

Iraq Trap 2

“AMERICANS ONLY WANT TRAGEDIES WITH HAPPY endings,” the novelist and critic William Dean Howells once said, and that strain in our culture seems to be at work once again in the debate about Iraq. Many of the war’s original supporters now concede it was a

tragic mistake, but they’re still holding out for it to end happily. Like the president, they grasp at a few positive statistics or favorable developments in one province, struggling to sustain the hope that bad decisions can be made right if only our troops stay in Iraq until we turn things around.

And so they lend their assistance in the laying of a trap. Iraq Trap 1 was the war itself—America stuck in the sands of Mesopotamia, lured there by false claims about weapons of mass destruction and promises of a conflict that would be quick and easy. Iraq Trap 2 is a political trap—a way that the Republicans may have found to win the war at home by setting up the next president to take the blame when that president is likely to be a Democrat.

Here is how that second trap might work. George W. Bush is certain to claim through the end of his term that progress is being made and then to dump the war into the lap of his successor. And when sooner or later the next president removes American troops, only to see Iraq fall into the hands of anti-American leaders or fall apart completely, the Republicans will charge that had the Democrats not been weaselly cowards, victory could have been ours.

The challenge for the Democrats is not just to figure out how to extricate the United States from Iraq Trap 1. The tricky political challenge is to avoid falling into Iraq Trap 2.

Which makes it crucial that the 2008 election provide a mandate for ending the war. It should be the American people who have made this decision.

The Democratic candidate should not promise an impossible victory, only an honorable end to the conflict as expeditiously as possible, without any guarantees that the United States can guide Iraq’s long-term destiny or any suggestion that we should be held responsible for it. Even if it takes time to get the United States out, George W. Bush’s successor has to avoid taking over ownership of the war from him.

Instead of drawing sharp distinctions with the Republicans on the war, however, some in the Democratic Party want to blur the differences in a fine mist of bipartisanship. The United States has been fighting the Iraq War for longer than we fought World War II, but a number of Democrats on the Baker-Hamilton Commission recently served on another group at the U.S. Institute of Peace that recommended that the United States give the war another five years.

No one knows what the region, let alone Iraq, will be like five years from

now. One might as well say U.S. troops will have to stay there indefinitely. No matter when we leave, whether it is 2008 or 2012, we can’t control what will happen in Iraq in the years beyond. The idea that we are going to leave behind a stable, pro-American national government, let alone a multi-ethnic democracy, is a chimera. The damage is done. Our intervention raised the Shia to power, strengthening Iran, and ignited the war between Shia and Sunni that we are unable to settle. Whether or not we accept it, the country has been effectively split up. And except in Kurdistan, the groups that have emerged as dominant—though they may find it expedient to ally with us for the moment—are not likely to be our buddies for long.

Combatting al-Qaeda remains the primary legitimate rationale for the U.S. military presence in the region. But just as Bush conflated Iraq and al-Qaeda to justify starting the war, so the war’s supporters still play on that confusion to justify continuing it. Although the group known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is a small fraction of the Sunni insurgency, the administration continually invokes it as a rationale for the war. Given Shia

predominance in Iraq, AQI has no chance of taking over the country. And the odds of it becoming entrenched in Sunni areas are fading. The fight against al-Qaeda ought to focus on the areas where al-Qaeda itself is centered: in western Pakistan and Afghanistan.

There is probably no way to avoid a debate about “Who Lost Iraq?” Indeed, it’s already begun. Bush managed the war so ineptly from

the start, however, that conservatives will have a tough time pinning the blame on anyone else—so long as his successor and the Democrats don’t take ownership of the war and fall into Iraq Trap 2. **TAP**

— PAUL STARR

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