

REPORT FROM IRAQ: Results and Lessons of the Surge

A Project of *Vets for Freedom* | October 2008

Joel Arends

Daniel Bell

David Bellavia

Shawn Bryan

Ben Hayden

Pete Hegseth

Kate Norley

Erik Swabb



PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

The members of *Vets for Freedom (VFF)* who participated in this project include the following:

Joel Arends

Joel served as an infantry Platoon Leader in Baghdad and provided security for Iraqis as they went to the polls for the first free and fair elections held there in the last fifty years. He currently serves in the United States Army Reserve as a Captain. Joel holds the Bronze Star for his time in Iraq. He was recognized by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as one of the fifty heroes in the Global War on Terror. He is an Iowa native and holds undergraduate and law degrees from the University of South Dakota. He lives with his wife and two children in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Joel serves as Executive Director of VFF.

Daniel Bell

Sgt. Bell served from January 2004 to April 2006 in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Sgt. Bell served as a Special Operations Medic in the 160th S.O.A.R. and has received multiple decorations for his actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, including two Air Medal Awards, the Global War on Terror Service Medal, and the Global War on Terror Expeditionary Medal. After more than nine years of service in the Army, Daniel separated in 2006, promoting support for the troops and victory in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since being honorably discharged, Daniel has voiced his endorsement of these efforts and the importance of their success through activism, public speaking, and the media outreach. Daniel regularly lobbies his state and U.S. representatives and senators in both Missouri and Washington, D.C. to support victory in the Global War on Terror.

A Missouri resident, Daniel manages a research and psychiatric clinic and will graduate with a degree in business from Evangel University in 2009. He is the Missouri VFF State captain.

David Bellavia

Author of the much acclaimed war memoir *House to House: An Epic Memoir of War*, Bellavia is a former army staff sergeant who served in the First Infantry Division (Task Force 2-2) for six years.

He is the recipient of both the Silver and Bronze Stars for valor, as well as the Conspicuous Service Cross, New York State's highest award for combat valor. Bellavia has also been nominated for both the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor for his actions in a fierce urban hand-to-hand fight in the battle of Fallujah in November 2004. As a result of their involvement in that operation, Bellavia and members of his unit were awarded the prestigious Presidential Unit Citation.

Originally from Buffalo, New York, Bellavia currently resides in western New York with his wife and two sons. There he has founded a local Veteran's Coordination Center that focuses on the early treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and other veteran-related issues and outreach programs. Bellavia is co-founder of VFF.

Shawn Bryan

Shawn Bryan is a former Marine Sgt. who most recently served in combat in Iraq in 2005 and was awarded the Purple Heart. Sgt. Bryan's service in Iraq was with the Third battalion 25th Marines out of Columbus Ohio during OIF3 2005 in Anbar province.

Sgt. Bryan originally joined the Marines in 1988 and served five years active duty with 3rd Marines on the West Coast as well as I&I duty in Florida. The afternoon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he re-enlisted with 4th Recon Delta Co and deployed to Anbar in 2005. He served as a Battalion IO and covered 13 regimental operations around the Anbar province. Over the course of those operations, Sgt. Bryan's unit lost 48 Marines and sailors while eliminating countless terrorists in that area.

Upon returning from Iraq, Sgt. Bryan opened a car dealership in New Mexico and is heavily involved in local veterans affairs. He is the founder of the War on Terror memorial currently being built in Albuquerque, New Mexico to memorialize New Mexico military members who have given their life in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sgt. Bryan is married with two children and three step children all under the age of 15.

Ben Hayden

Cpl. Hayden served in the United States Marine Corps from 2003 to 2007. During his service he was deployed to Iraq in 2004 and then again in 2005 to 2006. Cpl. Hayden served as a member of the First Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion and was in the first battle of Fallujah. He also battled insurgents across the Al Anbar province. He received a Certificate of Commendation from the USMC for his actions in Operation Iraqi Freedom and his battalion received multiple citations for their actions. He is the Iowa VFF State Captain.

Pete Hegseth

Capt. Pete Hegseth was commissioned into the U.S. Army upon graduation from Princeton University in 2003. A year later, Capt. Hegseth served in Guantanamo Bay for a year on a security mission with his National Guard unit and, upon his return from Cuba, volunteered to join the 3rd Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division for their deployment to Iraq from 2005 to 2006. Capt. Hegseth served as an infantry Platoon Leader in Baghdad during the nationwide elections in October and December 2005, and as a Civil-Military Operations officer in Samarra for seven months, a time period which included the bombing of the Golden Mosque.

Capt. Hegseth earned the Combat Infantryman's Badge and Bronze Star Medal for his time in Iraq and continues to serve as an infantry officer in the Fighting 69th Infantry Battalion, New York Army National Guard.

Capt. Hegseth serves as the Chairman of VFF. He also plans to start a masters program at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota in the spring of 2009. Capt. Hegseth and his wife, Meredith, reside in Minnesota.

Kate Norley

Kate Norley's call to duty occurred following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

After completing basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina in 2001, Kate received medical training at Ft. Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. Once she had completed medical training, Norley was assigned to Ft. Hood, Texas. While at Ft Hood, Kate served under the 1st Cavalry Division and completed desert-warfare training at the National Training Center in the Mojave Desert, California—an exercise in how the weather and sand in a desert environment will effect both medical equipment and transport.

Spc. Norley deployed to Iraq in December 2003 for a combat-tour of 16 months. She served as a medic during combat operations in Fallujah, Sadr City, and Ramadi. Kate was awarded the Combat Medic Badge for providing medical care while under fire. She traveled throughout Iraq as medical support on patrols, and also provided emergency response to ambushed units. Upon returning from Iraq, Spc. Norley was assigned to Walter Reed Army Medical Facility in Washington, DC, where she completed her initial military obligation.

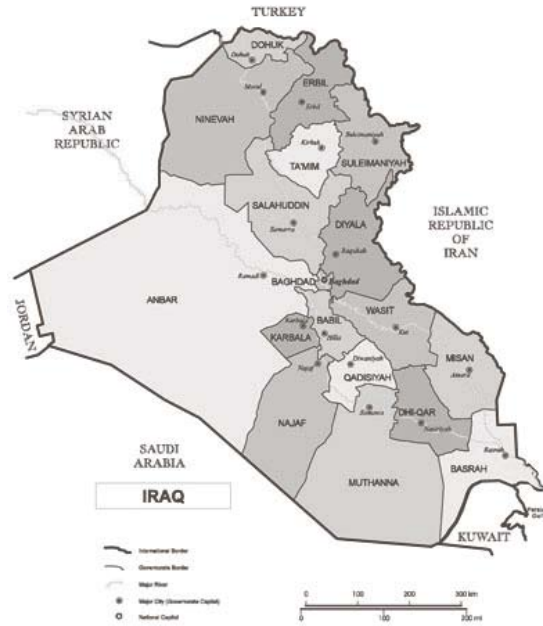
Kate is currently attending George Washington University and plans on continuing service once she has completed her degree as a Physician's Assistant. She is part of the Maryland VFF organization.

Erik Swabb

Erik Swabb served in Iraq as a Marine infantry officer from September 2004 to March 2005. He led a platoon in Alpha Company, 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion and participated in combat

operations in the Fallujah area, including Operation Al Fajr. After the battle for Fallujah in November 2004, he was in charge of a U.S.-Iraqi combat outpost in a town near the city. Swabb planned and executed counterinsurgency operations in partnership with the Iraqi Army that engaged local tribes and dismantled three insurgent cells. He was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal for Valor and Combat Action Ribbon for his service in Iraq.

After ending active duty in 2006, Swabb enrolled at Harvard Law School, where he is now a third-year J.D. candidate. Since returning from Iraq, he has published articles and op-eds on the war. Swabb holds a B.A. in political science from Columbia University.



ITINERARY OF ASSESSMENT TEAM

Embed Dates: August 6 to 12, 2008

Province	City/Neighborhood	Team Member
Baghdad	Central/Southern Baghdad	Arends
Baghdad	Southern Baghdad	Bell
Diyala	Baqubah/Sinsil/Mukdadiyah	Bellavia
Baghdad	Central Baghdad	Bryan
Anbar	Fallujah	Hayden
Salah ad Din	Samarra	Hegseth
Baghdad	Northern Baghdad	Norley
Baghdad	Central Baghdad	Swabb

I. Introduction

On January 10, 2007, President Bush announced a substantial and temporary increase in U.S. forces and operations in Iraq:

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. The vast majority of them—five brigades—will be deployed to Baghdad. These troops will work alongside Iraqi units and be embedded in their formations. Our troops will have a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs.¹

By ultimately committing nearly 30,000 troops and shifting to a counterinsurgency mission, the surge aimed to affect a dramatic decrease in violence, the destruction of al Qaeda in Iraq, and significant political progress on the part of the government of Iraq. The new strategy sought to provide the U.S. military sufficient combat power to control Baghdad, Anbar Province, and Diyala Province.

As veterans of the War in Iraq and members of *Vets for Freedom (VFF)*, a non-partisan issue organization dedicated to educating the American public about the importance of successfully completing the U.S. mission in Iraq, we returned to Iraq in mid-August 2008 as 'embeds' with specific units to document the impact of the surge through the following:

- Conduct a before-and-after comparison of conditions on the ground;

- Offer a strategic analysis of the effects of the surge;
- Develop Iraq policy recommendations for U.S. leaders;
- Review the current U.S. policy debate on Iraq in light of the surge; and
- Consider the impact of the War in Iraq on broader national security interests.

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Based on our site visits and extensive discussions with U.S. and Iraqi military and political personnel throughout the country, we can confirm the remarkable success of the surge—both militarily and politically. Moreover, our assessment finds that a continued U.S. military presence is indispensable to consolidating the gains of the surge and to reaching the objective of “sufficient security to provide the space and time for the Iraqi government to come to grips with the tough decisions its members must make to enable Iraq to move forward.”²

This assessment, *Report from Iraq: Results and Lessons of the Surge*, details our findings and conclusions. We hope the American people, and policy-makers in Congress, will consider our recommendations as the nation debates the future of U.S. military involvement in Iraq.

The members of *VFF* who participated in this effort have a unique perspective on events in Iraq because we have observed the conditions on the ground both

¹ Bush, George W. *The New Way Forward in Iraq*, 10 January 2007, Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html>.

² Petraeus, David H. “Opening Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” 23 January 2007, Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/23/world/middleeast/24petraeustextend.html?pagewanted=all>.

before and after the surge. We have seen the streets of Baghdad, Samarra, Fallujah and many other cities as they endured out-of-control spasms of violence.

But we have also seen life in Iraq return to normal as people and businesses reclaim the streets of these cities. We have seen Iraqis fight side-by-side with Americans and assume the burden of security in the fight against al Qaeda. We have witnessed both high-level legislative accomplishments, and the quiet progress of local political deliberation and reconciliation. The gains are indisputable, but they are also fragile. In our judgment, America must remain in Iraq until security and political progress are durable and self-sustaining. This is not a moving target, but an end state we believe is on the horizon.

Many leading critics of the surge, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, and Senators Joseph Biden, Chuck Hagel, and Barack Obama, among others, maintain that the surge provided limited strategic value and consider the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq as the leading policy objective. In this respect, these voices appear to support the notion that vacating the battlespace would itself constitute victory for the United States.

Our examination of current conditions, carefully informed by our experiences as veterans of the Iraq War, suggests that the departure of U.S. forces in advance of consolidating the gains of the surge and stabilizing the country would prove a defeat for the United States with grave, long-term consequences.

Whatever disagreements may persist about the original decision to go to war in Iraq, the United States must now complete the mission successfully.

The evidence makes clear that surging U.S. forces in Iraq was the right decision, and the surge has been successful in creating political breathing room necessary for Iraqis to begin building a lasting peace. Nonetheless, the situation in Iraq remains tenuous,

and America has a solemn duty to remain in Iraq until security is stabilized.

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Failure at this critical moment could undermine all of the progress that has been achieved and signal American weakness at a moment of growing international instability and conflict. It would be an abandonment of the solemn responsibilities of the United States to depart Iraq before completing the mission; not to mention a grave betrayal of the sacrifices made by our brothers in arms. The surge has established the foundations for victory in Iraq, so now let us resolve to finish the job.

II. The Surge: Before and After

PRE-SURGE CONDITIONS

The growth of the insurgency in Iraq can be traced back to 2004. The insurgency was comprised of former Saddam Hussein regime elements, nationalists who resented the U.S. presence in Iraq, and Islamic fundamentalists, such as al Qaeda in Iraq.

In the years before the surge, a key strategic goal was limiting American casualties. Accordingly, most American forces stayed on large, isolated and well-protected bases. Increased safety came at a price, however. As U.S. forces coagulated on big bases in the desert, they grew more distant from the people, providing insurgents free reign on the streets of most major cities.



The remote American presence had a number of detrimental side effects. Most importantly, the Iraqi population suffered from a spree of insurgent violence and suicide bombings that destroyed its faith in the United States to provide security. The relationship between Iraqis and Americans soured, reducing the stream of intelligence that is necessary to separate friend from foe and wage an effective counterinsurgency.

With the United States unable to protect them, Iraqis turned to sectarian militias. This development exacerbated the tensions among the ethnic, tribal, and religious groups in Iraq. The fabric of mixed neighborhoods in Baghdad and other cities was destroyed as neighborhoods were hastily cleansed of minority populations.

The increasingly powerful militias also challenged the Iraqi government. Mahdi Army leader Muqtada al-Sadr attempted to become the transcendent Shia political leader in Iraq, while Sunni militias challenged the authority of the Shia-run federal government. Political progress slowed to a crawl, and the antagonisms between the various communities in Iraq began to boil over.

On February 22, 2006, members of al Qaeda in Iraq bombed the sacred Shia al-Askiriya Mosque in Samarra—an event which one of the authors of this report witnessed. Shia, who, for the most part, had followed the peaceful counsel of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, lusted for revenge. The reprisals and counter-reprisals to the Samarra bombing unleashed the bloodiest year in Iraq.

During April 2006, more than 1,000 people were killed in Baghdad alone. In July, over 3,400 civilians died across the country. The United States appeared powerless to stop Iraq's precipitous descent into civil war. At this nadir in the conflict, however, plans for the surge were being developed. Even after the American people voiced their displeasure with

the war during the 2006 congressional elections, President Bush resolved to proceed with the surge as a last, best effort to salvage the U.S. mission in Iraq.

IMPACT OF THE SURGE

By July 2007, with nearly 30,000 additional troops finally “surged” into Baghdad and surrounding areas, U.S. and Iraqi forces pursued an ambitious set of combat operations. Multinational forces targeted multiple areas, among them Diyala/Salah ad Din province, parts of Babil province, parts of Anbar province, and enemy strongholds in Baghdad.

The new counterinsurgency strategy of David Petraeus, Commanding General of Multi-National Force-Iraq, was simultaneously applied throughout the country. Much more than just an increase in troops, the strategy called for reallocating the existing troops more efficiently. Top priority was given to the protection of the population, which in turn allowed warring parties to lessen dependence on militias that they increasingly viewed as out-of-step with their interests. Whereas the inability to protect the population from 2004 to 2006 resulted in the mistrust of U.S. forces, a decreased flow of intelligence, and increased membership in sectarian militias and insurgent groups, the successes of the surge crippled these hostile groups, generated confidence in U.S. forces among the Iraqi population, opened the lines of communication for accurate intelligence, and created space for political reconciliation.

The surge strategy also benefited from the Anbar Awakening and the Sons of Iraq (SOI) movement, both of which demonstrated that Sunnis were no longer willing to tolerate the violent destruction and dominance of al Qaeda in Iraq. Meanwhile, the Iraqi government became more assertive, as demonstrated by its operations against the Mahdi Army in Basra and Baghdad in mid-2008. Moreover, American casualties fell to the lowest levels since the war began and there was a dramatic decrease, and

almost complete eradication, of ethnic and sectarian violence.³ While all of these developments have contributed to the success of the surge strategy, the surge itself was the necessary condition upon which all other positive developments depended.

Without the demonstration of U.S. support and the application of counterinsurgency strategy—first with U.S. Marines in Ramadi and Anbar province in mid-2006, and later throughout the greater Baghdad area during the surge—Sunni tribal leaders and the Maliki government would not have been able to sustain, or for that matter, initiate, their counter-offensive against al Qaeda and Iranian-backed militias. The renewed American commitment to Iraq, through the surge, was the signal Iraqis needed to take on determined insurgent groups.

These changes in the military environment affected commercial life, political life, and social life throughout Iraq. *VFF* embeds observed the dramatic difference between the Iraq of 2008 and the Iraq from prior combat tours. Their observations illustrate the extent to which the surge transformed the environment—on the ground, and at the neighborhood level—in Iraq.

Marine Lieutenant Erik Swabb, who served in Iraq in 2004 to 05, noted a series of changes that were unthinkable during his last tour in Baghdad:

First, I sat in a traffic jam today. Yes, this is a mundane activity in the United States. However, I was in an Army convoy in downtown Baghdad. Before the surge, we would have been the perfect target for a suicide car bomber. Now, American units share the road with Iraqis and limit the use of opposite traffic lanes, which help avoid traffic jams but can scare or anger civilians.

Second, I witnessed a U.S. commander tell his Iraqi police counterpart when his U.S. unit would return to meet him at his station. Previously, passing along such information was unthinkable due to insurgent infiltration of the Iraqi Security Forces. A U.S. patrol risked being ambushed if its travel plans were known. Now, such coordination for a meeting is simply courteous and more efficient.

Third, I saw Iraqi, not international, human rights workers visit the detention facility of a local Iraqi police station. The two men were government employees checking up on the conditions of the jail. And no, they did not know that I was visiting (they actually refused to talk to me due to ministry rules on interacting with the press).

Lastly, I met two Iraqi police generals—one Sunni and one Shiite—who worked in the same mixed area of Baghdad. The Sunni general led mostly Shiite officers, who were incredibly dedicated to him.⁴

In July 2008, the United States suffered the lowest number of casualties since the 2003 invasion. As embedded Marine Corporal Ben Hayden observed in Baghdad,

I almost feel like I'm in Des Moines rather than the middle of a war zone... It used to be commonplace to receive motor fire and rocket attacks on a daily basis on some camps, yet now these same camps have swimming pools.⁵

The picture is just as optimistic in Fallujah. Hayden, who served in Fallujah in an earlier combat tour, noted the following:

In May of 2004, there were only a small number of people that stayed inside the city during the sweep and clear of the town, and from those that stayed, no one was outside. Now, the city was alive

³ USA Today Chart and CIOC Trends Database. (Appendix)

⁴ Swabb, Erik. "Back to Iraq Journal Entry #4," 12 August 2008, Available at <http://www.vetsforfreedom.org/troopblog/blogitem.aspx?id=498>.

⁵ Hayden, Ben. "Back to Iraq Journal Entry #2," 7 August 2008, Available at <http://townhall.com/blog/g/13faab53-bddc-49b1-b2b9-61fc4614e3f5>.

and busy, even for a Friday in a predominantly Muslim community. I notice the city has freshly painted buildings and restaurants. I could see 20 or 30 children playing in a soccer field, complete with soccer goals and painted lines on the grass.⁶

North, south, east and west, *VFF* documented the same phenomenon. The surge laid the groundwork for the military, political, and economic gains across Iraq.

In Baghdad, Lt. Swabb observed reconciliation and a resurgent Iraqi identity in mixed neighborhoods. Shias welcomed a largely Sunni army brigade when it removed the Mahdi army; an increasingly mixed army builds trust between Sunni and Shia.⁷ A Shia police chief emphasized the importance of returning Sunni original residents to his district.

In Diyala Province, Staff Sergeant David Bellavia returned to Forward Operating Base Warhorse, often called “MortarHorse” in 2004 because it was the target of constant enemy fire. Since the surge, FOB Warhorse has seen undergone a dramatic improvement in security, and it hasn’t been attacked by an enemy mortar in months.⁸ Progress is being made in the community as women are being recruited to join the “Daughters of Iraq” movement. Much work remains to be done, but it is an impressive beginning in a restive province.

Captain Pete Hegseth provides a vivid picture of the Samarra’s evolution. Dubout—a neighborhood that once housed some of Saddam’s most loyal military officers and served as a staging ground for al Qaeda—is now one of the safest neighborhoods in the city. Women and children fearlessly walk the streets and Iraqi Security Forces neglect to wear masks, all thanks to the “Safe Neighborhoods” counter-

insurgency campaign of an innovative American infantry battalion.⁹ Such developments have paved the way for political progress as well. During his embed, Hegseth watched the mayor, city council members, and local directors implement plans for reconstruction and business development.¹⁰

In over a week on the ground, not one of the eight *VFF* embeds encountered a single hostile action—no IED attacks, no mortar attacks, and no hostile fire. Without the benefit of special security, the *VFF* embeds walked most neighborhoods in baseball caps and spent hours on patrol and in local government meetings.

In each city that the *VFF* embeds visited, the reality on the ground answered the questions about the surge that play such a prominent role in the political campaign raging in the United States. The progress is undeniable; if U.S. will and patience can be maintained, the mission can be completed and U.S. forces will be able to return home in victory.

III. The Surge: Strategic Analysis

BREADTH OF THE GAINS OF THE SURGE

The Surge, which initially aimed to reduce violence in Baghdad, produced a positive ripple effect throughout the entire country. In the South, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the Iraqi Army exhibited determination in wresting control of Basra from violent Shia militias. Multinational forces, along with Iraqi Security Forces and Sons of Iraq, have targeted al Qaeda elements in Diyala, Salah ad Din, Anbar, and Baghdad.

⁶ Hayden, Ben. “Back to Iraq Journal Entry #3,” 8 August 2008, Available at <http://townhall.com/blog/g/28454737-3156-47b3-8f93-7ac4389d98d3>.

⁷ Swabb, Erik. “Security Scene,” 22 August 2008, Available at <http://www.vetsforfreedom.org/troopblog/blogitem.aspx?id=504>.

⁸ Bellavia, David. “Diyala Surge,” 8 August 2008, Available at <http://www.vetsforfreedom.org/troopblog/blogitem.aspx?id=481>.

⁹ Hegseth, Pete. “Up and Over the Palm Tree,” 12 August 2008, Available at <http://www.vetsforfreedom.org/troopblog/blogitem.aspx?id=494>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

DURABILITY OF THE SURGE'S GAINS

The impact of the Surge has been impressive, but its gains remain fragile. In a *The New York Times* profile, General David Petraeus is paraphrased as stating “that Iraq has indeed stepped back from self-destruction, but that “the gains are tenuous and unlikely to survive without an American effort that outlasts his tenure.”¹¹

While General Petraeus recently supported a modest reductions in force levels, both he and his successor, Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno favor maintaining a sufficient number of troops to adapt to changing circumstances and to consolidate the gains of the surge.

EVENTUAL DEPARTURE: CONDITIONS-BASED OR TIMETABLE?

Though the Bush administration committed to a withdrawal of forces by 2011, the commitment is conditions-based. This formulation is significant as it provides military commanders the ability to calibrate their forces in reaction to changing levels of violence. This calibration is important because there are a number of variables that affect progress in Iraq in both military and political terms.

Every single commander—from division-level to company-level—that *VFF* embeds interviewed on the ground said that a hasty withdrawal is not only irresponsible, but would be very dangerous and would put American lives at risk. Not to mention the fact that any hasty withdrawal (including 16 months) would be logistically infeasible.

A timetable that calls for a withdrawal of American forces without regard to the situation on the ground is dangerous. It would risk the hard work and accomplishments of the last two years by sacrificing flexibility for expediency.

POTENTIAL FOR AL QAEDA & IRANIAN-BACKED MILITIA RESURGENCE

Al Qaeda has been discredited in Iraq, but opportunities for the organization's revival remain. The SOI movement, so crucial to success in Sunni areas, will soon be demobilized. If members of these forces become idle and unemployed, their services may become available to the highest bidder, al Qaeda included. It is of crucial importance that members of the SOI either join military/police forces or find employment in the private sector. This must be a priority of the U.S. mission in Iraq.

American victories against al Qaeda in Iraq have been impressive, but pressure needs to be maintained. From 2004 to 2006, American forces often failed to follow up on victories against al Qaeda, allowing them to regroup and reassemble elsewhere. This is no longer the case. Still, a reckless troop reduction would reduce the ability of the military to trap and contain al Qaeda remnants. With al Qaeda elements at their weakest, now is not the time to let up.

A timetable that calls for a withdrawal of American forces without regard to the situation on the ground is dangerous. It would risk the hard work and accomplishments of the last two years by sacrificing flexibility for expediency.

Similarly, Iranian-backed militias—crippled by sustained offensives led primarily by Prime Minister Maliki and the Iraqi Army—have been marginalized. Their ability to reconstitute is directly linked to

¹¹ Filkins, Dexter, “Exiting Iraq, Petraeus Says Gains Are Fragile,” *The New York Times*, 21 August 2008, Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/21/world/middleeast/21general.html?_r=1&ref=middleeast&pagewanted=print&coref=slogin.





the ability of the Maliki government to maintain security gains in Baghdad and the Shia south, as well as solidify those gains with robust reconstruction and economic development plans.

POLITICAL RECONCILIATION

The key criticism of the Surge is its alleged failure to facilitate political reconciliation in Iraq.¹² The facts do not bear this claim out, however. According to a May 2008 report from the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, the Iraqi government has achieved 16 of 18 benchmarks established by Congress.¹³ While there is still progress to be made in the distribution of oil revenues, battling corruption and militia influence in the police force, and in disarming militias, the Iraqi government has significant accomplishments to its credit.

Among its many achievements, the government has:

- Completed a constitutional review;
- Enacted and implemented de-Baathification legislation;
- Set up an electoral commission and provincial election laws;
- Implemented amnesty legislation for former insurgents;
- Provided three ready brigades to support Baghdad security operations;
- Given Iraqi commanders the authority to pursue extremists of all factions (including militias);
- Reduced sectarian violence and militia control of security forces, ensured protection of minority party rights in Iraq's parliament; and
- Distributed \$10 billion in reconstruction funds on an equitable basis.

This impressive list of accomplishments is due to the improved security situation in Baghdad and the rest of Iraq, the key to which was the surge. Determining the proper distribution of oil revenues, Iraq's most important economic resource, is a highly difficult and time-consuming process. Similarly, the effort to weaken militias and foster fair and equitable treatment by the police department will not happen overnight. But it is imperative to note that a mere 18 months produced all the accomplishments listed above. More progress will be made on Iraq's most difficult problems if the country is stable enough to engage in political dialogue.

While the national-level progress is indisputable and significant, the local political progress is what was most evident to *VFF* embeds. In city council and tribal meetings across the country, the word "security" was barely uttered—a topic which dominated such discussions just two years ago. Today, these meetings are focused on the provision of basic services for local citizens, as local leaders grapple with reconstruction, returning refugees, and the renewal of civic life.

Here even, the United States is critical. Its armed forces gave the Maliki government the freedom to use the Iraqi Army to crack down on Shia militias in Basra and Baghdad. U.S. surge forces supported Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar Province as they devastated the ranks of al Qaeda in Iraq. Each of these objectives appeared impossible a mere 18 months ago, and would have remained so without the surge. Similarly, the most difficult objectives that confront the Iraqi government now are within reach if the United States has the will to see the Iraq War through to its successful conclusion.

¹² Obama, Barack. "Speech on Iraq and Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 15 July 2008, Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html?pagewanted=print>, and Nancy Pelosi on Meet the Press, 24 August 2008, Available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26377338/page/3/>.

¹³ DeYoung, Karen, "U.S. Embassy Cites Progress in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 2 July 2008, Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/01/AR2008070102860.html>

IV. Policy Recommendations

Having conducted an review of the conditions before and after the surge, VFF makes the following policy recommendations:

- **Do not allow economic concerns about expenditures for the Iraq War to determine U.S. policy.** Although U.S. disengagement from Iraq would save \$10 billion per month, it will create a dangerous security vacuum in Iraq with long-term strategic implications for the United States. Iraqi security forces are not fully prepared to shoulder the security burden alone, and, with a reduction in American investment, could face the prospect of a revived al Qaeda, the proliferation of ethnic militias amidst growing violence, and foreign influences aiming to utilize the instability for their own ends. Sooner or later, the United States would be compelled to return to Iraq to deal with the threat of terrorists who enjoy freedom of movement and access to oil revenues, a threat at least as serious as that of the al Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- **Do not attempt to use troop levels as a means to pressure the Iraqi government into political reconciliation.** The most important prerequisite of political reconciliation is security, and the success of the surge has been matched by political progress. Moreover, the United States does not need to resort to this type of threat; Iraq's sense of nationalism, shared by its public and its government, has bred the desire for U.S. forces to leave Iraq. But even Iraqi politicians who favor U.S. withdrawal understand that the conditions for that withdrawal do not exist yet. Without the pressure of potentially reduced troop levels, the Iraqi government made progress on 16 of 18 benchmarks. The United States and Iraq can work together to complete the training of Iraqi

security forces and the achievement of difficult political benchmarks. There is no need to change the effective strategy in place.

In addition, the U.S. has leverage, in large part, *because* of the number of forces it has in Iraq. This cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, whenever you draw down forces, especially during a vital transition period like that which exists today in Iraq, you are directly diminishing this leverage.

- **Provide a bridge for the Sons of Iraq forces into the Iraqi Army, Iraqi Police, or civilian jobs.** While these local security groups should eventually be demobilized, Iraq and the United States must not leave these armed men unemployed and bitter toward the government. The U.S. must use significant leverage to ensure, in the near term, that the Iraqi government pays the SOI; and in the long term, that they are fully integrated into the government or trained for new vocations. The challenge of addressing large numbers of armed and unemployed men is not new. When the United States failed to provide jobs, salaries, or pensions to former members of Saddam's army, those soldiers formed the backbone of the insurgency. The United States can not allow this to happen again. Only a meager investment is required in comparison to the costs (in both blood and treasure) of fighting a lengthy counter-insurgency.
- **Do not set a firm timetable for withdrawal.** Setting a conditions-based target date for withdrawal is acceptable, but any adjustment to the troop level must take into account the situation on the ground. As General Petraeus has repeatedly stated, the gains of the surge are fragile and at present not self-sustainable. Moreover, a set-in-stone timetable will cause insurgents and terrorists to anticipate and plan around a U.S. departure. Once the United States leaves, an unstable Iraq would be subject

to the same autocracy and tyranny that plagued it in the past. Again, the impatient desire to disengage from Iraq would create a new risk that the United States would have to return to fight again. A firm timetable does not make military, economic, or moral sense.

- **Continue aggressive training—and vetting—of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).** One of the central reasons why U.S. forces have been able to draw down (all surge forces have now come and gone, with additional decreases pending) and violence has remained at all-time lows is due, in large part, to the increased capacity of Iraqi security forces at all levels—police, army, and special forces. Ultimately, the capacity, and a-sectarian allegiances, of Iraqi security forces will determine the pace at which U.S. forces can phase out of direct oversight and into purely advisory roles. While the ISF continue to improve, they are still not fully mission capable in all places; in addition, sectarian motivations still permeate some commands. As a result, maintaining a sustained, and aggressive, U.S. training and vetting presence is essential to long-term strategic success in Iraq.
- **Do not misapply the lessons of Iraq to Afghanistan.** While the surge has worked in Iraq, an analogous effort may not be similarly effective in Afghanistan. The political and military situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are different, so an alternative, custom-tailored plan is necessary in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the United States needed to saturate dangerous areas with troops to clear, hold, and build afflicted neighborhoods and cities. Afghanistan's problems largely derive from the safe haven that al Qaeda and the Taliban

enjoy in the frontier regions of Pakistan. In contrast to Iraq, however, a large-scale U.S. military presence in Pakistan would not serve the counter-extremist goals. It could destabilize the Pakistani government, reduce the will of the Pakistani Army to fight extremists, and lead the population of Pakistan to support extremists. What's more, the Taliban leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan is indigenous to that region; in Iraq, the leadership of al Qaeda is not indigenous, and is perceived as a malignant foreign presence. It is an oversimplification to assert that a surge in Afghanistan would function like the surge in Iraq, and that the troop requirements of the Iraq War are impeding the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan.

- **Recognize and treat the Iraq War as crucial to the broader strategic interest of the United States.** The United States should not treat the Iraq War as a distraction to be cast aside for economic or military expediency. The outcome in Iraq will carry serious long-term consequences for relations with the Arab Middle East, Iran, Russia, China, as well as U.S. energy security. Defeat in Iraq would severely undermine the U.S. position in the Middle East, leaving both Europe and the United States vulnerable to economic pressure from energy-exporting nations. Further, defeat would damage the credibility of the United States and embolden Iran to accelerate its development of nuclear weapons, potentially provoking proliferation elsewhere in the Middle East. A new, uncertain, and multi-polar struggle for power would emerge, increasing the risk of miscalculation and large-scale war.

V. U.S. Policy Debate on the Future U.S. Military Commitment to Iraq

ADVOCATES OF WITHDRAWAL

The current policy debate with regard to future U.S. military commitment to Iraq has centered around the perceived results of the surge. From the initial months of the surge, a number of representatives and senators have taken the position that the surge has not fulfilled its objectives. These include Senator Barack Obama (D-IL), Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE), Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), as well as Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE).

These political leaders oppose a continued military commitment to Iraq because they feel that the Iraq War, including the surge, has been effectively fruitless. In April 2007, a mere three months after President Bush announced the surge, Senator Hagel laid out one of the first attacks against its progress:

This thing [the Iraq War] is coming undone quickly, and Maliki's government is weaker by the day. The police are corrupt, top to bottom. The oil problem is a huge problem. They still can't get anything through parliament—no hydrocarbon law, no de-Baathification law, no provincial elections.¹⁴

Also in April 2007, Senator Reid declared the war lost. By his reckoning, the surge was “not accomplishing anything.”¹⁵ The argumentation of opponents of the surge has been remarkably consistent. A year later, Senator Biden deemed the surge ineffective in an April 2008 Democratic radio address. According to Biden,

The purpose of the surge was to bring violence in Iraq down so that its leaders could come together politically. Violence has come down, but the Iraqis have not come together. The country remains terribly divided among Sunni, Shia and Kurds. There is little evidence the Iraqis will settle their differences peacefully any time soon.¹⁶

Senator Barack Obama later synthesized this argument with the idea that the Iraq War was diverting needed forces from the War in Afghanistan. As he stated in a key foreign policy speech:

In the 18 months since the surge began, as I warned at the outset—Iraq's leaders have not made the political progress that was the purpose of the surge. They have not invested tens of billions of dollars in oil revenues to rebuild their country. They have not resolved their differences or shaped a new political compact...

Now is the time for a responsible redeployment of our combat troops that pushes Iraq's leaders toward a political solution, rebuilds our military, and refocuses on Afghanistan and our broader security interests.¹⁷

Recently, Senator Obama reiterated the notion that, although military gains may have been achieved, the largely political and strategic objectives of the surge have not been met:

I think that the surge has succeeded in ways that nobody anticipated, by the way, including President Bush and the other supporters. It has gone very well, partly because of the Anbar situation and the Sunni awakening, partly because of the Shia military.

[But] there's an underlying problem where what have we done. We have reduced the violence...

¹⁴ Novak, Robert D. “Hagel's Stand,” *The Washington Post*, 30 April 2007, Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/29/AR2007042901562.html>.

¹⁵ Video of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, 19 April 2008, Available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18227928/>

¹⁶ “Senator Joe Biden Delivers the Democratic Radio Address,” 5 April 2008, Available at http://www.democrats.org/a/2008/04/senator_joe_bid.php.

¹⁷ Obama, Barack. “Speech on Iraq and Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, 15 July 2008, Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html?pagewanted=print>.

but the Iraqis still haven't taken responsibility, and we still don't have the kind of political reconciliation. We are still spending...\$10 to \$12 billion a month.¹⁸

ADVOCATES OF A CONTINUED COMMITMENT

The strongest supporters of the surge, including Senators John McCain, Joe Lieberman, and Lindsey Graham, contend that a continued commitment to the Iraq War serves U.S. interests. For nearly three and a half years, Senator McCain pressed the Bush Administration to increase troop levels in Iraq.¹⁹

As the world's richest country, with 1.4 million troops under arms, and having contained sectarian conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s, we have the capacity to properly resource this war. It is my strong belief that we need to begin doing so immediately. If we are not willing to provide the troops necessary for victory, however, victory itself will be impossible.

These policy-makers bemoaned the failure of U.S. strategy in Iraq up to that point, and worried about the possibility of a withdrawal that would leave Iraq in chaos. Senator Graham underscored the possible consequences of withdrawal during a July 2007 interview with *The Newshour* with Jim Lehrer:

I'm saying that, if Iraq is a failed state, my biggest concern is that the problems in Iraq spread to the Mideast as a whole and that the military situation that we now face in Iraq will dramatically change, that we'll be facing a military situation of how to police all-out genocide, how to control a war with Kurdistan and Turkey, how to stop Iranian influence in the southern part of Iraq. If Iraq fails, if the government collapses, I guess my statement to you and others is that we have a bigger war to fight, not a smaller war.²⁰

Noting the critical importance of victory in Iraq, these advocates of a continued commitment to Iraq also rejected the argument that the war had an adverse effect upon the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. Indeed, Senators Lieberman and McCain argue that the conflicts are synergistic, and that victory in Iraq saps the morale of al Qaeda terrorists as they retreat to Afghanistan:

And the fact is that we are winning in Iraq today. And you know, you can't choose, as Senator Obama seems to think, to lose in Iraq so you can win in Afghanistan. The reality is if we lost in Iraq, which Obama was prepared to do, we would go to Afghanistan as losers. Instead, al Qaeda has its tail tucked between its legs as it's exiting Iraq...²¹

Critics' claim that the surge has not brought political progress has been rebutted not only by our collective experience, but also by the U.S. Embassy report that finds substantive progress on 16 of 18 political benchmarks.

VFF POSITION

VFF supports a continued military commitment to Iraq until the gains of the surge are consolidated. VFF welcomes the withdrawal of forces, but only as conditions on the ground permit. A firm and rapid timetable for withdrawal risks the hard-fought games of the last year and a half. Most alarmingly, such a timetable may lead to instability in the Middle East that compels a return of the U.S. military to Iraq.

Furthermore, the arguments of critics of the surge rest upon a set of faulty assumptions. Their claim that the surge has not brought political progress

¹⁸ Obama, Barack. "Interview with Bill O'Reilly," *Fox News Channel*, 5 September 2008, Available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,417563,00.html>

¹⁹ Curl, Joseph. "McCain turns Bush on Iraq war surge," *Washington Times*, 21 August 2008, Available at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/aug/21/mccain-turns-bush-on-iraq-war-surge/>.

²⁰ Woodruff, Judy. "Graham Defends Military Surge in Iraq Despite Calls for Pullout," *Online NewsHour*, 17 July 2007, Available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec07/iraq_07-17.html.

²¹ Lieberman, Joseph on *Fox News Sunday*, 20 July 2008, Available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,386863,00.html>.



has been rebutted not only by our collective experience, but also by the U.S. Embassy report that finds substantive progress on 16 of 18 political benchmarks. *VFF*'s embedded veterans have witnessed political, economic, and military progress from Baghdad to Fallujah to Ramadi. It is simply incorrect to say that the surge did not contribute to political progress in Iraq.

VFF also dissents from the odd strategic view that Iraq is a distraction from the broader War on Terror. Setting aside the rationale for war in the first place, today surely no one can question the crucial importance of Iraq, which possesses the world's second largest proven oil reserves. Moreover, an Iraq left to disorder, and dominated by al Qaeda or Iran, could hemorrhage violence at some later point, acting as a source of instability that affects the rest of the region.

Even if Iraq *were* a distraction, and forces should be moved to Afghanistan, the policy of surge opponents is disingenuous. Senator Obama stated in a foreign policy speech that he would allocate two combat brigades—a mere 7000 troops—to Afghanistan from Iraq.²² If the forces operating in Iraq are detracting from the effort in Afghanistan, why would Sen. Obama send to Afghanistan a mere fraction of the troops he would withdraw from Iraq? What's more, there is little indication that a military surge alone will solve the central problem in Afghanistan, which is the safe haven that al Qaeda enjoys in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

VI. Conclusion

Victory in Iraq is more important than its mere intrinsic value or the significance of the Global War on Terror, though these considerations are immensely important.

Iraq is a strategic locus because it is situated at the heart of one of the most important regions to U.S. interests, because it holds the world's second largest oil reserves, and because it has and will have substantial impact on U.S. relations with Europe, Russia, and China.

It is often said that weakness is provocative, and there are few situations where an American defeat, either perceived or actual, would have such far-reaching consequences as would a defeat in Iraq. At a time when the United States is experiencing the pinch of high energy prices, gas and oil-rich adversaries such as Iran and Venezuela may be emboldened to squeeze global energy supplies if the United States withdraws in defeat.

Iran, already an aspirant to regional hegemony, will interfere more openly in internal Iraqi politics, utilizing economic, political, and religious linkages to build a closer, and more unfavorable, relationship with Iraq. U.S. military threats to stop Iran's nuclear program will lose credibility, spurring Iranian nuclear development and leaving Israel as the only state able to combat that threat. Should Iran manage to construct a nuclear weapon, the balance of power within the Middle East will permanently change, to America's detriment.

Saudi Arabia, long an ally of the United States, may decide to develop nuclear weapons itself. It may decide that accommodation to Iran is the wisest diplomatic option, and that distance from the United States is prudent. Other Arab allies in the Middle East, including Qatar, Bahrain, and the

²² Obama, Barack. "Speech on Iraq and Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 15 July 2008, Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html?pagewanted=print>.

United Arab Emirates would be particularly exposed in the event of a U.S. defeat in Iraq. They may in turn choose to evict U.S. forces from their territories to assuage a newly assertive Iran.

Meanwhile, U.S. reliance upon fossil fuels from hostile and neutral states becomes more problematic as Russia flexes its muscle throughout the former Soviet space and Europe. Europe's energy dependence upon Russia limits its response to Russian aggression, as Russia can turn off the fossil fuel tap at any time, as it has done in the past to Ukraine. Russia could take advantage of the weakened U.S. position and Europe's dependence as it works to reassemble the old Russian/Soviet Empire.

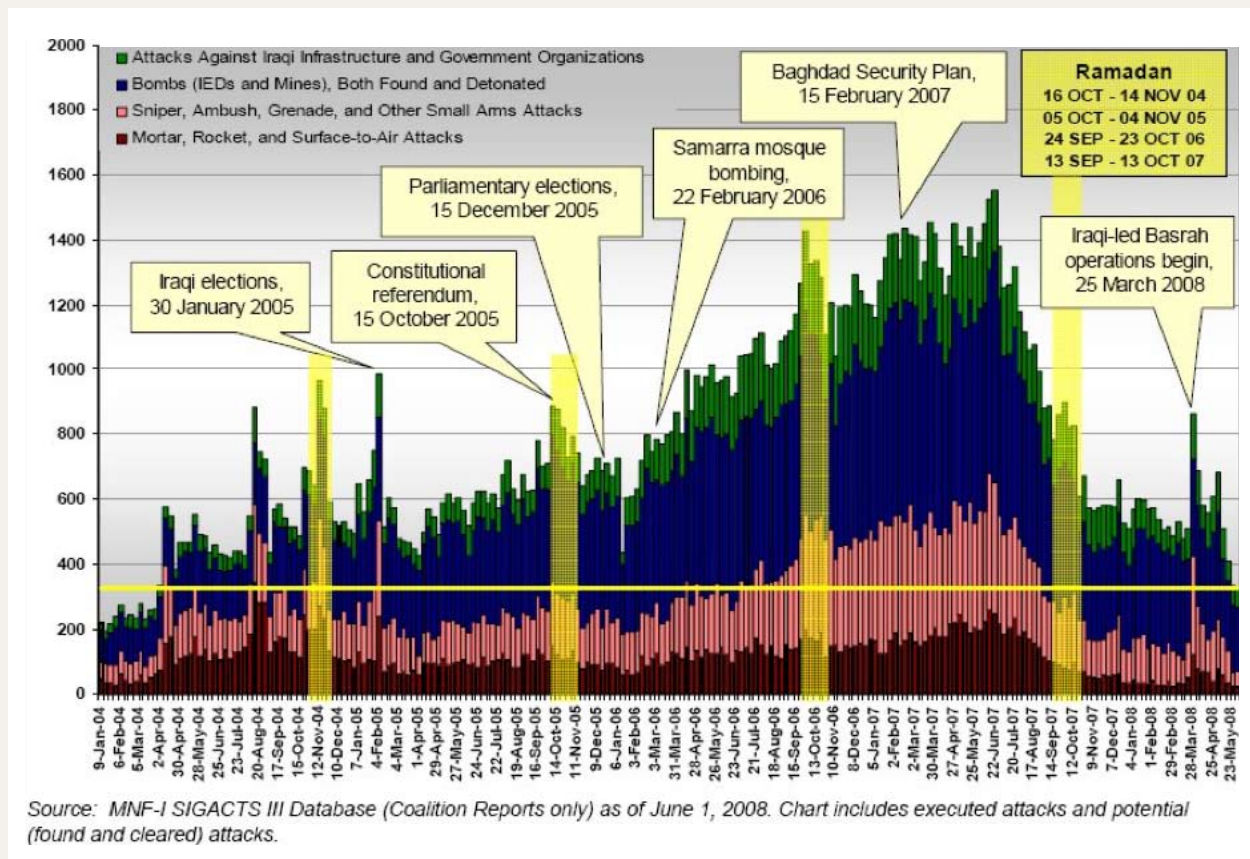
In Asia, China's impressive economic growth and procurement of energy around the world places it in an excellent position to assume regional hegemony, especially in the face of a defeated and war-weary United States that is unwilling to pay the costs necessary to maintain hegemony in East Asia.

Japan may become fearful that the United States will not remain a trustworthy ally, and may decide to militarize and/or nuclearize. Issues regarding the Korean Peninsula will be resolved according to Chinese strategic ends, not those of the United States.

All in all, a U.S. defeat in Iraq will accelerate the ascendance of a new multipolar international order and the descent of the United States from its role as global superpower. Some may look excitedly to a more "democratic" global power structure, but they are misguided. In this new international arena with a diversification of power, there will be more room for miscalculation, a greater cost to miscalculation, and more wars. One needs only to look at the international politics of the first half of the twentieth century to see the horrors unleashed during a period of multipolarity. Set amidst a backdrop of increased nuclear proliferation, the U.S. strategic picture becomes even more frightening.

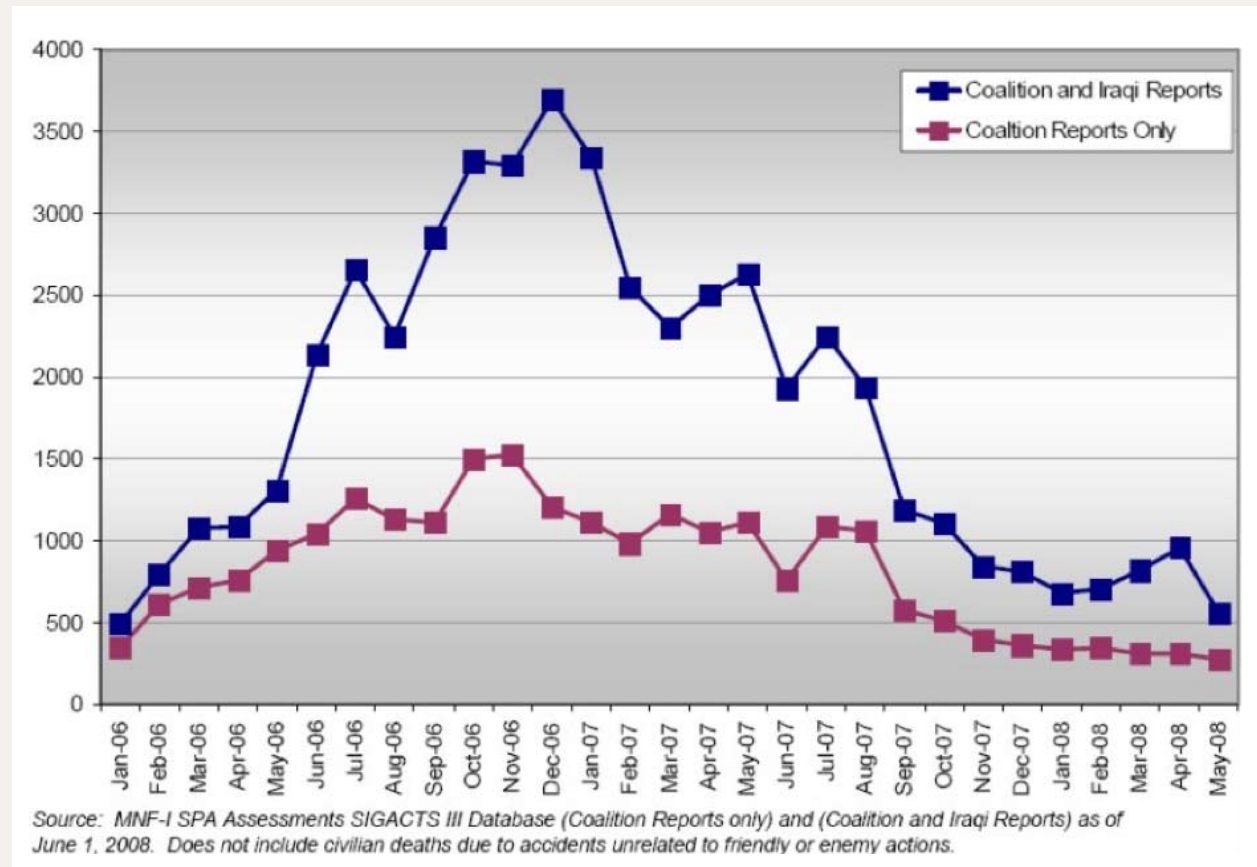
Appendix

OVERALL WEEKLY SECURITY INCIDENT TRENDS: January 3, 2004 to May 31, 2008



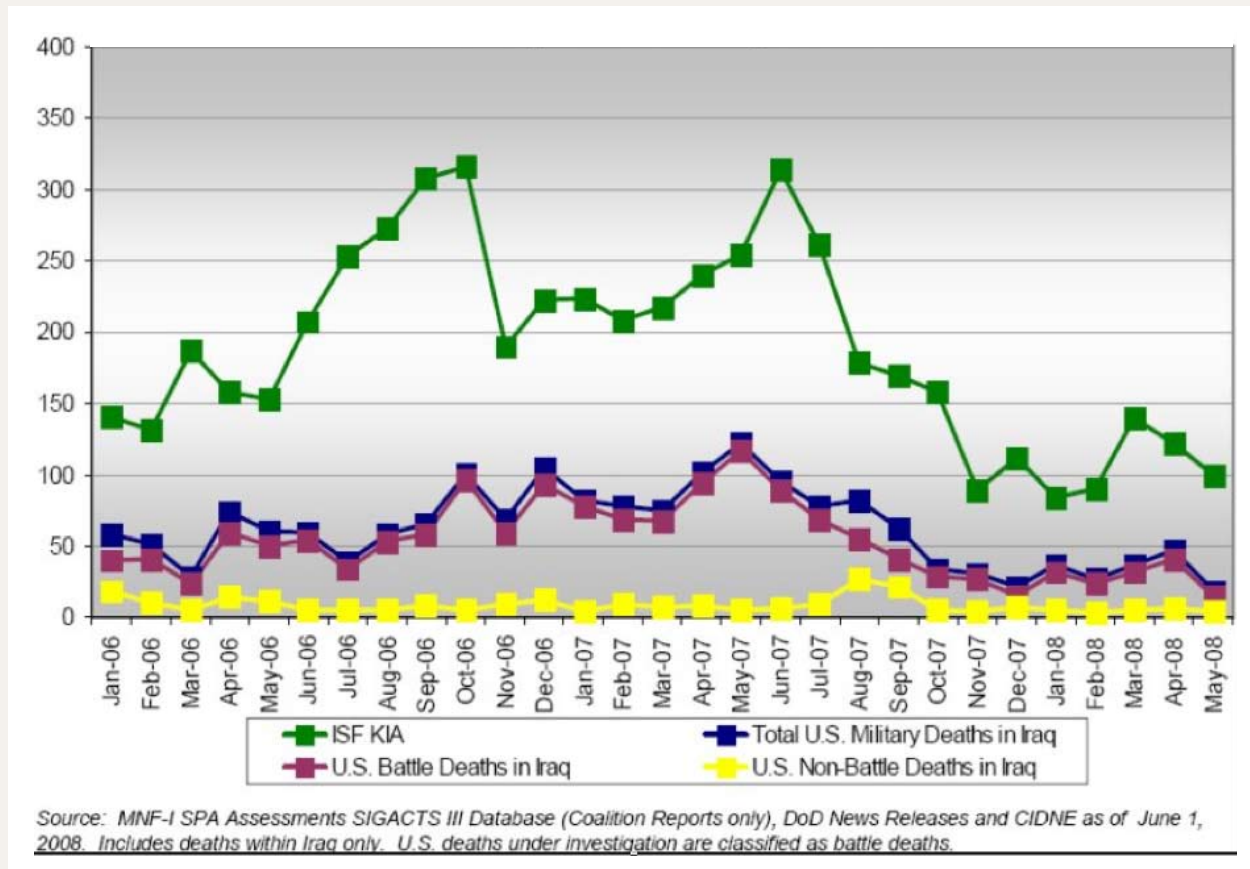
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CIVILIAN DEATHS: January 2006 to May 2008



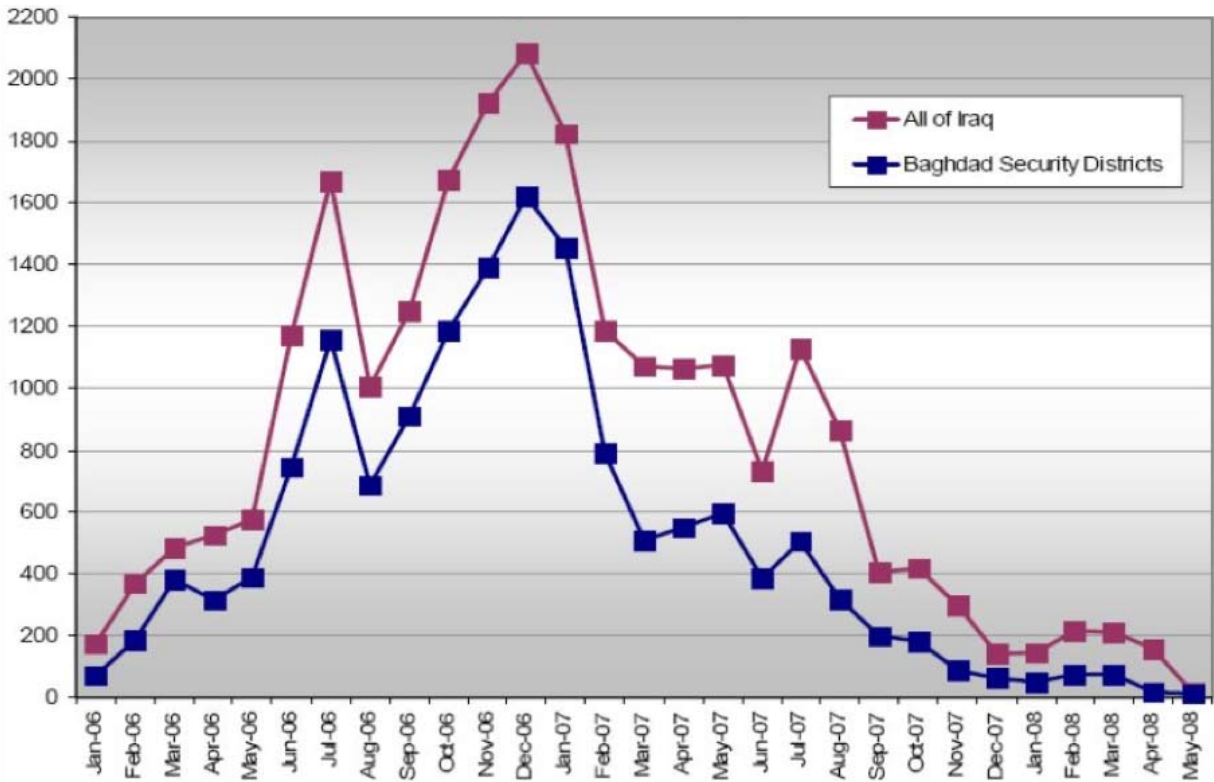
http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Master_16_June_08_%20FINAL_SIGNED%20.pdf (21)

ISF AND U.S. MILITARY DEATHS IN IRAQ: January 2006 to May 2008



http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Master_16_June_08_%20FINAL_SIGNED%20.pdf (23)

ETHNO-SECTARIAN DEATHS: January 2006 to May 2008



Source: MNF-I SPA Assessments CIOC Trends Database (Coalition and Iraqi Reports) as of June 1, 2008.

http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Master_16_June_08_%20FINAL_SIGNED%20.pdf (22)

VETS FOR FREEDOM

Vets for Freedom is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit 501(c)(4) organization established by combat veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our mission is to educate the American public about the importance of achieving success in these conflicts by applying our first-hand knowledge to issues of American strategy and tactics in Iraq.

We support the efforts of policymakers from both sides of the aisle who have stood behind our great generation of American warriors on the battlefield, and who have put long-term national security before short-term partisan political gain.

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