the image of the war in a positive direction. However, by converting the “meaning” of the war from a “neoconservative war of grand strategic transformation” to a “limited war of securing minimum security in parts of Iraq,” the administration disconnected the direct link between President Bush and the war and converted it into “Petraeus’s

war.” As a result, the testimony in September ceased to be the “decisive moment” Democrats had hoped for, and the war itself was marginalized as a political issue, although not totally. The strategy was to change how the war was being framed in Washington thereby invalidating the Democratic argument based on the “previous war.” This happened well before people started worrying about the economy in the early fall of 2007.

The surge policy, announced in midst of deep skepticism towards President’s war policy, was implemented as the “general’s policy.” President would recede into the background by only endorsing the policy. Even before the September testimony, polls showed that Americans trusted military commanders far more than the White House or Congress to bring the war in Iraq to a successful end. Although most favored a withdrawal of American troops, the polls suggested that the public was open to doing so at a measured pace.²⁵ In their testimony General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker talked about the ground situation in Iraq in a straightforward manner, sometimes giving the impression that it was the lawmakers who were engaged in a grandstand play. The testimony only reinforced the trust the American public felt toward the military commanders. An ad by Move On.Org, a web-based liberal anti-war group, portraying General Petraeus as “General Betray Us” only alienated the anti-war groups from the general public.²⁶ In this process, criticizing the President for the conduct of Iraq War, or more precisely, the “surge,” became somewhat irrelevant. Whether calculated or not, the “Petraeusization of the Iraq War” had the effect of putting a damper on war criticism.

The teflon effect of General Petraeus forced the Democrats into pressing the White House concerning the origins of the war. The “origins debate” involved issues such as whether or not intelligence was manipulated; whether links with Iraq and Al-Qaeda were exaggerated; and the fact that the administration sold the war as a “cakewalk.” Although they were all serious allegations, they were more than four years old. General Petraeus, on the contrary, focused solely on what should be done today. The “origins debate” would lead to the question of the legitimacy of the war but since the administration de-linked “General Petraeus’s war” from “Bush’s war,” the argument fell flat. This disappearance of President Bush from the frontline of the Iraq debate was not something the Democrats had expected. Both the Democrats and the Republicans frequently raised the question of whether political reconciliation between the various Iraqi factions had been achieved. The answer to this question was negative, but since there were signs of improved security situation, this did not diminish the rationale for the surge policy.²⁷ By the end of year 2007, although the public had not turned to supporting the war, trends clearly showed that they started to see progress in the war effort. It was clear that the Petraeus narrative had successfully penetrated the public’s view of the war.²⁸

The approval rate of the Bush administration in the second term is at a historical low. It was not in a position to take the initiative on difficult policy

issues. Indeed, most of the major domestic initiatives such as tax reform, tort reform, social security reform, and the realization of “ownership society” met with setbacks. However, on Iraq, the most difficult issue of all, the administration succeeded in getting through the deepest skepticism and contained the withdrawal option. This was a serious blow to the Democratic Congress. As a consequence, polls showed that the approval rate of Congress marked a historical low, dipping below 20 percent.²⁹ The Democratic Congress could not measure up to the expectations of the electorate that had supported them in 2006 midterm elections. However, the Iraq War could always come back as a front burner issue if the security situation on the ground clearly deteriorates and the number of U. S. casualty rises again.

The September 2007 testimony was held just when the surge policy hit its peak. The long-awaited Democratic offensive ended in a typical anticlimax without initiating an exodus from the war support camp. The balance of power in Congress more or less remained the same. After September, the next timing of the offensive would be April 2008 when both the general and ambassador would be back in Washington for another round of testimony. If the results of the surge were not clear and positive by then, Democrats figured that Iraq could become an explosive issue, just as it had been in 2006.

IV. Iraq Syndrome and War Fatigue

As it became clear that the war in Iraq was not proceeding as planned, people started to compare Iraq with Vietnam.³⁰ There were no doubt similarities. In both cases, many felt that the United States was stuck in a war where strategic objectives were no longer clear. After the February 2006 bombing of Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, many felt the situation in Iraq was descending into civil war. Just as the Vietnam War ceased to be an extension of the Cold War, the Iraq War ceased to be an extension of the war on terrorism. Rather, it was seen as a distraction to the larger objective. In both cases, the U. S. was losing its credibility even among its allies. However, there were important differences as well. One of the important differences is the public’s view of men and women in uniform.

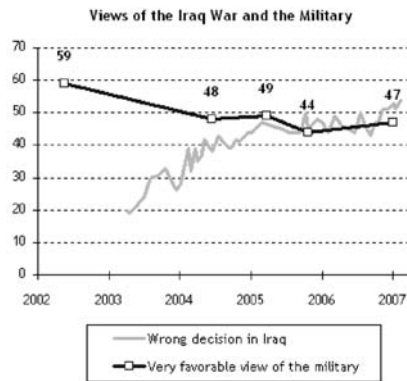
Figures 1 and 2 below indicate a correlation between one’s view of the war and of the military during both wars. In the case of Vietnam, as the perception of war turned negative, confidence in military leaders declined as well. However, in the case of Iraq, the favorable view of the military is rather stable after 2004 even though the frustration towards the war has nearly doubled.

There are multiple factors behind the numbers. The post-9/11 effect may be one of them. The fact that conscription is no longer in place, and that the burden of military service is not shared equally by all groups of the population may have an effect as well. Another reasons may be that the American people saw the war in Iraq as one initiated by the civilian officials in the Pentagon and vice

Figure 1



Figure 2



Source: "Iraq and Vietnam: A Crucial Difference in Opinion," Pew Research Center (March 22, 2007).

president’s office. For a final account, a detailed study using the primary source is much to be expected. However, although they did not speak out at the time, it was quite clear from the real-time coverage that it was the people in uniform who were skeptical about the civilian leaders’ war planning.³¹ Many of the retired military officers, including General Colin Powell and General Brent Scowcroft, were in the “skeptics” camp. General Powell never came out publicly denouncing the war but his skepticism was quite evident.³² General Scowcroft, former National Security Advisor in the senior Bush administration, was a vocal critic of the war.³³ The “bad guys” in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the popular anti-Bush movie directed by Michael Moore, weren’t the typical hawkish military officers, but were all civilians in suits. There were no Curtis LeMays or William Westmorelands in the Iraq War. Looking back, when the White House converted the Iraq War into the “General’s war” from a “President’s war,” the road to anticlimax was installed.

Another major difference is the attitude towards the war itself. This was a difference between the zeitgeist of the “sixties” and the “millennium.” Although the Vietnam War continued until the mid-1970s, as a socio-political event it was typically a 1960s phenomenon. Together with the New Left and other social movements the Anti-Vietnam War movement was one of the important pillars of the “anti-systemic movement” of the sixties.³⁴ In latter half of the sixties when civil rights movement toned down, opposition to the war was the main driving force of the New Left. Conscription still in force, it involved many young people and amassed into an anti-war movement. Within the movement, the feeling towards the military was quite negative, and America was seen as something that would have to be spelled with a “k” rather than with a “c.”

What then is a millennium zeitgeist? As Robert Kagan titled his recent book, general feeling was that the history had returned.³⁵ The post-Cold War decade ended abruptly with the attacks of September 11th. It became more natural to talk

about national pride and wear national symbols. As Michael Ignatieff notes, America is one of the few countries in the west to embrace without cynicism national symbols and national pride in the first place.³⁶ This tendency was no doubt reinforced by the terrorist attacks, although there are signs that this trend may be receding. Two major wars conducted in the post-9/11 world, the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq, did not have to face a sustainable anti-war movement. Although there were momentary outbursts of anti-war sentiment, it was never a sustainable mass movement. The anti-war rallies organized in the March 2008 in Washington, D. C. gathered fewer than 1000 marchers.³⁷

The strongly negative view of the Iraq War is something very different from the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War period. It is clear that the American public is weary of war, but ideological conviction is missing, hence the lack of a mass movement. The frustration is directed not towards the war itself but rather towards the fact that war has not been proceeding as it was explained, and young soldiers are losing their lives in the midst of seemingly strategic defeat. This in fact means that if the situation on the ground improves it may not be too much to expect the toning down of the opposition, although it might be difficult to expect American public to support the war after all that America has gone through. And this precisely is what happened after September 2007.

Figures 3 and 4 clearly show the public responding positively to the decreased casualty rate and the improved security situation as a result of the “surge.” Another Pew study shows that Iraq coverage in the media dramatically decreased after September 2007, partly as a result of the early start of presidential election politics (see Figure 5 below). However, the report adds, “the war has virtually disappeared from the headlines and talk shows these days—and that’s the situation inside Iraq itself. The reduction in violence on the ground that began late last year has coincided with a significant decrease in coverage from the war zone as well.” Since the negative views of the Iraq War were not based on anti-

Figure 3

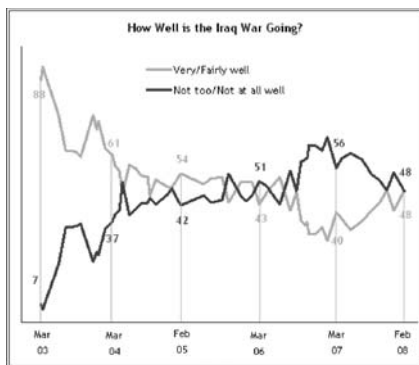
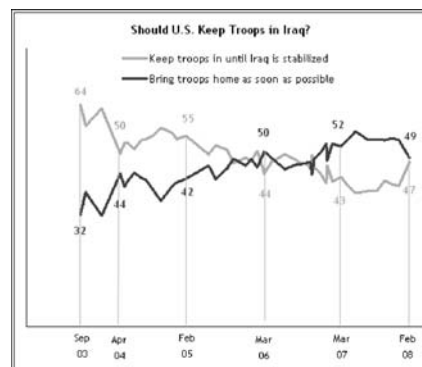
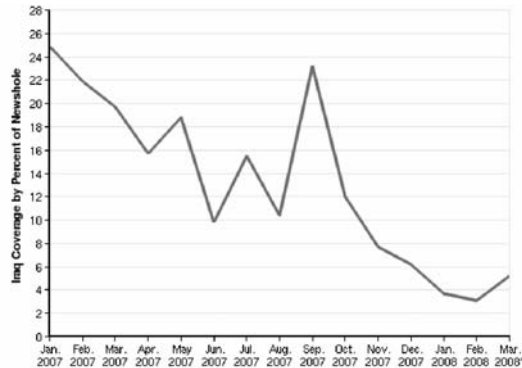


Figure 4



Source: “Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003–2008,” Pew Research Center (March 19, 2008).

Figure 5



“Why News of Iraq Didn’t Surge,” Pew Research Center, March 27, 2008.

war conviction, they were susceptible to the situation on the ground. This may suggest that the Iraq War may not trigger Vietnam Syndrome-like symptoms because it is more a response to a situation than a general attitude toward war.

What happened in the November election of 2006 was more like a “perfect storm” for Democrats. It took place when the situation on the ground in Iraq was at its worst. But if the indications highlighted in this paper hold true, Democrats may not win the 2008 presidential election with only Iraq as an issue on the front burner. The second Petraeus/Crocker testimony, which took place in April, was again an anticlimax. It more or less became a performance stunt for the remaining three presidential candidates at the time, without whom it would not have received that much public attention. In the primaries the core message of the Democratic candidates on Iraq was that the war was wrong and that U. S. should withdraw as soon as possible, albeit not immediately. The public weariness of war may soar and that may seem very much the same as the anti-war movement in the 1960s, yet it will respond smoothly to the improved situation on the ground, and in a short term, the public image of war might shift to the positive. This does not mean that the public would suddenly support the war effort. However, it suggests that they maybe more flexible about the timing of the withdrawal.

The 2008 presidential election was supposed to be a national security election in which, for the first time since 1972, Democrats would be on the offensive on security issues because of the prolonged battle in Iraq. Democrats would emphasize that they are the party of Kennedy and Truman, that they can bring back the tradition of muscular internationalism which has been marginalized for so long, and that they can restore America’s position in the world.³⁸ But the Bush administration’s effort to “de-politicize” the war and make it into a pure military operation took the steam out of the issue, and shifted the sub-context of the election. The effect may be temporary, but from a domestic standpoint, it was a

political success.

Conclusion

Although national security issues would no doubt remain a serious election issue, it may no longer be the dominant issue for the 2008 election as it was for the 2006 election. However, the important question for us is not whether or not it will become an electoral issue, but rather how the new administration and the U. S. public would see its role after 2009, and how it will locate the war in the nation's collective memory. In this respect, how the war will be treated in this election cycle will give us a glimpse of what to expect in the near future because through this process, the candidates and the American people are trying to rethink and organize what has happened in the past few years into a single narrative. And no doubt, this would be a starting point for new action (although we must also be careful not to be overwhelmed by the election rhetoric, which so often goes out of control). Will the unilateral bypassing of international institutions continue, or will the U. S. embed itself in a web of agreements and institutions? It probably will be neither. No matter who becomes president, the simple structural fact that U. S. is the sole superpower and the main engine of globalization would constrain them to be somewhat unilateral and different from others. In this sense, change is a question of degree.

However, we can expect political leaders to inspire the nation to see itself differently, and we are already hearing those new voices from the candidates themselves. One candidate sees the world in quite an untypical manner:

When you travel to the world's trouble spots as a United States Senator, much of what you see is from a helicopter. So you look out, with the buzz of the rotor in your ear, maybe a door gunner nearby, and you see the refugee camp in Darfur, the flood near Djibouti, the bombed out block in Baghdad. You see thousands of desperate faces. Al Qaeda's new recruits come from Africa and Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Many come from disaffected communities and disconnected corners of our interconnected world. And it makes you stop and wonder: when those faces look up at an American helicopter, do they feel hope, or do they feel hate?³⁹

Another candidate, though much more traditional in its scope, argues for a new kind of internationalism:

In such a world, where power of all kinds is more widely and evenly distributed, the United States cannot lead by virtue of its power alone. We must be strong politically, economically, and militarily. But we must also lead by attracting others to our cause, by demonstrating once again the virtues of freedom and democracy, by defending the rules of international civilized society and by creating the new international institutions necessary to advance the peace and freedoms we cherish. Perhaps above all, leadership in today's world means accepting and fulfilling our responsibilities as a great nation.... There is such a thing as international good

citizenship. We need to be good stewards of our planet and join with other nations to help preserve our common home.⁴⁰

The views here, if implemented as policy, may differ widely, but the thrust of the two statements is the same. America needs a new narrative to redefine its role in the world. If these are the Iraq syndromes we are going to witness, it would no doubt be welcome. We can expect a new type of “vital center internationalism” out of this debate. What the world does not need is variations of “dead center internationalism,” aggressive unilateralism on the one hand and unilateral isolationism on the other. The creeping of partisanship into foreign policy was a result of a polarization created by the Vietnam War. After that, bipartisanship never returned to the level of the 1950s and the 1960s.⁴¹ If some sort of internationalist compact could be reached that will resonate with the world, American internationalism is always a welcome.

Notes

- 1 For a guide to domestic sources of U. S. foreign policy, see, Eugene R. Wittkopf and James M. McCormick, *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and Evidence*, 5th ed., (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).
- 2 For polarization of foreign policy, see, Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, “Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States,” *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Fall 2007).
- 3 Cf., Kurt M. Campbell and Derek Chollet, “National Security Election,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Winter 2007–2008).
- 4 Kurt M. Campbell and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Hard Power: The New Politics of National Security* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
- 5 “An Even More Partisan Agenda for 2008: Election-Year Economic Ratings Lowest Since ’92,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (January 24, 2008).
- 6 President George W. Bush, in a speech delivered on August 22, 2007, invoked the Vietnam War, criticizing the timing of the withdrawal, to buttress the Iraq War drive. This was a rare case, in which Vietnam was referred to in the context of supporting the war.
- 7 “Awareness of Iraq War Fatalities Plummet,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (March 12, 2008).
- 8 Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics 2007–2008* (Washington, D. C.: CQ Press, 2008), p. 123.
- 9 For 2004 Bush campaign team, see, Ed Gillespie, *Winning Right: Campaign Politics and Conservative Politics* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2006).
- 10 *...So Goes the Nation: A true story of how elections are won... and lost*, dir., James D. Stern and Adam Del Deo, 2006, DVD, Genius Entertainment, 2007.
- 11 Office of the House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, *A New Direction for America* (2006).
- 12 A. B. Stoddard, “Twelve Years Later, Myth about the Contract Persist,” *Hill*, April 5, 2006.
- 13 Toyoki Hosono, “Minshuto no fukken (Resurgence of Democratic Party),” *Kokusai*

- Mondai*, no. 559 (March 2007); Toshihiro Nakayama, “Minshuto tasuha gikai to touha seiji no yukue (Democratic Majority and the Fate of Partisan Politics),” *Kaigaijijo*, vol. 54, no. 12 (December 2006).
- 14 James A. Baker, III, and Lee H. Hamilton, Co-Chairs, *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward—A New Approach* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).
- 15 Michael Howard, “The Prudence Thing: George Bush’s Class Act,” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 1998).
- 16 See, the fact sheet provided by the White House on “The New Way Forward in Iraq,” January 10, 2007 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-3.html>, accessed on May 31, 2008).
- 17 Frederick W. Kagan, “Choosing Victory: Plan for success in Iraq, Phase I Report,” A Report of Iraq Planning Group at the American Enterprise Institute, 2007.
- 18 Mark Benjamin, “The Real Iraq Study Group,” *Salon*, January 6, 2007. (<http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/01/06/aei/>, accessed on May 31, 2008)
- 19 See event info at http://www.aei.org/events/eventID.1446/event_detail.asp, accessed on May 31, 2008.
- 20 George Lakoff, “Framing, Death and Democracy,” Rockridge Institute, February 13, 2007 (<http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/research/lakoff/framing-death-and-democracy/>, accessed on May 31, 2008).
- 21 George W. Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation,” January 10, 2007 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html>, accessed on May 31, 2008).
- 22 All that time, Democratic Congress kept on pressing the White House on Iraq War, presenting a series of Iraq related bills. A House bill that included language that dictated troop levels and withdrawal schedules was vetoed by the President. Cf., Akihiko Yasui, “Lame Duck Bush Administration and Democratic Majority Congress,” *Kokusai Mondai*, no. 568 (January and February, 2008).
- 23 After being unseated, Sen. Chafee left the Republican Party and became an independent. He endorsed Sen. Barack Obama for president in February of 2008.
- 24 Cf., Nakayama Toshihiro, “Iraku Senso no Petoreias-ka (Petraeusization of the Iraq War),” *Shōten*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, no. 44 (October, 2007).
- 25 Steven Lee Myers and Megan Thee, “Military Holds Most Trust in Iraq Debate, New Poll Finds,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2007.
- 26 See, <http://pol.moveon.org/petraeus.html> (accessed on May 31, 2008) for the MoveOn.org ad.
- 27 It is not at all clear whether Gen. Petraeus had any political intentions. Unlike L. Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Gen. Petraeus, who was responsible in preparing *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency Manual*, seems not to have been motivated politically. *FM 3-24* can be downloaded from Federation of American Scientists (FAS) website (<http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24fd.pdf>, accessed on May 31, 2008).
- 28 “Public sees Progress in War Effort,” Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (November 27, 2007).
- 29 “Congress’ Approval Rating Ties Lowest in Gallup Records,” May 14, 2008 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/107242/Congress-Approval-Rating-Ties-Lowest-Gallup-Records.aspx>, accessed on May 31, 2008).
- 30 Cf., William Greider, “Iraq as Vietnam,” *Nation*, May 3, 2004; John Dumbrell and

- David Ryan, *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies and Ghosts* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 31 Cf., Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
- 32 Sidney Blumenthal, “Will the real Colin Powell stand up?,” *Salon*, August 9, 2007 (http://www.salon.com/opinion/blumenthal/2007/08/09/iraq_powell/, accessed on May 31, 2008).
- 33 Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam: It would undermine our antiterror efforts,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2002; Glenn Kessler, “Scowcroft is Critical of Bush: Ex-National Security Adviser Calls Iraq a ‘Failing Venture’,” *Washington Post*, October 16, 2004.
- 34 Cf., Immanuel M. Wallerstein, “1968, revolution in the world-system,” Immanuel M. Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- 35 Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).
- 36 Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Picador, 2000).
- 37 Michael E. Ruane, “Cries Against War Sparse but Fierce: Fewer than 1,000 Protest, 33 Arrested in Scattered Displays in the District,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2008.
- 38 For such a view, see Will Marshall, ed., *With All Our Might: A Progressive Strategy for Defeating Jihadism and Defending Liberty* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).
- 39 Remarks by Senator Barack Obama to the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D. C., “The War We Need to Win,” August 1, 2007 (http://www.barackobama.com/2007/08/01/remarks_of_senator_obama_the_w_1.php, accessed on May 31, 2008).
- 40 Remarks by Senator John McCain to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council in Los Angeles, “U. S. Foreign Policy: Where We Go From Here,” March 26, 2008 (<http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/News/Speeches/872473dd-9ccb-4ab4-9d0d-ec54f0e7a497.htm>, accessed on May 31, 2008).
- 41 Kupchan and Trubowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 23.