

I WAS WRONG

A Real-Time Chronicle of The Iraq War
2001 - 2008

by Andrew Sullivan

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Edited by
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Table of Contents

Editors' Note	4
I - Trauma	5
II - Doubt	44
III - Regret	100
Afterword	136

Editors' Note

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Andrew Sullivan became one of the most prominent advocates for the invasion of Iraq. He was also one of the first journalists to pioneer blogging, a then-new form of real-time, unfiltered writing. The text before you is the result of these two factors coming together – a day-by-day, hour-by-hour record of Andrew grappling with one of the most important foreign policy issues of our time. The hundreds of posts are arranged in three acts: the march to war and Andrew's case for it; his recognition, in fits and starts, that the execution of the war was deeply flawed; and, ultimately, his realization that the war should not have been waged at all.

To bring this narrative to you, we first compiled an unwieldy mass of material – every Dish post related to Iraq over a seven-year period. We slowly pared it down, cutting out posts that were short, redundant, centered on other people's writing, or that contributed very little to the understanding of Andrew's evolving views. Some posts were edited for the sake of length, clarity, and flow. Occasionally we filled in the relevant details of certain groups or figures, such as their full names. And we removed all hyperlinks because many of them no longer work, and even if they did, certain e-reading devices do not recognize them. Every entry includes the date and time of its publication, so any reader can search the Dish archives to see how we edited any particular post. And because the full record of Andrew's blogging is easily accessible, readers can check for themselves if they feel we excluded any controversial posts.

The most important point to make about the editing process is that we retained full control over the book's contents. While Andrew read the manuscript and offered suggestions, he granted us final say over which posts were included and which ones were not. *I Was Wrong* reflects the whole, unvarnished truth.

Patrick Appel and Chris Bodenner
Executive Editors, The Dish

I

Trauma

September 11, 2001
3.47 pm

The forces of barbarism have clearly struck an extraordinary blow against freedom this morning. When our shock recedes, our rage must be steady and resolute and unforgiving. The response must be disproportionate to the crime and must hold those states and governments that have tolerated this evil accountable. This is the single most devastating act of war since Nagasaki. It is the first time that an enemy force has invaded the precincts of the American capital since the early nineteenth century. It is more dangerous than Pearl Harbor. And it is a reminder that the forces of resentment and evil can no longer be appeased. They must be destroyed - systematically, durably, irrevocably. Perhaps now we will summon the will to do it.

September 11, 2001
9.46 pm

I have been unable to think of anything substantive to write today. It is almost as if the usual conventions of journalism and analysis should somehow remain mute in the face of such an event. How can one analyze what one hasn't even begun to absorb? Numbness is part of the intent of these demons, I suppose.

So here are some tentative reflections. It feels – finally – as if a new era has begun. The strange interlude of 1989 – 2001, with its decadent post-Cold War extravaganzas from Lewinsky to Condit to the e-boom, is now suddenly washed away. We are reminded that history obviously hasn't ended; that freedom is never secure; that previous generations aren't the only ones to be called to defend the rare way of life that this country and a handful of others have achieved for a small fraction of world history. The boom is done with. Peace is over. The new war against the frenzied forces of what Nietzsche called *ressentiment* is just beginning.

The one silver lining of this is that we may perhaps be shaken out of our self-indulgent preoccupations and be reminded of what really matters: our freedom, our security, our integrity as a democratic society. This means we must be vigilant not to let our civil liberties collapse under the understandable desire for action. To surrender to that temptation is part of what these killers want. And the other small sliver of consolation is that the constant American temptation to withdraw from the world, entertained these past few years by many, will perhaps now be stifled. We cannot withdraw; we cannot ignore. We live in a world where technology and hatred accelerate in ever-faster cycles, and in which isolation is not an option. Evil is still here. It begets evil. When you look at the delighted faces of Palestinians cheering in the streets, we have to realize that there are cultures on this planet of such

depravity that understanding them is never fully possible. And empathy for them at such a moment is obscene.

But we can observe and remember. There is always a tension between civilization and barbarism, and the barbarians are now here. The task in front of us to somehow stay civilized while not shrinking from the face of extinguishing – by sheer force if necessary – the forces that would eclipse us.

September 12, 2001
1.29 am

A 1995/1996 Public Interest essay on the first World Trade Center bombing sends chills down your spine with its prescience. But its most important suggestion is that Iraq might have been behind the bombing. Ditto today. Saddam is not only capable but willing – especially against a nemesis like the son of the first George Bush. More evidence that Colin Powell's tragic abandonment of the war against Saddam might well be one of the biggest blunders in recent history. If this coordinated massacre needed real state-sponsored support, which nation would you pick as the prime suspect?

September 12, 2001
8.07 pm

This enemy is not simply a band of thugs, but several regimes that aid and abet these people and have celebrated this atrocity. These regimes have declared war on the United States, and it is time we repay the favor. This is the most grievous declaration of war against America in history. We are no longer fighting terrorism. We are at war. And we are not at war with any old regime or even a handful of terrorists. We are at war with an evil that will only grow unless it is opposed with all the might at our command. We must wage that war with a ferocity that doesn't merely scare these monsters but terrifies them. Merely murdering bin Laden is a laughable response. If this new war can be waged with partners – specifically Russia, NATO, China – so much the better. But if not, the United States must act alone – and as soon as we can be assured of complete success.

There are times when it is not inappropriate or even immoral to use overwhelming power merely to terrify and avenge. Read your Machiavelli. We must shock them more than they have shocked us. We must do so with a force not yet seen in human history. Then we can begin to build a future of greater deterrence. I repeat: we are not responding to terrorism any more. We are at war. And war requires no restraint, simply massive and unanswerable force until the enemy is not simply defeated but unconditionally destroyed. To hesitate for fear of reprisal is to have capitulated before we have even begun. I don't believe Americans want to capitulate to anyone. The only question is whether we will get the leadership now to deal with this or whether we will have to endure even worse atrocities before a real leader emerges.

September 14, 2001
1.55 am

I'm sorry for the thin dish today. I have just finished two essays for the New York Times magazine and the Sunday Times of London on this event and its meaning. I've written over

6,000 words in one day and I'm spent. Worse, it was impossible to think and write honestly about this without seeing the screen blur with the tears in my eyes. In my life as a writer, I've never come across an event that I could not somehow professionally analyze and dissect with some enthusiasm and zest. But this was just something I deeply didn't want to write. I just wanted the event to be undone.

I realize more than ever that, seventeen years after coming to this amazing place, I am an American now. When they placed the flag on the rubble, I wept as I have rarely wept before. And then when I saw the Queen's Guards at Buckingham Palace play the Star-Spangled Banner, it occurred to me how deeply appropriate this was. Isn't everyone on the side of civilization an honorary American now?

September 15, 2001
7:54 pm

I haven't written today because this is surely a time for prayer not argument. But let me share a report from a small gathering in a small town on the edge of America. Just before 7 pm tonight, as people made their way to the center of town, the rain cleared and an enormous rainbow stretched across the bay. People came out of houses and stores and looked upward. And then as we gathered around Provincetown's monument, and friends arrived from New York, their eyes and faces seared with fear, a welling low sound came from the crowd. With no instruction, we started singing the Star-Spangled Banner. Candles were lit and placed around the base of the iron plaque at the base of the monument. And then I realized for the first time the symbolism of where we were. This was the Pilgrim Monument. This is where it all began, where the first pilgrims arrived before moving on to Plymouth. This deeply diverse place – with its fishermen and store-owners, contractors and poets, gays and lesbians and families and children – stood undemonstratively together in grief and resolve.

September 19, 2001
1:59 am

Timothy Noah of Slate asks me to retract the following sentences from my recent piece for the Sunday Times of London: "The middle part of the country – the great red zone that voted for Bush – is clearly ready for war. The decadent left in its enclaves on the coasts is not dead – and may well mount a fifth column." Noah doesn't elucidate why this should be retracted, presumably because he doesn't really know, except that his left-wing friends find it abhorrent. Note what I didn't say. I didn't say that the vast majority of Gore voters aren't patriots or that they don't support this war as much as anyone else. Later in the piece, I pay particular tribute to New Yorkers, mostly Gore voters, who have shown the world their humanity and courage this past week.

What I was clearly saying is that some decadent leftists in "enclaves" – not regions – on the coasts are indeed more concerned with what they see as the evil of American power than the evil of terrorism, that their first response was to blame America, and that their second response was to disavow any serious military action. If this was their attitude in the days after 5,000 civilians were killed, what will they say and do when we have to take real risks and incur more civilian casualties weeks and months from now? These people have already openly said they do not support such a war, and will oppose it. Read Sontag and Chomsky

and Moore and Alterman and on and on, and you'll see that I'm not exaggerating. Go to any campus and you'll find many, many academics saying the same thing. If anything, I'm minimizing their open hatred of the United States. So why should I retract?

September 19, 2001
12.29 pm

I retract nothing, since the point Noah thought he was trying to make is simply untrue. But these broad categories of "blue" and "red zones" can be misleading and unhelpful. I won't use this shorthand again. Ditto the shorthand of "fifth column." I have no reason to believe that even those sharp critics of this war would actually aid and abet the enemy in any more tangible ways than they have done already. And that dissent is part of what we're fighting for. By fifth column, I meant simply their ambivalence about the outcome of a war on which I believe the future of liberty hangs. Again, I retract nothing. But I am sorry that one sentence was not written more clearly to dispel any and all such doubts about its meaning.

September 20, 2001
8.13 pm

I probably shouldn't write this right now since I am literally shaking with anger. A memorial service for San Francisco's victims of the World Trade Center massacre was essentially hijacked by America-haters. San Francisco supervisor Amos Brown took advantage of the occasion – in front of families of the victims – to deliver an anti-America tirade. Paul Holm, the partner of Mark Bingham, the heroic gay rugby player who may well have played a part in downing one of the planes in Pennsylvania, stormed off the stage in protest. "America, America," Brown ranted. "What did you do – either intentionally or unintentionally – in the world order, in Central America, in Africa where bombs are still blasting? America, what did you do in the global warming conference when you did not embrace the smaller nations? America, what did you do two weeks ago when I stood at the the world conference on racism, when you wouldn't show up? Ohhhh – America, what did you do?" As the leftist crowd cheered, Paul went over to Senator Dianne Feinstein and said to her "This was supposed to be a memorial service." Brown's sentiments are completely inappropriate in any case. But to express them in front of grieving spouses, people who may well not share Brown's hideous politics, is simply vile.

October 5, 2001
12.37 am

There's a chance that Bush is simply taking a minimalist approach to this war on terrorism, after a rhetorical fusillade. If all this amounts to is a few commando raids against bin Laden, if Saddam is allowed to stay and prepare yet another counter-attack, if Hamas and Hezbollah are left intact, if the Saudis are allowed to continue their policy of fostering extreme Islamofundamentalism, then this policy is worse than nothing at all. Anything less than a full-frontal assault on terrorism and terrorist-sponsoring states would be sending a clear signal to bin Laden and his ilk. That signal would be that, for all our bluster, we are not serious, that we can absorb and accept an act of war upon us with mere minor retaliation as a consequence. The terrorists will understand from this that they can strike again with relative impunity, and next time, make it even bigger.

I worry every time I hear Bush tell us to get back to normal. Normal is the last thing we should feel. What happened on September 11 was a brutal invasion of this country. There is no normality after it. The only thing that follows should be an extermination of the enemy in all its forms – relentlessly, constantly, insistently. No, I'm not for rushing into an unfocused action. I'm not for alienating any friendly state we can find. But everything – everything – must be subordinate to the ultimate goal of extinguishing the terrorism that threatens the United States and the West. I still believe this is what Bush is aiming for. But there are some signs that he is going wobbly. I'm hoping and praying that those signs disappear soon. Whatever the dangers of action, the dangers of inaction are now far, far greater.

October 8, 2001
2.42 pm

Just as chilling as the Florida anthrax attack itself is the fact that it was directed at a tabloid paper which has recently run the usual tabloid fare on Osama bin Laden. Who did this? I hope the current somewhat complacent attitude of the authorities begins to shift as we contemplate the next round of terrorist warfare on Americans. In some ways, a repeat of the massive toll in New York City is unnecessary. Random mini-attacks everywhere in the country could actually be more effective in creating the widespread panic and fear that al Qaeda obviously wants to foster. The FBI needs to throw as much effort into tracking down these suspects as into bombarding military targets in Afghanistan. And the perpetrators should not be treated as regular criminals with the usual rights. They are military forces, conducted by a military enemy. If captured, they need to be put in military detention centers, not regular prisons.

October 11, 2001
12.19 am

The key thing to look for is whether there is any Iraqi connection to the Florida anthrax outbreak. If there is, then this war will be expanded, whatever Colin Powell wants. I had my own bio-chemical jitter today. I saw two separate pigeons flailing in distress on the sidewalk, one block apart. A man walking nearby saw me notice and said he had contacted the public health department. Almost certainly nothing – but you don't realize how unconsciously you're looking out for things until you see them in front of you. I felt like I was in the opening chapters of Camus' "La Peste."

October 15, 2001
12.46 am

Why couldn't we cite our suspicions about biological warfare to demand immediate access to Saddam's bio-chemical installations? If he refuses, why not destroy them from the air? Give him 48 hours notice and then annihilate them, rather as Israel did to prevent his earlier attempt at nuclear capability. It would be better if we could get hard evidence. But even without it, it's justifiable. In my view, it's self-defense. Do we have to wait for the worst to happen in a major U.S. city before we take action?

October 16, 2001
2.03 am

I feel a bit bad, as I was one of the first to say that biological warfare was clearly the next

phase of the attack. But the current wave of anthrax hysteria is getting absurd. I believe we need far more government action to get a smallpox vaccine developed and distributed, and a far more proactive policy with regard to Iraq's intent to use chemical and biological weapons against the U.S. and Israel. But beneath all this, there's a silver lining to the latest attack. If this is the best they've got, it's truly pathetic. I always thought that bin Laden must have planned a second strike to back up his first one. I cannot believe he wouldn't have launched it by now if he could.

October 17, 2001
1.18 am

At this point, it seems to me that a refusal to extend the war to Iraq is not even an option. We *have* to extend it to Iraq, which is by far the most likely source of this anthrax; Saddam is clearly willing to use such weapons in the future; and no war against terrorism of this kind can be won without dealing decisively with the Iraqi threat. We no longer have any choice in the matter. Slowly, incrementally, a Rubicon has been crossed. The terrorists have launched a biological weapon against the United States. They have therefore made biological warfare thinkable and thus repeatable. We once had a doctrine that such a Rubicon would be answered with a nuclear response. We backed down on that threat in the Gulf War but Saddam didn't dare use biological weapons then. Someone has dared to use them now. Our response must be as grave as this new threat.

I know that this means that this conflict is deepening and widening beyond its initial phony stage. But what choice do we have? Inaction in the face of biological warfare is an invitation for more in a world where that is now thinkable. Appropriate response will no doubt inflame an already inflamed region, as people seek solace through the usual ideological fire. Either way the war will grow and I feel nothing but dread in my heart. But we didn't seek this conflict. It has sought us. If we do not wage war now, we may have to wage an even bloodier war in the very near future. These are bleak choices, but what else do we have?

November 19, 2001
12.57 am

As Condi Rice said this weekend, it matters not whether we can prove that Saddam was involved in September 11 or the subsequent anthrax attacks. What matters is that he is trying to get chemical, biological and nuclear weapons in contravention of U.N. resolutions. He is acquiring those weapons as a means to control his own people and to attack the West. We already have a *casus belli*.

In some ways, Iraq would be easier than Afghanistan. Iraq has no major supporting neighbor, like Pakistan for the Taliban. Airpower could be much more effective, because there are more targets. Saddam is already pinned down in only a third of his own country, and is unpopular even among his own Sunni minority. The usual suspects claim that the main opposition to Saddam, the Iraqi National Congress, is divided, incompetent and unscrupulous. Sounds exactly like what they said about the Northern Alliance. As for regional conflagration, the State Department has it backwards, as usual. The main impact of our firmness with al Qaeda will not be greater Muslim revolt; it will be a broader awareness within the Muslim world that we should not be messed with. There will be fear. And there will also be greater hope among those people now trampled by the Baathists in Baghdad. We

let those people down once before. Let's not do it again.

November 27, 2001
1.36 am

Check out Leon Fuerth, Al Gore's closest foreign policy adviser, in the Washington Post today. It's a classic. Saddam is a real threat; he endangers America and the Middle East. There is every reason to take him on urgently. But ... not now. The reason? "U.S. forces will need to be rested after the campaign in Afghanistan." Puh-leeze. Russia (with whom we have now created a strong alliance) and France – yes, France! – might complain. There's a worry about "the Arab street." Has Fuerth learned nothing from the past two months? And there is this classic piece of equivocation: "We certainly ought to cooperate with the Iraqi National Congress, but not be swept up in romanticism about its ability to operate effectively inside Iraq." This, of course, is exactly what they once said about the Northern Alliance. So where should our next priority in the war against terrorism be? Er, well, somewhere other than Iraq. Where? Fuerth bravely posits "other parts of the world." Gee, thanks, Leon. This piece is so profoundly incoherent, yet so spun in liberal diplo-speak, you can almost imagine Gore listening to a briefing along those lines, nodding his head, pulling on his beard, and saying, "Fascinating, Leon, fascinating." And then he would conduct a seminar. Thank God he lost.

November 30, 2001
1.14 am

Steve Chapman has a singularly unpersuasive piece in Slate against taking the war to Iraq. The basic argument is that deterrence works, and that Saddam would never actually use all the chemical, biological and nuclear weapons he's been spending so much time and money constructing. The reason? Our ability to respond in kind prevents him. Only if we really pushed him into a corner would he be tempted to use such weapons. There are a few questions worth asking about this line of argument: a) why does Chapman think Saddam has gone to such great lengths to get these weapons – even to the point of watching his country pummeled by international sanctions – if he has no intention of using them against his most formidable enemy? b) he *has* used them – against his domestic enemies after the Gulf War debacle; c) why couldn't he cooperate with al Qaeda or other terrorist groups to use these weapons indirectly and so avoid blame and therefore retaliation? To reassure us on the first two counts, Chapman relies on Saddam's mental stability to argue that he wouldn't do something irrational. Hmmm. And Hitler would never do something crazy like invade Russia, either. Let's just say this wager is a lot more persuasive when the consequence of its being wrong isn't the elimination of a major Western city.

December 2, 2001
1.54 pm

There is simply no trade-off whatsoever between the war and the economy right now, and anyone who thinks so is either dumb or deliberately trying to trick W into repeating not his father's but his predecessor's mistakes. If we win the war, the economy will do fine; if we half-win this war, the economy will tank at the slightest hint of another terrorist attack. Memo to W: ignore these domestic-policy types. Veto the stimulus package; focus like a laser-beam on Iraq.

January 29, 2002
10.35 pm

The president's State of the Union address started soberly, talking, as he should have, about by far the most urgent task in front of us: the war on terrorism. Listening and looking at him, I felt even more securely than in the past that he gets it. He understands that the danger is still enormous; that the risks still huge; the price of failure unthinkable. We needed to be reminded. Even those of us most intent on a thorough war on terror had felt our concentration lapse; our focus blur. Bush sharpened it – and us – again.

March 22, 2002
8.36 am

I don't know why I took so long to read Jeffrey Goldberg's latest piece from Kurdistan in the New Yorker. I started reading it coming back on the plane from Miami and I'm still reeling. It's easily the most important piece of journalism produced this year: judiciously reported, pellucidly written, morally strict. Goldberg's key contribution is to show, convincingly to my mind, how logical and likely it is that Saddam is now in league with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups to bring these awful weapons of mass destruction to the cities and towns where you and I live.

Even if it is merely possible that these allegations are true, the consequences are obvious. This war has just begun. Afghanistan was a preliminary. Iraq is the issue. We must act – quickly, decisively, and with no possibility for error. I trust this president to get that balance right, and was relieved to hear his renewed commitment yesterday. The phony war is nearing its end.

March 26, 2002
1.21 am

Bob Wright gives a report-card on the war on terror and finds much to be leery of. His basic argument seems to be: if you don't want more terror, suck up to the prejudices of the terrorists. Wright thinks that an invasion of Iraq is a net loss, and would increase Islamist hatred for the U.S. He seems utterly blind to the fact that our victory in Afghanistan does not seem to have invited a wave of Islamic anger, or a ramping up of terrorism. For some reason, the terrorists reacted to a massive assault by running away. Who woulda thunk it? And ordinary Iranians reacted to the "axis of evil" speech by increasing their resistance to their evil regime. Go figure. I know the word "appeasement" is thrown around a lot – but what other word is there for a policy that argues that confrontation of evil can only, in the long run, exacerbate it?

May 24, 2002
1.00 am

The president told the German press yesterday that there is no plan to invade on his desk. He said it almost proudly. His military leaders, in a sign of their determination to risk nothing and achieve nothing, are now leaking to the Washington Post that they have all but scotched a serious military option in Iraq. The arguments they are using sound like they might come from a Gore administration. After all that this president has said, after all that

he has asked, a reversal on this central question would be nothing short of a staggering betrayal of trust, a reversal of will and determination.

Of course, there should be no peremptory, rushed or botched war. Of course, all options should be examined. But the signs are unmistakable. This president, having begun as an improvement on his father, is showing signs that he could end up as something even worse. It's time he heard from his supporters that this is a critical matter on which there can be no compromise. If he balks, it will be worse than his father's betrayal on taxes. It will be a betrayal of the very security of the American people.

July 26, 2002
12.40 am

I guess we should thank Al Gore for making his position clear on the war against Iraq. He says he's for it, except he's against it. The timing is wrong. The European allies are not on board. We need to debate it more. He's for delaying it, but he's against saying we will take on Iraq unless we do so soon. "I think the principle of 'first things first' does apply and has to be followed if we are to have any chance of success," he expounded, arguing that we have to make Afghanistan a perfectly functioning democracy before we protect the homeland. Does he have any sense that Americans are under threat *now*, that we have already lost over 3,000 civilians to mass destruction, that the enemy is vowing to do more, and that Iraq is easily the most significant source of weapons of mass destruction?

July 31, 2002
12.18 am

Why is it front-page news that Donald Rumsfeld thinks air-strikes alone can't disable Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction? Hasn't this been obvious for ever? We've been treated to several competing alleged leaks for *ground* invasions of Iraq over the past few weeks, as Jack Shafer has noted. Does the Times think that ground troops of 50,000 to 250,000 will be deployed from the *air*? Shafer asks the question of why these leaks are occurring but misses an obvious one: the doves in the Pentagon are allying with the doves at the major papers to wage a public campaign against the necessity of war against Iraq.

The opposition is determined and organized, and they are passionately opposed to using American power to defeat the forces of state terror. What if the U.N. opposes it or doesn't endorse it? Many visceral doves in Washington will rally. If they can isolate the administration from the allies and the Congress, then there's a good chance appeasement will gain even more momentum.

July 31, 2002
12.01 am

Tom Friedman balances the Times' recent relentlessly dovish coverage with the counterfactual omitted from the Times' recent story on the economic impact of an Iraq war. What if a victory in Iraq were to lead to far lower oil prices? And what if not tackling Iraq meant at some point we'd have to rebuild Washington D.C. or Manhattan? It seems to me that a critical element in this debate has to be September 11. We're not discussing hypotheticals any more.

August 1, 2002
12.45 am

Matt Welch, in a flight of high-mindedness, says I provide no evidence for my claim that the American public supports a war to disable Iraq's potential to deliver weapons of mass destruction. Well, a Newsweek poll last October found the following:

Nine out of 10 Americans say they support the current military action in Afghanistan. Seventy-nine percent support the use of military force against suspected terrorist targets in other Middle Eastern countries, with 81 percent approving the use of direct military action against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Seventy-one percent support the use of military force to combat terrorism outside of the Middle East, in countries like Sudan and the Philippines.

I'd say 81 percent is pretty decisive. The notion that Americans need to be apprised of Saddam's threat, have not thought about the pros and cons of war, and need a thorough, from-scratch debate about this is self-evidently silly. That doesn't mean we shouldn't have a real discussion about *how* to unseat Saddam, an exploration of all the possible consequences, and a sober period of argument and decision-making. But the war's opponents are acting as if this is a new idea, as if it has to be debated *de novo*, as if September 11 is irrelevant, as if the public is divided or confused, as if there's no compelling evidence to warrant intervention. That's baloney. Here's what the Washington Post reported yesterday:

U.S. opinion polls indicate that more than 60 percent of Americans support the use of force to overthrow Hussein, "and that's without the administration doing much selling of the idea," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center.

August 2, 2002
1.03 pm

When opinion polls show overwhelming support for the war against Iraq, how does the New York Times find a sample in which only one person out of dozens feels that way? The only conceivable answer is that the reporter was simply told to find opponents of war and write his story on those lines. Wouldn't a story like that need some context about what the polls are telling us? Not in the Times' universe. And the critical goal of the anti-war left is to sever any connection between September 11 and the war against Iraq. Here's the Times' editorial today insisting that this dimension – the most important background for any war against Iraq – be ruled out of discussion:

One argument for war often floated by officials ought to be disposed of quickly. Military action against Iraq may be justified, but not in response to the terrorism of Sept. 11 or al Qaeda. To date there is no reliable evidence that Baghdad had any serious connection to either. The dangers posed by Iraq have more to do with protecting American interests in the Middle East than with warding off fresh terrorist attacks on American cities.

This is preposterous. The *only* reason invading Iraq is being discussed at all is because of

September 11 and what it taught us. It taught us that we are extremely vulnerable to terrorist assault, that these murderous fanatics are capable of anything, that they would use weapons of mass destruction in a heartbeat if they could get them. It is no secret that Iraq is the prime potential source of such weapons, and it is headed by a despot who has used them himself, and would dearly love to deliver them to America. What more do we need to know?

September 3, 2002
12.36 am

There are times when you marvel at the discipline of the Bush administration. And then there are times when you despair. How on earth did the president let his secretary of state and his vice-president say two superficially contradictory things about U.N. weapons inspection in Iraq within days of each other? That kind of mixed message can only cause glee in the hearts of the anti-war coalition, from Saddam to Mandela and Chirac (not to mention Brent Scowcroft and Howell Raines).

Or does it? Cheney says inspectors are useless. Powell says they're necessary. Is it possible that both could be right? Much of the global hostility to dealing with Saddam cannot be avoided. It comes from America-envy and the usual appeasement and terrorist-lovers. But some of it could be headed off if a Cheney-Powell Bad Cop-Good Cop routine became part of American diplomacy. Why not ask Cheney to come up with a rigorous weapons inspection regime that could actually do the job – dozens of inspectors, random visits, no limits on what they can investigate and look at, and so on? Then ask Powell to endorse it and demand instant compliance from Baghdad.

What's the downside? I'm not sure there is one. If the U.N. balks at the stringent conditions for new inspections, then we tried. If the U.N. complies and Iraq balks, then we have added yet another justification for the war. Either way, our international position is strengthened. What if Saddam says yes to genuine inspections? He won't. If he says yes and then tries to wriggle out as he has so often in the past, then we can invoke U.N. resolutions, and have a mighty force in the region with which to destroy his regime. And both parts of the strategy help each other. Our military buildup can be the force behind the inspections regime and its insurance policy. And our last-ditch diplomatic effort can help justify our action in the minds of those few world leaders who can swallow their America-envy and see what's best for the entire planet.

September 8, 2002
11.48 pm

I'd become more skeptical of Tony Blair these past few years, especially on domestic policy, but all that has to be balanced now against his piercing leadership in the war on terror. The fact that Britain might be the country to formally prod the U.N. Security Council to act up to its obligations on Iraq is proof enough. But Blair's matter-of-fact insistence on the profound threat posed by Saddam to the rest of the world rescues the United States from an international isolation it does not in any way deserve. The British tabloid press depicts Blair as Bush's poodle. Nonsense. He's Bush's translator and facilitator. He adds rhetorical nuance and diplomatic finesse to Bush's gut refusal to risk American citizens' lives for the sake of pleasing French presidents and the editorial board of the New York Times.

September 11, 2002
12.00 am

Most of us know that there is no moving on from September 11. It wasn't a random tragedy for which grief is a slow-acting salve. It was a massacre – a cold-blooded, fanatical murder of civilians by men possessed by a theocratic ideology. It was an invasion – the violation of sovereign American soil, the erasure of a visible monument to American success and energy and civilization. It was a crime – the filling of the air of a great city with the irradiated dust of innocent human lives. It was a statement – that radical Islam intends to attack and destroy the very principles of the Enlightenment that underpin the American experiment – freedom of religion, of conscience, toleration and secularism. The appropriate response to this act of nihilism and evil is therefore not grief or remembrance or sadness or reflection, although each of those has its place. The appropriate response is rage.

For whatever else September 11 was, it was a declaration of war. That war continues. The totalitarian force of fundamentalist Islam, like the forces of Nazism and Communism that preceded it, has not disappeared. We briefly defanged it in its most important lair in Afghanistan, but even there, it has not been extinguished. Saudi Arabia, the chief exporter of this murderous ideology, remains protected by the West. Saddam Hussein is currently laboring to manufacture weapons of mass destruction which his allies in the Islamist terrorist network would dearly love to use on American soil. The United Nations and much of the civilized world would rather let him do so than face the risks of taking him on. Suicide bombers – ideological comrades of the twisted sociopaths who flew planes into the World Trade Center – have not relented in attempting to destroy the democratic state of Israel. Anti-Semitism, now as in the past a core of the totalitarian mind, has metastasized like a cancer throughout the Middle East and back into its ancient home in Europe. Educated men and women who regularly find the slightest fault in democratic Western societies vie with each other to provide excuses, justifications and rationalizations for the murderous tyrannies and blood-thirsty mobs of the Arab Middle East. In a welter of arguments, articles, op-eds and books, intellectuals are eagerly laying out the case that the murderers of 9/11 died for an explicable and justifiable cause, that the West itself is in part responsible for what was unleashed against it, that war can be avoided, that there is nothing but shades of gray in this complicated world.

But through all this, we know what that day showed us. It really wasn't complicated. That day showed us that we stand deeply vulnerable to a destructive force in some ways more dangerous than even the last two totalitarian powers Americans were called on to defeat. This enemy refuses to fight with honor; it kills civilians not as a by-product of fighting but as an end in itself; it hides and disappears and re-emerges whenever its purposes are served; it may soon have access to weapons that Hitler and Stalin only dreamed of. But it cannot be defeated the way Nazi Germany and Communist Russia were defeated because it is more like a virus than a host, infecting and capturing nation-states, like Afghanistan, and then moving on to others. September 11 showed Americans that for the first time in their history, they stand vulnerable to that force in their homeland. War has been brought to them. And, deep in their hearts, they know it.

That's why I think that, for all the return to superficial normality, Americans really have changed. The illusion of isolationism has been ripped apart. How can America opt out of the

world when the world refuses to leave America alone? The illusion of appeasement has been destroyed. Do we really think that by coddling regimes like Iraq or Syria or Iran or Saudi Arabia, we will help defuse the evil that lurks in their societies? The illusion of American exceptionalism has been shattered. The whole dream of this continent – that it was a place where you could safely leave the old world and its resentments behind – was ended that day. The proliferation of flags that day and subsequently was not a function of jingoism. It was the display of a symbol whose meaning had just been changed for ever. The inviolability of America had been destroyed. And the display of Old Glory was a signal not of blind patriotism but a way to show the world and the enemy that we loved it still and passionately, and that we were prepared to fight to restore its honor. A whole generation will grow up with this as their most formative experience – a whole younger generation that knows that there actually is a right and a wrong, and that neutrality is no longer an option.

September 13, 2002
12.30 am

Where are the Democrats? The short answer is that they're so busy calling for us to have a debate that they've forgotten to join it. How many Democrats have come out clearly either for or against a war with Iraq? Very, very few. Daschle bravely said yesterday that the Democrats were "not prepared to make any commitment" to voting on a war resolution until yet more questions are answered. He's scared shitless. The New Republic rightly puts the boot in this week. It's one brilliant editorial. An honorable exception is Bob Kerrey, whose piece in the Journal yesterday was wonderfully sane and sensible. But he's retired from the Senate! As for the rest of them? Pathetic weather-vanes.

You know, the media hates the fact that Republicans might use the war on terror as a campaign issue this fall. But I think they're quite right to. With a few exceptions, the Democrats' contribution to one of the most vital discussions this country has had in many years has been next to nothing. Why should a party that has almost nothing clear to say on the most important matter before us be entrusted with control of the Congress? They deserve to lose big.

September 17, 2002
2.09 am

Saddam's latest gamble is less an indication of his intent to disarm than a sign of how desperate his plight is. He wants to use the inspection issue – its vagaries, details and endless process – both to split the Security Council (i.e. France) and to buy time. This was, of course, always a risk and one of the strongest arguments for by-passing the U.N. altogether. But Bush's speech was smarter than Saddam may recognize. The resolutions Bush invoked mean that Iraq must do far far more than simply play the inspector cat-and-mouse game again. It must actively disarm, destroy its weaponry, allow U.N. monitors a long-running role in the country, and give up its active sponsorship of terrorism. The White House is therefore absolutely right to throw the issue back to the Security Council with the assertion that "this is a tactical step by Iraq in hopes of avoiding strong U.N. Security Council action. As such, it is a tactic that will fail."

We're now headed, I think, for a fight over what genuinely unfettered inspections require and which resolutions Iraq is supposed to adhere to. I say: unconditional, unfettered,

military-backed inspectors with no time limit on their withdrawal; and every single U.N. resolution. Apart from the obvious need to have real access anywhere anytime, it also seems to me that inspectors should have the right to interrogate Iraqi scientists and be in a position to offer them political asylum if needs be. The regime's very existence impedes genuine inspection, which is why some political space must be created for inspections to work adequately. My best guess is that there will be several rounds of shenanigans and a great deal of brinkmanship in the weeks ahead. But whatever happens, the U.S. cannot let the inspections regime return to the farce of the 1990s.

Meanwhile, war preparations need to continue apace. They're the reason we have this concession. They'll be the reason we get any more.

September 19, 2002
1.37 am

I've long been skeptical of the notion that governments in foreign affairs are either multilateralist (good) or unilateralist (bad). It seems to me that any government's first priority in foreign policy should be the pursuit of national interest, broadly understood. For some, that's a unilateralist position, almost by definition. But I'd argue that it's more nuanced than that.

The pursuit of national interest can (and should) lead to multilateral arrangements – NAFTA, GATT, NATO, the EU, etc – that benefit each party. Moreover, these multilateral arrangements work precisely because they do represent the sum of national interests, and aren't merely talking shops based on high-minded but impractical ideals. These diplomatic contraptions, in other words, are means, not ends. Bush gets this, I think. And it's a profound improvement on the muddled abdication of American leadership in the previous administration.

But Bush adds a twist. It may be that some multilateral deals only really work when one of the critical parties to them threatens to abandon them and go it alone. Call it "unilateral multilateralism". Thatcher's relationship with the E.U. was rather like this. And Bush's continued insistence that the U.S. reserves the right in the last resort to deal with Iraq by itself has, I think, been the single most important factor in forcing the U.N. to act. His unilateralism made multilateralism possible. And it also gave direction to the multilateralism, reminding the U.N. that it should be concerned with tangible results, not just debates and resolutions. I doubt the U.N. is up to the task, but it is one of the ironies of the present moment that without Bush's threat to walk, the U.N. wouldn't even recognize the task in front of it. You know, he really is a lot smarter than his critics recognize. Which is, of course, fine by him.

September 24, 2002
12.46 am

Gore unveiled himself in the 2000 campaign as a left-liberal on domestic matters – favoring race-baiting, corporation-bashing and pseudo-populism. But his neo-liberal supporters still supported him. They argued that he was still a foreign policy hawk, that he favored strong American action in the Balkans, that he backed the first Gulf War, that he was pro-Israel to the core.

Now we know he was faking that as well. His comments on the war do not surprise me. In the text of the speech, I am unable to find any constructive suggestion made by Gore as to how to tackle Saddam's threats. All he does is reiterate the idea that we need an international coalition, and that we need to be committed to Iraq after the war is over. Well: duh. Did he know of Condi Rice's recent commitment to democracy in a post-war Iraq? As to the coalition argument, Gore, of course, spent eight years assembling a wonderful international coalition on Iraq, which agreed enthusiastically to do nothing effective at all. Now he wants us to wait even further, claiming that the administration has abandoned Afghanistan, while vast sums of U.S. money are being expended on rebuilding the country. And then he reiterates the bizarre notion that undermining one of the chief sponsors of terrorism in the world will somehow hurt the war against terrorism. Huh? Perhaps his lamest line was accusing the administration of dividing the country by hewing to a foreign policy of the "far right." In fact, of course, Bush is merely seeking to enforce the U.N. resolutions the Clinton-Gore administration allowed to become a mockery. And most Americans back him.

In the last week or so, a new slurry of phony arguments has emerged against the war with Iraq. The increasingly unhinged MoDo just asserted that a war against Iraq is actually a function of a "culture war" that Rumsfeld and Cheney are engineering to get back at their Vietnam-era peacenik peers. Paul Krugman today takes up what's left of his column (once he's addressed the errors he's made in other recent columns) to another argument. "In the end, 19th-century imperialism was a diversion," he writes. "It's hard not to suspect that the Bush doctrine is also a diversion – a diversion from the real issues of dysfunctional security agencies, a sinking economy, a devastated budget and a tattered relationship with our allies."

Leave aside these weird and cynical accusations for a second. What's amazing about Krugman and Dowd and others is how uninterested they are in the actual matter at hand. Does Saddam Hussein have or is he close to having weapons of mass destruction? And if he is close to gaining them, what should we do about it? As David Brooks has pointed out with regard to the anti-war movement as a whole, to write about the budget or the culture war or "imperialism" without addressing this basic question is simply an abdication of seriousness. (Well, I guess Dowd left that aspiration behind years ago.) These commentators are constantly claiming that the Bush administration is using the war as a diversion. But in fact, it is these anti-war types who are engaging in a desperate series of diversions, distractions, irrelevancies, smears and fantasies in order to avoid the grave matter in front of us. When, one wonders, will they grow up?

September 30, 2002
12.39 am

Congressman Jim McDermott has just accused the president of willfully lying to the American people about national security threats from Saddam or al Qaeda. He said this not on the floor of the House or in his district – but in Baghdad, the capital city of a despot who is on the brink of war with the United States. At a time when the U.S. government is attempting some high-level diplomatic maneuvers in the U.N., when Saddam is desperate for any propaganda ploy he can muster, these useful idiots play his game. I think what we're seeing now is the hard-core base of the Democratic Party showing its true colors, and those colors, having flirted with irrelevance and then insouciance are now perilously close to

treason. Here's a section of the New York Times story on these people:

“Speaking of the administration”, Mr. McDermott said, “I believe that sometimes they give out misinformation.” Then he added: “It would not surprise me if they came up with some information that is not provable, and they’ve shifted. First they said it was al Qaeda, then they said it was weapons of mass destruction. Now they’re going back and saying it’s al Qaeda again.” When pressed for evidence about whether President Bush had lied, Mr. McDermott said, “I think the president would mislead the American people.”

So at a crucial juncture in American diplomacy, this Democrat is saying that Bush is a liar and a cheat – and in Baghdad! The only word for this is vile. Then there’s David Bonior, formerly second-ranking Democrat in the House, who said the following: “We’ve got to move forward in a way that’s fair and impartial. That means not having the United States or the Iraqis dictate the rules to these inspections.” Let’s be clear here. This guy is saying that we should be neutral between the demands of the United States and Iraq over weapons inspections. *Neutral.*

October 7, 2002
1.29 am

The Times does its best to spin their poll this morning. But the critical number is the 67 percent support for war against Iraq, despite the intense and relentless campaign by the elites at the Times and elsewhere to turn that number around. They have failed. Now they will try to change the subject.

October 8, 2002
12.28 am

When anti-war Democrats argue that we cannot “focus” on both al Qaeda and Iraq, they make no sense at all. Philosophically, pre-empting terrorists from getting weapons of mass destruction must logically include preventing the allies of terrorists from harboring such weapons. And practically, I’ve yet to read a single, credible military account of why we cannot both disarm and remove Saddam and keep up the pressure on al Qaeda at home and abroad. The whole “focus” issue is as fake as the whole “delay” issue, as Charles Krauthammer deftly pointed out yesterday. If Saddam has weapons, if he won’t give them up, and if such weapons are a threat to the region and to the U.S., what possible reason is there for delaying? These “arguments” aren’t really arguments, of course; they’re desperate rhetorical roadblocks thrown up by some Democrats terrified to face their responsibilities in a time of war.

October 15, 2002
12.54 am

Jon Chait – one of the New Republic’s most impassioned opponents of George Bush’s domestic agenda – seems to me to have nailed a couple of vital weaknesses in the liberal case against war. First, the notion that this war is somehow uniquely unilateralist or threatening to international law. On the contrary, Chait argues:

The more persuasive justification for war is that Iraq has violated a series of U.N. resolutions requiring its disarmament and compliance with weapons inspections. Yes, lots of countries violate U.N. resolutions. What makes Iraq's violation a *casus belli* is that it agreed to disarm as a condition of ending the Gulf war. War with Iraq does not require trashing international law. Just the opposite: Sustaining international law is central to its very rationale.

I wish Jon hadn't engaged in some gratuitous Bush-bashing in the piece. But maybe it's as well he did. He proves that you can be a Bush-hater and still support the war. Would that more liberals had the courage to overlook their dislike of the president and get to the point.

October 17, 2002
12.22 pm

Dan Savage produces another scorcher against the peacenik left. Here's the key point:

These developments - a Republican administration recognizing that support for dictators in Third World countries is a losing proposition; a commitment to post-WWII-style nation-building in Iraq - are terrific news for people who care about human rights, freedom, and democracy. They also represent an enormous moral victory for the American left, which has long argued that our support for "friendly" dictators around the world was immoral. (Saddam used to be one of those "friendly" dictators.) After 9/11, the left argued that our support for brutal dictatorships in the Middle East helped create anti-American hatred. Apparently the Bush administration now agrees - so why isn't the American left claiming this victory?

Because, Dan, these people hate Bush more than they care about the fate of the oppressed people they pretend to care about. Or because they have deeper suspicions about the U.S. than about Saddam's Iraq. Yep, they're that depraved and out of it.

October 20, 2002
11.36 pm

The argument that immediately surfaced in the media following the North Korean revelation about their nukes has been: See? Why shouldn't we invade North Korea now? The Bushies are sooo inconsistent. They just want to invade Iraq for oil/empire/the hell of it/the mid-term elections, or fill in the latest Dowdian allegation. But the difference between North Korea and Iraq is so simple it's astonishing some people don't see it. So let's put this as clearly as we can: North Korea has a nuke; Iraq, so far, doesn't. Got that? When a rogue state succeeds in getting weapons of mass destruction, our options are severely limited. The question with Iraq is simple: in trying to stop Saddam getting a nuke, do we follow the same policies as Clinton and Carter in 1994 with North Korea, or do we try something else? Amazingly, large swathes of apparently intelligent people seem to think we should try the Carter/Clinton approach to Iraq.

My view is simple: if we do not disarm Saddam now, we never will. And if we don't, a full-scale nuclear, biological and chemical war is inevitable in the Middle East; and that war, with the help of terror groups like al Qaeda, will soon come to LA and New York and London and Washington. So the choice is a dangerous war now; or a much more destructive war later. I

know democracies don't like to hear these as the two options; democracies rightly, understandably hate to go to war. But these choices, in my view, are the only ones we actually have. So what's it gonna be? Or do we still want to change the subject?

November 3, 2002
11.22 pm

France's delaying tactics, as Bob Kagan pointed out yesterday, have now gone beyond a diplomatic dance. They are designed to achieve one thing: a reprieve for Saddam and a humiliation of the United States. That's why it's past time we put an end to them. Besides, if we go on like this much longer, the delay will be fatal. I've long believed that some kind of U.N. mandate would be very helpful in waging what will be a difficult and unpredictable war and occupation. I even think that inspectors aren't completely useless, as long as they are genuinely allowed to operate without conditions and we can interrogate Iraqi scientists outside the country and give their families amnesty to protect them. Perhaps we'll have such inspections at the same time as the U.S. and the allies prepare for invasion: the best of both worlds. But it seems vitally important to me not to give Saddam another year for weak inspections, and then plan on war in 2004. In that scenario, we seem weak; we lose momentum; we invite a counter-attack; and Saddam has even more time to play defense shrewdly and well. The Iraqi dictator knows the game. He even knows that his best friends in maintaining his brutal rule are the anti-war members of Anglo-American left and far right. And he understands that time is on his side. We need to reverse that equation soon – or more lives will be lost to the dictates of the terrorists.

November 10, 2002
11.42 pm

It's hard not to feel dread when Saddam seems to be moving toward "compliance" with the latest U.N. resolution. I don't mean, of course, that we should dread actually disarming him; merely that we should dread his trapping the U.S. and the rest of the world in yet another sandpit of confusion and obfuscation. That's why it seems to me that we should be publicly mobilizing for war right away. There are some signs that this is happening already. I was reassured by Colin Powell's statement on CNN yesterday that, "I can assure you if he doesn't comply this time we are going to ask the U.N. to give authorisation for all necessary means, and if the U.N. isn't willing to do that, the United States with like-minded nations will go and disarm him forcefully." Powell is the right man to make such a statement.

I'm a skeptic about whether inspections can ever truly work. But if they do, it will only be because of a massive invasion force poised to attack immediately after the first violation. Hence: mobilize. The display of military might and readiness makes peace and compliance more likely – whether the weaponry is used or not.

November 11, 2002
10.22 pm

Since September 11, this blog has been galvanized by the need to fight the battle of ideas over the war against Islamo-fascism. That means exposing the vacuous nihilism of the academic left, the poisonous isolationism of the anti-war right, the thinly veiled anti-Semitism of some parts of the anti-war movement, the incoherence of the Democrats, and the p.c. delusions of

much of the media. That's also what has propelled the blogosphere into stardom – voicing what most people really think, sentiments and arguments that are routinely absent in many mainstream media outlets. But after last week, things have changed, haven't they? A reader makes the following points:

I have been a very avid reader of your column in the Sunday Times for a number of years now, and for the past few months I have also read your Website daily. I am a huge fan, and applaud your hard work and diligent presentation. However, since last Wednesday, I have lost a bit of interest. The reason for this is nothing to do with your efforts, which have not diminished at all. Rather, the situation has changed dramatically, and I think you need to take account of this. WE HAVE WON. We won the mid-term elections ... and we even won in the U.N. (quite how, I cannot imagine). We are now the majority, in control, and no longer victims of a left/liberal conspiracy to suppress the will of the American people through the imposition of an establishment elite's left of centre viewpoint. Yes, the media is generally biased, but in a nation where the Right is generally in control this is less of a worry than before – indeed it may even be a good thing. I am reminded of the last time I actually enjoyed reading the Village Voice. This was the early 1980s, when Reagan was in power (because I along with so many others voted for him) and the conservative agenda dominated. Now the liberals are useful as gadflies – and you need to think about redefining your role.

I'd say the academic left and the left-liberal consensus in the media and Washington have been largely routed by events. But that doesn't mean that many of these misguided individuals have genuinely seen the light. If and when war comes, they will still try to turn it against the West, spin every military victory as a defeat, and do all they can to undermine the Bush administration's difficult job in this war. If another terrorist attack occurs, they will blame it on Bush and the West.

November 14, 2002
12.30 am

Absorbing the Iraqi letter to the U.N. is a surreal experience. It reads a little like those notes from the Washington snipers. It's the note that might be written by a psychopath – full of inane self-grandeur, stupid threats, excessive Unabomber-style rhetoric and any number of Nazi-like references to the “Zionist entity.” If you got a letter like this in the mail, you'd call the cops. My favorite piece of rhetorical weirdness: “We shall see when remorse will not do any good for those who bite on their fingers.” Ohhhhh-kay.

I point this out because some people insist on arguing that we are dealing with an actual state, a legitimate government, or an erratic but familiar kind of leader. We're not. We're dealing with a psychopathic megalomaniac. Which is why we have to assume that everything he says is a lie; and yet we also have to assume that amid these pathological lies there might be a smidgen of truth. We need criminal psychologists, not diplomats.

At this point, I find myself oscillating between hoping for a peaceful outcome while knowing that any peaceful but phony outcome now will only make a future war bloodier and more terrifying. So I'm hoping – yes, hoping – for war soon.

December 5, 2002
11.04 pm

The Iraqi deadline is fast approaching and it's worth trying to figure out what could happen in the next few days. Saddam's current ploy is to welcome inspectors as a way to prove he has no weapons of mass destruction. Without taking experts out of the country and interrogating them, the inspectors almost certainly won't find any. That's surely why the December 8 deadline is so important. It's the first clear trip-wire for war. What if Saddam produces a list of mainly civilian-use technology and the Bush administration declares that it knows it's incomplete. What then? The administration has long argued that the point of the U.N. inspections is not to find well-hidden weapons but to provide Saddam a mechanism by which to disarm completely. If his December 8 declaration is a lie, then Saddam is clearly violating the terms of the 1991 truce and the U.N.'s last-chance option. So we declare war. We could be on a direct war-path by next week. In fact, I think it's highly likely we will be. And then the counter-strikes in northern Lebanon and throughout the West may well be ramped up. This is the calm before the storm. As snow blankets much of us, we should savor it while we can.

December 18, 2002
11.31 am

So it's war. How else to interpret the U.S.'s judgment that the Iraq arms dossier is incomplete? The only reason not to say so explicitly today is because we need more time before we attack. I can see no other rationale for delay. It's a good sign Colin Powell is the front man for this assessment. It carries more weight coming from one of the more conciliatory members of the administration. But the truth is, Saddam has given no possible leeway for conciliation. The blizzard of obfuscatory documents hasn't worked. The administration was right to take its time. The more patient we are, the tighter the noose around Saddam gets. And then it starts in earnest. I'd put the odds of war early next year as close to 80 percent now.

January 16, 2003
1.22 pm

Warheads capable of delivering chemical weapons were just discovered. If verified, and if not accounted for in Iraq's declaration, case for war closed.

January 21, 2003
11.42 pm

If France, Germany and China succeed in ensuring that the war to disarm Saddam doesn't have the sanction of the United Nations, then the U.N. is effectively dead as a viable international body. It will be shown to be palpably uninterested in ensuring that its own resolutions are enforced. Am I exaggerating? I wish I were. But it seems to me that our European allies' current position is one of spectacular intellectual dishonesty. They declare that the U.N. inspectors merely need more time. How much more time? They don't say. There is no deadline. There is never any deadline. Eleven more months, perhaps? The key premise to this argument is that they are satisfied so far by Saddam's compliance.

So let's recap: vast gaps in his declaration to the U.N., discovered plans for a nuclear capacity, chemical warheads found that are unaccounted for, no real interviewing of scientists by U.N. officials. But the French are just pleased as punch. Do they have any proposals to make such inspections actually work? A vast increase in the number of inspectors, perhaps? Nope. Do they intend to support the military pressure on Saddam with their own troops? Nope. Germany has specifically disavowed such a course of action – ever. I'm left with the impression that they don't want to do anything serious, but they don't want anyone else to do anything serious either. The time is surely coming, alas, when the U.S. and the U.K. will have to acknowledge that these European powers are now de facto allies of Saddam. Because they sure as hell aren't ours.

January 27, 2003
12.00 am

I've been trying to understand better the groundswell of anxiety about the coming war. Leaving aside the extremists, it seems to me that the undecideds simply hold an assumption I don't share. The assumption is that 9/11 was an isolated event that portended nothing more than itself and only legitimized a police operation in self-defense targeted precisely at the group that perpetrated it. If that's your position, then I can see your point about Iraq. It must be baffling to see the U.S. subsequently (and simultaneously) pursuing a target apparently unrelated to that awful event.

I think one of the key points the president must therefore make in his State of the Union speech tomorrow night has to relate to this assumption. He should say: look, there are two ways to approach this problem of international terrorism. The first is roughly the strategy of the 1990s: you tackle groups that specifically attack you. You play defense. You take one group at a time. You don't go after the governments behind them. You try and soothe feelings of resentment around the world and stay out of trouble. You don't go around stirring up hornets' nests of state-sponsored terror. The occasional cruise missile attack or covert operation, combined with a hefty increase in domestic security and tightening of civil liberties, is enough.

The other strategy is to take 9/11 not as an isolated event but as a stark warning. Defense alone won't work. These groups are guided by a philosophy that is not amenable to suasion or deterrence. And they are aided by a complex network of allies – governments and non-governments – throughout the Middle East that share at least some of the same ideology and a lot of the same methods. Worse, new technology means that these groups could very soon perform their evil with weapons far more powerful than anything we have experienced before. 9/11 is therefore best understood as an early tremor before a real earthquake. So the best defense is offense. We cannot wait for catastrophe to strike again. No one disputes Saddam's malign intentions or brutality. No one seriously doubts he has weapons of mass destruction, and may at some point get nuclear weapons if we don't do more than we have done to stop him. The point of remembering 9/11 is not to prove that Saddam did it; but to remind ourselves that some combination of Saddam and others could do far worse in the future. So what should we do? Wait and hope we can keep this thing under control by a series of defensive actions? Or go on the offensive and do what we can to stop, deter and reverse this threat?

Neither option is without risks. The calm today is deceptive. The risk tomorrow is greater than most of us can imagine. If we do nothing – or worse, we do nothing that looks like something, i.e. fruitless U.N. inspections ad infinitum – then the worst could happen. If we do something, the worst could also happen – the use of such weapons in Iraq, a growing conflict in the Middle East. But by going in, we also stand a chance of seizing our own destiny and changing the equation in the Middle East toward values we actually believe in: the rule of law, the absence of wanton cruelty, the dignity of women, the right to self-determination for Arabs and Jews. We also have a chance to end an evil in its own right: the barbarous regime in Baghdad. We choose Iraq not just because it is uniquely dangerous but because the world has already decided that its weapons must be destroyed. We go in to defend ourselves and our freedoms but also the integrity of the countless U.N. resolutions that mandate Saddam's disarmament. Our unilateralism, if that is what is eventually needed, will therefore not be a result of our impetuous flouting of global norms. It will be because only the U.S. and the U.K. and a few others are prepared to risk lives and limb to enforce global norms. Far greater damage will be done to the United Nations if we do nothing than if we do what we have an absolute responsibility to do.

January 27, 2003
11.30 pm

Hans Blix's U.N. report is a devastating blow to those who still hold out hope that appeasing Saddam or attempting to contain him diplomatically will solve the problem we face. The critical elements of the report are: that Saddam's December 7 dossier was riddled with unaccountable gaps and omissions; that there are tons of unaccounted-for VX gas, anthrax, 6,500 missing chemically-armed bombs, SCUD missiles, and the like; that Saddam has neither shown what happened to these weapons and chemicals nor has he publicly destroyed them; that no Iraqi scientists have been granted immunity in order to talk to UN inspectors alone and without fear of retribution; and that documents related to uranium enrichment have been found in scientists' private homes, suggesting a policy of deliberate concealment of critical documents related to chemical and biological weapons. Any one of these is a material breach of U.N. Resolution 1441. All of them represent a hole the size of a tank in the credibility of Saddam. What we have seen is the most minimal cooperation – just enough to confuse useful idiots in the West – in the attempt to disarm.

Nothing the U.S. or the U.K. could say could be as damning as this report. It's a slam-dunk.

So the question now is: what do we do about it? The U.N. promised severe consequences if Iraq didn't comply with active cooperation. The last chance has been missed. Should the West give Saddam a really really last chance? I think we should. But purely for the demonstration that we have absolutely no desire to go to war as such, but only to protect the West and the Middle East from Saddam's menace. That means no more than a few weeks, and only enough time to ensure we have the best conditions in which to wage what will be a hazardous war. That should be the message of the president tomorrow night. He can't win over the haters; but he absolutely can win over those who believe the U.S. can and must uphold some element of order in the world, especially with regard to weapons of mass destruction, rogue states and terror.

The issue, in Colin Powell's eloquent expression, "is not how much more time the inspectors

need to search in the dark. It is how much more time Iraq should be given to turn on the lights.” A few weeks at most. And then *we* will turn on the lights, and the world will retroactively judge this war as one of the most justified the West has ever waged.

January 28, 2003
11.42 pm

I respect those who worry about the unintended consequences of a war with Iraq. I understand those who are concerned about the precedent of a pre-emptive strike. I admire those who want clear empirical data before the grave decision of war. But it seemed to me that the president tonight effectively answered each of those worries. He should have mentioned the allies who are already on board – the Brits and Italians and Australians and Spaniards. But if his goal was to show resilience, patience and a moral grasp of America’s current responsibility, then he accomplished it. In many ways, this was a Kennedy-like speech, a speech a Democratic president could have made, if the Democratic Party hadn’t fallen into such moral and strategic confusion. Self-confident, convinced, as he should be, of the benign nature of America’s role in the world, ambitious, and warm, it was a tour de force of big government conservatism, mixed with Cold War liberalism. His best passage was when he outlined the irrefutable logic that connects 9/11 with Saddam:

Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained. But chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily contained. Imagine those 19 hijackers with other weapons and other plans, this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.

That’s it, in a nutshell. It is not paranoid to fear this. It is responsible. And it is the president’s job to be responsible. He seemed to me to show the calm of someone with real faith – both in the justice of his cause and America’s ability to see it through. Everything else is minor compared to this. Everything.

January 30, 2003
12.27 am

Stunning article in the Times of London today. Eight leaders of European countries call for unity between Europe and America in dealing with Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction. They are: José María Aznar, of Spain, José Manuel Durão Barroso, of Portugal, Silvio Berlusconi, of Italy, Britain’s Tony Blair, Václav Havel, of the Czech Republic, Peter Medgyessy, of Hungary, Leszek Miller, of Poland, and Anders Fogh Rasmussen, of Denmark. Their average economic growth last year was more than twice that of France and Germany.

Let’s not get too huffy about Europe. Much of it is far closer to the U.S. position than the tired and increasingly narcissistic powers in Berlin and Paris. Schroder, remember, has brought his party to historic lows in the polls. Chirac is president mainly because he was the only alternative to fascism. The center of gravity in Europe is indeed shifting. And Washington’s clarity in the war on terror is one reason.

February 4, 2003
11.04 pm

I'm not sure why Jeffrey Goldberg's latest superb piece in the New Yorker hasn't made more of a splash. Yes, he has some mini-scoops on Saddam's links with al Qaeda. But its real merit is in helping us understand what levels of empirical evidence are required in the matter of espionage and intelligence. Or to put it another way: the question to be asked of Saddam and al Qaeda is not do we have clear evidence of their connections; but why *wouldn't* they be connected? You can look at intelligence entirely inferentially, looking through the myriads of signals and signs and hints and guesses to find hard evidence of, say, a link between al Qaeda and Saddam. Or you can use your common sense, assume such a link and then go back to the intelligence data to see if such an assumption is backed up or disproven.

February 5, 2003
12.14 pm

I just watched Colin Powell's address to the Security Council. More impressive than I expected, especially on the Saddam-al Qaeda linkage. How, I wonder, can anyone now doubt that Saddam is deliberately obstructing the implementation of Resolution 1441? The evidence is overwhelming. The only question now is whether the U.N. cares about its own credibility, its own authority and its own integrity. I'm no fan of the U.N. but I'm no implacable foe either. We do need an international body to reflect international consensus. That consensus must be forged by the major powers, especially the United States. So far, the process has worked. It's up to the U.N. to see if it can work in the immediate future. The main, horrifying conclusion from Powell's presentation, however, is not about the U.N. It's about the direct threat we are still under. If Saddam has what Powell outlines, then this war could be horrendous. It could lead to massive casualties among American troops and a possible attack on civilians in Europe and the U.S. That makes it more important that we get international cover and support for the terrible duty we now have. This seems to me to be particularly true because it was the international coalition that insisted in 1991 that the first Gulf War not extend to deposing Saddam. That coalition now has a moral responsibility to help the U.S. and the U.K. to finish the job. We can only pray now that France, Russia, Germany and the others take that responsibility seriously. Powell has done all that he could have done to make that choice stark and unavoidable. The rest is up to the U.N.

February 11, 2003
11.07 pm

I learn three things from the latest morsel of half-crazed religious rhetoric from Osama bin Laden. The first is that he is perfectly willing to ally himself with Saddam. The critical section is as follows:

And it doesn't harm in these conditions the interest of Muslims to agree with those of the socialists in fighting against the crusaders, even though we believe the socialists are infidels. For the socialists and the rulers have lost their legitimacy a long time ago, and the socialists are infidels regardless of where they are, whether in Baghdad or in Aden. And this fighting about to take place resembles the fight with the Romans earlier and the collusion of interest doesn't harm, for the Muslims' fight against the Romans was due to the collusion of the interests with the Persians.

This isn't exactly a Hitler-Stalin pact. It's more like the German-Japan axis of the last world war. Osama is the ideological purist; but Saddam is a critical ally of the Islamo-fascists against the West, against any notion of Western freedom in that part of the world. More important, Iraq provides a base – and far more lethal weapons – for the continuing war. The enemy of Osama's enemy is his friend. Only experts in the Middle East could have missed that one.

The second thing I learn is that Osama still under-estimates American military power. He writes that America's fundamental weakness are

fear and cowardice and absence of the fighting spirit among American soldiers. Those soldiers are completely convinced about the injustice of their government and its lies, and they lack a fair cause to fight for. And they are rather fighting for the capitalist and interest hoarders, and weapons and oil merchants, including the criminal gang at the White House, which harbors crusader hatreds and personal hatreds from Bush the father.

If I were Gen. Tommy Franks, I would post that statement in every barracks I could find, alongside a picture of the World Trade Center. If that doesn't mobilize the troops, nothing will. But lastly, Osama is getting desperate. He senses, I think, a huge blow to his cause in the Middle East if Baghdad is liberated and Saddam's weapons of mass destruction are taken off the table. Hence the somewhat pathetic military tips, the pep-talk, the prayers for victory, and so on. For all these reasons, this message is a timely one for the world. Some Europeans will argue that this means we should avoid war even more carefully, ignore Saddam's arms, keep the inspection charade for a few more months, and so on. Others will recognize the voice of a lethal and determined enemy, in league with the regime they are so desperately trying to keep in power. Sooner or later, they will realize that they are at war too. And that we're risking lives to defend their freedom as well as ours.

February 13, 2003
11.21 pm

I keep hearing from people who insist we should try "containment" of Iraq instead of war. They don't seem to have observed that we are where we are precisely because of twelve years of "containment". But, leaving that aside for a moment, what can containment mean now? One thing it surely does mean is maintaining sanctions. As Tony Blair just noted, "The moral choice in relation to this is a moral choice that has to weigh up the moral consequences of war. But the alternative is to carry on with a sanctions regime which, because of the way Saddam Hussein implements it, leads to thousands of people dying needlessly in Iraq every year." Exactly. How odd that those who have long accused the West of murdering thousands of Iraqi babies because of sanctions now want to continue those sanctions indefinitely. Of course, some don't. As soon as the pressure is off, they'll get back to lobbying for an end to such sanctions and liberating Saddam to even further horrors.

This war is a just one. We didn't start it. Saddam did – over twelve years ago. We responded at the time with a restraint and patience and deliberation that would have made Aquinas proud. After victory, we acted with a magnanimity utterly unreciprocated by the dictator we

routed – even to the extent of leaving Saddam in power, even to the point of betraying in grotesque fashion the millions who dreamed of freedom – only to see slavery instead. (If only to right that horrifying wrong, we have a moral responsibility to finish the job.) We made a truce with the tyrant, with conditions that the entire world has witnessed him routinely violate.

Our enemy, moreover, has no moral compunction whatsoever – he has violated every maxim of a just war imaginable. He has murdered opponents; he has gassed innocent and defenseless civilians; he preaches genocidal hatred and practises torture; he has laid waste to the environment; and made a mockery of religion. He has refused to disarm; and lies through his teeth. When fanatical murderers from that region developed a terrorist network and massacred thousands of Western civilians, we realized that Saddam’s weapons couldn’t be contained in his lair with any guarantee of security. So we made a belated attempt to live up to the truce of 1991, to finish the unfinished job. We could have destroyed him and his regime at any point. We didn’t. We waited; we sent in inspectors; we were forced into sanctions. We went to the U.N. again to beg for help and support. The U.N. complied, provided a clear resolution, with the burden of proof finally on Saddam. Just as clearly, Saddam has violated it, and continues to violate it.

By any rational, objective standard, we have done *everything* we possibly can to settle this war peacefully. To say that we are in a rush to war is an obscene fabrication, a statement of wilful amnesia, a simple denial of history. To retreat now, to concede that this monster has a better case than we do in the final prosecution of this war is a travesty of any concept of just war theory. In fact, it is to engage in positive pro-active injustice. Yes, we must do all we possibly can to keep casualties in this war as low as possible. We must do more than we can imagine to help rebuild that poor country and bring hope and democracy to its terrorized and brutalized people. And those objectives are absolutely essential for the justice of this war to be maintained. But equally, we would fail in any conception of Christian duty if we failed to act after all this time, if we let evil succeed, if we lost confidence in our capacity to do what is morally right.

February 14, 2003
5.44 pm

We now know that, barring a miracle, there will be no second U.N. resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq. We know that European public opinion has hardened against any such military action, and that large sections of world opinion regard the United States as more morally abhorrent and internationally dangerous than the genocidal murderer in Baghdad. We know in other words that we will have to wage this war with an international coalition that is not synonymous with the U.N. The U.N. route has been a failure. But it was still worth trying, even if only to give it one last chance. The U.S. and the U.K. have shown amazing patience in trying to force the U.N. to live up to its own resolutions. That very effort gives the lie to those who argue that the Anglosphere nations have no interest in multilateralism.

The lesson from this is a simple one: we have to abandon the U.N. as an instrument in world affairs. I’m not saying complete U.S. withdrawal, although I’m beginning to think that now makes a lot of sense. I mean temporary U.S. disengagement. The body is now a joke of

immense proportions. If it cannot enforce a resolution it passed only a couple of months ago, it cannot enforce anything. If it cannot read the plain meaning of its own words, it is an absurdist theater piece, not a genuine international body. It isn't in danger of becoming the League of Nations. It now *is* the League of Nations. The difference is that this time, after 9/11, U.S. isolationism is not an option.

February 17, 2003
1.53 am

Several things are worth noting after the weekend's spasm of outrage and protest at the thought of deposing Saddam with American and British arms. The first is that the NATO crisis seems to have eased. The second is that France has still not ruled out supporting the use of military force although Chirac is sailing very close to the German position. The third is that editorials in the New York Times and even the Guardian/Observer have reasserted the need to keep a military option on the table. I think some reason for this new-found sobriety is based on the weekend's marches. There is little doubt that they represent something absolutely real in European public opinion: an aversion to any war for any cause except in urgent self-defense. But what, one is forced to ask, were these marches actually *for*? And if these people's representatives were actually in power, how safe would we be?

The British march was a negative one: against conflict. But its positive goals were and are opaque: they range from Islamism to revolutionary socialism to pacifism to anti-Americanism. Lesbian avengers marched next to people who would stone them to death. None of the marches addressed an answer to the problem of what to do about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, the premise of the marches was that there is no problem. Saddam is evil but harmless, they seem to say (although the avoidance of any mention of Saddam, in words or pictures, was the most stunning aspect of the spectacle). Or they think that the terrifying prospect of a Blixkrieg will cow Saddam into compliance. Very few concede that "inspections" are only happening at all because Bush and Blair played the military card and meant it.

February 21, 2003
12.15 am

A provisional American-run government, designed to foster reconstruction, humanitarian aid and a fledgling constitution, is a perfectly understandable idea. But a long-term de facto colony is surely asking for trouble – both in terms of actual governance and in terms of American public acceptance. Of course, these plans will change under the pressure of events, but I can't be the only one concerned that democratic institutions do not seem very high on the Cheney wish-list (and it's largely Cheney's construction). The extent of de-Baathification is also critical. Krugman gleefully declares today that only "Saddam Hussein and a few top officials will be replaced." The Washington Post, with a far better track record than Krugman, reports:

Under a decision finalized last week, Iraqi government officials would be subjected to "de-Baathification," a reference to Hussein's ruling Baath Party, under a program that borrows from the "de-Nazification" program established in Germany after World War II. Criteria by which officials would be designated as too tainted to keep their jobs are still being worked on, although they would likely be based more on

complicity with the human rights and weapons abuses of the Hussein government than corruption, officials said. A large number of current officials would be retained.

Which is it? We'll see. But the administration needs to be put on notice by its supporters as well as its opponents. Many of us signed onto this war not merely to protect the West from terrorists with weapons of mass destruction, but as an attempt to grasp the nettle of Arab autocracy. If we make no effort to foster democratic institutions, the rule of law and representative government in Iraq, then we will lose the peace as surely as we will have won the Iraq war. And losing that peace means losing the wider war on terror as well.

February 24, 2003
1.49 am

Good news about the prospect for democracy after liberation. Paul Wolfowitz – and not some anonymous leaker to the Washington Post – clearly stated yesterday that Iraq is “not going to be handed over to some junior Saddam Hussein. We’re not interested in replacing one dictator with another dictator.” That’s a relief. The proof of that, of course, will be tested in the coming months and years. But I believe Wolfowitz. And trust him.

February 25, 2003
11.22 pm

By far the most depressing aspect of the debate over war to disarm Saddam has been how it has swiftly adopted the contours of the culture war. There is a solid and passionate base among many blue-staters that opposes this war at least in part because they oppose George W. Bush. At some point in the last few months, in fact, being anti-war clearly became a defining cultural moniker for an entire sub-population. Almost the whole academic class, the media elites, the college-educated urbanites, the entertainment industry and so on are now reflexively anti-war. Worse in fact: there is very little argument or debate going on in these sub-populations, simply an assumption that war against Saddam is wrong, and that all right-thinking people agree about this. Obviously, the polls suggest that this sub-population is not a majority, but they are a powerful and increasingly angry minority. If the war hits snags, they will redouble their efforts to humiliate the president. I don't think their anger will be abated if the war goes well either. They will merely find a new reason to hate Bush.

But I do think that an opportunity exists for Bush to neutralize and even co-opt some of these people by his conduct in the post-war settlement. He must commit real resources, real troops, real money to reconstructing Iraq and to building the beginnings of democracy there. No friendly new dictator; no cut-and-run; no change of the subject. He has to show the essentially progressive nature of the war against Islamist terror and its state sponsors – not just for the security of the West but for the future of the Arab world. Rescinding some future tax cuts to help pay for this may well be prudent – and even popular.

February 26, 2003
11.26 pm

It took a while, but the president's transformation seems to be almost complete. From a candidate who projected a smaller defense budget than Al Gore, who pooh-poohed “nation-building,” who spoke very modestly of the United States being a “humble nation,” we now

have a president saying the following:

We will remain in Iraq as long as necessary, and not a day more. America has made and kept this kind of commitment before – in the peace that followed a world war. After defeating enemies, we did not leave behind occupying armies, we left constitutions and parliaments. We established an atmosphere of safety, in which responsible, reform-minded local leaders could build lasting institutions of freedom. In societies that once bred fascism and militarism, liberty found a permanent home.

I'm a little troubled by the phrase: "not a day more." It's as if the president still believes that a real commitment to Iraq and to the region as a whole will be unpopular at home. It needn't be – if the president makes Iraq a cornerstone of this country's commitment to a freer and therefore more stable world.

March 3, 2003
1.12 am

The capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is big news. In fact, it's surely the biggest news in the war on terror in months. The nabbing followed previous arrests and interrogations, all of which have clearly helped stymie and disorient al Qaeda. In terms of the broader debate about the war, one conclusion is obvious. It's time to retire the frayed notion that somehow we cannot go to war against Saddam and al Qaeda at the same time. In fact, it would be hard to think of a more perfect refutation.

March 3, 2003
11.57 pm

Chatting with a senior member of the administration this weekend, I felt a sense of relief. The president is adamant that Saddam will soon be gone. It will happen. The only option short of war will be Saddam's exile, or death. I think Saddam understands this, which is why we suddenly have his desperate attempts to show superficial disarmament. But it isn't enough. It cannot be enough. Maybe if he'd done it three months ago, we could have come to an agreement. But now the moment has passed. The permanent and transparent disarmament we need – the reassurance that the world deserves – cannot be accomplished while that duplicitous monster is in power. We should try for a second U.N. resolution, but we shouldn't be too disheartened if we don't get it.

March 5, 2003
11.16 pm

Josh Marshall and Fred Kaplan, who both support a war, nevertheless complain about alleged Bush administration "incompetence." It seems to me that both have to give some real reasons as to what the Bushies did wrong. They pursued a text-book U.N. strategy. They secured a tortuous U.N. Resolution which was passed unanimously. They won the Congressional vote easily. I'm unaware of any obvious military failings. If the impasse is because of the irredentist opposition of Germans to war under any conditions, then it's not Bush's fault. If it's because of a French desire to stymie American power, then it's hard to see what Bush could have done to stop this. If the French refuse to enforce a resolution they signed, why is that a sign of incompetence on the part of the Bush administration?

March 12, 2003
12.20 am

In the past, we conceived of the threat of warfare coming from rival states which had built up various means of economic and thereby military strength. But now we have the reality of completely weak states, or parasitic states, or failed states or neo-states (like al Qaeda) getting nukes by buying them, or stealing them or smuggling the component parts. They can also find ways to detonate them anonymously so that the civilized world is incapable of rational response or even rational deterrence. It seems to me that the chances of something like this happening are extremely high.

Europeans simply don't believe that we're living in a radically more dangerous and unstable world. Or they think that mild measures can temporarily solve the problem – like porous and largely ineffective inspection regimes in Iraq. So we are at a deadlock. And if we cannot get consensus on Iraq – with umpteen U.N. resolutions and the precedent of a previous unprovoked war – what hope is there of getting consensus if Iran's mullahs go nuclear? Or North Korea's nut-case gets several nukes? Or someone else out there we have yet to hear from decides to go to heaven via a suitcase nuke in L.A.?

March 12, 2003
11.42 pm

The most concise and devastating piece yet on the alternative to war against Saddam appeared in the Washington Post yesterday. If you haven't yet read it, do so now. Here's the money quote from Walter Russell Mead:

Sanctions are inevitably the cornerstone of containment, and in Iraq, sanctions kill. In this case, containment is not an alternative to war. Containment is war: a slow, grinding war in which the only certainty is that hundreds of thousands of civilians will die. The Gulf War killed somewhere between 21,000 and 35,000 Iraqis, of whom between 1,000 and 5,000 were civilians. Based on Iraqi government figures, UNICEF estimates that containment kills roughly 5,000 Iraqi babies (children under 5 years of age) every month, or 60,000 per year. Other estimates are lower, but by any reasonable estimate containment kills about as many people every year as the Gulf War – and almost all the victims of containment are civilian, and two-thirds are children under 5. Each year of containment is a new Gulf War. Saddam Hussein is 65; containing him for another 10 years condemns at least another 360,000 Iraqis to death. Of these, 240,000 will be children under 5.

That's the difference between the French and much of the American "peace" movement. The French are at least candid about their hope that a pretense of disarmament could lead to renewed trade with Saddam. The more legit peace protestors, when they occasionally diverge from haranguing the evils of America, presumably want the sanctions maintained. That's neither justice nor peace.

March 17, 2003
12.26 am

The latest polling data show something worth remembering as we head into war. USA Today's poll shows the highest levels supporting an invasion of Iraq – 64 percent – since November 2001, a jump of five points from two weeks ago. 57 percent say that the Bush administration has made a convincing argument for intervention. This is far higher support for war than before the first Gulf War and a remarkable finding, to my mind, given the relentless anti-war propaganda flooding the airwaves. Americans see the danger; and they want to act. Finally, the determination of this country to defend itself is going to be demonstrated. We can only pray now that the war is as successful as possible and as casualty-free on both sides as any such war can be.

March 17, 2003
11.51 pm

Please read Ann Clwyd's devastating piece in the Times of London today. Here's how it starts:

There was a machine designed for shredding plastic. Men were dropped into it and we were again made to watch. Sometimes they went in head first and died quickly. Sometimes they went in feet first and died screaming. It was horrible. I saw 30 people die like this. Their remains would be placed in plastic bags and we were told they would be used as fish food ... on one occasion, I saw Qusay [President Saddam Hussein's youngest son] personally supervise these murders.

What Clwyd says – clearly, unforgettably, indelibly – is something that some people think is unsophisticated or crude or manipulative. What she says is that the Saddam regime is evil. I'm aware of the argument that there are many evil regimes in the world and we aren't invading to destroy all of them. But there comes a point at which such arguments say less about the world and more about the people making them. Saddam's regime is certainly one of the vilest on earth. Its malevolence and brutality is documented beyond dispute. In a world in which morality matters, the leading theologians and moralists and politicians would not be bending over backwards to find arguments to leave this regime alone, to lend credence to its lies, and to appease its poisons.

I say that before this war begins, because the cause is just whatever vicissitudes of conflict await us, and there will be plenty of people who will make this point if and when the war succeeds. But the truth is, regardless of what happens next, we know something important about the two major leaders of the free world right now. Neither man has blinked at evil. The only question in the next forty-eight hours is whether evil will blink before it is destroyed.

March 19, 2003
1.33 am

What if Saddam uses chemical weapons? I've been thinking about that for weeks. There's no doubt that U.S. and U.K. forces will prevail against them. But what of American public opinion if such horrors occur? Will there be a wobble? My view is that it will only confirm the justice of this intervention and its timeliness. I also believe that Saddam, if he wants to

wound the United States, could not do anything more destructive to the cause of our enemies. Americans will feel one thing if such an atrocity occurs: rage. And more than Saddam will feel the ultimate consequences of that anger. There's nothing we can do about it now, of course, except pray. So I'm praying – for an overwhelming, swift and casualty-scarce victory; that the worst won't happen; that we haven't waited too long; that the young men and women defending us know deeply that we are all behind them. God bless and save them. I'm inspired by the words of a soldier via Mike Kelly in Kuwait right now: "A thousand things can happen to make life absolutely miserable for us. There is not one thing that can happen to stop us."

March 21, 2003
12.49 am

I just read a first-hand account from the epicenter of fifth columnism. And another report from a pathetic protest in D.C. And another from Paris. Lamer? There's a story about a puke-in in San Francisco. Yes, a puke-in. Hey, guys, why not just start defecating on the sidewalks? Here's what I don't quite understand: If you're trying to persuade mainstream Americans that this war is wrong, why do you stop rush-hour traffic, rely on school kids playing hookie and set up a public mock-vomitorium? I guess asking obvious rational questions of these people is pointless.

March 21, 2003
2.38 am

I've been watching the television for a couple of hours now and I can't stop watching. Why? Because something incredible is beginning to look possible. The fact that, as I write this, we are being told that Saddam was in the bunker when it was hit; we have seen no credible video of him since; large numbers of the Iraqi military may be surrendering en masse; the command and control system within the Iraqi military structure seems to have broken down; and there seems to be no meaningful military opposition at all so far – suggests something beyond believable. Have we destroyed this regime with one strike?

We cannot now know. Maybe I'll be proven horribly wrong and this is a defensive ploy. Maybe things will get much worse. But there's something strange about this beginning. It's not "shock and awe." It's one strike, and then tentative, quiet ground advance. And almost nothing from the other side. Did the threat of "shock and awe" lead to a senior defection, and surrender from the near-top? Is that why this is going eerily well? Who gave the White House the intelligence about Saddam's whereabouts? And is he reliable? Perhaps that's why the war is going so gingerly so far. Let's just say: I'm amazed that this dream scenario is even conceivable. Was Saddam brutally betrayed? And did the White House know in advance? Right now, in the early morning hours, all this is beginning to seem at least within the bounds of possibility. Or have I lost it and this is just crazy optimism?

March 21, 2003
12.04 pm

Overnight, some new resistance is reported from some Saddamite troops. But still no new footage of Saddam. Meanwhile, what anyone with a brain would expect:

So far, however, there is no indication that the Iraqi population at large is resisting the allied forces. At Safwan, another town in the southeast, Iraqis waved in celebration as members of the 1st Marine Division hauled down giant portraits of Saddam Hussein. "We're very happy... Saddam Hussein is a butcher," said a man in the back of a pickup truck, identifying himself only as Abdullah. A woman fell at the feet of the Americans and embraced them, touching their knees, the Associated Press reported.

Are you watching this, M. Chirac?

March 21, 2003
12.25 pm

A reader writes:

I too am hopeful about the progress of the war. But I don't know which network you are watching. I am hearing reports of fierce fighting in the north as well as Basra in the south. An Iraqi tug was stopped while attempting to mine a waterway. And we are not yet confronting the forces around the capitol. Yes it is going well. So far so good. That's it. If Saddam is dead, why aren't Iraqi leaders running through the streets with white flags shouting don't shoot?

All good points. But there's also the possibility that some in the Saddam command structure are as in the dark as we are. The question we have yet to answer is: where did the tip of Saddam's whereabouts come from? An inside job? Brilliant Special Forces work? Either option is highly encouraging. Again, I'm waiting to see new footage of Saddam.

March 21, 2003
1.16 pm

While Iraqis cheer, American lefties protest. Doesn't that just say it all? Actually, in some ways, this mass lunacy has some potential. If this war continues as well as it has been, won't the anti-war left not merely be defeated but beyond humiliated? And won't that leave an impression on at least some of them? The younger ones, perhaps? You've got to keep hoping.

March 21, 2003
6.30 pm

No use yet of any biological or chemical weapons; and only relatively "minuscule" sabotaging of the oil wells. Early days yet – but these tactics were expected early on as well.

March 22, 2003
8.15 pm

100 miles from Baghdad. They're racing in.

March 24, 2003
8.28 pm

It is important to remember, I think, that the war isn't just between the West and Saddam.

There's also a political and ideological war within the West. The anti-war crowd have lost the argument about going to war; so they are determined to win the case during and after it. They want this war to be regarded as a disaster. And it's up to the rest of us to fight back, expose them, and keep people focused on reality, not pro-Saddam and anti-Western spin. I need your help in this, so keep those press clips coming. Blogs are another weapon. We should use them.

March 24, 2003
12.43 am

The setbacks the allies have suffered these last couple of days are all due to one thing: some Saddam units acting as terrorists. By pretending to surrender and then opening fire, by relocating in civilian neighborhoods, by shooting prisoners of war in the head, the soldiers apparently still loyal to Saddam are not reversing the allied advance. What they're doing is trying to inflict sufficient damage to improve their morale and increase the costs of the invasion. They want us to fire into civilian areas; they want us to panic at a few atrocities (as in Somalia); they are counting on an American unwillingness to persevere through serious casualties. And they intend to use the Arab media and their Western sympathizers, i.e. the BBC, NYT, NPR etc., to get this message out. The lesson to learn is that we have cornered the equivalent of a rabid dog. It will fight nastily, brutally and with no compunction. Those units who will go down with this regime will not go down easily. After an initial hope that this thing could be over swiftly, I think it's obvious by now that we're in for a nasty fight – and the Saddamite remnants will ally with the anti-war media to fight dirty and spin shamelessly.

But at the most important level, these remnants are also surely wrong. It's still an astonishing fact that in a few days, allied troops are approaching Baghdad, much of the Saddamite government infrastructure in Baghdad has been pulverized, Saddam himself is severely wounded, and the momentum is clear. How seriously should we then take the reports of guerrilla-type rearguard actions? I'm not a military expert. Here's one from the Washington Post this morning:

Military experts predicted that the resistance in the south was so disorganized and relatively small-scale that it would die out quickly. "Nothing surprising," said retired Marine Col. Gary Anderson, who has played the role of the Iraqi commander in several U.S. military war games of an invasion. In those games, played to probe U.S. war plans for weaknesses, he said, "We came up with much worse." He noted that the Iraqi attacks were sporadic and small in nature, temporarily stopping small U.S. units but hardly affecting the broad advance toward Baghdad. Getting to the capital quickly is a key U.S. objective.

The question, to my mind, is who these resisters really are. Senior Saddamites who know they could get killed when power shifts? Islamist terrorists? Opportunists? Regular soldiers? It's extremely hard to tell; and it certainly helps reveal the difficulties ahead for governing a country where such units can melt away into residential neighborhoods. But if the government itself changes, wouldn't the incentives for resistance shift as well? I guess we'll know in a few days, when the battles for Basra and Baghdad get fully under way.

March 24, 2003
1.46 pm

Amid all the uncertainty and second-guessing, one thing is worth remembering. Our main fear before this conflict was that Saddam might use chemical or biological weapons against our troops or Iraqi civilians. One reason for the strategy of a short air campaign and then risky troop advances was that a repeat of the 1991 strategy would have allowed Saddam free rein to use such weapons against us. The fact that he hasn't so far is a big achievement, it seems to me. But it has meant slightly greater risks for the troops on the ground. Still the benefits are also huge in terms of saved lives and the closer we get to Baghdad, the less likely such weapons will be used, since they would backfire on the regime itself. Score one for this plan. But no plan is risk-free or perfect.

March 24, 2003
11.18 pm

How do the Iraqis feel? It's too hard to tell. It seems to me that we may have underestimated the psychological effect of president George H. W. Bush's brutal betrayal of the Iraqi people in 1991, at the behest of the U.N. No wonder Iraqis are still skittish about Americans and fearful that this interlude may end. The allied strategy of simply skirting past major cities also means that Saddam's henchmen may still be in control there, and so feelings are still deeply skeptical, mixed or shrouded. I also think that we hawks might have underestimated the Iraqis' sense of national violation at being invaded – despite their hatred of Saddam. And yet we also have evidence of their obvious joy at the possibility of ending the long nightmare of Saddam. We simply don't know for sure, and the mood may vary dramatically from area to area. In fact, we may not know at all until Saddam is finally gone. Like so many other things in this conflict, we'll see.

March 24, 2003
11.20 pm

I'm not a military expert, but a new piece from the Washington Post provides food for thought. Do we have enough troops in time for the final battle? Have we gone too fast too soon? Those seem reasonable concerns to me, although I'm not qualified to take a side in the argument. But it is not too unreasonable to worry that with one northern front denied us, we need overwhelming force to smash through to Baghdad quickly enough. Do we have enough? And do we have enough humanitarian follow-through available soon enough to build support in the south? That's what I want to know. If you see any useful information out there on this, please send it to me and I'll link and post.

March 26, 2003
12.51 am

There's some hope to be gleaned at least by what hasn't happened. The oil fields seem secured and haven't been set aflame. No chemical or biological weapons have yet been used. Iran is quiescent. The Turks have not invaded. Israel hasn't been attacked. These are all good signs. So far, the worst hasn't happened. But there are obvious worries as well. The Shia population in the South is still not sure of an allied victory. It seems we under-estimated their skittishness about an allied war – due in large part to their understandably bitter

feelings at being betrayed in 1991. If we had more overwhelming force in the region, that may have been less of a problem. But it appears we don't, for reasons of logistics and Turks but also of war planning. The fact that Saddamite forces are now firing into civilian areas in Basra is therefore a horrifying but also hopeful sign. And the Brits, it seems, are determined to try and support the civilians. As I write, they're probably moving in. (Note to self: this is what a real ally looks like.)

March 27, 2003
1.53 am

The Washington Post has a good and long analysis today of what the war so far teaches us about the future. There are two scenarios – a sudden collapse of the regime after some more pounding from the air and some successful skirmishing on the ground; or a more protracted affair in which we wait for more troops, keep Baghdad surrounded, deal with guerrilla warfare in the South, and then engage in brutal urban warfare for the remainder. The first is still possible and would make this war amazingly successful. But you'd have to be more of an optimist than I am to believe it's the more likely.

If the war is more protracted, that makes the home front much more important. The propaganda organs against this war will fight hard to weaken American resolve. They are Saddam's only real hope – that Americans will tire of casualties, lose confidence, and make some sort of deal with the devil. With this president, that won't happen. But heaven knows, the anti-war right and left will do all they can to derail a war they so fiercely opposed. They will use even the slightest civilian casualties, however tiny in relative terms, for an hysterical campaign to foment regional unrest and sap morale at home. We have to counter and challenge their every argument.

March 27, 2003
12.39 pm

The guys fighting us are the equivalent of the SS. We're invading a milder version of Nazi Germany – only after eleven years of relative peace. These guys have barely been softened up at all. Why did conservative hawks like me not believe our own rhetoric about the horrors of totalitarianism? The point about such systems, as Orwell showed, is not just their brittleness and evil, but their *success* in indoctrinating and marshalling the shock troops. I'm chagrined at my own optimism in this regard. I should not have been surprised by the ferocity of the elite's defense of itself.

March 28, 2003
1.34 am

One lesson of the ferocity of the Saddamite resistance is surely this: who now could possibly, conceivably believe that this brutal police state would ever, ever have voluntarily disarmed? Would a regime that is forcing conscripts to fight at gunpoint have caved to the terrifying figure of the U.N.'s Hans Blix, supported by the even more intimidating vision of French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin? I'd say that one clear lesson of the first week is that war was and is the only mechanism that could have effectively disarmed Saddam. If true disarmament was your goal, it seems to me that the inspections regime has been revealed,

however well-intentioned, as hopelessly unsuited to staring down a vicious totalitarian system.

March 31, 2003
3:56 pm

Josh Marshall is indeed on fire at the thought of his nemeses – the dreaded, evil, incompetent neocons – getting their comeuppance in Iraq. The rhetoric he's using, however, seems to me a little overwrought. The White House is in a "meltdown," a state "of pandemonium and implosion." Huh? Don't get your hopes up, Josh. Marshall has staked a certain amount of cred on being just, well, so much smarter than anyone in the administration, but a hawk as well. But his hyperbole strikes me as somewhat undermining of his case.

I may still be proven wrong. Wars are unpredictable. But Marshall's statement that the entire enterprise is now doomed to military and/or diplomatic and/or political failure strikes me as something that may come back to haunt him.

April 1, 2003
11:22 pm

Josh Marshall has a detailed rebuttal to my recent criticisms of his criticisms of the Iraqi campaign so far. Josh is easily the most credible liberal blogger, so let me take his counter-arguments one by one. I argued that the plan made sense in as much as we shot for the moon in trying to decapitate the regime quickly, but still have the resources to fight a less triumphant campaign. Josh counters:

If it were true that we were just shooting for the moon knowing that it might fail and that we'd then hit them with a more conventional infantry and armor attack, we'd already have our infantry and armor in place. We don't. So I don't find that argument particularly credible.

But from what I can tell, we *do* have our infantry in place. Moreover, our air superiority is helping destroy the Republican Guards before we encounter them on the ground. I see no evidence that we are holding back from Baghdad because we don't have sufficient troops. I see evidence that we're trying to avoid street-fighting, by luring the Saddam shock troops out into the open, while we pulverize them from the air, and get reinforcements from Kuwait. Like Josh, I'm not expert enough to tell whether we have enough troops for the job at hand. But Gen. Tommy Franks says we do; Gen. Peter Pace says we do; the latest reports suggest we do. What difference does it make if we take Baghdad in four weeks rather than two?

Josh's second point is the following:

The administration premised virtually all of its strategy and most of its tactics on the assumption that the civilian population would treat us as liberators. Unfortunately, that basic assumption has been shown itself to be fundamentally flawed. Our military strategy was based on the idea that the Iraqis would be so happy we'd shown up that they wouldn't harrass our supply lines on the way to Baghdad. That hasn't panned out.

But ordinary Iraqis are *not* harassing our supply lines. Paramilitary Saddam loyalists are. We did indeed under-estimate the legacy of 1991, and the power of a police state to intimidate people – and I’ve been more than candid about that. But, as Josh agrees, it’s still unclear what the general Iraqi population feels about our intervention. Which brings me to a different point. What if we’d done what Josh seems now to support: a massive 1991-style 500,000-troop, lumbering onslaught through the deserts? Wouldn’t that have looked much more like an invasion than the current action? And would that have been more useful in getting rid of fedayeen in street-fighting? I can see the Arab press now writing up the huge invasion force as a new imperialism; and a whole bunch of military commentators pointing out how the army was fighting the last war. I can also see the dangers in that approach of not being able to move quickly and deeply enough to secure the Western air bases (to protect Israel) and the oil-fields (critical for reconstruction). It seems to me that the flexible Franks-Rumsfeld plan was therefore a pretty good one.

April 8, 2003
12.11 am

As I write, we still don’t know if Saddam has been killed. I sure hope so. But we do know that this war is almost as good as won after three weeks. The Saddam regime no longer controls its two biggest cities; its armed forces seem in disarray; Saddam’s palaces are occupied by G.I.s. Again, measure this against Kenneth Pollack’s neutral projection:

Probably the most likely scenario would be about one third of Iraq’s armed forces fighting hard, limited use of tactical WMD, and some extensive combat in a few cities. In this most likely case, the campaign would probably last four to eight weeks and result in roughly 500 to 1,000 American combat deaths.

Three weeks. Under 100 American casualties, half of which came from accidents. No use of tactical WMD. Extraordinarily targeted bombing; exceptionally light force; oil wells intact; Israel secure; Turks kept at bay. War is terrible, of course. It may flare up again for a while. There’s still a chance of last-minute atrocities. And every civilian casualty is a tragedy. But it’s beginning to look as if this was an amazing military campaign, something of which the American and British people – and their governments – can be deeply, deeply proud.

April 27, 2003
11.04 pm

Several reports over the weekend, barely covered in the mainstream American press for some reason, strike me as blockbusters. The Sunday Telegraph’s scoop of documents in Baghdad clearly linking al Qaeda with Saddam, if verified, means that an essential debate is over. Even opponents of the war against Saddam’s dictatorship said they would be more inclined to support war if there were proof of a link to al Qaeda. Now, it seems, there is.

But the manner in which we found this out *after the event*, raises a more complicated question about foreign policy in the age of terror. We know that Saddam had elaborate designs to make chemical and biological weapons. No serious person doubts that – although whether he tried to destroy evidence before the war, how extensive it was, what exactly it amounted to, are still questions in search of good answers. (But we’re getting warmer, it

seems.) So what does a free country do when confronted with an enemy state, with WMDs, that we strongly suspect is in league with terrorists like al Qaeda, but cannot prove without invading? It's tough. My view is that, after 9/11, we have little option but to launch a pre-emptive strike and hope for retroactive justification. But I understand why people demand proof before such action. This new finding – and I bet there will be more like it – strengthens my position, I think. The threat was not the weapons as such; it was the regime, its capacity to make and use such weapons and its potential or actual alliance with al Qaeda. We had to make a judgment about how likely it was that such a link existed. We bet right.

II

Doubt

May 2, 2003
12.48 am

I'm pretty sure that televised address on an aircraft carrier was an effective campaign speech. The president is exactly right to remind people of the war that began on September 11; he's right to connect the liberation of Iraq to that event; he's right to remain vigilant; and to embrace the new concept of a war that can break a regime while freeing a people with a minimum of civilian casualties. I deeply admire his determination and clarity, and felt goosebumps at certain moments.

But I agree with Glenn Reynolds that the whole backdrop, including the fighter-pilot entrance, was – how do I put this politely? – hubristic. It's one thing to arrange a beautiful and moving photo-op to commemorate an historic event, as Reagan did so masterfully at Normandy. It's another thing to mark the end of a liberation by addressing the military and the nation at the same time. Boisterous cheers from American troops are great; those amazing people deserve our thanks. But I'm not sure this was the occasion for that. It was an address to the nation at the conclusion of a conflict, one that shouldn't be interrupted by foot-stomping and cheering. It made it look as if the president was using the military for partisan purposes – and that's not right.

May 6, 2003
3.48 am

There was some excuse for the anarchy that broke out immediately upon the liberation of Iraq. We didn't want to look like an imperial power or an occupier; and some of the pent-up frustration after decades of tyranny was probably foolish to try and restrain. But a month later, those excuses are wearing thin. I'm told that new troops are arriving daily. I know that it will take time to find a credible new government able to represent all the myriad factions in the country. But chaos is still chaos; and anarchy, as Hobbes understood, is an evil that undermines even the possibility of a civil space. This quote today from the Washington Post is worrying:

“We're glad to hear what Mr. Bush is saying about the future, but the future is a long time. We want the present,” said Mustafa As Badar, an executive at an oil drilling company. “We want them to handle this like Americans.”

Exactly. Iraq needs order. We'll get criticized for being too heavy-handed whatever we do. So why aren't American troops in large numbers being deployed to keep the peace, restore order and exercise credible authority? If we do not show our commitment now to the country, what message are we sending a future Iraqi government about our commitment to a stable and long-lasting democracy?

May 14, 2003
2.08 am

The New York Times poll today must be welcome in the White House. Most people, like me, still find this president strong, likable, and focused. But there are two issues on which, in my opinion, the administration is in some denial about its vulnerability. The first is the question of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Where are they? It's possible they have been destroyed, or smuggled out, or sold. It's possible the program was far less ready-to-go than we were led to believe. But we *were* led to believe that there were large quantities of dangerous materials that posed an imminent threat. If they are not found, the public needs an explanation. We need to be told what exactly, for example, was true in Colin Powell's December address to the U.N., and what was not. We need to know that we were not deceived or that the intelligence services are not wildly incompetent or politically manipulable. I don't know the answer; but I do know we need one.

Personally, I support the war more fervently now for humanitarian and broader security reasons. But that's beside the point. Was Powell accurate? If not, why not? I understand if a definitive answer to that is not yet available, but that's not a reason to defer or forget the question.

May 16, 2003
1.52 pm

How to explain the lack of WMDs in Iraq? Were we lied to? Is our intelligence flawed? Were the weapons destroyed? But if Saddam had no such weapons, why didn't he simply open up his country to the inspectors? Jim Lacey posits another theory: that Saddam was conned by his own underlings into believing that the WMD program was working:

In the event that we do not find the WMD smoking gun this is the only explanation that would make any sense. Saddam wanted the program and was willing to endure crippling sanctions to have it. However, his henchmen were unable to deliver and, unwilling to be on the receiving end of Saddam's zero-defects program, they faked it. In the process of making Saddam believe he had a functioning program they could easily have sucked U.S. intelligence into the deception. In fact, deceiving U.S. intelligence in this way would have been important to them. It would not have been conducive to a long life if the United States had come to Saddam and told him they had discovered he had no WMD program and all of his most trusted advisers were lying.

Ingenious, methinks. But the bottom line of Lacey's argument is that our intelligence caused Bush and Blair to commit extraordinary errors in front of the entire world. Where is the accountability for that?

May 17, 2003
2.29 pm

All the signs are pointing to a serious screw-up in Iraq. Patience is one thing. But the reporting from the country, including a devastating account from a pro-war writer, suggests that the state of affairs there is spiraling out of control. Even if the voters won't punish Bush

for finding no WMDs, they sure as hell will hold him responsible if Iraq collapses into chaos or civil war. And they should.

May 18, 2003
11.55 pm

I think it's pretty obvious by now that the Pentagon has seriously misjudged the post-war situation in Iraq. The good news is that the administration seems to be responding, with more troops and more attention. 160,000 troops for a country the size of Iraq is not sufficient, certainly not in the short term. General Eric Shinseki was right in this respect; and Wolfowitz was wrong. There's no scandal in this. War-plans are designed to be flexible. And now we need to be. For the war on terror to be successful, achieving stability and some measure of democracy in Iraq is an absolutely vital objective. It isn't anti-Bush to say so. It's precisely so that the president's broad eight-year campaign against terror can succeed that Iraq must be successfully managed now. Before it slips out of our control. Does that mean nation-building? You bet it does. So let's build one, can we?

May 29, 2003
1.33 am

It appears that tackling Iran is the last thing the State Department wants to do. But the Brits are beginning to be concerned with Iran's mullahs meddling in Iraq. There's much we can do short of military intervention: financial and logistic support for the student and opposition movement; aggressive attempts to monitor Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; outreach to dissidents through the Internet and Iranian exile radio; and so on. But military power shouldn't be ruled out either. We are still at war. Iraq will never be successfully pacified or reconstructed without regime change in Iran. The connections between Iran's ruling Islamofascist elite and al Qaeda need to be the subject of intense and sustained intelligence work. I suspect that we might find greater links between Tehran and al Qaeda than with any other terrorist-sponsoring state.

Yes, we need to focus on Iraq right now. But not at the expense of the real source of trouble in the region.

June 2, 2003
12.13 am

I still believe that the biggest story of the past two years is al Qaeda's reeling. I'm amazed we haven't had another huge attack in the U.S. and believe the Bush administration deserves some credit for that. Heck, it deserves a lot of credit. To my mind, freedom from terror is still easily the most important objective of this moment. On that – despite my misgivings about his big spending and coziness with some on the far right – Bush deserves continued, critical support.

June 4, 2003
11.07 pm

One reason I find some of the grand-standing over WMDs increasingly preposterous is that it comes from people who really want to avoid the obvious: more and more it's clear that the liberation of Iraq was a moral obligation under any circumstances. People say to this

argument that if we depose one dictator for these kinds of abuses, where will we stop? But the truth is: very few dictators have resorted to imprisonment or mass killing of children. Saddam's evil was on a world-historical scale. Ending it was one of the most progressive things the United States and Britain and their allies have ever done.

July 2, 2003
3.04 am

The inevitable outbreaks of violence and dissension in Iraq are obviously worth covering and important news. But there's an undercurrent of complete gloom in news reports that seems to me to be more fueled by ideological fervor than sober analysis. Given the magnitude and complexity of the task of rebuilding post-Saddam Iraq, it seems to me we're making slow but decent progress. The lack of a complete social implosion or exploding civil war is itself a huge achievement. And no one said the post-war reconstruction was going to be easy. So what's behind this drumbeat of apocalypse? I think it's a good rule among boomer journalists that every story they ever edit or write or film about warfare will at some point be squeezed into a Vietnam prism. The modern military has denied these people the chance to be vindicated during actual combat; so they will try and present the occupation in exactly the same light. Yes, there is probably considerable discontent in Iraq right now; yes, every death is awful; but no, this isn't even close to being combat; let alone Vietnam.

July 3, 2003
2.39 am

No, I don't think Bush saying "bring them on" is merely rhetoric. One of the many layers of the arguments for invading Iraq focused on the difficulties of waging a serious war on terror from a distant remove. Being based in Iraq helps us not only because of actual bases; but because the American presence there diverts terrorist attention away from elsewhere. By confronting them directly in Iraq, we get to engage them in a military setting that plays to our strengths rather than to theirs. Continued conflict in Iraq, in other words, needn't always be bad news. It may be a sign that we are drawing the terrorists out of the woodwork and tackling them in the open.

July 16, 2003
2.27 pm

My analysis of the current campaign to impugn the war against Saddam on the WMD issue is that it will fizzle out fast. My prediction is that it will boomerang against those who are busiest hyping it. Tom Friedman is absolutely right. All that really matters right now is that we do all we can to bring about a new, representative government in Iraq. The rest is petty politics from people who are still pissed they lost the war over the war.

July 17, 2003
2.47 am

No one should underestimate the scale of the task still in front of us. But the media coverage of the situation in Iraq, directed by many who opposed the war, has now gone way overboard in hostility. Richard Cohen's moronic notion today that the occupation is a "catastrophe" is an absurd exaggeration. Channel 4 News and the Spectator in Britain just commissioned the first half-way reliable poll of what Iraqis now think. The results are both sobering and

encouraging:

By almost three-to-one, Baghdadians expect life in one year's time to be better (43 per cent) rather than worse (16 per cent) in one year's time than it was before the war. Looking five years ahead, optimists outnumber pessimists by five to one (54-11 per cent). By then, most people hope that the occupation will be over; but, despite the criticisms, fears and acute day-to-day problems, only 13 per cent want the Americans and British troops to leave immediately. As many as 76 per cent want them to stay for the time being – with a majority, 56 per cent, wanting them to remain for at least 12 months.

There's still plenty of time to make this work – and to transform Western prospects in the Middle East for a generation. That promise remains. Bush needs to ignore the nay-sayers and focus on the task at hand.

July 18, 2003
2.40 am

The burden of proof must be on those who counsel inaction rather than on those who urge an offensive, proactive battle. Does it matter one iota if we find merely an apparatus and extensive program for building WMDs in Iraq rather than actual weapons? Or rather: given the uncertain nature of even the best intelligence, should we castigate our leaders for over-reacting to a threat or minimizing it? Since 9/11, my answer is pretty categorical. Blair and Bush passed the test. They still do.

July 22, 2003
2.37 am

My liberal readers have just about had it with me on the Niger-Uranium story. They think I'm deliberately ignoring it; in denial about the collapse of the occupation of Iraq; and still swooning for Dubya. Well, they might be right about the third. But the reason I'm unmoved by this story is that I can't see why it matters. Intelligence is always a somewhat dubious enterprise. There is little certainty, only grades of uncertainty. No one – left, right or center, European or American, Democrat or Republican – believed that Saddam had come clean about his WMD ambitions in the months before the war. Does anyone today? That refusal is the entire reason for the war. Not our intelligence – his refusal. The notion that a single minor piece of evidence which is still defended by British spooks somehow undermines the case for war against Saddam is just loopy.

Should we investigate to see where our intelligence might have failed? You bet. Should we worry that our credibility has been tarnished? Absolutely. Did the Bush administration "lie" about the intelligence it received? There is no evidence whatever that the president deliberately misled the American people. If he had one fault, it was veering on the side of caution when faced with Saddam's record in a post-9/11 world. Count me as someone who is glad he didn't veer toward complacency instead. This non-scandal, as Bill Kristol has argued, may well hurt its advocates more than the Bush administration, just as the BBC may end up (here's hoping) mortally wounded by its own attack on the war.

What matters now – the only thing that matters – is that we get the current end-game in

Iraq right and find and kill or capture Saddam and his dead-enders. As for the dangerous situation in that country: who can be surprised? Did people really believe it would be one Tocquevillean orgy as soon as the Baathists were deposed? Did we really hope that the vast Baathist military that disappeared at the climax of the war would literally evaporate? The fact that the three major groups – Sunni, Shia and Kurd – are still on board for a representative government is far more significant than the resilience of a few Baathist left-overs, coordinated by Saddam.

July 23, 2003
12.30 am

The basic and under-reported news – of slow but measurable progress in Iraq – got a fillip yesterday with the killing of Saddam's two vile sons. Of course, no one but a few crackpots can be anything but thrilled by this news. But the best part of this event is that it focuses us back on what really matters: not quibbles over intelligence lapses months ago, but the war against terror and tyranny now. What happened yesterday will help remove the fear among some Iraqis that the Baathists might return; and so help the reconstruction immeasurably. It's wonderful news.

But of course this focus – on our current progress and on how we now move from one success to another – is exactly the kind of topic the anti-war left (and right) want to avoid. It is vital to them that we forget just how evil the Saddam regime was, that we ignore the immeasurably better life Iraqis (and Afghans) now have, that we do not build on this success to take the cause to Iran and Syria and Saudi Arabia. Why? Because all that will merely strengthen Bush and weakening Bush – regardless of its effects on the wider world – is the prime obsession of the antis.

September 2, 2003
1.57 am

I could forgive this administration almost anything if it got the war right. But, after a great start, it's getting hard to believe the White House is in control of events any more. Osama bin Laden is regrouping in Afghanistan; Saddam, perhaps in league with al Qaeda, is fighting back in Iraq. The victims of terror in Iraq blame the United States – not the perpetrators – for the chaos. And the best news of the war – that Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds were not at each others' throats – is now fraying. Worse, the longer the impasse continues the harder it will be to get ourselves out of it.

About this we hear two refrains from the White House: a) everything is going fine, actually; and b) this new intensity of terror in Iraq is a good thing because it helps us fight the enemy on military, rather than civilian, terrain. The trouble that we're discovering is that a full-scale anti-terror war is not exactly compatible with the careful resuscitation of civil order and democratic government, is it? And if we are in a new and vital war, why are we not sending more troops to fight it? And why are we not planning big increases in funding for the civil infrastructure at the same time? The response so far does not strike me as commensurate with the problem, and I say this as a big supporter of this war.

What to do? I'd be hard put to express it better than John McCain Sunday: more troops, more money, more honesty from the president about the challenges, swifter devolution of

power to Iraqis, and so on. And yet the White House in August decided to devote the president's public appearances to boosting his environmental credibility. Are they losing it? So far, I've been manfully trying to give the administration the benefit of the doubt, especially given the media's relentlessly negative coverage of Iraq. But they're beginning to lose me, for the same reasons they're losing Dan Drezner. They don't seem to grasp the absolutely vital necessity of success in Iraq. And I can't believe I'm writing that sentence.

September 4, 2003
12.36 am

An astonishing leak in London from the office of the foreign secretary, Jack Straw. It's in the form of prep-notes for a meeting with the prime minister, Tony Blair. According to the Telegraph, Straw argues:

The lack of political progress in solving the linked problems of security, infrastructure and the political process are undermining the consent of the Iraqi people to the coalition presence and providing fertile ground for extremists and terrorists.

He wants more troops and more resources. The Telegraph hints the British initiative is also designed to buttress the White House's resolve in providing more troops. Let's hope it works. For the record, I see nothing wrong with the U.S. seeking U.N. help and support in Iraq, even if it means losing some control. What matters now is rescuing Iraq from the logic of chaos and terror. And for the record, worrying about the drift in Iraq is not a function of going wobbly. Not worrying – and coming up with all sorts of facile defenses of what is clearly going awry – *that* is going wobbly.

September 11, 2003
12.16 am

On this anniversary, the tritest thing to feel is mere grief. Not that grief isn't justified. But grief is a natural response to unforeseen tragedy, to random events, to things beyond human control. And what happened two years ago today wasn't merely tragedy. It was a conscious atrocity, an act of war. The free West was attacked by a pathological ideology that still holds a whole region of the world in its grip.

War began that day. We didn't choose it. But we are still waging it.

When you remember this thoroughly, you might still want to argue and debate about the accuracy of WMD intelligence in Iraq or the merits of the post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan or the nuances of U.N. and U.S. control in post-Saddam Iraq. Those kinds of fights are what democracies relish and do well. And it's equally true that anger is not an emotion that lasts. Human beings simply cannot live with that kind of fear or that kind of fury for very long. But we can still nurture what might be called the cold rage of reason: the calculated and calm recollection of what was done and what we can still do to prevent it again. And the key resolve I felt that day was not to let this act of war become in our minds an isolated occurrence, separate and apart from all the regimes that foster Islamo-fascism and seek to harm the West. In fighting back, we had to stop the defensiveness and ad hoc approach of the late twentieth century (both in the Clinton and early Bush administrations) and go on the offensive, tackle this nightmare at its roots, get our hands dirty, risk failure

and aim for real success. That's the difference between police work and war. That's why the astonishingly humane wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are just the beginning of a long attempt to bring the Middle East out of the dark ages.

Some are now arguing that there is a dimmer light at the end of this tunnel. They're wrong. We have accomplished a huge amount, both in weakening al Qaeda, destroying Saddam and bringing flickers of democracy and pluralism into a region long victimized by tyranny and theocracy. These are real achievements. They are the platform for the next phase: in building a free society in Iraq, toppling yet more tyranny in Iran, removing the Saudi dictatorship, and bringing some kind of settlement to Israel. We cannot disengage now.

September 23, 2003
12.14 am

I noticed this little nugget from the CNN poll results:

In May, soon after Bush announced that major combat operations had ended in Iraq, 41 percent of Americans said they thought the war was over. But now only one in 10 feel that way.

I'd say that this has a lot to do with the disillusionment. I don't think most Americans feel the president lied his way into war. He didn't. But his post-war strategy both in Iraq and at home has been dismal. Rummy's intransigence over the need for real troop support after the war created a security vacuum from which Iraq is still reeling. Rove's strategy of egregiously milking military victory for short-term political gain gave the impression that everything was over, done with, finished. So when conflict continued – as anyone who noticed the melting away of the Republican Guards would have predicted – it looked as if Bush was not in control.

Subsequently, there hasn't been a clear and positive account from the president of why Iraq is so vital. He needs to tell the country that we have accomplished two hugely important things: we have removed Saddam from power, liberating millions and ending a continuing threat to the West; and we have begun the difficult process of trying to turn the entire region around by attempting a democratic revolution in Iraq. This broader, positive goal of the war on terror has never been as front-and-center as it needs to be.

October 3, 2003
12.13 am

Could we have contained Iraq indefinitely? If we'd wanted to continue to starve an entire country, make a mockery of U.N. resolutions, give new life to one of the most vicious dictatorships on the planet, and leave open the risk of this shadow but viable WMD program coming into the hands of any terrorist faction Saddam wanted to entertain. Were there risks of action? You bet. But most of the enormous risks did not come about: no use of such weapons, no massive destruction of oil wells, no fracturing of the country, no terrorist revenge or resurgence.

One of the crazy premises of the "Where Are They?" crowd is that we would walk into that huge country and find large piles of Acme bombs with anthrax in them. That's not what a

WMD program is about; and never was. Saddam was careful. He had to hide from the U.N. and he had to find ways, over more than a decade, to maintain a WMD program as best he could, ready to reactivate whenever the climate altered in his favor. Everything points to such a strategy and to such weapons being maintained.

October 3, 2003
12.15 am

If you think that arms inspector David Kay's report on Iraqi WMDs can be adequately summarized by idiotic headlines such as: "No Illicit Arms Found in Iraq," then you need to read this report. If you believe the following "news analysis" by David Sanger in today's New York Times summarizes the findings of David Kay, then you need to read this report. Sanger's piece is, in fact, political propaganda disguised as analysis, presumably designed to obscure and distort the evidence that you can read with your own eyes. His opening paragraph culminates in a simple untruth:

The preliminary report delivered on Thursday by the chief arms inspector in Iraq forces the Bush administration to come face to face with this reality: that Saddam Hussein's armory appears to have been stuffed with precursors, potential weapons and bluffs, but that nothing found so far backs up administration claims that Mr. Hussein posed an imminent threat to the world.

That is not what the administration claimed. (The Times has even had to run a correction recently correcting their attempt, retroactively, to distort and misrepresent the administration's position.) The administration claimed that Saddam had used WMDs in the past, had hidden materials from the United Nations, was hiding a continued program for weapons of mass destruction, and that we should act *before* the threat was imminent.

October 6, 2003
12.42 am

There's no question that we were led to believe that there were stockpiles of WMDs unaccounted for in Saddam's Iraq before the war. And we still don't have a good explanation for that. But this does not mean that the war was not justified in the terms under which it was waged: that Iraq had an obligation to account fully for its WMD program (it didn't), that it cease all such research and development (it didn't), that it stop deceiving U.N. inspectors (it didn't), and, above all, that it posed a threat, via intermediary terrorists, that was intolerable after 9/11 (it did without a shadow of a doubt, as the Kay report shows). Is this kind of nuanced assessment possible in today's polarized culture? We better hope it is.

November 16, 2003
2.16 pm

Is there any journalist one trusts more than John F. Burns to tell us what is going on in Iraq? Somehow, Burns is untainted with the cynicism and reflexive anti-Americanism of many of his journalistic peers, and yet is open to the nuances of a complicated and often surprising world. His despatch from Iraq today in the NYT is peerless. Not just beautifully written, deep while never seeming less than conversational, it makes a couple of really important points. First off:

The amiability that greets a Westerner almost everywhere outside the Sunni triangle, and even there when American troops are not around, masks a reflex commonly found among people emerging from totalitarian rule: the sense of individual and collective responsibility is numbed, often to the point of passivity. The Iraqis' instinct to blame their rulers for life's hardships, engendered by Mr. Hussein's regime and at the same time silenced by it, is the Americans' burden now.

We have to keep reminding ourselves of the context from which these beleaguered people have emerged. It's perhaps impossible for any of us to feel in our bones the psychological hell of living in a police state like Saddam's. But these people are still, for the most part, in post-traumatic shock.

November 25, 2003
1.27 am

It seems clear now that Saddam has played a simple, clever game: instead of fighting conventionally, he simply withdrew his forces and went into hiding; now he plays a game of guerrilla harassment until the U.S. wearies and pulls out; then he makes another bid for power, in league with Islamists and terrorists of all stripes. In order to keep this from happening, we have to stay in Iraq in considerable numbers for a decade or so. And we have to convince the Iraqis that we mean it. I still don't believe that this administration is intent on premature withdrawal. But I do know we still have a hell of a job ahead of us – in the Sunni Triangle at least. I know it's early days yet, but the president needs to speak to the public at some point in ways that acknowledge more deeply the long, hard slog we face. And the huge dangers we have yet to encounter on the way.

December 12, 2003
12.45 am

What a relief to hear the president forthrightly defend his decision to bar Germany, France and Russia from competing on Iraq reconstruction contracts. There is a difference between being magnanimous and being a patsy. Germany, France and Russia are completely free to donate money and troops to help Iraq's transition away from a dictatorship they defended and bankrolled. (They have, of course, delivered nothing.) But, after doing everything they could to undermine the U.S. at the U.N. and elsewhere in order to protect their own favored dictator, they have absolutely no claim on the tax-payers of the United States.

December 14, 2003
3.23 pm

The capture of Saddam is, of course, a transformative event. The hole in which he was discovered – and those bedraggled, hobo-like photos – re-emphasize his humiliation, and can only discourage his erstwhile allies trying to restore his gang of thugs to power. But this is a moment not merely for jubilation. Take a moment to recall the hundreds of thousands of men, women and children murdered, tortured, or sent to certain deaths by this monster. Take a moment to consider those who also lost their lives deposing him. In the end, even Chirac and Schroder and Putin couldn't save him. And the renewed focus on the single most important Iraqi weapon of mass destruction – Saddam himself – will help remind the world

of the great, moral achievement of this war; and the unprecedented humanitarian effort that is now underway. No time for hubris. But plenty of time to remember what this war was about; and why it is still eminently worth winning. Congratulations, Mr President and Mr Prime Minister. In the end, this war will be viewed as your greatest achievement.

December 21, 2003
11.24 pm

Neither London nor Washington has eschewed diplomacy these past three years. Both leaders tried manfully to get the United Nations to sanction the much-needed liberation of Iraq. Both have cooperated in keeping pressure on Iran and North Korea without resort to arms. Both have engaged diplomatically in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the use of force in Iraq and Afghanistan has made their diplomacy far, far more credible. Hence the slow climb-down of the French, Germans and Russians over Iraqi debt. Hence Iran's reluctant acceptance of nuke inspectors. Hence Gaddafi's volte-face. Hence, the cracking of the Iraqi Baathist thugs who were not amenable to the softly-softly approach during Ramadan.

What Bush and Blair realize is that you need to talk but you also need to show strength – especially in the Arab world. Theirs is neither a crazed unilateralism nor a shoot-first diplomacy. It's a pragmatic but determined combination of talk and walk – with the goal of keeping terror and WMDs at arms length from us. So far, so good. There's a long, long way ahead. But I feel more confident about the war now than at any time since that awful day.

January 14, 2004
12.01 am

Some of you have questioned my criticisms of the president with regard to Iraq. I think I've earned a certain amount of credibility on this one. I'm a big admirer of the both the aims and methods of this administration in the war on terror. But that doesn't mean they haven't made some real mistakes. They got the WMD question wrong. The intelligence was faulty *and* they failed to be sufficiently skeptical about it. They did have elaborate plans for post-war Iraq, as Jim Fallows details in the current Atlantic, but largely ignored them, perhaps dismissing such details as cover for an anti-war agenda. This insouciance led to debacles like the disbanding of the Iraqi army in the middle of last year.

I don't think it would kill the administration to fess up to this. They were human errors, compounded by a certain ideological fervor. I think, given the overall achievement, that they were entirely forgivable. And I guess the White House has learned to concede nothing, because when they do, it backfires (remember uranium from Niger?). But people did screw up. One consequence of that screw-up is that almost any future argument for pre-emption based on intelligence will be extremely hard to win. Ditto, the view that deficits don't matter could well lead to an inability to take military action in the future, since the country will be unable to afford it. In that sense, the Bush administration's errors have undermined the crux of their own foreign policy. That's a loss. And, with a little more modesty and skepticism, it was preventable.

January 20, 2004
11.56 pm

I found the massive demonstrations by Iraqi Shiites earlier this week to be somewhat good news. The demos were peaceful; they were pro-democracy; they're a small sign that democracy is possible in that blighted country.

At the same time, David Ignatius' troubling report from Baghdad shows the faultlines ahead. The vicious cycle of security breakdown preventing economic revival fomenting more unrest has yet to be broken. The possibility of the much-predicted civil war is now higher than in the recent past. The fact that we now desperately need the U.N. to achieve a stable transition shows how tough this has turned out to be.

No, I still support the effort. The chance for a stable non-dictatorship in the Middle East would be a huge and transformative event. I just hope the White House still understands this; and won't take its eye off the ball. We need the U.N.'s help to persuade Shiite Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani of the impracticality of a direct election by the end of June. Just as obviously, we shouldn't attempt to delay the transfer of power to a provisional Iraqi government. It's going to take skill and some luck to thread this needle. But we cannot afford to botch it.

January 20, 2004
11.59 pm

Tonight's was the worst Bush State of the Union yet. Maybe the occasion wasn't up to the previous ones. But the speech lacked a real theme; it had only a few good lines (at the beginning, on the war); offered no new vision or any concrete future direction in foreign policy; and revealed complete insouciance toward the deficit and, more importantly, toward those who have not yet benefited from the economic recovery. A pretty bad political misjudgment in my view. To brag about a growing economy without some kind of passage of empathy for those still struggling reveals major political obtuseness. I was also struck by how hard right the president was on social policy. \$23 million for drug-testing children in schools? A tirade against steroids? (I'm sure Tom Brady was thrilled by that camera shot.) More public money for religious groups? Abstinence only for prevention of STDs?

Whatever else this president is, he is no believer in individuals' running their own lives without government regulation, control or aid. If you're a fiscal conservative or a social liberal, this was a speech that succeeded in making you take a second look at the Democrats. I sure am.

January 21, 2004
11.26 pm

Well, I've never tried to please everyone with this blog but the torrent of abuse and mockery yesterday because of my criticisms of the SOTU caused me a little grief. According to many Republicans, I'm selling out to the "hard left." According to some Democrats, I've finally seen the light - ha, ha, ha. How about applying principles to changing events and circumstances? It says something about what has happened to the Republican party that supporting fiscal responsibility is now the position of the "hard left." And it says something about some Democrats that you either have to hate this president or love him unconditionally.

Why can't a grown-up have a complicated position? I'm a fiscal conservative, social/cultural liberal and foreign policy hawk. Neither party provides a comfortable home for people like me. I supported Clinton in 1992, backed Dole on moral grounds in 1996 and opposed impeachment. I backed Bush (narrowly) in 2000. The war made my support for Bush stronger than I ever expected. I still admire his courage during that terrible time and respect his tenacity against terror. This time, I'm leaning toward Bush for those reasons but appalled by his fiscal recklessness, worried by his coziness with the religious far right, and concerned that he has no forward strategy in the war. I'm equally concerned about the obvious irresponsibility of the Democrats on national security (and spending) at a time of great peril. But at least they're not going to bait gays. So I'm stuck, and trying to figure things out as I go along.

January 26, 2004
12.08 am

Weapons inspector David Kay's resignation puts the issue of pre-war intelligence about WMD in Iraq front and center. Tony Blair, to his credit, puts it baldly enough: "I am simply accepting there is a fact, and the fact is that WMD have not yet been found in Iraq. That is simply accepting the facts." Dick Cheney still refuses to accept those facts. The president has not seriously acknowledged this important discrepancy between pre-war claims and post-war discovery. Kay's comments on public radio put the matter even more starkly: "I don't think [the WMDs] exist. The fact that we found so far the weapons do not exist – we've got to deal with that difference and understand why."

I for one certainly believed the British and American governments when they insisted that such WMDs did exist before the war. It was one factor among many that persuaded me that the war was worthwhile. But it turns out I was wrong to believe what the intelligence services were telling me, just as Colin Powell was wrong to rest America's international credibility on what turns out to be a mistake. Notice I said: mistake. I do not believe and there is no reason to believe that there were any deliberate deceptions. But it seems to me incumbent on Bush to be candid in what he said before the war that now turns out not to be true. That's called keeping faith with the American people.

It is in the context of such an argument that the president should clearly restate that this was nevertheless a just war. It was never incumbent on the world community to prove that Iraq had dismantled its WMD program before the war. It was incumbent on Saddam to show otherwise. He refused – either because he was being lied to and wanted to conceal weapons that did not exist, or because such an admission of impotence would have been terribly damaging to the dictator's reputation, both internally and with regard to Iran, or because he was slowly going nuts and his regime was collapsing from within. But what matters is that he refused. The responsibility for the war therefore lies squarely with the dictator.

Moreover, we know that if Saddam had been left in power and sanctions lifted, he would have attempted to restart such programs – and indeed Kay has found a vast apparatus of components, scientists and plans to achieve exactly such a result. Kay has now told us that Saddam was working on a ricin-based biological weapon right up to the eve of the invasion. We know now something else: his tyranny was worse, more depraved and more brutal than

we believed to be the case before. The moral and strategic case for his removal appears stronger now than ever. We also have a chance to move one part of the Arab world toward some kind of open, pluralist society. Since the appeal of Islamo-fascism is deeply connected to the backwardness and tyranny of so much of the Arab world, this is a fundamental and critical part of the response to 9/11. Iraq was and is a critical component of the war on terror. It's an attempt to deal with the issue at its very roots. I believe the victims of 9/11 deserve nothing less.

The critics that harp on the notion that Saddam was not integral to the murderers of 9/11 don't understand that that that was always part of the point. We have given the world notice that we are not returning to pre-9/11 notions of fighting terror as a narrow crime enforcement enterprise. Iraq was proof we were serious. If we had caved, we would have suffered a terrible loss of clout and credibility, and we have removed a potential source for WMD programs in the hands of terrorists.

February 12, 2004
12.24 am

The news of yesterday's latest suicide bombing is grim indeed. The strategy is so obvious it barely rewards repeating. Al Qaeda and Qaeda-like Islamists target innocent Iraqis involved in the rebuilding of their country's security and infrastructure. They kill dozens. Then they infiltrate and help spread rumors that it was actually some kind of bizarre plot by the Americans to kill people they need to win over. The aim is to keep the reconstruction off-kilter, fuel anti-coalition feeling and destabilize the place enough for it to be used as a base for Islamo-fascist revolt. Then you have this chorus, as reported in the Washington Post:

"There is no God but Allah. America is the enemy of God," the protesters chanted.
"Hell to the Americans. Hell to the Jews."

The Jews? How did they get involved? Ah, yes. Of course they are involved. For fascists, it's always the Jews. If anyone thinks this war is over, they need to get real. We need more resources in Iraq, not fewer. We need to think of July as the beginning of our new engagement, not the end of a war and occupation. And yet while this country is at war, some are trying to make the issue of the president's National Guard service decades ago a real issue; others want to split the country in two with a constitutional amendment to bar gay couples from any civil rights or benefits. We have lost sight of the central issue of our time. We owe it to the dead to remember again, to keep our focus – and press on.

February 27, 2004
2.01 am

There are still many pitfalls – not least of which is the nature and shape of an interim Iraqi government after June 30. But Sistani's agreement to extend the deadline to the end of this year for national elections strikes me as a real coup for the Bush administration. I'm still an optimist. I'd be interested in hearing or seeing a real tally of U.S. casualties in Iraq recently. From reading the papers, it appears that the casualty rate has subsided – or has shifted (appallingly) toward the civilian population. But I've long believed that if we show real determination to persevere, and if we don't lose our nerve, Iraq can transition to a functioning, if ramshackle, democracy. That remains a huge achievement – the most

encouraging development in the Middle East since the Israel-Egypt peace accords. And Bush and Blair deserve the credit.

March 1, 2004
12.49 am

Good news from Iraq on two fronts. The U.S. military casualties in February amounted to 23 – half the previous month's. It's the lowest monthly number since the invasion and represents a very steep drop-off from the 110 casualties last November. The number of wounded has also hit a new post-war low. Credit goes to those trying to control the Sunni insurgency. There are front-page stories when soldiers are killed (and rightly so). But there should also be front-page stories when we make real progress. And that's why it's also good to see the New York Times trumpet Iraq's rebound in oil production and revenues. Well ahead of schedule. When you put all this together with Ayatollah Sistani's acquiescence to end-of-year elections and the new cooperation of the United Nations, you have the architecture of real success. Fingers crossed. I have, naturally, a question about this success. Could Halliburton have had anything to do with it?

March 2, 2004
12.08 pm

A lot of what you need to know about Islamist terror was revealed today as suicide bombers killed scores in Shiite shrines. They do not represent Islam; they do not represent Iraqis; they represent nihilist murder and aspirations to totalitarianism. Maybe these explosions will help Iraqis realize that our enemies are their enemies. It is certainly hard not to be sickened by the sacrilegious nature of their atrocities.

March 2, 2004
11.28 pm

We know from the released memo that may or may not have been written by Islamist mass murderer, Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, what the strategy of the enemy now is in Iraq. It is to execute coordinated mass slaughters in order to divide Sunni and Shia even further and so precipitate a civil war to tear Iraq apart; and at the same time to direct public hostility and blame toward the coalition forces. It's too soon to tell how successful they have been with their horrifyingly sacrilegious slaughter today. But the attacks are textbook. I persist in regarding them as indications that we are in fact slowly winning the war for a transition to democracy in Iraq, or at least a polity which is constitutional and remarkably free by Middle Eastern standards. But it is equally hard not to be concerned at the impact such mass violence can have.

March 7, 2004
10.46 pm

The violence in Iraq – even the horrifying sectarian mass murders last week – have failed to derail the tortuous political process. That's hugely good news. It's not surprising that there should be last-minute renegotiations, brinkmanship and the like in forging a new constitution in a fissiparous country. That's called politics. It hasn't been practised in Iraq for many, many years. Its emergence – however imperfect – is wonderfully good news. Instead of lamenting this wrangling, we should be encouraged. What we're seeing is something you

simply don't see anywhere else in the Arab-Muslim world: negotiation trumping violence. This isn't a path to democracy. In important ways, it is democracy. The first true post-war victory is ours – and, more importantly, Iraq's.

March 11, 2004
11.41 pm

It's still unclear who exactly is responsible for the mass murders in Madrid. It seems to me, however, that it has all the hallmarks of al Qaeda. The Basque terrorists have never attempted something on this scale before; the coordinated attacks are reminiscent of al Qaeda operations; and Spain, of course, is a major target of the Islamists since helping liberate Iraq. Spain is also on the verge of elections – an exercise in democracy anathema to the theocratic fascists we are still fighting. And the horrifying carnage is something that reeks of the evil we are confronting:

“There were pieces of flesh and ribs all over the road,” [one witness] said. “There were ribs, brains all over. I never saw anything like this. The train was blown apart. I saw a lot of smoke, people running all over, crying. I saw part of a hand up to the elbow and a body without a head face down on the ground. Flesh all over. I started to cry from nerves. There was a 3-year-old boy all burnt and a father was holding him in his arms, crying.”

Somehow this evil puts everything else in perspective, doesn't it? If it is the beginning of an Islamist terror campaign throughout Europe, then we will witness a cultural and military war on that continent not seen since the last world war. We can only hope it won't transpire, that we have managed to keep al Qaeda at bay. But if it does, we can equally hope that the democratic nations of Europe will begin to realize what Tony Blair and George Bush have been warning about for so long. The enemy is clear. The question is not whether it will strike, but whether the West can strike back and decisively defang and defeat it. It's up to Europe now. Maybe now they'll get it.

March 14, 2004
10.30 pm

If the appeasement brigade really do believe that the war to depose Saddam is and was utterly unconnected with the war against al Qaeda, then why on earth would al Qaeda respond by targeting Spain? If the two issues are completely unrelated, why has al Qaeda made the connection? The answer is obvious: the removal of the Taliban and the Saddam dictatorship were two major blows to the cause of Islamist terror. They removed an al Qaeda client state and a potential harbor for terrorists and weapons of mass destruction. So it's vital that the Islamist mass murderers target those who backed both wars. It makes total sense. And in yesterday's election victory for the socialists, al Qaeda got even more than it could have dreamed of. It has removed a government intent on fighting terrorism and installed another intent on appeasing it. For good measure, they murdered a couple of hundred infidels. But the truly scary thought is the signal that this will send to other European governments. Britain is obviously next. The appeasement temptation has never been greater; and it looks more likely now that Europe – as so very often in the past – will take the path of least resistance – with far greater bloodshed as a result. I'd also say that it increases the likelihood of a major bloodbath in this country before the November elections. If it worked in

Spain, al Qaeda might surmise, why not try it in the U.S.?

March 15, 2004
11.33 pm

Some readers have written me to criticize my argument that al Qaeda is striking back at our allies in Iraq because they see how dangerous to them the transition to democracy in Iraq could be. Some argue that the war against Saddam has nothing to do with the war on terror and that al Qaeda is using it as a new way to win recruits and divide the West. But this misunderstands al Qaeda's basic philosophy. What they object to is any Western or infidel influence in traditionally Muslim lands. They want those lands not just *Judenrein* but purged of any non-Muslims and even those Muslims who dissent from Wahhabist orthodoxy. They do not and have never needed the war in Iraq to justify their terror in pursuit of these aims. They killed long before the Iraq war. Their objection is to our intervention at all. And part of that agenda is our intervention in Afghanistan. After all, that was their safe harbor. Those who blame the war in Iraq for this counter-attack must also logically blame the war in Afghanistan. Should we not have waged that, since it would only embolden the enemy? In other words, all of Europe was at risk long before the Iraq war. And the Germans and Brits and Italians and many others now in Afghanistan are reason enough for more attacks in Europe. Al Qaeda not only resents any impurity in their homelands, they also long for more *Lebensraum*. They long to regain Andalusia, something bin Laden himself referred to not long after 9/11. What the Europeans refuse to understand is that there is no proximate cause for this violence. It is structural; it is aimed at the very existence of other faiths; it wishes to purge the entire Muslim world of infidels (which means the annihilation of the Jews), and eventually to reconquer Europe. You can no more negotiate with these people than you could negotiate with Hitler.

March 17, 2004
12.51 am

You'd be a fool to predict anything, but I do think the odds of the next major Jihadist terrorist action happening in Europe just went up a notch. Al Qaeda and its multiple offshoots have learned a couple of things recently. The first is that the U.S. will not cower before a terror attack. Bin Laden misjudged that one on 9/11, foolishly believing that he could move public policy in his direction by shell-shocking the American public. He was hoping for classic isolationism in response to the casualties of that awful day. Wrong. In fact, the opposite happened – a huge miscalculation on al Qaeda's part, which led to the destruction of their client state, Afghanistan, and the removal of a strategic anti-American ally, Saddam. The American counter-attack also took Libya out of the WMD equation.

But now the Jihadists know something else: that the 9/11 gambit can work in Europe. Starting with Spain, and wrecking the anti-terror alliance of New Europe, was a masterstroke. But it has an added effect of demoralizing the others – especially Italy. That's why E.U. Commission President Romano Prodi's astonishing disavowal of any force in response to terrorism was so devastating. Then Britain, where the terrorists may not be able to get rid of a Labour government, but may well try to inflict such a blow against Blair (in next year's elections) that he is ousted in favor of a more amenable center-left alternative. Humiliating Blair will prevent a future prime minister from ever fully and unequivocally committing to the American-led war on terror again. France and Germany can be left till last – they are

already deeply vulnerable to Islamist terror networks and in France's case, there's also a vast, unassimilated Muslim population ripe for exploitation. The alligator will eat them last. Let's hope they enjoy the ride in the months left to them.

April 5, 2004
12.06 am

With three months to go before sovereignty is handed over to a provisional government, there are some nightmarish portents. We knew that elements in the Sunni minority would resist the reconstruction of Iraq into a representative polity; now we have the extremists among the Shiites, under Moktada al Sadr, unleashing Shiite anger against the occupation. You have to ask yourself: if this is the state of affairs now, what will happen to civil order when the U.S. military takes an even more passive role after June 30? This report is chilling – and all the more so because it's penned by John F. Burns, our finest reporter in the country. More and more, it seems hard to avoid inferring that we made one huge mistake: not in liberating Iraq, but in attempting to occupy it with relatively few troops.

You have to have unquestioned security before any sort of democracy can begin to function. But, under the Rumsfeld plan, we never had the numbers or resources to do precisely that. So the extraordinary gains that have been made since the invasion are constantly at risk of being overwhelmed by violence. The silver lining is that only a handful of factions have an interest in seeing Iraq go down the tubes in a civil war between rival militias. The Sadr uprising might, in fact, help Ayatollah Sistani realize that unless more cooperation is promised to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), he could lose control of the Shiites to the extremist mobs represented by Sadr. From this distance, it's not clear what our response to all this should be: a strong show of force; an attempt to broker a firmer deal for handover with the establishment Shiites; more troops; or all of the above. But it seems to me undeniable that events may be spinning out of control.

April 7, 2004
11.11 pm

Like all of you, I have been trying to make sense of the various reports emerging from Iraq about the escalating violence there. There's no point in attempting to ignore this or spin it away. It's a critical moment in the struggle for a new Middle East, which is inextricable from a safe West. The war to depose Saddam, it now seems, has unfolded slowly. The sudden quick victory was followed by a low-intensity war against the remnants of the Saddam regime and elements among the displaced Sunni minority. Then there was something of a lull – months when the U.S. casualty rate declined and progress seemed to be made. Then the Shiites began resisting the terms of the handover, some Sunnis in Fallujah tried a Mogadishu, and the most radical Shiites, under al Sadr, made their move.

I don't know what to make of al Sadr's declaration of an alliance with Hamas and Hezbollah or of Debka's claims that Iran and Syria are implicated in the latest violence. But what I do know is what I learned from Hobbes. The entire enterprise of attempting to bring some kind of normalcy to Iraq can only be accomplished if the coalition forces have a monopoly of violence. Right now, we don't. At this point, establishing that monopoly is far more important than in any way showing reluctance to take the battle to the enemy. The Sadrists must be confronted and as effectively as possible. If that means more troops, send them. If

that means more firepower, get it. In some ways, it seems clear to me that the Sunni hold-outs and the Sadrists were always going to be trouble. Better that they play their card now than after the handover of sovereignty.

April 8, 2004
11.36 pm

The closer we get to transferring power, the more the extremist factions need to prevent a peaceful transition and establish their own power bases for the next phase. The closer we get to a self-governing Arab state, the more terrified Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas and the rest will be that their alternatives – theocratic fascism and medieval economics – will look pathetic in comparison. There are millions of people in Iraq who need us now more than ever. Their future and our future are entwined. Which is why we have to keep our nerve, put down these insurrections with focused ferocity, and move relentlessly toward self-rule.

April 28, 2004
11.09 pm

Very sobering news from the latest big poll within Iraq. The obvious problem is that people feel less physically secure than before the invasion. Of course, some of that is inevitable. The security of a police state is not true security. The centrifugal forces that Saddam was slowly failing to control were bound to have a period when they spun out of control. Nevertheless, more troops, more focus on simple street security seems a no-brainer. Also notice the astonishing disparity between the Kurds and everyone else. The Kurds love us. But of all Iraqis, 57 percent want us out within the next few months.

April 30, 2004
2.06 pm

We're experiencing another bout of trans-Atlantic dissonance on Iraq. The *only* story in Europe and the Middle East right now are the images of some U.S. soldiers humiliating and mock-torturing some Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison. The images are indeed revolting, appalling, and shameful. They are being used and will be used as further propaganda fodder to make democracy fail in Iraq and to neuter America's moral credibility. But that in no way excuses them. The people involved need to be punished as severely as military justice demands. We need to figure out just how exceptional these cases of cruelty are. And we have to acknowledge the huge propaganda blow the fight against terror has just received in world opinion. Instead, the U.S. media is barely on the case.

May 3, 2004
12.43 am

All I can honestly say is that I have no clue what is going on in Fallujah, the critical battle of the war in Iraq. The obvious interpretation is that the Bush White House, under political pressure at home, has decided to all-but surrender the city to the enemy. That has certainly been the message sent to (and received by) the wider terrorist world.

I think the obvious answer to the question as to what is happening in Fallujah is that the White House doesn't have a clue. In a critical battle, we have made sure that the enemy understands we can have overwhelming military power and not be willing to use it; we have

appointed a new commander who hasn't even been vetted; and people on the ground are making up policy that has far-reaching political and military implications, while the White House has to adjust. The only word for this is incompetence and chaos.

I know that it's easy to sit here in D.C. and pontificate while, on the ground, political compromises and military messes are inevitable. But last week seems to me to have reached a point where even hopeful, pro-war Bush supporters like me have to acknowledge the epic mishandling of the post-war occupation. The U.S. is beginning to look both cruel and (a much bigger problem) weak. The huge propaganda victory handed to the enemy by the celebrations in Fallujah by Islamo-fascists shouldn't have happened. Nor should the disgusting pictures of prisoner abuse and humiliation simply exist in a military as professional and ethical as that of the U.S. The misconduct is unforgivable, and shows simply a lack of control of the situation.

May 4, 2004
12.11 am

I am in no way attempting to minimize the horror of what appears to have gone on in Abu Ghraib prison under U.S. command. But it's worth realizing that the nakedness and the sexual humiliation might be far more potent in a sexist, homophobic and patriarchal culture than in less sexually repressed societies. One of the most important things to remember about today's Muslim extremism is that it has taken what is the submission of women under Islam and turned it into a political pathology. Like most variants of fascism, it is deeply troubled by women's equality and by homosexuality. Hence the impact of these images could be psychologically devastating to many Iraqis – and far worse to those in countries where Islamism has made even deeper inroads. This was not simply a p.r. debacle; it was a p.r. catastrophe.

May 4, 2004
11.08 pm

Like most of you, I've had a hard time coming to grips with the appalling abuses perpetrated by some under U.S. command in, of all places, Abu Ghraib. We can make necessary distinctions between this abuse and the horrifying torture of Saddam's rule, but they cannot obliterate the sickening feeling in the pit of the stomach. Those of us who believe in the moral necessity of this war should be, perhaps, the most offended. These goons have defiled something important and noble; they have wrought awful damage on Western prestige; they have tarnished the vast majority of servicemembers who do an amazing job; and they have done something incontrovertibly disgusting and wrong.

By the same token, this has been – finally – exposed. We have a chance to show the Muslim and Arab world how a democracy deals with this. So far, the punishments meted out have not been severe enough; and the public apology not clear and definitive enough. It seems to me that some kind of reckoning has to be made by the president himself. No one below him can have the impact of a presidential statement of apology to the Iraqi and American people. Bush should give one. He should show true responsibility and remorse, which I have no doubt he feels. I can think of no better way than to go to Abu Ghraib itself, to witness the place where these abuses occurred and swear that the culprits will be punished and that it will not happen again. It would be a huge gesture.

But frankly there is something tawdry about a president at a time like this campaigning in the Midwest in a bus. His entire war's rationale has been called into question. The integrity of the United States has been indelibly harmed on his watch. He must account for it. Soon. And why not in Iraq?

May 4, 2004
11.19 pm

The full text of the military investigation is now online. Bottom line:

- 6.- (S) I find that the intentional abuse of detainees by military police personnel included the following acts:
- a.- (S) Punching, slapping, and kicking detainees; jumping on their naked feet;
 - b.- (S) Videotaping and photographing naked male and female detainees;
 - c.- (S) Forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing;
 - d.- (S) Forcing detainees to remove their clothing and keeping them naked for several days at a time;
 - e.- (S) Forcing naked male detainees to wear women's underwear;
 - f.- (S) Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped;
 - g.- (S) Arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them;
 - h.- (S) Positioning a naked detainee on a MRE Box, with a sandbag on his head, and attaching wires to his fingers, toes, and penis to simulate electric torture;
 - i.- (S) Writing "I am a Rapest"- (sic) on the leg of a detainee alleged to have forcibly raped a 15-year old fellow detainee, and then photographing him naked;
 - j.- (S) Placing a dog chain or strap around a naked detainee's neck and having a female Soldier pose for a picture;
 - k.- (S) A male MP guard having sex with a female detainee;
 - l.- (S) Using military working dogs (without muzzles) to intimidate and frighten detainees, and in at least one case biting and severely injuring a detainee;
 - m. (S) Taking photographs of dead Iraqi detainees.

It renders one speechless.

May 8, 2004
12.15 pm

I have to say my mind and heart are reeling from these images from the bowels of Abu Ghraib and the thought that worse are yet to come. The look on Lindsey Graham's face yesterday said it all: he was in a kind of panic. Yes, I know that the implications of this do not extend to our entire endeavor in Iraq; it is still a noble, important and worthwhile thing to accomplish. In fact, it is perhaps more essential that we get it right now and, by a successful end, remedy in part the unethical means of Abu Ghraib. But I cannot disguise that the moral core of the case for war has been badly damaged. It would be insane to abort our struggle there now because of these obscenities. But we will be changed even in victory.

I believed the WMD rationale for this war and that still survives, though with greatly

diminished credibility. But I believed in the war fundamentally on moral grounds. When doubts surfaced in my head before the conflict, I kept coming back to the inadequacy of the alternative - i.e. keeping a crumbling Saddam in power - and to the moral need to replace a brutal dictatorship with freedom. By any objective standard, that rationale still holds. Iraq is a far better place today than it was as a police state, and its future immeasurably brighter. But what this Abu Ghraib nightmare has done is rob us of much of this moral high ground – and not just symbolically or in the eyes of others. But *actually* and in the eyes of ourselves.

The political consequences of this – will Rumsfeld go? will Kerry become president? – strike me as less important than the crisis of national morale it provokes. I want us to get over this but I also don't want us to get over this. The betrayal of our ideals is too deep to be argued away. Images in this media-saturated, volatile world can have more impact than any words. But the impact will, I think, be deeper on Americans than on an Arab street where hatred for this country runs high in any case. And that is how it should be. For these pictures strike at the very core of what it means to be America. We must expose, atone for, and somehow purge ourselves of this stain, while fighting a war that still must be fought. And it will not be easy.

May 9, 2004
3.35 pm

Read Sy Hersh's latest account of what went wrong at Abu Ghraib. The truly horrifying thing is that the worst is yet to come. The photos we have seen are, apparently, benign compared to what we have not yet seen. I am sorry I cannot be more upbeat. But nothing that the enemy could dream up could have done us more harm in the eyes of the world than what some in U.S. uniform have done to the United States' credibility and honor. We have no option but to withstand it and carry on. We owe that to the Iraqi people, to the world and to ourselves and our own security. But the damage is immeasurable; and, ultimately, the president must take responsibility.

May 9, 2004
11.06 pm

The question I have asked myself in the wake of Abu Ghraib is simply the following: if I knew before the war what I know now, would I still have supported it? I cannot deny that the terrible mismanagement of the post-war – something that no reasonable person can now ignore – has, perhaps fatally, wrecked the mission. But does it make the case for war in retrospect invalid? My tentative answer – and this is a blog, written day by day and hour by hour, not a carefully collected summary of my views – is yes, I still would have supported the war. But only just. And whether the “just” turns into a “no” depends on how we deal with the huge challenge now in front of us.

There were two fundamental reasons for war against Iraq. The first was the threat of weapons of mass destruction possessed by Saddam Hussein, weapons that in the wake of 9/11, posed an intolerable threat to world security. That reason has not been destroyed by subsequent events, but it has been deeply shaken. The United States made its case before the entire world on the basis of actual stockpiles of dangerous weaponry. No such stockpiles existed. Yes, the infrastructure was there, the intent was there, the potential was there – all good cause for concern. Yes, the alternative of maintaining porous sanctions – a regime that

both impoverished and punished the Iraqi people while empowering and enriching Saddam and his U.N. allies – was awful. But the case the U.S. actually made has been disproved. There is no getting around that.

The second case, and one I stressed more at the time, was the moral one. The removal of Saddam was an unalloyed good. His was a repugnant, evil regime and turning the country into a more open and democratic place was both worthy in itself and a vital strategic goal in turning the region around. It was going to be a demonstration of an alternative to the autocracies of the Arab world, a way to break the dangerous cycle that had led to Islamism and al Qaeda and 9/11 and a future too grim to contemplate. The narrative of liberation was critical to the success of the mission – politically and militarily. This was never going to be easy, but it was worth trying. It was vital to reverse the Islamist narrative that pitted American values against Muslim dignity.

The reason Abu Ghraib is such a catastrophe is that it has destroyed this narrative. It has turned the image of this war into the war that the America-hating left always said it was: a brutal, imperialist, racist occupation, designed to humiliate another culture. Abu Ghraib is Noam Chomsky's narrative turned into images more stunning, more damaging, more powerful than a million polemics from Ted Rall or Susan Sontag. It is Osama's dream propaganda coup. It is Chirac's fantasy of vindication. It is Tony Blair's nightmare. And, whether they are directly responsible or not, the people who ran this war are answerable to America, to America's allies, to Iraq, for the astonishing setback we have now encountered on their watch.

The one anti-war argument that, in retrospect, I did not take seriously enough was a simple one. It was that this war was noble and defensible but that this administration was simply too incompetent and arrogant to carry it out effectively. I dismissed this as facile Bush-bashing at the time. I was wrong.

I sensed the hubris of this administration after the fall of Baghdad, but I didn't sense how they would grotesquely under-man the post-war occupation, bungle the maintenance of security, short-change an absolutely vital mission, dismiss constructive criticism, ignore even their allies (like the Brits), and fail to shift swiftly enough when events spun out of control. This was never going to be an easy venture; and we shouldn't expect perfection. There were bound to be revolts and terrorist infractions. The job is immense; and many of us have rallied to the administration's defense in difficult times, aware of the immense difficulties involved. But to have allowed the situation to slide into where we now are, to have a military so poorly managed and under-staffed that what we have seen out of Abu Ghraib was either the result of a) chaos, b) policy or c) some awful combination of the two, is inexcusable. It is a betrayal of all those soldiers who have done amazing work, who are genuine heroes, of all those Iraqis who have risked their lives for our and their future, of ordinary Americans who trusted their president and defense secretary to get this right. To have humiliated the United States by presenting false and misleading intelligence and then to have allowed something like Abu Ghraib to happen – after a year of other, compounded errors – is unforgivable. By refusing to hold anyone accountable, the president has also shown he is not really in control. We are at war; and our war leaders have given the enemy their biggest propaganda coup imaginable, while refusing to acknowledge their own palpable errors and misjudgments. They have, alas, scant credibility left and must be called to account. Shock has now led – and

should lead – to anger. And those of us who support the war should, in many ways, be angrier than those who opposed it.

But we must still win the war. This isn't about scoring points. It should not be about circling partisan wagons. And it must not mean withdrawal or despair. Much has also gone right in Iraq. Saddam is gone; the Kurds are free and moving toward democratic rule; in many areas, self-government is emerging. The alternatives to regime change, we should remember, were no alternatives at all. Civil war is neither inevitable nor imminent. Before the Abu Ghraib disaster, there were encouraging signs that Shiites were themselves marginalizing al Sadr's gangs; and that some responsible Sunnis could be integrated into a new Iraq. We have time yet to win over the middle of Iraqi opinion to the side of peaceful democratic change.

How to do it? We need to accelerate elections; we need to show the Arab and Muslim world that we will purge our military and intelligence services of those who perpetrated these obscenities and those responsible for them; we must spend the money to secure the borders, police the power-lines, and bring measurable prosperity to a potentially wealthy country; and we have to eat even more crow to get the U.N. to help legitimize a liberation that most Iraqis now view as an intolerable occupation. To my mind, these awful recent revelations – and they may get far worse – make it even more essential that we bring democratic government to Iraq, and don't cut and run.

May 20, 2004
10.03 am

It appears Bush will talk to the American people next week, laying out a detailed strategy for the transfer of sovereignty in Iraq. That's good news – exactly what I was hoping for earlier this week. I hope he also explains what military strategy is in Fallujah and Karbala and the south. Many of us are committed to winning this war, whatever it takes. But the endless stream of mistakes and setbacks, when placed in the context of no effective presidential communication, is no recipe for victory. There are three battles right now: the military campaign against the insurgency, the fight for political legitimacy in Iraq itself, and the opinion war in America itself. We have won much of the first, have largely lost the second, and are fast losing the third. We can still turn this around. But Bush has to lead the way.

May 24, 2004
11.34 pm

The president's speech last night gets a B+ rating from yours truly. He did much of what he needed to do, even explaining what has gone on in Fallujah and Karbala and Kufa. It began abruptly, but soon settled down. The critical point that the swift victory over Saddam paradoxically made the occupation more difficult – because Saddam's minions were able to escape, melt into the population and fight another day – was made early on. Bush could have made more of it – and should do in the weeks ahead. People need to be reminded who the enemy is; and why he's worth fighting. My own sense of what was new was the clear and emphatic declaration that the transfer of sovereignty June 30 will be real. That's critical – and critical to deliver. I also liked the way the president unapologetically linked what we are doing in Iraq with the broader war on terror. Critics like to believe that Saddam was somehow utterly unconnected to broader terror, had no potential to enable it, and was too secular to cooperate with al Qaeda. They're wrong on all counts. In the wake of 9/11, a

Saddam-Zarqawi alliance would have been a terrible threat. Now we have a Baathist-Zarqawi insurgency. And we have had a year to defeat it. Threading the needle of sovereignty, transfer of power, battling terrorism and coordinating elections is still a massive undertaking. But I was reassured by the president's speech. It's a beginning. He now has to make a version of it again and again and again. He is up against a press corps determined to make this transition fail, in order to defeat a Bush presidency. He will need true grit to withstand it.

June 1, 2004
1.26 pm

If someone had said in February 2003, that by June 2004, Saddam Hussein would have been removed from power and captured; that a diverse new government, including Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, would be installed; that elections would be scheduled for January 2005; and that the liberation of a devastated country of 25 million in which everyone owns an AK-47 had been accomplished with an army of around 140,000 with a total casualty rate (including accidents and friendly fire) of around 800; that no oil fields had been set aflame; no WMDs had been used; no mass refugee crises had emerged; and no civil war had broken out... well, I think you would come to the conclusion that the war had been an extraordinary success. And you'd be right.

Yes, there are enormous challenges; and yes, so much more could have been achieved without incompetence, infighting and occasional inhumanity. But it's worth acknowledging that, with a little perspective, our current gloom is over-blown. Stocks in Iraq have been way over-sold. I even regret some minor sells myself. Now watch the media do all it can to accentuate the negative.

June 11, 2004
10.13 pm

The use of unmuzzled dogs to terrify prisoners was approved military practice in Abu Ghraib. It seems to me to be getting clearer and clearer that Abu Ghraib was not the work of a few rogue soldiers. The dogs are among the least troubling tactics, of course. But when you also consider that up to 80 percent of the inmates at Abu Ghraib were guilty of nothing, you have to wonder who thought this was a good way to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis.

June 12, 2004
11.07 pm

How much higher will the abuse scandal go? Surely Rumsfeld was aware of the new relaxed interrogation methods. He approved of using dogs at Guantanamo:

In January 2002, for example, Rumsfeld approved the use of dogs to intimidate prisoners there; although officials have said dogs were never used at Guantanamo, they were used at Abu Ghraib. Then, in April 2003, Rumsfeld approved the use in Guantanamo of at least five other high-pressure techniques also listed on the Oct. 9 Abu Ghraib memo, none of which was among the Army's standard interrogation methods. This overlap existed even though detainees in Iraq were covered, according to the administration's policy, by Geneva Convention protections that did not apply to the detainees in Cuba.

But didn't Rumsfeld deny under oath that he had any knowledge of such techniques in Iraq?

June 15, 2004
10.24 pm

The latest poll of Iraqis – skewed because it doesn't include the Kurds – is nonetheless bleak news. The Iraqis still have trust in the Iraqi security forces, while they have little or no trust in the CPA (it has an approval rating of 11 percent). A staggering 92 percent view the Coalition forces as “occupiers” as opposed to 2 percent who consider them “liberators;” and 55 percent say they would feel more safe if the Coalition forces left (that number was 11 percent last November). It doesn't get more decisive a judgment than that.

The obvious conclusion is that we have lost the window of opportunity to use the goodwill gained from the ouster of Saddam to leverage a pro-American democracy in non-Kurdish Iraq. But a democracy is still possible, and it's hard to think of a more rational way forward than the one now proposed. The task now is to achieve some kind of workable pluralist, non-Islamist government that will not be a major anti-American force in the region. That's much better than leaving Saddam in power; but it's far less than we might once have hoped for. Maybe in a decade or so, we'll see the real fruits of this noble, flawed experiment. I'm still hoping.

June 18, 2004
12.18 pm

Look, I want the Iraq war to succeed with every bone in my body. But I don't think it helps the war effort never to criticize the conduct of it. One reason democracies do well in war is that they can indeed air criticism and achieve correction more quickly than rigid dictatorships. But some on the right are now busy saying that any criticism is tantamount to treason, that torture can be justified, that disasters (such as Abu Ghraib) should be kept from the public (Jonah Goldberg's position), that a vote for Kerry is a vote for Osama, and so on. Such reflexive, brain-dead defensiveness is not a key to success. It's a recipe for failure.

June 18, 2004
12.49 pm

Given what we now know about Abu Ghraib, given the murders and rapes of several inmates in U.S. custody, given the fact that the U.S. now allows for “disappearing” prisoners in order to hide them from the Red Cross, is it not incumbent on the administration to release all memos detailing what this administration regards as permissible “coercive interrogation techniques?” (By the way, isn't that term in and of itself chilling? Its plain meaning is the use of violence or the threat of violence against inmates. When a government resorts to this kind of euphemism, you know something fishy is going on.) If the administration wants to say it has never condoned torture, and that Abu Ghraib was the work of a handful of rogues, these memos could prove their case. So why won't they release them? Hmmm.

July 6, 2004
10.15 pm

The news of Iranian officers caught with explosives in Baghdad is an important turning

point. The truth is that the “resistance” to the liberation was always formed around Baathists, Jihadists, and Iranian and other foreign meddlers. But until sovereignty was transferred, they could always be portrayed as fighting America, not fighting Iraq. Now, within days of the power transfer, we are seeing the new dynamic. It seems to me that the best reason for voting for Bush this fall is Iran. We know they will fight back soon. We also know that Kerry is closer to the “see-no-evil” French approach to the Iranian mullahs. This is the next phase of the war. It has already started in Iraq.

July 19, 2004
10.17 pm

I hope the Iran question becomes the central foreign policy question of the campaign: What are the differences between Bush’s and Kerry’s approaches to Iran? One of our recent failings (and I readily include myself) has been, I think, to conceive of the “war on terror” too abstractly. We need to unpack the notion that one guy is “weak” and the other “strong” in the war or that one is more “unilateralist,” the other less so – and ask hard practical questions of the candidates. Here are a few that spring immediately to mind: Do you consider Iran an enemy of the United States? How integral is the Tehran regime to the Jihadist terror network? How plausible is democratic government in Iraq with continued obstruction from Iran? How would you grapple with the imminence of an Iranian nuclear bomb? The truth is that, for all its rhetorical bluster, the Bush administration’s Iran policy has been all over the map.

I cannot see how we can truly turn the tide on Jihadist terror without grappling with the mullahs at the ideological and military center of it all. Fitting this piece into the post-Afghanistan, post-Iraq puzzle is perhaps the most important foreign policy challenge of the next few years. Let’s see if Kerry or Bush even cite it in their convention speeches.

July 25, 2004
10.14 pm

This convention week strikes me as easily the most important week for the Kerry candidacy. The voters who will decide this election have already, I think, made up their minds that they could live without a second Bush term. This is not because they necessarily hate Bush (many don’t, including me); nor because they believe that his war and economic policies have been failures (again, I think the record is mixed); but because his conduct of the war in the last year has been wracked with error and hubris, and his economic policy relies upon tax cuts that we simply cannot afford with the kind of spending levels Bush has also enacted. I think it’s also clear that, in so far as some swing voters are libertarian in outlook, Bush has shown his authoritarian, anti-federalist colors. This administration is uninterested in restraining government power, in balancing the budget, in winning over opponents (as opposed to sliming them), and in allowing people to live their own lives free from government moralism. There is not even a sliver of daylight between the White House and the religious right in social policy. This isn’t what we were told before the last election; and it isn’t what many of us hoped for. But it remains the case that Bush’s determination to defeat Jihadist terror is beyond much doubt, even if his methods seem often strained by incompetence, recklessness and arrogance. So Kerry has a great opportunity to win over the undecideds over this week, and if he cannot take advantage of it, he will reveal himself unworthy of the office he seeks.

July 26, 2004
3.16 pm

From the minute Baghdad fell, I expressed concern about hubris and chaos. At the first sign of fiscal disaster, I called Bush to account for his spending policies. As a cultural liberal, I'm obviously alienated by Bush's embrace of everything and anything James Dobson says. As a believer in free trade, I was offended by steel tariffs; as a federalist, I was appalled by his incursion on states' rights, from marriage to marijuana; as a balanced-budget conservative, I was horrified by the president's insouciance toward deficits and expansion of entitlements; as a strong believer in the moral superiority of American values, Abu Ghraib was an indelible lapse, however effectively it is white-washed by the Defense Department.

Does all this represent a capitulation to the "left"? On all these matters, I'd argue that my core principles remain unchanged. Should the war trump every other issue? In some ways, yes. But, as I have argued, I'm not sure that the choice is as stark as some want to make it out to be. I have yet to discern a distinction between Bush's and Kerry's Iran policy, for example. If our major unfinished task is "nation-building," I'm not convinced Kerry would be much worse than Bush. And Bush's errors – the WMD debacle, for example – have definitely made him less effective on the world stage. No British prime minister will go out on a limb for an American president in the foreseeable future. Pre-emption has been largely discredited – by Bush himself. When I listen to the president on the war, I am heartened by his support for democracy. I take back not a word of praise for his conduct after 9/11 and during the buildup to the Iraq war. But I think he has shown himself to be at worst incompetent and at best feckless in many aspects of the conduct of the war at a time when such lapses are unforgivable.

All this leads me to look at the alternative. Heaven knows I have been critical of Kerry. But I want to give him a chance. So sue me. I know in this polarized climate, such indecision is rare and punished. But it's my best take on what's going on. And the joy of a blog is that I can simply write that – and let the chips fall where they may.

July 28, 2004
12.02 am

I don't know enough about Barack Obama to judge whether he will be a good senator on a range of issues, but from his convention speech tonight, it's hard to think he has anything but a stellar future. America is deeply thirsty for a black leader who is first and foremost an American leader; and for any leader who can reach out to both sides of the culture war. Obama struck many conservative notes: of self-reliance, of opportunity, of hard work, of an immigrant's dream, of the same standards for all of us. He also found, I think, the best anti-war formulation for the Democrats:

When we send our young men and women into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they're going, to care for their families while they're gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return, and to never - ever - go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world.

So the anti-Bush argument is framed in terms of defending our troops. I also think that the

term “shade the truth” is far more defensible rhetoric against the White House than the cant about lying and misleading the country. I still don’t believe there was any deliberate shading of any truth. But it’s a deft way of laying into the administration while not sounding like Michael Moore.

September 2, 2004
12.16 am

Cheney’s convention speech was a sound one, certainly defensible in its sharp attacks on Kerry and heartfelt in its defense of the character of the president. But it is astonishing to me that neither he nor anyone, in invoking the war on terror, has mentioned any developments in Iraq or Afghanistan over the last year. These speeches could have been written as Baghdad fell or at the latest, when Saddam was captured. And this party and president claim to be war-leaders. Real war-leaders explain defeats and setbacks, they recognize the current situation, they grapple with reality. But this war is easy, it seems. There are no problems in Iraq. Everything is peachy. Democracy is breaking out everywhere; no mistakes have been made; no rethinking is necessary after the travails of the occupation. I understand the political need to put a gloss on things. But the surrealism of the rhetoric is, in some respects, an insult to the American people, who deserve a real accounting of where we are. Of all the difficult choices we have to make – in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia – nothing is spoken. There is not even a nod to reality. Just an assertion that only the Republicans have the balls to fight this war. It may well work in the election. But it speaks to the character of our leaders that they prefer bromides and denial to a real accounting and real leadership.

September 12, 2004
11.23 pm

The Iraqi government is beginning to lose control of Baghdad now. I think the Rove political strategy must now be simply to hope that no one notices anything that is happening in Iraq before they vote in November. Just say after me: 9/11, 9/11, 9/11. If anyone brings up Iraq today, just put your fingers in your ears and start singing loudly. Thank God the campaign is more focused on what Bush did in the National Guard thirty years ago and what Kerry’s votes were in the 1980s. Otherwise we might have to debate reality.

September 13, 2004
11.08 am

My own hope a year ago was that the sheer amount of reconstruction money that would be spent in Iraq would surely win over the population. But I was dumb enough to believe that the Bush administration was competent enough to spend it. Barely five percent of reconstruction funds have been disbursed. We have to face facts, I’m afraid: we have helped create a classic guerrilla insurgency in Iraq in which the U.S. is struggling not to be defeated politically. The consequences of failure are exponential. And yet I see no awareness in the administration – or even among many of their supporters – that they even have a problem.

September 20, 2004
4.05 pm

John Kerry’s newest attempt to get a handle on the Iraq debate is a big improvement. Money

quote:

The administration told us we'd be greeted as liberators. They were wrong. They told us not to worry about looting or the sorry state of Iraq's infrastructure. They were wrong. They told us we had enough troops to provide security and stability, defeat the insurgents, guard the borders and secure the arms depots. They were wrong. They told us we could rely on exiles like Ahmed Chalabi to build political legitimacy. They were wrong. They told us we would quickly restore an Iraqi civil service to run the country and a police force and army to secure it. They were wrong. In Iraq, this administration has consistently over-promised and under-performed. This policy has been plagued by a lack of planning, an absence of candor, arrogance and outright incompetence. And the President has held no one accountable, including himself. In fact, the only officials who lost their jobs over Iraq were the ones who told the truth.

Ouch. I agree with everything but the first statement. We *were* greeted as liberators. Then we blew it.

September 21, 2004
11.02 am

I really do worry that Bush is out of his depth in this conflict, and that his handling of Iraq these past twelve months essentially disqualifies him from re-election. But better the devil you know? If the war was the only issue – and the fiscal lunacy, social intolerance and institutional arrogance were not also in play, I might have to swallow hard and go for Bush. But a vote for wimping out in Fallujah, bigger government and the social policy of James Dobson? Please. Bush's crude, see-no-problems campaign has also done a lot to persuade me that he's not up to the job.

September 28, 2004
11.06 pm

Yes, I've been alarmed at the gross mismanagement of the war; and I do not believe it helps our effort to minimize or ignore it. But Blair reminds us why this current struggle in Iraq is indeed a critical struggle in the war. The reason, I think, that George W. Bush is now ahead is simply because he reminded people in New York City that this is indeed the struggle; and because people don't believe Kerry has the will and steadiness to win it. To put it bluntly, I don't believe Iraq is a "diversion" from the war on terror; I believe it's the central front. If you share this view, Blair's view, it's extremely hard to support Kerry.

Bush deserves to be scolded for his arrogance, his divisiveness, and his incompetence. But not for his fundamental judgment about the world we live in. There, he's right. And Kerry's wrong. And that, in the end, may be all that matters.

September 30, 2004
9.31 am

The disorder and mayhem continues to delegitimize the Iraqi government and, by inference, the coalition occupation. The key moment was probably when George W. Bush blinked in Fallujah. That was when the general population inferred that we were not prepared to win.

It's amazing, really. This president has a reputation for toughness and resolution. Yet at arguably the most critical moment in this war, he gave in. He was for taking Fallujah before he was against it. I cannot believe the situation is beyond rescue. But this president's policies have made it much much more difficult than it might have been.

October 7, 2004
12.34 am

The fundamental question in this campaign is the war in Iraq. Was it worth starting? Has it been conducted well? Will it make us safer? My answers to those three questions are, briefly, yes, no, and, it depends. But from a broader perspective, the following facts are simply indisputable. The fundamental rationale for the war – the threat from Saddam's existing stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction – was wrong. Period. In the conduct of the war, it is equally indisputable that the administration simply didn't anticipate the insurgency we now face, and because of that, is struggling to rescue the effort from becoming a dangerous mess. Period.

So the question becomes: how can an administration be re-elected after so patently misjudging the two most important aspects of the central issue in front of us? It may end up as simple as that. Maybe, in fact, it should end up as simple as that.

October 11, 2004
1.11 am

One of the central questions in this election is simply: can John Kerry be trusted to fight the war on terror? Worrying about this is what keeps me from making the jump to supporting him. I'm a believer in the notion that we are at war, that you cannot ignore state sponsors of terrorism, and that the 1990s approach obviously failed. Bush rightly shifted our direction toward regime change rather than police work, something long overdue. But when you look ahead, it's more difficult to see where the differences between Kerry and Bush would actually lie. In Iraq, Bush declared last Friday night that Kerry's plan was a carbon copy of his own. Why, then, would Kerry be such a risk?

In Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush has committed any successor to a process of lengthy and difficult nation-building. If that truly is the major task of the next few years, wouldn't it be better to have people who have experience in nation-building and who actually believe in it, rather than people like Rummy and Cheney who clearly disdain it and keep under-funding and under-manning it?

The major objection to this, of course, is that Kerry simply cannot be trusted. He won't simply change tactics in the war; he'll change direction. His long record of appeasing America's enemies certainly suggests as much. And I don't blame anyone who thinks that's enough evidence and votes for Bush as a result. But it behooves fair-minded people also to listen to what Kerry has actually said in this campaign: that he won't relent against terrorism. He isn't Howard Dean. And 9/11 has changed things – even within the Democratic party.

Moreover, the war on terror, if we are going to succeed in the long run, has to be a bipartisan affair. By far the most worrying legacy of the Bush years is the sense that this is a Republican

war: that one party owns it and that our partisan battles will define it. Simply put: that's bad for the country and bad for the war. Electing Kerry would force the Democrats to take responsibility for a war that is theirs as well. It would deny the Deaniac-Mooreish wing a perpetual chance to whine and pretend that we are not threatened, or to entertain such excrescences as the notion that Bush is as big a threat as al Qaeda or Saddam. It would call their bluff and force the Democrats to get serious again about defending this country. Maybe I'm naive in hoping this could happen. But it is not an inappropriate hope. And it is offered in the broader belief that we can win this war – united rather than divided.

October 15, 2004
4.02 pm

The security situation in Iraq hardly seems to be improving. The Green Zone, which I was warning about a couple of weeks back, is no longer safe. If you cannot maintain minimal security in the inner sanctum of your own capital, then security itself is a misnomer. And now we have indications of some reservists – the victims of Bush's awful war-management – who are simply refusing to go on what they are calling "suicide missions." Even America's soldiers are having a hard time defending themselves in a country where chaos reigns. Whose responsibility? Bush's. Will he take it? Never.

October 18, 2004
6.10 pm

What I simply don't understand is the silence of so many who supported this war about the appalling amateurism with which it has been conducted. I guess they think Kerry would be worse and are therefore hiding their criticism in public. But everything I hear in private is damning – even among the neocons. The question we have to ask is: if the Bush people screwed up Iraq this badly, how do we trust them in any future military operation? But that's a question the neocons refuse to ask.

October 18, 2004
11:38 pm

It does strike me as astounding that in four debates lasting six hours, the horrors of Abu Ghraib were never mentioned. Remember when we were reeling from the images? They remain the most spectacular public relations debacle for this country at war since Vietnam. And we know the underlying reasons for the abuse and torture: the prison was drastically under-manned and incompetently managed, the Pentagon had given mixed signals on what constituted torture, the Coalition Provisional Authority had no idea that it might be dealing with an insurgency and was dragging in all sorts of innocents to extract intelligence in a ham-handed manner. Although the administration has clearly done all it can to stymie Congressional investigations, it has become clear that responsibility for the chaos ultimately stops at Rumsfeld's desk. No, it wasn't a systematic policy. It was a function of what wasn't done, rather than what was done – and, in that, it remains a symbol of everything that has gone so wrong in Iraq.

Bush, of course, barely mentioned it at the time. He has no ability to stare harsh reality in the face – especially if it means reflection on himself and his administration. And so his silence in the debates is not surprising. But Kerry's is – and reveals a worrying lack of

courage. Kerry is afraid that criticizing Abu Ghraib will make him look like a war critic, or anti-American, or somehow responsible for weakening morale. Vietnam hovers over him. It shouldn't. What happened was unforgivable negligence and evil, a horrendous blow to American moral standing – as well as simply an outrage on a human and moral level. It didn't affect Iraqis' views: they tragically already believed we were as bad as these images portrayed. But it was a fatal blow to domestic morale. I haven't fully recovered from it in my pro-war heart. I couldn't believe America could do this. I still wince at the memory.

But what I still remember was Dick Cheney's response to criticism of Rumsfeld at the time. "Get off his case," he harrumphed. Even after such a blow to the very core of the meaning of America, Cheney was contemptuous of holding anyone in his circle accountable. It says it all, doesn't it?

October 20, 2004
11:14 pm

There's been a lot of generally sensible guffawing at Kerry's promise to win over the French and Russians in the war on terror. But there's been less attention paid to how Bush has dealt with the U.S.'s most critical ally, Britain. The answer is: terribly. Bush has made any future military alliance with even the Brits a near-impossibility. The British people won't allow it. The Tories are now anti-Bush; almost the entire Labour party is anti-Bush; the Liberal Democrats are pathologically anti-Bush. And this is the success story of Bush's diplomacy! Again, the worst thing about this is that it undermines our ability to wage this war in future. When you lose the Brits and half your own country in a vital war, you deserve to be fired as president. I'm sorry, but it's time the pro-war camp began to deal with this.

October 21, 2004
11.31 am

Could we simply police next year's Iraqi elections ourselves? First question: with whom? We don't even have enough troops to retake Fallujah and keep Baghdad from blowing up. And if we did, our troops are now so unpopular they would themselves undermine popular legitimacy for the elections. What is Bush's answer to this? He simply asserts that elections *will* take place. That's it. Say after me: if Bush says it, it must be true. If Bush says it, it must be true. Feel better yet? This is what Republicans have to do every day. Faith, not facts. Faith, not facts. Believe ... and you will be healed. All will be healed.

October 21, 2004
3.13 pm

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration has shown itself impatient with and untalented at nation-building. Moreover, the toll of the war has left the United States with minimal international support, one important ingredient for the successful rebuilding of nations. If Bush is reelected, even Britain will likely shift toward withdrawal in Iraq, compounding American isolation there and making it even harder for a new Iraqi government to gain legitimacy. In the essential tasks of building support for greater international help in Iraq – financially, militarily, diplomatically – Kerry is the better choice.

No, other countries cannot bail us out or even contribute much in the way of an effective

military presence. But within Iraq, the impact of a more international stamp on the occupation and on the elections could help us win the battle for the hearts and minds of Iraqis. That battle – as much as the one on the battlefield itself – is crucial for success. I fear Bush is too polarizing, too controversial, too loathed a figure even within his own country, to pull this off.

The president says that he alone can act militarily when the danger is there; and Kerry is too weak for our current crisis. I disagree. The chance of a third forced regime change somewhere in the world in the next four years is extremely low. We don't even have the troops. Bush's comparative advantage – the ability to pull the trigger when others might balk – will be largely irrelevant. That doesn't mean it hasn't come in handy. Without Bush, Saddam would still be in power. But just because the president was suited to fight the war for the last four years doesn't mean he is suited to succeed at the more complicated and nuanced tasks of the next four. In fact, some of the very virtues that made him suited to our past needs now make him all the more unsuited to our future ones. I am still glad he was president when we were attacked. But that doesn't mean he's the right leader for the years ahead. And one of the great benefits of being a democracy at war is that we can change leaders and tactics to advance the same goals. Dictatorships are stuck with the same guy – with all his weaknesses and all the hubris that comes from running successful wars, hubris that almost always leads to fatal errors, hubris that isn't restricted to tyrants.

Does Kerry believe in this war? Skeptics say he doesn't. They don't believe he has understood the significance of September 11. They rightly point to the anti-war and anti-Western attitudes of some in his base – the Michael Moores and Noam Chomskys who will celebrate a Kerry victory. I understand their worries. But they should listen to what Kerry has said. The convention was a remarkable event in that it pivoted the Democratic Party toward an uncomplicated embrace of the war on terror. Kerry has said again and again that he will not hesitate to defend this country and go on the offensive against al Qaeda. I see no reason whatsoever why he shouldn't. What is there to gain from failure in this task? He knows that if he lets his guard down and if terrorists strike or succeed anywhere, he runs the risk of discrediting the Democrats as a party of national security for a generation. He has said quite clearly that he will not "cut and run" in Iraq. And the truth is: He cannot. There is no alternative to seeing the war through in Iraq. And Kerry's new mandate and fresh administration will increase the options available to us for winning. He has every incentive to be tough enough but far more leeway to be flexible than the incumbent.

I admire this president in many ways – his tenacity, his vision of democracy, his humor, his faith. I have supported him more than strongly in the last four years – and, perhaps, when the dangers seemed so grave, I went overboard and willfully overlooked his faults because he was the president and the country was in danger. I was also guilty of minimizing the dangers of invading Iraq and placed too much faith, perhaps, in the powers of the American military machine and competence of the Bush administration. Writers bear some responsibility too for making mistakes; and I take mine. But they bear a greater responsibility if they do not acknowledge them and learn. And it is simply foolish to ignore what we have found out this past year about Bush's obvious limits, his glaring failures, his fundamental weakness as a leader. I fear he is out of his depth and exhausted. I simply do not have confidence in him to navigate the waters ahead skillfully enough to avoid or survive the darkening clouds on the horizon.

Kerry? I cannot know for sure. But in a democracy, you sometimes have to have faith that a new leader will be able to absorb the achievements of his predecessor and help mend his failures. Kerry has actually been much more impressive in the latter stages of this campaign than I expected. He has exuded a calm and a steadiness that reassures. He is right about our need for more allies, more prudence, and more tactical discrimination in the war we are waging. I cannot say I have perfect confidence in him, or that I support him without reservations. But not to support anyone in this dangerous time is a cop-out. So give him a chance. In picking the lesser of two risks, we can also do something less dispiriting. We can decide to pick the greater of two hopes. And even in these dour days, it is only American to hope.

October 21, 2004
11.22 pm

An over-wrought attack on yours truly characterizes me as the Judas of Bush-supporters. Please. Oh, and I'm also "Zarqawi's microphone." Actually, I'm even more important than that: "I suspect Andrew Sullivan has done more damage to the president, and more help to Kerry, than George Soros and MoveOn with all their billions." My power, it frightens me. A simpler explanation is that I'm a blogger who tries to call things as I see them. When facts change, I try and adjust. I never believed the Iraq liberation would be this botched; and it behooves those of us who supported it to be accountable. (God knows, the Bush administration won't take responsibility.) I've learned in life that error is not something to be afraid of. But fear of admitting error is. And so my mounting misgivings about this administration are simply a function of watching and thinking.

I could be wrong again – especially about Iraq. (I've enthused about progress in Afghanistan and wherever I can find it) All I can say is: I hope to God I am wrong. Nothing would give me more pleasure. And if Bush wins the election, I will draw a line below all of this and do all I can to support a war I believe in. But first: accountability. And the truth, as far as I can see it.

October 27, 2004
3.20 pm

The competence of the current leader cannot be completely irrelevant. If his incompetence means we actually lose the war, then surely some kind of reassessment is due. So the question becomes: how incompetent is he? And that's a matter of degree not kind. What disappoints me about Bush supporters is their apparent inability to give *specifics* about where their candidate differs or would differ from Kerry. I'm listening. And I hear little but rhetoric.

October 28, 2004
11.20 pm

If you care about ending Jihadist terrorism, ask yourself: can we afford four more years like the last year in Iraq? How many more Abu Ghraibs? How many more Fallujahs? How many more debacles before we actually *lose*? The reason I'm for Kerry is that I want to *win*. And I refuse to ignore reality.

October 29, 2004
6.16 pm

Why would Osama bin Laden release a tape just before the elections? The obvious impact will be to help Bush. Any reminder of the 9/11 attacks will provoke a national rallying to the commander-in-chief. The deep emotional bond so many of us formed with the president back then is Bush's strongest weapon in this election, and bin Laden has just revived it. The real October Surprise turned out not to be Osama's capture but his resilience. I have a feeling that this will tip the election decisively toward the incumbent. A few hours ago, I thought Kerry was headed for victory. Now I think the opposite. I also have a sinking feeling that that was entirely bin Laden's objective.

October 30, 2004
2.08 pm

Did I turn against Bush because of the war failures? Or because of the Federal Marriage Amendment? Or because of the spending? Am I a traitor or a thinker? Am I deluded or are my critics? Well, the great thing about a blog is that if you really care that much, you can see all the evidence splayed out in front of you. When someone writes daily, hourly, as I do, you don't just make arguments or points. You're showing the whole inglorious sausage-making of the intellectual process. I think that's a good thing.

I've made countless arguments about Bush's spending record and his war conduct – from long before the FMA endorsement. I've been very candid, however, in saying that Bush's opposition to a cause – equal marriage rights – I have devoted my adult life to is bound to have affected my preferences. I guess if you think the case for Bush's incompetence is completely baseless or overblown, then it seems as if the only reason for backing Kerry is the FMA. Ditto if you simply don't think of the FMA in the same dire terms that I do, or believe gay equality is a petty or objectionable cause, and not the moral imperative I do. My best shot at self-analysis is that my main reason for backing Kerry is that I sincerely think that rewarding incompetence is not a good idea in wartime, and that Kerry is better suited to winning the next stage of the war than Bush is. But obviously, Bush's hostility to gay equality, and the cynical manner in which he and his party have exploited this issue, has had a huge impact as well. It's *all of the above*.

October 31, 2004
12.42 pm

Glenn Reynolds says no one should have expected a mistake-free war. But whence this straw man? Who has ever said that? But let's review: a humiliatingly bollixed war rationale, a completely bollixed post-war campaign, a bare chance of getting through the next few months in Iraq without calamity, a clear increase in terrorism within Iraq, the slow loss of most of our allies, and, with Abu Ghraib, the end of our moral high ground. These are "amazing accomplishments"? Yes, I guess they are. When you run the most powerful military in the history of the world, and had plenty of time to prepare, fucking things up this badly is somewhat amazing.

November 3, 2004
1.12 am

It's over. President Bush is narrowly re-elected. It was a wild day with the biggest black eyes for exit pollsters. I wanted Kerry to win. I believed he'd be more able to unite the country at home, more fiscally conservative, more socially inclusive, and better able to rally the world in a more focused war on terror. I still do. But a slim majority of Americans disagreed. And I'm a big believer in the deep wisdom of the American people. They voted in huge numbers, and they made a judgment. Not a huge and decisive victory by any means. But at least a victory that is unlikely to be challenged. The president and his aides deserve congratulations. And so, I think, does Senator Kerry, whose campaign exceeded the low expectations of many of us.

I've been more than a little frustrated by the president's handling of this war in the past year; but we have to draw a line under that now. The past is the past. And George W. Bush is our president. He deserves a fresh start, a chance to prove himself again, and the constructive criticism of those of us who decided to back his opponent. He needs our prayers and our support for the enormous tasks still ahead of him. He has mine. Unequivocally.

November 3, 2004
3.53 pm

I have to say it's almost funny that for the past few months, I've been harangued about the selfishness of gays who put their issues ahead of pressing matters like the war, and yet the exit polls show something rather different. The gay vote for Bush was - amazingly - only slightly down on 2000. Many of them obviously thought the war or the economy was pre-eminent. But for evangelicals, the issue of "moral values" trumped the war! It wasn't about the war on terror for the Bush base. It was about the war on gay couples. Oh, the ironies.

November 22, 2004
12.29 am

News flash: we need more troops in Iraq. Duh. The truth is: we needed far more from the very beginning – and this incremental increase, which reflects the enemy's tenacity as much as ours, is exactly the kind of mission creep we should always have avoided. I'm still dumbfounded by the political branch's refusal to acknowledge this before now, and the lame excuse that the only justification for more troops would be if the commanders demanded them. The level of troops – like the war in general – is far too important to be left to the military. Such decisions require political and strategic judgments that can only be made by the commander in chief. Bush's limitations as a real war-leader are nowhere better illustrated than in this passivity on a matter of supreme importance. But better late than never. The important thing now is to win.

One of the real skills of many neoconservatives is their message discipline. Their private concerns about the dreadful post-war planning in Iraq, and their frustrations with Rumsfeld in particular were kept absolutely under wraps until after the election. These are intellectuals whose first calling is political power, rather than intellectual candor. Win first, cavil later:

that's the motto. This is not to say they are intellectually dishonest, merely that they have learned the benefits of silence when their political masters are caught with their pants down. But now the election is over, you can read the following missive from the Politburo head, Bill Kristol, with some interest:

The president presented himself for the judgment of the American people with 150,000 troops in the field, taking real casualties and on the verge of launching a major offensive. The people didn't flinch. They showed fortitude and judgment, sticking with Bush and the difficult path he has chosen, a path in some respects made more difficult by mistakes his administration had made, but not one his opponent could be counted on to follow to success.

Translation: Bush screwed up monumentally but at least he didn't waver; and we were able to keep the full truth of the Iraq mess from the people long enough to survive. Yes, Bush's record did not merit re-election; but Kerry would have been far worse. (That's why Kristol barely wrote a word about Bush for months, and wrote ceaselessly against Kerry.)

December 3, 2004
2.12 pm

Evidence procured by torture is now sufficient to detain "enemy combatants" at Gitmo. Prisoners "have no constitutional rights enforceable in this court." Slowly, we are beginning to piece together what the Bush administration has set up – with little public debate. The government can detain prisoners without naming them, it can use methods that are "inhumane," it can use evidence procured by torture, and anyone the government deems an "enemy combatant" is beyond the recourse of constitutional protection. Some of this might be defensible, although I doubt whether I'd agree. But the lack of candor, the absence of real debate (neither Gitmo nor Abu Ghraib came up in any of the presidential debates), and the vagueness of many of the rules are surely worrying in the extreme.

December 15, 2004
11.48 pm

Let's review. We have the horrors of Abu Ghraib; we have several murders and rapes of inmates in Iraq and in Afghanistan; we have separate abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib *after* the scandal broke; we have the use of electric shocks, beating to unconsciousness, scarring chemicals, one instance of "water-boarding," using dogs to terrorize and sometimes bite inmates, forced sodomy, and any number of bizarre pieces of sexual humiliation, designed specifically to abuse Arabs.

It's increasingly clear that these kinds of abuses – the use of nakedness, exposure to extreme heat and cold, hooding, sexual abuse, real and faked electric torture – are themes across these disparate acts. In other words, there seems to be an informal methodology for the abuse and humiliation of prisoners. Do we really believe that these common practices are the result of completely spontaneous imagination by soldiers with no idea of what they were doing and no culture of acceptance from their superiors? These were not just some untrained grunts, coping with Rumsfeld-engineered chaos. These were elite Navy SEALs and Special Forces. And we have no idea how many incidents have gone unreported or have been covered up.

We don't know – and may never know – the full extent of the torture. But we do now know that this wasn't just "abuse"; it was torture, used as part of the interrogation process or just randomly. We do know it wasn't a handful of hoodlums on the night shift in one prison. We do know that it followed a clear directive from the president that in this war, the enemy has the protection of the Geneva Conventions solely at his personal discretion, and that the "enemy" can include thousands of people rounded up in the middle of the night who are and were guilty of absolutely nothing. We also know that this president only rewards loyalty, not competence. We do know that the pattern of abuse affects the Special Forces, the Military Police, the Army, the Navy SEALs, reservists, and the Marine corps. We also know that no one in the higher commands has been found guilty of anything. And check this out: the marines who used electric shock torture against an inmate were found guilty. Their sentence? One got one year in confinement. The other eight months. The lesson? No big deal. They're still in the uniform.

January 6, 2005
12.29 am

Let's retire at the start the notion that the only torture that has been used by the U.S. has been against known members of al Qaeda. This is not true. Many innocent men and boys were raped, brutally beaten, crucified for hours (a more accurate term than put in "stress positions"), left in their own excrement, sodomized, electrocuted, had chemicals from fluorescent lights poured on them, forced to lie down on burning metal till they were unrecognizable from burns – all this in Iraq alone, at several prisons as well as Abu Ghraib. I spent a week reading all the official reports over Christmas for a forthcoming review essay. Abu Ghraib is but one aspect of a pervasive pattern of torture and abuse that, in my view, is only beginning to sink in.

Orwell urged us against the kind of terms favored by torture-justifiers as "coercive interrogation." That's why I've cited just a few of the methods. These methods are evil, counter-productive to the war effort and deeply wounding to the integrity and reputation of the United States and the entire free world. After Abu Ghraib, you might expect some kind of reckoning. But what's stunning about this president is his complete indifference to these facts. His nomination of Alberto Gonzales to attorney general is a de facto statement that he believes that someone who enabled these things needs rewarding, not censuring. This from a president elected in part on something called "moral values." If "moral values" mean indifference to torture, they are literally meaningless.

January 13, 2005
12.14 pm

It's hard to find clearer evidence that Condi Rice wants to keep torturing detainees than the fact that the administration refused to acquiesce to a legislative ban on CIA torture last December. The techniques include Algerian-style water-boarding. The trouble with this president is – how do I put it? – he's lying. He publicly says he finds torture abhorrent, and yet he ensures that the CIA's expansion of torture techniques is retained. Remember that the incidents we have are not from black box CIA interrogations. If the abuses were this bad in the regular military, can you imagine what is actually going on – where none of us can find out?

January 13, 2005
12.06 am

Among the more bizarre notions gaining traction in the blogosphere is that there can only be two positions on the Iraq war: a) that it's all good and that the critics are spineless anti-Americans (or, worse, reporters for mainstream media) or b) that it's a calamity from Day One and will surely end in disaster. So those of us who have been critics of aspects of the occupation – from insufficient troop members to deployment of illegal torture, for example – are accused of being fair-weather pro-warriors. Or, because we still back the goals of the original invasion and want Iraq to shift toward democracy, we're deemed Bush lackeys.

The problem with this way of looking at things is that the stakes are far higher, it seems to me, than the question of whether you are pro-Bush or anti-Bush. The truth, it seems to me, is that Bush is a very mixed blessing. On the one hand, he gets the fundamental issue – the war for survival against Islamist fascism, and the critical importance of establishing some democratic space in the Arab world to undermine it from within. I've criticized this president for many things. But never for these two vital objectives, which I share and have always shared. But – again – it's perfectly legit to criticize the *methods* of the war, while supporting its goals. In fact, it's unavoidable if you're being more than a cheerleader for one side or the other. You can, of course, dismiss the mistakes, ignore them or say they're not a big deal. Or you can argue genuinely that they aren't mistakes. Or you can say that you disagree, say, with the troop level critique but agree with those who want accountability (and not just an "accountability moment") for the use of torture by some American troops. But the notion that our debates have to be about *whose side are you on* in terms of domestic politics strikes me as depressing.

I understand that partisanship isn't always bad, and indeed inevitable. But the way in which the blogosphere has become *more* partisan over the last few years, rather than less, strikes me as a disappointment.

January 20, 2005
12.47 am

When Justice Department nominee Alberto Gonzales was given an opportunity to disown such practices as "forced enemas, infliction of cigarette burns, and binding detainees hand and foot and leaving them in urine and feces for 18-24 hours," he replied that it was not appropriate for him to "attempt to analyze" the legality of such techniques. We want this guy for Attorney General? The administration, despite saying that the war in Iraq falls under the Geneva Conventions, nevertheless exempts insurgents from the protections. How convenient. So it's open season for any suspected insurgent in U.S. custody in Iraq. (And the word "suspected" is apposite here. The dozens of inmates abused at Abu Ghraib were part of a random intake that was up to 90 percent innocent.)

January 21, 2005
1.21 am

There are many reasons to be worried about Iraq – the dangers of a civil war, the remaining lack of reconstruction, the persistence of the insurgency, the failure to train a sufficient

number of Iraqi troops, etc etc. I'm not one to dismiss the problems, as some supporters of the war are. But I do believe one thing: given a chance, people vote for a sane future. The Iraqi elections have the potential to be a catalyst for broader change. We have lost windows of opportunity before. Let's not lose this one.

January 28, 2005
12.14 am

“In Iraq, the very centerpiece of the U.S. campaign to export democracy, ‘democratic movements and institutions’ are dying, the result of illiberalism, U.S. neglect, and, above all, sheer physical insecurity. As it grinds into its third year, the war for a liberal Iraq is destroying the dream of a liberal Iraq.” That’s Lawrence Kaplan’s grim verdict from Baghdad. No doubt he will now be derided as a squishy left-liberal defeatist – but, in fact, Lawrence was one of the most stalwart supporters of the war against Saddam, co-authored a passionate pro-war book with Bill Kristol, and is a card-carrying neoconservative. (He’s also a friend). But he’s not blind; and he’s not dishonest. The failure is in part a failure to get the U.S. bureaucracy to support liberal institutions and groups; but it is also simply a failure of order and security. Democracy was always going to be hard in Iraq. But democracy amid chaos and violence is close to impossible. And we never sent enough troops or conducted a smart enough post-victory occupation plan to maintain order and defeat a fledgling insurgency while we still could. So we are now left to ask ordinary Iraqis to risk their lives in order to leave their homes and vote.

Our predicament is that you cannot have democracy without order and you cannot have a new order without democracy. Do I want the elections to succeed? Of course I do. Only those blinded by partisanship or cynicism wouldn’t. Maybe a democratic miracle can occur. But at this point it would be exactly that: a miracle. So pray, will you?

January 30, 2005
12.59 pm

The major revelation of the day, it seems to me, is something that could have been predicted. And that is the impact of the actual experience of Iraqis voting, of getting your finger dyed, or sharing in a new and communal rite of democracy. Regardless of the results, that is in itself a success. Once people taste democracy, they will never forget it. That memory itself is an insurance against its future eclipse. Consciousness matters. And we have just seen a change in consciousness.

January 30, 2005
1.08 pm

Here’s an email worth treasuring from a friend in Baghdad:

Andrew, you should have been here today. Today, the insurgents lost. Regardless of what happens tomorrow or the next day, or the day after that, today, the insurgents lost. Tonight, the bombs and the mortars, and the gunshots which still echo in the streets, sound different. Men and women, whose children, whose mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, have been murdered by madmen, took a few simple, but very difficult steps, out of their homes and into polling stations.

There will be debates about turnout, and legitimacy, and occupation, and every other conceivable thing, but everyone who is here right now, knows something extraordinary happened today. Today, the insurgents lost.

I don't want to be excitable, but aren't you feeling euphoric? It's almost a classic tale of good defeating evil. We always needed the Iraqi people to seize freedom for themselves. Given the chance, they have. This is their victory, made possible by those amazing Western troops. This day eclipses – although, alas, it cannot undo – any errors we have made. Only freedom can defeat terror. Today, freedom won.

January 31, 2005
12.29 am

The latest indicators suggest a turnout of something like 60 percent. We'll have to wait for precise numbers and ethnic/regional breakdowns. But if I stick to my pre-election criteria for success, this election blows it away: "45 percent turnout for Kurds and Shia, 25 percent turnout for the Sunnis, under 200 murdered." Even my more optimistic predictions of a while back do not look so out of bounds. But the numbers don't account for the psychological impact. There is no disguising that this is a huge victory for the Iraqi people – and, despite everything, for Bush and Blair.

Yes, we shouldn't get carried away. We don't know yet who was elected, or what they'll do, or how they'll be more successful at controlling the insurgency. There are many questions ahead. And I don't mean to minimize them. But I'm struck by some of the paradoxes of all this. We're too close to events to see them clearly. But the timing of this strikes me as fortuitous. Why? Because by the time of the elections, the insurgents had been able to show themselves as a real threat to the democratic experiment and to reveal their true colors – enemies of democracy, Jihadist fanatics and Baathist thugs. The election was in part a referendum on these forces. And they lost – big time. Their entire credibility as somehow representing a genuine nationalist resistance has been scotched.

The pictures are extraordinary. The images of women especially moved me – because of what this election represents for the future of women's dignity and equality in the Middle East. Then the general merriment all round. Even from this distance, it appears that Iraqis were celebrating their common citizenship, a moment when their civic and national space just got larger. Look at these photos and re-read the president's Inaugural. This is real. Freedom is advancing. Out of chaos and fear. Maybe it took staring into the abyss to bring Iraq back from a form of hell.

February 28, 2005
12.32 pm

I think even the fiercest critics of Bush's handling of the post-liberation phase in Iraq will still be thrilled at what appears to me to be glacial but important shifts in the right direction in the region. The Iraq elections may not be the end of the Middle East Berlin Wall, but they certainly demonstrate its crumbling. The uprising against Syria's occupation of Lebanon is extremely encouraging; Syria's attempt to buy off some good will by coughing up Saddam's half-brother is also a good sign; ditto Mubarak's attempt to make his own dictatorship look

more democratic. Add all of that to the emergence of Abbas and a subtle shift in the Arab media and you are beginning to see the start of a real and fundamental change.

Almost all of this was accomplished by the liberation of Iraq. Nothing else would have persuaded the thugs and mafia bosses who run so many Arab nations that the West is serious about democracy. The hard thing for liberals – and I don't mean that term in a pejorative sense – will be to acknowledge this president's critical role in moving this region toward democracy. In my view, 9/11 demanded nothing less. We are tackling the problem at the surface – by wiping out the institutional core of al Qaeda – and in the depths – by tackling the autocracy that makes Islamo-fascism more attractive to the younger generation. This is what we owed to the victims of 9/11. And we are keeping that trust.

April 11, 2005
12.35 pm

It behooves me to write that I'm chastened – and extremely heartened – by the progress we're making in Iraq. The elections were obviously the key – and they should have been scheduled at least a year before they were. But it's equally true that the constancy of our amazing troops, and the magic of democracy, are turning this long hard slog into a long hard slog with an end in sight. The criticisms of the past endure. But the fundamental objective seems to be within sight. The right decision – to remove Saddam – is no longer being stymied by wrong decisions. I feared the worst. I was wrong.

May 24, 2005
11.09 am

I haven't tackled the fundamental question in Iraq for a while. Since the elections, it's simply been hard to figure out exactly what's going on. The demise of a complete Sunni boycott of the next political phase also has to be encouraging. But it would surely be dumb not to notice how resilient the insurgency still is, how it has capitalized on the political drift of the past few months, and how it is as lethal as ever.

June 23, 2005
11.00 am

Ever since a key rationale for the war to depose Saddam – existing stockpiles of WMDs – was debunked, the interesting theoretical question is: if we'd known then what we know now, would we still have launched a war? It would be dishonest to say I'm not chastened by the inept post-war, Abu Ghraib, the abandonment of the ban on “cruel and inhumane treatment” of prisoners, the resilience of the insurgency, the ineffectiveness of reconstruction and the loss of 12,000 Iraqi lives while we were responsible for their security. But I still think that, even knowing what we know now, the war was worth it, if only for the potential for Arab democratization that has opened up; and the end of Saddam's brutality.

July 7, 2005
10.42 am

I guess a terrorist attack in London was inevitable at some point; but, of course, it is still horrifying and barbaric and a reminder of the terrible danger we still live under. My brother, who works in the city, is fine. Londoners, unlike New Yorkers on that September morning,

have dealt with this kind of violence before and have endured. My father's response will perhaps be typical of many, as it often is. He told me not to worry, that this was "not nice," and that "we're too bloody p.c. over here."

The coordination is like Madrid. But Britons will not respond by blaming their government. They will respond by stiffening their will to fight back.

August 29, 2005
10.26 am

The one minority group that is bound to lose the most from a new, devolved constitution – the Sunni elite – is resisting the complete rearrangement of Iraq's polity on democratic lines. Sure, it would have been much better if legit Sunni leaders had signed onto a solid deal. But they didn't, and now their recalcitrance will be put to a vote. Yes: a vote. What we have here is a remarkable demonstration of a modern Arab and Muslim country working through its own political arrangements in a pre-ordained constitutional process. That itself is something of an achievement. It reveals that although the U.S. is obviously heavily present as a force for ultimate order, the Iraqis themselves are figuring out how to run their country again. This takes time, as Bush is right to point out, and patience.

September 2, 2005
2.42 pm

We do not have an administration capable of running the country during the war on terror. They have bungled homeland security; they have mismanaged Iraq; they have now dropped the ball in New Orleans. In each case, a conservative government does not seem to understand that law and order are always, always, the first priority. The glib self-congratulation of government official after official made me retch listening to them. Only today did the president say that the response was "not acceptable." Notice again the distancing: you, Mr Bush, are the man responsible. It is *your* performance that is not acceptable.

Of course, we have to live with this president for three years – and one can only tremble at the thought of what that means in the event of another terror strike. I do think however that this crisis means an obvious shift in terms of Bush's successor. Two words: Rudy Giuliani. We need someone to do for the federal government what Rudy did for New York's. His social liberalism will now be far less of an obstacle. We need competence again.

September 14, 2005
11.33 am

After 9/11, not having a national plan in place to cope with disasters that wipe out the capacities of first-responders is inexcusable. Katrina is the scenario that Dick Cheney envisaged minutes after he heard about 9/11: that terrorists could attack a major U.S. city with much more devastating weaponry. That's why we went into Iraq. Four years later, no real plan is in place. We are still on our own. After all that money poured into homeland defense, we still have no capacity to act swiftly to save lives after a major attack. This is not only a betrayal of his campaign promises; it's a betrayal of war leadership; and, much worse, it's an invitation to our enemies to attack. That's why I endorsed his opponent last

November: demonstrated incompetence.

September 23, 2005
7.02 pm

I have been trying to raise the alarm about what has really been going on for a while. But the abuse and torture claims have been dismissed or ignored. But even the torture-denialists will be unable to ignore this new material. It beggars belief.

Specific instances of abuse described in the Human Rights Watch report include severe beatings, including one incident when a soldier allegedly broke a detainee's leg with a metal bat. Others include prisoners being stacked in human pyramids (unlike the human pyramids at Abu Ghraib, the prisoners at Camp Mercury were clothed); soldiers administering blows to the face, chest and extremities of prisoners; and detainees having their faces and eyes exposed to burning chemicals, being forced into stress positions for long periods leading to unconsciousness and having their water and food withheld.

This is not enemy propaganda. This is the testimony of decent American soldiers so appalled by what they were witnessing that they felt compelled, after being ignored by their superiors and the administration, to go directly to senators to get their complaints aired. Rumsfeld must resign. Now.

September 29, 2005
1.53 pm

I don't think most Americans are aware of what really went on at Abu Ghraib, and the depth and extent of the brutality. The reason is that the administration did everything it could to prevent the full record being made public; and its fawning acolytes in the right-wing media did all they could to portray what happened as "frat-house" hazing by "bad apples." That was patently untrue then; and is patently untrue now. Now, a judge, after months of government delays, has bravely upheld the release of the remainder. His argument? "My task is not to defer to our worst fears, but to interpret and apply the law, in this case, the Freedom of Information Act, which advances values important to our society, transparency and accountability in government." Maybe now, we will begin to get accountability for what has been done and is being done in our name in Iraq, with regard to abuse of detainees and violation of the Geneva Conventions. I repeat: Rumsfeld must resign.

October 11, 2005
11.23 am

By allowing chaos to engulf many Iraqi lives, the coalition may have undermined Jihadist appeal by exposing their willingness to slaughter other Muslims in their bid for a new Caliphate. Al Qaeda is as splintered today as it is brutal as it is *dumb*. We may have unintentionally given these murderous fanatics enough rope to hang themselves in Arab and Muslim opinion. It's not that we're safer because we're engaging them there rather than here, as the Bush soundbite goes. It's that by forcing the battle into the heart of the Middle East, rather than in the West, the coalition is exposing internal rifts and dividing the Muslim world into its sane and insane camps. If the sane camp wins, we all win.

The risk, of course, is a widening conflagration between Sunni and Shiite – especially if Iraq degenerates into complete civil war, and Iran backs the Shia and the remaining Sunni autocracies, like Syria, keep funding the Sunni-Jihadist forces. But if we can keep the fledgling Iraqi state somewhat stable, the potential benefit is that by using schismatic divisions in Islam, we can help isolate and undermine al Qaeda and Jihadism in general. If Iraq is the place where moderate Islam finally rebels decisively against the mass-murderers, we will have achieved something very significant. It may take a long time, and the odds are still against us, I'd say. But the strategy is not a crazy one, even if it has emerged from the wreckage of incompetence. Indeed, it may be the best hope we now have.

October 25, 2005
12.01 pm

We are constantly told that the United States does not torture or abuse detainees as a matter of policy. President Bush has told the American people exactly that. Two facts in the news today show otherwise. The first is evidence of how many detainees have actually been tortured to death by the U.S. Over a hundred detainees have died in captivity. The ACLU looked at the records of 44 such deaths and concluded that 21 were homicides and that “at least eight resulted from abusive techniques by military or intelligence officers, such as strangulation or ‘blunt force injuries’, as noted in the autopsy reports.” This is the minimum we are likely to know about.

Now you begin to understand why Bush is for the first time threatening to veto a piece of legislation – the McCain Amendment. If the administration doesn't and would never condone abuse or torture of detainees, why would it want to exempt the CIA from the ban on torture and cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of prisoners? If we are not abusing detainees as a matter of policy, why would the White House be in any way resistant to the amendment? The compromise is that the military will no longer abuse detainees, *as long as the CIA still gets to do it*. In other words, prodded by the Bush administration, the U.S. would actually *legislate* the government's permission to torture for the first time.

McCain is resisting any compromise, as he must. It's one thing to have a rogue president, violating the law and instituting torture and abuse as militarily acceptable. It's another thing to actually give him the cover of the law. One day, Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld will be held accountable for their actions. Let them have no legal defense. Bush and Cheney are also threatening a veto of any independent investigation that would examine their own role in sanctioning torture and abuse in the military. Duh. If you were in their shoes, wouldn't you?

October 31, 2005
10.41 am

We now have the U.S. military's own data on civilian deaths in Iraq. I don't think we'll ever reach consensus on the actual numbers, but every measure agrees on the trend. What is beyond dispute is that the insurgency is now stronger today than it has ever been – if measured by its ability to launch attacks and kill civilians and Iraqi security forces. Money quote:

Iraqi civilians and security forces were killed and wounded by insurgents at a rate of about 26 a day early in 2004, and at a rate of about 40 a day later that year. The rate

increased in 2005 to about 51 a day, and by the end of August had jumped to about 63 a day.

It's easy to dismiss these numbers from a distance, or to say they are a function of the insurgents' failure to kill U.S. troops. You could even argue that this kind of widespread slaughter will help undermine the insurgency – as it murders more and more Muslims, and reveals the nihilism of the enemy. You could argue that the critical indicator is whether the political process is continuing and if the infrastructure can be better protected and rebuilt. At least, those are the more plausible arguments I'm hearing these days, as evidence of progress in Iraq. They're not insane arguments. But imagine if the United States endured such a terrorist casualty rate. If you calibrate for population, imagine an America where 700 civilians or cops are murdered *each day* by insurgents able to operate at will. *One 9/11 a week*. And each week, the number grows. How likely is it that a successful transition to constitutional government can be maintained in such a climate?

November 6, 2005
11.16 am

Two stories in the NYT this morning point to a paradox at the center of the administration's case for war. Since, in my view, they got the big issue right, why did they get the little things so wrong? Two examples: if they knew that the captured Qaeda operative, Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, was fibbing as early as February 2002, why did they include his tainted info in subsequent arguments for war? If they knew the real story behind the tragic death of Pat Tillman, why did they immediately lie about it? The same goes for the Niger connection. In my view, the case for not trusting Saddam with our security was solid without these embellishments. A candid, clear laying out of what we knew and didn't know for sure would have won majority support for war against Saddam. So again, why these cut corners and shaded spin?

The same goes for the absurdly petty attempt to exact revenge on Joe Wilson. To put it bluntly: why did anyone in the administration give a flying turd about Joe Wilson? He was a bit-player, a liar, a non-entity, whose information did not even undermine the very carefully crafted words about Brits, uranium and Africa in the State of the Union. How paranoid, bitter, and defensive do you have to be to do what Libby did (in my view, almost certainly with Cheney's permission)? Worse: these unnecessary fibs, spins, and deceptions have inevitably come back to haunt the very people who committed them – and to weaken public support for a war that it is still critical to win.

It seems to me that we are getting a better picture every day of how this administration screwed up its own war. They were defensive when they should have been candid; they were reckless when they should have been meticulously prepared for every outcome; they were insecure when they should have been forthcoming; they decided to divide, rather than unite the country. None of this means we should follow the anti-war movement and abort the mission. It simply means we have to be very skeptical of the key players in this war – Cheney and Rumsfeld above everyone – and try and prevent them from inflicting more damage on a noble cause.

November 12, 2005
12.14 pm

I'm sympathetic to the president's case that he was not the only one who supported war against Saddam because of the threat of WMDs. The consensus at the time – and it was shared by opponents and supporters of the war – was so overwhelming that Saddam's WMDs were a *premise* of everyone's case, pro and con.

Were we lied to? I see no reason yet to believe we were – in the strong sense that deliberate untruths were consciously uttered. Was the post-9/11 atmosphere sufficient to blind many people to the possibility that they might be wrong about this premise? Certainly, that's the case for me. I wasn't skeptical enough. I followed the groupthink. I shouldn't have. It's also true, I think, that in the effort to ensure that the CIA was doing its job, some around the veep's office and elsewhere may have seized on materials of dubious, if not discredited, validity. In retrospect, they were not skeptical enough either – and they have a much higher responsibility in this respect than bloggers or even Democrats who do not have full access to the full intelligence.

What I'm describing here is a failing, not a sin. It may deserve criticism on the grounds of incompetence, but not, I think, moral condemnation on the grounds of duplicity. The "Bush Lied!" screams are as cheap as they are very hard to substantiate. Moreover, it's easy to get lulled into the fact after four years of no further atrocities on the mainland that we do not face grave dangers. After 9/11, I give government officials a pass on over-estimating threats to the country. Moreover, I don't doubt the sincerity of Bush and Cheney in making their case for war on the WMD grounds (although, again, it's baloney to say that that was the only ground they based their argument on). I'm open to the argument that the administration could have been more careful in their rhetoric. Talk of mushroom clouds was not exactly conducive to calm debate.

But my bottom line is: These guys made a hard call in perilous times for good reasons. It turns out they were also wrong in one critical respect. That's the judgment we have to grapple with – and it's not very emotionally satisfying for either side. Above all, it's not good for the president. In this debate, Bush has to choose between being called a liar or someone who made a profound, if forgivable, misjudgment in the gravest decision a president ever has to make. That's no-win. "Hey, guys, I'm not a liar. I just got the intelligence completely wrong, and waged a pre-emptive war partly on the basis of that mistake. Sorry." Not exactly a strong position.

Oddly enough, I think Bush would have been more easily forgiven by the public if he'd been less defensive about it at the moment the WMD argument collapsed after the invasion. But he refused to acknowledge the obvious, dismissed the embarrassment, tried to change the subject and then just went silent. Once again, he mistook brittleness for strength. These many small decisions not to trust the American people with the full, embarrassing truths about the war has, in the end, undermined trust in the president and therefore support for the war. For that lack of candor, the president is paying dearly. So is the war in Iraq.

December 8, 2005
11.37 am

Next week will be the most critical Iraqi election of them all: one which actually leads to the first, real constitutional, democratically elected government in decades. We still have so much to do; and our guide should be the millions of ordinary Iraqis who do not kill, who are not mass-murderers or religious fanatics, but who want to lead a normal life. After all this, we owe it to them to stand by them. However long it takes. For all the blunders of this blighted administration, it is absurd to expect perfection a mere three years after being liberated from totalitarian dictatorship. Thirty years is a more reasonable timeline. My hope is that U.S. troops, albeit in a minuscule presence compared to today, will still be there in thirty years' time. Just as they are today in Japan, Germany and South Korea.

December 16, 2005
12.15 pm

The bottom line is surely this. With each election, Sunni Arab participation has risen this year. Yesterday, there was a clear indication that some deal had been made between the Sunni Arab political leadership and the insurgents to halt violence. That means that a) Sunni Arabs want in on an equitable Iraq and that b) the insurgency can indeed be destroyed by politics. American policy must now be a relentless attempt to facilitate concessions to the alienated minority, especially on oil rights, that can continue this process.

U.S. ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad has his work cut out; and the dealing will, of course, be determined by the precise result. But this is an amazingly good opportunity for progress. Moreover, I believe as a matter of faith and of history that each time a people votes for its own future, the practice of democracy deepens, the sane majority strengthens, the appeal of extremism diminishes. Our job is now to keep this momentum going, to force the parties to deal, quickly and expeditiously, with their differences, and to lean on the Shiites to understand it is in their interest to make concessions to the people who tormented and oppressed them for so long.

January 2, 2006
12.15 pm

After never sending enough troops to provide order for a peaceful democratic transition in Iraq, the Bush administration is now cutting Iraq's reconstruction funds to zero in the future. Once again: a memory check. Do I recall being told that a critical element in winning over Iraqis would be a massive Marshall-Plan-type effort to rebuild the economy? Was I then reassured that America's military strategy would be primarily to protect infrastructure and to rebuild the shattered energy and electricity grid? Last week saw a major oil refinery succumb to insurgent sabotage. And up to a quarter of all reconstruction funds have been soaked up by security. Now the funding will end altogether. And people wonder why the Bush administration has a trust issue with the American public.

February 19, 2006
4.58 pm

I have no doubt that Frank Fukuyama's essay in the New York Times Magazine will prompt a

lot of debate. For my part, I think he gets his analysis almost perfectly right. In retrospect, neoconservatives (and I fully include myself) made three huge errors in the last few years. The first was to over-estimate the competence of government, especially in extremely delicate areas like WMD intelligence. The shock of 9/11 provoked an understandable but still mistaken over-estimation of the risks we faced. And our fear forced errors into a deeply fallible system. The result was the WMD intelligence debacle, something that did far more damage to the war's legitimacy and fate than many have yet absorbed. Fukuyama's sharpest insight here is into how the near miracle of the end of the Cold War almost certainly lulled many of us into over-confidence about the inevitability of democratic change, and its ease. We got cocky. We should have known better.

The second error was narcissism. America's power blinded many of us to the resentments that such power must necessarily provoke. Those resentments are often as deep among our global acquaintances as enemies – in fact, may be deeper. Acting without a profound understanding of the dangers to the U.S. of inflaming such resentment is imprudent. This is not to say we shouldn't act at times despite them, unilaterally if necessary. Sometimes, the right thing to do will inevitably spawn resentment. We should do it anyway. But that makes it all the more imperative that we get things right, that we bend over backwards to maintain the moral high-ground, and that we make our margin of error as small as possible. The Bush administration, alas, did none of these things. They compounded conceptual errors with still-incomprehensible recklessness, pig-headedness and incompetence in preparing for the aftermath of Saddam.

The final error was not taking culture seriously enough. Fukuyama is absolutely right to note the discrepancy between neoconservatism's skepticism towards government's ability to change culture at home and its naivete when it comes to complex, tribal, sectarian and un-Western cultures, like Iraq's, abroad. We have learned a tough lesson, and it's been a lot tougher for those tens of thousands of dead innocent Iraqis and several thousand killed and injured American soldiers than it is for a few humiliated intellectuals. American ingenuity and pragmatism on the ground may be finally turning things around, but the original policy errors have made their work infinitely harder. The correct response to this is not more triumphalism and spin, but a real sense of shame and sorrow that so many have died because of errors made by their superiors, and by intellectuals like me.

February 22, 2006
4.51 pm

The bombing of the al-Askariya shrine in Samarra may be a turning point, it seems to me. It could be the spark for a full-scale civil war; or it could be a moment for the Sunni Arabs to realize the evil of the Jihadists in their midst. I'm alarmed that the shrine is apparently where the "Hidden Imam" that dominates Ahmadinejad's theology sought refuge centuries ago, and where he is supposed to return. It's like a Protestant bombing of St Peter's. Here's hoping the civil war will not be between the Shia and Sunnis, but between the Sunnis and al Qaeda. I'm not that optimistic, though.

February 24, 2006
2.12 pm

If we were to look on the bright side, we could say the following: the attack on the Samarra

mosque is so heinous an atrocity in its patent blasphemy and attempt to ignite sectarian passions that it may be a good sign. How much more hideous a thing could the insurgency achieve? And yet, Iraq hasn't disintegrated – yet. Today, the government has restored a semblance of calm. How could the insurgents top such a terrible crime? Attacks in Najaf might do the trick, I suppose. But we may now be seeing the maximum damage the insurgency can do to the process of forming a new government. If Iraq can manage to stagger toward a political consensus government after this, then it will have crossed a Rubicon of its own. Maybe it takes staring into the abyss of civil war to pull back from it. I know I may sound Pollyannish, but it is too soon to despair or to relent. And far too soon to pull out.

March 13, 2006
11.59 am

We find out two important things about the Iraq invasion from the NYT:

A United States Marines intelligence officer warned after the bloody battle at Nasiriya, the first major fight of the war, that the Fedayeen would continue to mount attacks after the fall of Baghdad since many of the enemy fighters were being bypassed in the race to the capital. Instead of sending additional troops to impose order after the fall of Baghdad, Mr. Rumsfeld and General Franks canceled the deployment of the First Cavalry Division.

So from the beginning of the invasion, it became clear to many on the ground that the situation was not as expected, that it was more complex, that there was an organized resistance that needed to be tackled, that many more troops were needed. Rumsfeld should have been fired within days of the invasion. That he is still in place is a critical sign that the president still isn't taking winning this war seriously. No one who was committed to victory would still be retaining a man who has presided over the shambles that has been the occupation – and who still doesn't even understand what a shambles it has been. Fire him.

May 24, 2006
2.03 pm

The NYT account today of lawless militias, and a government whose various ministries are gradually gathering private armies makes for sobering reading. You have this vicious cycle of insecurity leading to self-defense, leading to more insecurity. That's why it really did matter to establish order immediately after the invasion; and why, thanks to Rumsfeld and Bush, we have come to the current crisis. But it's not insuperable. Maliki has his work cut out. But we could help. I'm not convinced that military withdrawal or the promise of such withdrawal is what is needed.

June 1, 2006
2.47 pm

The great paradox of Iraq has been there from the start and it still, frankly, confounds me. We were told by the president that the Iraq war was the critical battle in the war on terror, an effort of enormous stakes that we couldn't possibly lose. And then he went to war with half the troops necessary to win, with no plan for the aftermath, and refused to budge even when this became obvious to anyone with eyes and a brain. He says there is no greater friend or

supporter of the troops, yet he sent them to do an impossible task, with insufficient numbers or support or even armor to accomplish the job. He said we face the equivalent of the Third World War and yet he has done nothing to increase the size of the military to meet the task. He said the invasion was to advance the principles of freedom and democracy, and yet he immediately abandoned those principles in our detention policy and has done more damage to the moral standing of the United States than anyone since the Vietnam war. He says he wants to build democracy, and yet he has gutted reconstruction funds, and withdrawn support for building democratic institutions. He said he will keep troops there until the job is done, and yet sustains a policy to draw down the troops as soon as possible.

There has always been a military solution to Iraq. It just required resources to achieve it, to pacify a post-totalitarian society, provide order and the context in which politics can happen. The American public would have approved the resources necessary, and made sacrifices if asked. And yet Bush has deliberately and by conscious choice allowed anarchy and terror to decimate Iraqi civil society. None of this helps the war; and none of it helps him.

There are many times when I am simply baffled by the whole farce. Is he this stupid? Is he this blind? Or was this never a serious venture? Did Cheney and Rumsfeld never want to build a democracy in Iraq, just reduce it to rubble and chaos, while ensuring that Saddam could get no WMDs? Even now, I have no idea. But something here doesn't add up. Incompetence doesn't quite capture the enormity of the failure or the incoherence of the project. And so we stagger on, desperate for hope, but forced to confront the worst-managed war since Vietnam. Except the stakes are far, far higher than Vietnam. And the consequences of failure close to existential. I know that in part because Bush keeps telling us. Is he lying? Or is he just drowning in a job that he is simply unable to do?

June 5, 2006
2.34 pm

We thought we still lived in a constitutional democracy where the Congress regulates the rules of war, as specified in the Constitution itself. No longer. Bush's signing statement on the McCain Amendment was the first signal. Now we have the second. The new version of the Army Field Manual will maintain the removal of any reference to the basic Article 3 in the Geneva Conventions with respect to military detainees. There had been an attempt to reinstate it, on the delusion that we still live in a country where the executive enforces the rule of law. But it was foiled by the usual suspects.

The United States is a rogue nation that practices torture and detainee abuse and does not follow the most basic principles of the Geneva Conventions. It is in violation of human rights agreements and the U.N. Convention against torture. It is legitimizing torture by every disgusting regime on the planet. This is a policy mandated by the president and his closest advisers.

June 24, 2006
2.56 pm

If we do pull out of Iraq too soon, and Maliki is too weak to survive, we will have to deal with the Jihadist-riddled failed state that may emerge (and already has emerged in an embryonic form) in Iraq. Those forces will not decide to leave us alone because we have left. If anything,

the reverse is true. They will claim victory and press the war further onto our shores and elsewhere. The one thing we have to keep in mind is that, however screwed up the Iraq policy has become, the enemy has not gone away. Withdrawal from Iraq would not mean that this existential struggle is over. It would mean that the enemy has been strengthened and ready to take the war against the West (and “heretical” Islam) to a more lethal stage.

July 19, 2006
1.44 pm

Iraq is in a de facto civil war. I don’t know what else to call a hundred deaths a day, and 6,000 every two months. If you occupy a post-totalitarian, bitterly divided country and provide enough troops to adequately police, say, Texas, then you’ll get the civil war Rumsfeld asked for and insisted on. And so, thanks to Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld, the policy of democratization never had a chance of having a peaceful example in Iraq and has instead destabilized the region further – showing for good measure that Islamist parties who gain power democratically will use that power immediately to wage war. Their target will be Jews, and any Muslims who don’t subscribe to their vision of the new Caliphate or whatever theocratic lunacy they are currently pursuing.

August 4, 2006
3.20 am

As pro-Hezbollah rallies overwhelm parts of Baghdad, two of the most influential centrist columnists in America just essentially gave up on Iraq. Tom Friedman wants one last chance for an Iraqi national conference, then withdrawal; David Broder thinks it’s time to cut our losses. He makes this critical point:

If Hezbollah in Lebanon and the insurgents in Iraq really are deadly threats to Israel and the United States, respectively, then those nations should have used their full military might – which is overwhelming – to deal with the menace.

President Bush never took this war seriously enough. That is why we have all but lost it. We failed to find WMDs; we failed to stop the Sunni-Jihadist insurgency; we failed to stop a civil war. We may, however, have helped incite a broader Sunni-Shiite war in the entire region. What’s needed now is a long-term strategy to exploit these sectarian divisions in order to weaken Islamism. In the short-term, redeployment of troops into Kurdish areas is one option. I’m afraid anything more ambitious would be irresponsible, given the gross incompetence of the political leadership (now on vacation).

August 17, 2006
11.25 pm

You’ve probably read Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s account in the Washington Post today of how the Iraq occupation became, in part, an employment agency for the children or relatives of well-connected Republican party operatives or ideologically correct hacks, with much less expertise than others turned down. In the immortal words of Abe Simpson, it’s a story that angers up the blood. The guy in charge? James O’Beirne, the husband of National Review’s Kate O’Beirne. So many pundits married to so many party officials – it gets hard to keep them straight at times.

The only thing that matters in this White House is politics. The substance of policy is secondary. If Bush ran a war with the dedication, ruthlessness and attention to detail that he brings to bear on a political campaign, then he might actually have a strategy for winning one. And, as Jon Chait points out, the more we find out about the spectacular recklessness of this administration's conduct of the war the less persuasive it is that this operation was always doomed to failure. In my view, although the war was always going to be extremely difficult, it wasn't necessarily doomed from the start. It was the administration's relentless, politicized incompetence that doomed it.

October 9, 2006
4.59 pm

"There's a real sense that the clock is ticking, that Bush is desperate for a change, but no one in the White House can bring themselves to say so with this election coming," – an anonymous member of the Iraq study group, headed by James Baker.

So once again, the president is not being candid with the American people about the challenges of this war and the changes he may be about to make. Why? Because *we have an election*, and heaven knows we mustn't address Bush's failure as a war-leader before people vote, must we?

Just think about that for a second. We are entering an election which will have a huge impact on the war in Iraq. And yet the president doesn't want possible changes in policy debated or floated beforehand – because it might suggest his current policy has failed and that the admission might cost him support among the faithful for whom he must appear to be as inerrant as the Bible. So he places his own political exigencies over the interests of the country as a whole at a time of war. Again.

October 9, 2006
6.55 pm

I go back a long way with Fareed Zakaria and respect him enormously. He's a center-right realist, and he thinks the war is essentially over in Iraq and we have lost. I'm not there yet and willing to give the military one last try, if Rumsfeld is fired and a serious new plan for regaining control is unveiled. But if Fareed is giving in, you know it's beyond serious.

October 16, 2006
1.55 pm

Norm Geras, who, like me, despised the Saddam regime and feels no need to apologize for wanting it removed, is nonetheless forced to a brutal provisional conclusion: this war has failed. That does not mean that we should pull out (although some may reasonably infer that). It does mean that the reasons many of us backed this war have been utterly undermined in the last three years:

Had I been able to foresee, in January and February 2003, that the war would have the results it has actually had in the numbers of Iraqis killed and the numbers now daily dying, with the country (more than three years down the line) on the very

threshold of civil war if not already across that threshold, I would not have felt able to support the war and I would not have supported it.

Measured, in other words, against the hopes of what it might lead to and the likelihoods as I assessed them, the war has failed. Had I foreseen a failure of this magnitude, I would have withheld my support. Even then, I would not have been able to bring myself to oppose the war. As I have said two or three times before, nothing on earth could have induced me to march or otherwise campaign for a course of action that would have saved the Baathist regime. But I would have stood aside.

That's where I am too. Before the war, I argued for it along just war grounds: that the risk of inaction was greater than action, that the continuance of sanctions was an immoral burden on the Iraqi people, that we would conduct the war aiming to minimize casualties, and would assume responsibility for the security situation as soon as we toppled Saddam.

But we now know, with the benefit of hindsight, that the risks of inaction were far less than we were told; we know, after Abu Ghraib, Gitmo, Bagram and all the other torture sites, that in the conduct of the war, the Bush administration has wrecked America's moral high ground; we know that our refusal to provide security for Iraqis has led to the deaths of more innocents than even under Saddam. We may not be the ones killing civilians. But we are responsible for the situation in which such killings can occur with impunity. Those of us who supported this war cannot wash our hands of the blood of tens of thousands of innocents it has now claimed. Our intentions may have been good. But we misjudged this administration. And we misjudged the extent of the collapse of Iraqi civil society in the 1990s.

That changes the moral equation. I stand by my good-faith belief that ridding the world of Saddam's tyranny was a great and important thing. I even stand by my naive but sincere faith in the Bush administration in 2002. But I was wrong, as events have proven. And the human carnage in Iraq today, taking place because the U.S. refused to provide order after the invasion, renders the justice of the war deeply compromised. A war that was not, it turns out, the last resort; a war that has authorized torture; a war that has led to a civilian casualty rate of around 7,000 a month; a war that has unleashed far more terrorism than it has stifled: whatever else this is, it is not the just war some of us once supported. It is in another category now.

That does not mean our moral responsibility is to abandon Iraq even further. It may require the opposite. But it does mean that we have witnessed a moral failure on an epic scale. I cannot see how voters with consciences can reward those who let it happen.

October 17, 2006
3:39 pm

I hear reports of a serious rift between Bush and Maliki. The awful truth seems to be: Maliki cannot restrain the militias; the sectarian violence is getting worse, not better; and yet Maliki is resisting partition or a big new infusion of U.S. troops. I have to say that the rumors of a Bush-backed coup actually reassured me a little. Not because I'd support it – but merely because it suggests that finally the White House seems to understand how dire the situation is. I have a sinking feeling, however, that their fundamental concern is not Iraq itself, but the

effect it will have on the November elections. God knows what lies beyond that horizon. But if the Democrats control one or both Houses, the Iraq debate will become electric.

October 21, 2006
1.17 pm

I'm well into Bob Woodward's book, *Plan Of Attack*, and what's striking is how many people in the government warned very clearly that this was *not* going to be easy – and they were ignored or fired or lost traction in internal fighting. The interesting question – unanswerable but also essential to ask – is obvious, and has been wrestled with elsewhere. Was this project always doomed or did the execution doom it? I'm still struggling with that question. Woodward's evidence suggests that the incompetence and recklessness – almost carelessness – at the top was so staggering that historians will have a hard time separating out the variables for failure.

But it doesn't mean it was ever "comparatively easy." I made the dumb error of thinking that the administration would never leap into such a scenario with no real plan for the aftermath. I made the error of believing these people had even a minimal sense of responsibility. My only defense is that I have tried to avoid that error ever since.

III

Regret

October 31, 2006
2.34 pm

I have come to see that many, many liberals are indeed my brothers and my sisters. And increasing numbers of conservatives as well, thank God. For some on the far left, Bush could never have done any right, ever. I'm not going to exculpate the hate-filled parts of the far-left. But many, many others on the left were right about these people in power; and I was wrong. I threw some smug invective their way and, in retrospect, I am ashamed of it. Sure, I recognized my error before the last election, but that doesn't excuse it. Sure, some of it was just misunderstanding each other, in a climate of great fear, and some of it was just my arrogance that I was right. But that doesn't excuse it all either. *The Conservative Soul* is an attempt to rescue something from the wreckage – an atonement of sorts – and to move forward.

October 31, 2006
5.39 pm

Fareed Zakaria has a must-read essay in this week's Newsweek. We cannot leave Iraq prematurely, but neither do we have much chance of staying without making matters worse unless we threaten to leave in the near future. My own fear is that our only realistic option is the following, endorsed by Fareed:

There is one shift that the United States itself needs to make: we must talk to Iraq's neighbors about their common interest in security and stability in Iraq. None of these countries – not even Syria and Iran – would benefit from the breakup of Iraq, which could produce a flood of refugees and stir up their own restive minority populations. Our regional gambit might well lead to nothing. But not trying it, in the face of so few options, reflects a bizarrely insular and ideological obstinacy.

We may have to open up negotiations with Tehran and Damascus. Both regimes are despicable. But our interests in stabilizing Iraq are the same as theirs. Call it realism's revenge.

November 1, 2006
8.40 pm

George W. Bush just gave the most powerful reason for voting Democratic next Tuesday. He has reiterated unconditional support for the two architects of the chaos in Iraq, Cheney and Rumsfeld. He intends to keep Rumsfeld in his job until 2008! Why not a medal of freedom while he's at it?

Let me put this kindly: anyone who believes that Donald Rumsfeld has done a "fantastic job" in Iraq is out of his mind. The fact that such a person is president of the United States is beyond disturbing. But then this is the man who told Michael Brown he was doing a "heckuva job." And, yes, our Iraq policy begins to look uncannily like the Katrina response. The president, in other words, has just proved that he is utterly unhinged from reality, in a state of denial truly dangerous for the world. He needs an intervention. Think of this election as an intervention against a government in complete denial and capable of driving the West off a cliff. You can't merely abstain now. Bush just raised the stakes. And he must be stopped.

November 8, 2006
5:36 pm

Watching the president's post-election press conference, we have finally gotten to see what happens when George W. Bush is forced to face reality. It wasn't pretty. He was prickly from the word go, defensive, and also revealing. He was trying to say (I think) that he had already decided to fire Rumsfeld last week, even as he was insisting that Rummy would stay for two more years. So Bush's own spin is that he was lying through his teeth last week. Good to have that confirmed in his own words.

The removal of the increasingly deranged Rumsfeld is, of course, great news. This blog has been calling for such a move for close to two years. Frankly, I doubt it would have happened without what Bush called the "thumping" of last night. But it's a start. If Bush were truly interested in reaching out, he would have picked a Democrat to replace him. I'm not sure what to make of Gates. But Rummy's removal shows we do not have a complete nutcase in the White House.

November 8, 2006
9:35 pm

Rumsfeld just compared himself to Churchill. Yep: still clinical. The truth is: it was Rumsfeld who little understood and was unfamiliar with the actual conflict he was tasked with managing. It was not too "complex for people to comprehend." It was relatively easy to comprehend. If you invade a post-totalitarian country and disband its military, you better have enough troops to keep order. We didn't. Rumsfeld refused to send enough. When this was made clear to him and to everyone, he still refused. His arrogant belief in a military that didn't need any actual soldiers was completely at odds with the actual task in Iraq. But he preferred to sit back as tens of thousands of Iraqis were murdered and thousands of U.S. troops died rather than to check his own ego.

So let me put this as simply as I can: Rumsfeld has blood on his hands – American and Iraqi blood. He also directly ordered and personally monitored the torture of military detainees. He secured legal impunity for his own war crimes, but that doesn't mean the Congress shouldn't investigate more fully what he authorized. He remains one of the most incompetent defense secretaries in history (McNamara looks good in comparison). But he is also a war criminal: a torturer who broke the laws of this country. The catastrophe in Iraq will stain him for ever. His record of torture has indelibly stained the United States.

November 29, 2006
2.18 pm

Rich Lowry finally comes out of denial about Bush:

Bush simply has failed to run his war. Historian Eliot Cohen describes how, in contrast, the best American wartime president conducted himself: "Lincoln had not merely to select his generals, but to educate, train and guide them. To this end he believed that he had to master the details of war, from the technology to the organization and movement of armies, if only to enable himself to make informed judgments about general officers." Bush has taken the opposite approach and - for all his swagger and protectiveness of executive prerogatives - is becoming a disturbing study in lassitude in the executive branch.

I did all I could to give this president the benefit of every doubt, until, in the weeks after the Iraq invasion and the torture revelations, it became impossible to continue to do so. Four years later, I think we now all sadly know the answer to the question of whether we had the right leader at the right time.

The Iraq failure, I should add, does not mean surrender. It means a tactical retreat from a dreadful error in order to fight again. But not recognizing it as an irretrievable failure at this point is pure fantasy. In war, we cannot afford fantasy. We need strategy, based on a cold, hard empirical look at where we are. You think Churchill would have advised fighting on to retain Dunkirk? The choices are as Tom Friedman puts them today:

10 months or 10 years. Either we just get out of Iraq in a phased withdrawal over 10 months, and try to stabilize it some other way, or we accept the fact that the only way it will not be a failed state is if we start over and rebuild it from the ground up, which would take 10 years. This would require reinvading Iraq, with at least 150,000 more troops, crushing the Sunni and Shiite militias, controlling borders, and building Iraq's institutions and political culture from scratch.

Given our military constraints, the message of the last election, and the inadequacy of presidential leadership, I'm compelled to say: 10 months.

December 2, 2006
7.37 pm

Both National Review and the Weekly Standard take aim at the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group this week. But when you examine what the Kristol-Kagan team sees as the alternative to a gradual retreat from the South and Anbar into Kurdistan, you can't help wondering how serious they really are. Money quote:

We hope that [Bush] will now take the steps necessary to accomplish his stated objectives in Iraq, including a substantial increase in the number of U.S. forces in Baghdad and throughout the contested parts of the country, as well as a long overdue increase in the total size of American ground forces so that higher force levels in Iraq can be sustained.

How much higher would make a difference? At this point, close to 50,000 to 100,000 extra troops to halt the centrifugal force of societal disintegration in Iraq. Does the Weekly Standard seriously believe that is either politically or militarily possible with the urgency necessary? Of course not. Would, say, another 20,000 troops work in a pitched battle with Sadrite forces to retake parts of Baghdad? Unlikely – and with massive casualties probably prompting an uprising in the South. Anbar is all but gone. The South is a battleground for various Shiite militias and sending U.S. troops in to police the conflict is madness. But even if you reduced troops in the South and West, and focused on 20,000 more troops just for Baghdad, it's a stretch. As even Fred Kagan acknowledges:

It is certainly true that only the 20,000 or so troops now programmed to deploy to Iraq in the spring are ready to go. Others could be made ready only in months, and would require accelerated training schedules.

We need at least 50,000 NOW. The only way to do that is sending untrained and ill-prepared or exhausted forces into a combat zone as chaotic and as opaque and as deadly as urban warfare in Baghdad. It would mean re-taking Baghdad three years after we did the first time, with far fewer advantages. And the massive surge in U.S. casualties it would mean would provoke massive opposition at home. If Rumsfeld and Cheney and Bush had done this three years ago, it might have had a chance. But they were too arrogant to do what was obviously needed when it mattered, and the window of opportunity is over. To ask for such a radical re-upping of the ante now – after the American public's patience has been exhausted and the Iraqi population has been massacred and thereby embittered on a large scale – is simply a non-starter.

The attempt to belittle the efforts of Baker-Hamilton is therefore pure positioning. In Margaret Thatcher's phrase, there is tragically no alternative to some sort of retrenchment and retreat right now. I agree we need an effort to expand the military by several divisions. That was Al Gore's position in 2000, by the way, the candidate the Weekly Standard hounded as insane and weak. It was Kerry's position in 2004, another candidate the Standard smeared as Jane Fonda in drag. Maybe a period of retrenchment and rebuilding of US forces could mean a new offensive in a year or so. But the idea that it can be accomplished swiftly enough now to make a difference in a "country" that has already disintegrated into Hobbesian hell is pure fantasy, and Bill Kristol and Bob Kagan must know it.

There is a mood on the right at this moment that is not entirely rational. They are lashing out at the people who can rescue them from the folly of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld policy in Iraq. They are viciously attacking those who have had the temerity to explain why they lost the last election. And they are throwing the vilest of epithets at James Baker. Please. This is not 1991. They are as graceless in defeat now as they were hubristic in premature victory three years ago. Or to put it more precisely, they are exactly what National Review accuses the Baker-Hamilton Commission of being: "driven by their own internal dynamics rather than by any connection to the real world."

It's over, guys. Your beloved Bush administration botched this so badly it's irrecoverable. You enabled them. You never fully took them on when it would have counted – and you trashed those of us who did. You knew this before the 2004 election and still cynically played

the anti-Kerry card for all it was worth, telling yourselves you could sway Rummy after the election. Well, you couldn't and you didn't. Your policy was sabotaged by a defense secretary who never believed in it and by a president too weak and out-of-it to rein him in. Get over yourselves and recognize that this dream has died. And we have to fight the nightmare we now face rather than pretend your dream is still even on life support. That's the patriotic responsibility at this point. And no, I'm not impugning your patriotism. I'm asking you to place it before your shattered dreams.

December 5, 2006
3.23 pm

One feels a sense of great relief to hear the candor of Bob Gates in his Senate hearings. We are losing the war in Iraq; and our incompetence may have triggered the beginning of a massive regional conflagration. At least we now know that someone in this administration is grappling with reality rather than fantasy, that someone has some modicum of responsibility. At last.

My own darkest fear is that the Middle East is at the beginning of its own period that Europe experienced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: a massive, sectarian, regional bloodbath. I hope this won't happen. I hope to be proven wrong again. But I fear the process is already underway. The best hope for Iraq is perhaps a temporary surge in U.S. troops to make one last effort at a relatively peaceful de facto partition, before the near-inevitable U.S. withdrawal and subsequent involvement of Saudis and Egyptians in support of the Sunnis and the Iranians on the side of the Shia. (At this point, I'd be relieved if we can save the Kurds.)

The major powers in the Middle East, in other words, are on the verge of behaving like the major powers in Europe centuries ago: they will act as expressions of national interest but also of sectarian theology. And they will fight a terrible war before they agree on a chastened peace.

The difference between now and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe is that this regional war within a divided monotheism will take place in a time of vastly greater technological capacity for destruction. So the consequences of such a war may be far more ominous than the massacres, burnings and civil wars that beset Europe in the past. The silver lining of this terribly dark prospect is that catastrophe may strike sooner rather than later, and that only through such a catastrophe will Muslim Arabs and Persians realize that their best interests lie in forgoing the bromides of fundamentalist certainties for the messy, secular, banal success of liberal democracy. So what took Europe two centuries may take the Middle East a decade.

America's mistake is to believe it can impose this learning curve on another civilization – in a speed-reading course. We cannot.

December 7, 2006
1.01 pm

I'm still reading and absorbing the Iraq Study Group (ISG) report. Here's my first basic impression. It's absolutely not more of the same. It's a clear declaration that we're leaving.

Money quote from Lee Hamilton to ABC News:

We did not find one single person, and we interviewed over 200 people, who thought we should stay the course ... The Iraqis must be under no misapprehension here. We are going to pull out our combat troops out of Iraq in a responsible way over a period of time and they have to begin to accept the new mission and we have to begin to accept the primary mission of training and embedding troops.

But it's also a very realist "Hail Mary" which requires so many simultaneous things to happen right that its chance of success, even using the Baker-Hamilton premises, can only be in the 20 percent range. Overhaul Iraqi army training to wean it from sectarian loyalties and give it a capacity to enforce peace on the whole country? Get Iran and Syria to back off? Do all this while we've declared we have no intention of sticking around for much longer than a year in any real force strength? And do it all while civil war spirals further? Yeah, right.

But the key claim of the ISG is that the only alternative to this – the current strategy with the current force levels, however massaged – has a *zero* percent chance of success.

We have two awful options, it seems to me. First: throw everything we've got at this thing, do all the Baker-Hamilton commission wants (including the Iran and Syria gambits) *except withdraw* troops. But merely maintaining current force levels is, as Baker argues, a non-starter. If Bush wants to pursue something called "victory" in his head, then the acid test will be his troop commitment. He needs to embrace much of Baker-Hamilton *and* add more than 50,000 and probably closer to 75,000 new troops into the theater – in the next three or four months. And why *not* talk to the regimes in Syria and Iran? If they are what the Bush administration says they are, the diplomacy will go nowhere, and we can then be seen to have at least tried. The new troops should then be used to prop up Maliki, train the Iraqi army, and finally police the borders. No timelines. Full Metal McCain.

If we don't do that, we should leave – rapidly, and let the real war begin. It may already have. I don't see a third way working, especially given the incompetence in the White House, the profound weakness of Maliki, and the complete lack of domestic confidence in this administration's conduct of the war. Asking young Americans to die for a slower, longer civil war between Sunnis and Shia is, at this point, the real non-starter. In fact, a third way may make us even more complicit in the conflict we will eventually have to escape from. That's my first take, open to revision and correction. Double down and deal; or get out in a matter of months.

December 10, 2006
6.18 pm

In my description of our only two real options in Iraq as "double-down" or complete withdrawal, I of course have to grapple with the moral consequences of a swift withdrawal. A reader writes cogently:

You've been remarking recently on your blog about how our only options in Iraq are a) doubling-up on troops, or b) 'getting out completely, and finally giving the region the civil and religious war it so obviously and deeply wants'. This last option strikes

me as glib and shortsighted. Most Iraqis don't want civil or regional war, they want stability. It's a minority of thugs with guns and bombs who want civil war. Our invasion set loose all of these thugs, so don't we have a moral obligation to at least limit the damage? In other words, if option a) (doubling-up) is politically impossible, doesn't 'stay the course' (slow-burn civil war) remain a less irresponsible option than complete withdrawal (fast-burn civil war, possibly raging for years)?

Most estimates conclude that the current sectarian violence is killing tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians a year. Well, the Iran-Iraq war killed a million people. I fear that withdrawing merely out of frustration with Bush's incompetence and Iraq's inability to police itself would mean consigning millions of ordinary Iraqis to total anarchy rather than limited anarchy. The difference between those two states of anarchy could be hundreds of thousands of lives.

The "slow burn and fail" option may indeed restrain the toll of the civil war and ethnic cleansing in the short run. But that ethnic cleansing is happening anyway. And in order for the U.S. to actively stop the civil war, we would have no option but to get involved on one side or the other, depending on the circumstances, and provoke those sectarian hatreds into targeting us as well. The danger of this is that we actually get ourselves embroiled in an insane new Thirty Years War in which we have no real stake. By that I mean no sane American cares for theological purposes whether the Shiites or Sunnis deserve to win, or the minute details of their ancient hatreds. We have already lost treasure and human beings in the attempt to build a democracy where no one with any power wants it. The one chance we had – a quick, overwhelming invasion, a long and lucky process of nation-building, winning over the people with massive investment and the establishment of order – has been lost.

I want to believe we can endure and win. But a conservative looks at the world as it is, not as he wants it to be. The small chance we had of achieving our goals of a stable, democratic Iraq is gone for ever. Maybe there is a chance to leverage the neighboring powers' fears of a regional bloodbath into some kind of deal to stabilize the "country". But that is a long shot, and risks enmeshment in a civil war that is increasingly hard to control or even monitor.

January 6, 2007
4.04 pm

The execution of Saddam is turning into a much bigger deal. For all the painstaking attempt to conduct a trial that represented justice, the execution made it all look like a sectarian lynching. Actually, strike that. In the end, it *was* a sectarian lynching. And the lynchers were the people we are now supporting in government in Baghdad.

Don't get me wrong. I loathe Saddam with every ounce of my being, and am relieved he is now gone. But my hatred of him makes me even more angry that we have enabled him to secure a final victory. The manner of his death means a deepening of the sectarian vortex into which the president is about to send more young Americans. It has rendered a regional Shia-Sunni war much more likely. It has destabilized many other Sunni governments; and given new life to the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. It has made the very idea of a functioning national Iraqi government almost unthinkable. In its way, it captures the entire effort that is and was the Iraq war: well-meant, catastrophically run, and ultimately overtaken by the

pathologies that make the Arab world what it is.

January 8, 2007
9.55 am

We've heard of plans for partition, redeployment to Kurdistan, a massive new infusion of troops as a game-changer, re-emphasizing the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, talking to Iran and Syria, and on and on. Even those who favor doubling down are nonetheless skeptical of whether it is feasible, and whether an escalation of a mere 20,000 can do anything but compound the problem. Among those who believe that a minimum of 50,000 more troops are needed are such luminaries as John Keegan, a conservative military scholar. Others suggest up to 100,000. And in airing the realist case for speedy withdrawal, I think I've been candid about the potential for a much wider war than we now have. I just fear that war is coming soon anyway, and that it would be worse for the U.S. to be enmeshed in the middle of it or, even worse, allied with one side of it.

You want anti-American Jihadism brought to fever pitch? Then ally U.S. soldiers with Shiite militias in Iraq. Every Sunni fanatic will be lining up to kill us. Or, ally with the Sunni minority in Iraq. And then you bolster Ahmadinejad and put the Shiites on our tail. Only if we bring overwhelming force to the country and pacify it effectively can we hope to extricate anything worthwhile. Even then, the odds are long. By overwhelming, I mean a minimum of 50,000. It doesn't look as if Bush is envisaging anything like this. Without it, the reconstruction money is meaningless.

Iraq is in a civil war; we lost the momentum of liberation in late 2003; the only people who have the capacity to run Iraq as a normal country have fled or been butchered. The neocons, it seems to me, cannot have it both ways. When it comes to the Palestinians, they tell us that Arab culture is too irredentist and irrational to negotiate with. When it comes to Iraq, they seem to believe that the deepest historic divide in Muslim history, deepened and intensified by the Iraq fiasco, in the middle of a civil war, given passionate new life by the Shiite execution of Saddam, can now be overcome with 20,000 more U.S. troops.

January 11, 2007
12.56 am

The premise of the president's address to the nation, and of the strategy, is that there is a national democratic government in Baghdad, defending itself against Jihadist attacks. The task, in the president's mind, is therefore to send more troops to defend such a government. But the reality facing us each day is a starkly different one from the scenario assumed by the president. The government of which Bush speaks, to put it bluntly, does not exist. The reality illumined by the lynching of Saddam is that the Maliki government is a front for Shiite factions and dependent for its future on Shiite death squads. U.S. support for the government is not, therefore, a defense of democracy in a unified country, whatever our intentions. It is putting the lives of American soldiers in defense of the Shiite side in an increasingly brutal civil war.

What we will discover in the next few months, therefore, is simply whether the entire premise of this strategy is actually true. The president is asking us to find this out one more time. He seems to disbelieve the overwhelming evidence on the ground – that the dynamic

has changed beyond recognition. His intellectual rubric – democracy versus terror – has not changed to deal with fast-changing events, or to take account of the sectarian dynamic that his appallingly managed occupation has spawned. And so his strategy is no surprise. It would have made sense in 2004, when so many of us were begging for more troops, only to be dismissed as fair-weather warriors, terror-supporters, or lily-livered wimps. We were right. This president was disastrously wrong – and clung to his disproved strategy in the face of overwhelming evidence, supported by the Republican right regardless, until it simply became impossible to sustain the lie any longer.

If the president tonight had outlined a serious attempt to grapple with this new situation – a minimum of 50,000 new troops as a game-changer – then I'd eagerly be supporting him. But he hasn't. 21,500 U.S. troops is once again, I fear, just enough troops to lose. The only leverage this president really has left is the looming regional war that withdrawal would bring. Yes, if we leave, the civil war will take off. And if we stay, with this level of troops, the civil war will also take off. One way, we get enmeshed in the brutal civil war in the region. One way, we get to face them another day, and perhaps benefit by setting them against each other, and destabilizing Iran. That's the awful choice this president has brought us to. Under these circumstances, I favor withdrawal, while of course, hoping that a miracle could take place. But make no mistake: a miracle is what this president needs. And a miracle is what we will now have to pray for.

January 11, 2007
5.17 pm

A key premise of the president's speech is that the alternative is so horrifying we have no choice but to press on. But this assumption, like the fixed WMD assumption before the war, risks freezing our thought and immobilizing strategy. The assumption deserves close examination. I've argued that withdrawal to Kurdistan, allowing the Sunni and Shia forces in Iraq to reach their own settlement through a real civil war with a real outcome, is something we need to think through. It may be less damaging to our interests than the surge. Its most important aspect is the way it changes the narrative of the war from Osama's "Islam vs the West" to "Islam vs itself". I think that's a strategic game-changer that may redound to our long-term advantage. It requires a United States prepared to let go of trying to control the region and stabilize it. I fear the president is unable to even think in such terms. But that doesn't mean we cannot.

January 17, 2007
1.20 pm

One of the fresh tragedies of the Bush Iraq debacle is that the military team now finally preparing to try to calm Baghdad is, by all accounts, superb. I've tried to get a variety of experts to say something bad about Petraeus, but to no avail. He has swiftly assembled a team to help him succeed; the new defense secretary is not a flaming asshole, which makes a change from the last six years; the counter-insurgency doctrine championed by Petraeus has already met success in Mosul. If this team had been put together in 2003, we could be looking at a totally different scenario in Iraq today.

But this is not 2003, alas. It isn't even December 2006, when the advocates of a surge spoke of 80,000 more troops. There is, moreover, no viable national government upon which to

premise any serious counter-insurgency effort. Above all, there is no commitment to a serious, indefinite, long-term counter-insurgency effort. Both secretary of state Rice and defense secretary Gates have signaled a desire to draw down U.S. troop levels by the late summer; and the Sadr militias can read the papers. As the surge advocates were saying not so long ago: a new push with too few troops and a swift deadline is the *worst of all possible options*, however talented and well-intentioned the commander.

Petraeus may meet some success, of course, and we should all be praying he does. One perfectly possible scenario is that the violence ebbs in Baghdad in the next few months, as the militias and other insurgents melt away and bide their time in the face of more U.S. troops. Sadr City will be left largely unmolested. After this lull, the president will declare something that isn't obvious defeat. And when the U.S. troops depart, we will go back to the chaotic *status quo ante*. Which is why, I fear, this entire effort is less about the future of Iraq than a short-term domestic political gambit by the president and what's left of his party. I still want a miracle to happen, of course. But what Bush is devising is the appearance of a miracle, rather than the reality. And he's using the lives of young Americans to conjure it up.

January 31, 2007
4.26 pm

The other night, I watched an astonishing British documentary set in Iraq in the days after the invasion for the following year or so. It followed the life of a man who called himself "The Liberace of Baghdad." He was a piano player in a hotel, a Christian, a womanizer, and a chain-smoker. The documentary managed to convey more graphically than anything I have ever seen the chilling terror of a slowly collapsing social order, enabled and made possible by Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld.

We saw it through a sane, civilized Iraqi's eyes – and witnessed the pain he felt at seeing what was left of his country torn to pieces by preventable anarchy. But what struck me most was how I had almost forgotten the idealism that once surrounded this war, the hope that it could lead to a better world, the knowledge that a terrible evil, Saddam, had been removed, the chance for progress in the heart of the Middle East. Time plays tricks on our minds; and I had forgotten the great optimism I had only recently felt.

My response to the documentary? Renewed, indelible shame that I had supported an administration so manifestly unwilling or unable to do the right thing. I should have known better. I was far too naive, and caught up in the desire to fight back against Islamist evil to recognize the callower, casual evil I was enabling in the Bush administration. When I hear of the thousands of innocents who have been killed, tortured and maimed in the Rumsfeld-created vortex, my rage at what this president did is overwhelmed by my shame at having done whatever I did to enable and even cheerlead it, before the blinders were ripped from my eyes. This war has destroyed the political integrity of Iraq. But it has also done profound damage to the moral integrity of America.

February 2, 2007
3.58 pm

I confidently predict that the following phrase from Charles Krauthammer will become the new neoconservative mantra on Iraq:

We midwifed their freedom. They chose civil war.

And the truth is: it isn't untrue. Blaming the U.S. entirely for the deep ethnic divides and profound sectarian hatreds in Iraq is preposterous. But speaking of the civil war in Iraq as if the Bush administration had nothing to do with it is equally preposterous. Even the most optimistic of pro-war thinkers were aware of the potential for sectarian warfare once Saddam had been deposed. I remember writing for a long time after the invasion that we should be happy that the most likely thing had not yet happened: a civil war. So we knew it was a risk; and we knew we had to act quickly to prevent it. We didn't. As the insurgency took shape, Dick Cheney was more interested in smearing Joe Wilson than in preventing an incipient civil war. Moreover, the invading army has a moral responsibility to maintain order. What Charles ignores is how complete anarchy is the oxygen necessary for civil war to spark into a conflagration. When there is no central authority, people immediately seek security from their family, tribe or faith-community. By refusing to send enough troops to maintain order, the Bush administration provided the timber, fuel and context for a sectarian fire. No, they didn't strike the match. But their negligence gave Zarqawi his opening. And he took advantage of it. Zarqawi won this war – because Bush was too clueless and arrogant to win it (and Bush didn't kill Zarqawi when he had a clear chance).

Recall also how patient the Shia in Iraq were for so long. Constantly goaded by Sunni terrorists and al Qaeda, they tolerated attacks for three years before snapping around a year ago, after the Samarra mosque bombing. So sorry, Charles. If you think you can get the Bush administration off the hook for the past four years and blame everything on Arab pathologies, you're dreaming.

February 25, 2007
12.20 pm

Obama was right. I was wrong. This quote from 2002 is impressive:

I am actually pleased with how things evolved from where I thought they were going to be three months ago, in the sense that I think that whether because of Colin Powell's intervention or pressure of allies across Europe that President Bush went through the U.N. and obtained Security Council resolution calling for aggressive inspections in Iraq. I don't think there's anyone who imagines that Saddam Hussein is a good guy or someone who isn't a threat to stability in the region as well as his own people.

But I also think that us rushing headlong into a war unilaterally was a mistake and may still be a mistake. I think that we have to give those inspections a chance. Part of what's gonna be difficult to anticipate by the time of the 2004 primary is whether in fact the United States has invaded Iraq, whether the overthrow of Saddam is complete, if it has happened, then at that point what the debate is really gonna be about is: what's our long-term commitment there? How much is it gonna cost? What does it mean for us to rebuild Iraq? How do we stabilize and make sure this count doesn't splinter between the Shia and the Kurds and the Sunnis? There's gonna be a whole host of critical issues and I think that's gonna be something that whoever the

Democratic nominee or those who're seeking the nomination is gonna have to be able to grapple with.

If it had come to me in an up or down vote as it came, I think I would've agreed with our senior senator Dick Durbin and voted 'nay.' And the reason is not that I don't think we should have aggressive inspections; what I would've been concerned about was a *carte blanche* to the administration for a doctrine of preemptive strikes that I'm not sure sets a good precedent.

March 6, 2007
11.38 am

I have no doubt Petraeus is doing his best and we should all wish him well. Maliki has managed to talk the Shiites into chilling for a while as well, which is a temporarily good thing. But the last two days reveal the evil of the Sunni and al Qaeda forces in Iraq as starkly as ever. We have news of an attack on a Shiite mosque in Hillah, with possibly 90 dead. Yesterday, they targeted the book market, providing this heart-wrenching quote from a local poet:

There are no Americans or Iraqi politicians here — there are only Iraqi intellectuals who represent themselves and their homeland, plus stationery and book dealers. Those who did this are like savage machines intent on harvesting souls and killing all bright minds.

Yes, they are: they target mosques where another religious tradition worships; and a market where free people can have free thoughts. This is theocratic terrorism at its purest. In our absolutely justified anger at the incompetence of Bush, it remains a necessity to remind ourselves that he is not the cause of this evil; he has just allowed it to flourish because he is out of his depth and because his advisers never understood the central importance of order as the *sine qua non* of any occupation. The evil is the same evil that killed so many on 9/11. It is religious violence, driven by fundamentalist certainty.

The carnage forces us to answer the question of what to do. The surge cannot and will not stop this evil — unless it is a surge five times the size of the one we have and in a climate that existed three years ago, not now. You have to be clinically deluded, i.e. the president, to believe that this hasn't gone past the point of no return.

March 20, 2007
12.01 pm

It's well worth reading Hitch's account of the decision-making timeline before the war. It's worth it because it reminds us that there never was an easy solution to the problem of Saddam Hussein. Iraq was going to be a headache for the civilized world - and a living hell for most of its inhabitants - war or no war. After 9/11, concern about Saddam's potential for possibly terrifying mischief was not misplaced. And yes, the U.N. had been grotesquely impotent in enforcing its own resolutions. Much of what was motivating the French and Russian governments was contemptible. But ... there are obvious weaknesses in Hitch's case. Here's one key sentence that now reads a little hollow:

All Western intelligence agencies, including French and German ones quite uninfluenced by Ahmad Chalabi, believed that Iraq had actual or latent programs for the production of WMD.

That was not the basis on which we went to war. If the president had told us that he could only safely verify that Iraq had "latent programs for the production of WMD," then his case would have been far more honest but far less cogent. We were told rather that there was no doubt that stockpiles of WMD existed. We were even led to believe he had some nuclear capacity. If the actual, unrigged intelligence data had been presented at the U.N., if the statements of the president, vice-president, defense secretary et al had been carefully parsed to ensure that we knew exactly the knowable risks of action and of inaction, then a ramped-up inspections regime might well have been preferable to war. We may not have achieved such a regime without sending troops to Saddam's doorstep. But that leverage might have enabled us to achieve more effective containment, while supporting Shiites and Kurds by indirect means. The threat of imminent war might even have brought the Russians and French into backing a tougher containment strategy. This is hindsight, of course. But hindsight is exactly what Hitch is asking us to use.

But the real point my friend doesn't mention is much more important and much more damning for us war supporters. The real question is: if we knew then what we know now about the caliber, ethics, competence and integrity of the president and his aides, would we have entrusted them to wage this war? Would we have trusted their presentation of pre-war intelligence? And the answer to that, I venture to guess for my friend as well, is: no. If we had known that war meant sending Iraq into a vortex of uncontrollable violence; if we had known that proving Rumsfeld's theories would turn out to be more important than providing basic law, order and security for the invaded country; if we had known that this president would unleash torture indiscriminately throughout the conflict and destroy America's moral standing in the world; if we knew that there was no post-invasion plan; if we had known all of this - would we still have supported the war?

Of course not.

Some of this was our own fault - our own psychological captivity to the trauma of 9/11, our own excessive trust in a president many saw through already, our own good intentions with respect to Iraqis' suffering taken to levels where self-delusion was involved. But some of it, we now know, was also a function of being misled. Quite how we were misled and how consciously is still not entirely clear. But that we were misled is indisputable. Why more war supporters are not angrier about this deception escapes me.

The supporters of this war therefore fall into two camps: those of us who deluded ourselves, and those of us who deluded others. They are not mutually exclusive groups. But the moral burden for this hideous, brutal war falls primarily on those in the administration whose responsibility it ultimately was, who had access to intelligence the rest of us didn't, who were privy to arguments the rest of us never knew about till later.

Yes, I am glad Saddam is gone. Yes, I believe my own intentions before the war were honorable, if mistaken. Yes, I believe Hitch's were as well - and those of many others. But we were fools not to see the true nature of the people we were trusting; and too enraptured by

our own sense of righteousness to realize that we could have been wrong. And wrong we were.

April 12, 2007
10.53 am

There is much in McCain's speech to applaud, even while its historical poignancy remains. Unlike many of his fellow Republicans, he has exhibited patriotic candor about the appalling leadership that brought us into this mess. But his presidential ambitions prevent him from naming the truly guilty men: the duplicitous Cheney, the arrogant Rumsfeld, and the glib, clueless Bush. McCain says this:

For the first time in four years, we have a strategy that deals with how things really are in Iraq and not how we wish them to be.

That is a brutal indictment of a president he eagerly supported for re-election. And yet support him he did with an embrace that only helped sustain the madness of King George (including the right to torture). And that's why the Democrats have a huge advantage going into the next election. They don't have to defend Bush's record, or Bush himself. Painfully, McCain still does.

The war in Iraq has crippled our ability to confront Tehran and it has siphoned resources away from Afghanistan and Pakistan, where al Qaeda is rebuilding unhindered. It is crippling the military, making it less capable of dealing with threats elsewhere. It may be that extricating ourselves from the Iraq disaster is indeed the only way to grapple with the wider problems of the war against us. I'm not saying this is obvious; but it's surely debatable – and the balance of the argument now lies with those seeking to escape the trap we have walked right into. McCain still seems to act as if the trap does not exist – or that it won't tighten the more we seek to impose by force what he concedes force alone cannot impose. If McCain had been president in 2003, this might be a speech to rally behind. But he wasn't and, tragically, it isn't.

April 25, 2007
1.24 pm

Rudy unveiled his 2008 electoral identity yesterday. It's a very powerful one, and perfect for him to deploy. Here's the money quote:

I listen a little to the Democrats and if one of them gets elected, we are going on defense. We will wave the white flag on Iraq. We will cut back on the Patriot Act, electronic surveillance, interrogation and we will be back to our pre-Sept. 11 attitude of defense... The Democrats do not understand the full nature and scope of the terrorist war against us.

It's worth unpacking the argument. What does going on defense mean? For Giuliani, it means first of all "the white flag on Iraq." But, again, what does that mean exactly? Who will we be surrendering to if we redeploy out of Baghdad and into the Kurdish areas, and let the Iraqis know we have no interest in permanently staying in their country? If Giuliani means we are surrendering to the Shiite majority in Iraq, or the Maliki government, then wasn't

that the point of the entire war? Isn't that actually victory? If he means surrendering to al Qaeda, whose presence in Iraq was minimal before we invaded, then he must explain why Barack Obama's proposal for an "over-the-horizon" force that would still target al Qaeda is meaningless or insufficient? When you probe Giuliani's logic, it means that we should start invading every country that could or does harbor al Qaeda – and that we should stay in Iraq indefinitely, since our presence there manages to generate more terrorists than we can kill. In fact, there's strong evidence that we are effectively training the next generation of al Qaeda in Iraq by honing their skills against a superior enemy.

The logic of Giuliani's case is therefore an open-ended occupation of much of the Middle East – an idea that seems extremely September 12. Has he learned nothing from Iraq – except the need to create more Iraqs? The "offense" argument is so crude, in other words, as to be meaningless. The question is not about "offense" or "defense"; it's about *smart* offense and *dumb* offense. We've seen dumb offense. Look at what it has accomplished.

I think Giuliani will run as the Jack Bauer candidate. It's in his DNA. There isn't a civil liberty he wouldn't suspend if he felt it was necessary for "security." And there isn't a dissenter he wouldn't bully or silence in the interests of national security. There is a constituency for this – a big one. It has been primed by pop-culture to embrace torture and the suspension of habeas corpus. It is a constituency with scant respect for any civil liberties when a war on terror is being waged. If that's the path Giuliani wants us to take, we have to be very clear about what it means. We have to ask ourselves: after the next terror attack, what powers would a president Giuliani assume? And what would be left of the Constitution after four years of the same? Give Rudy the office that Cheney has created – and America, already deeply altered, will become a new political entity altogether.

May 5, 2007
7.27 am

Bob Kagan likes the tone of Obama's internationalism. I've been impressed with Obama's foreign policy vision. It sure isn't isolationist or pacifist. But I should add that Kagan's dichotomy between "realism" and "internationalism" is a bit of a canard. The critique of Bush is not that he is somehow too internationalist. It is that he is incompetent at internationalism, failed to do due diligence before launching a vital war, and refused to adjust when adjustment was necessary. Part of the critique must also now surely be that nation-building in an Islamic country can fail to grasp the nature of the enemy we're facing. It's more like a disease than an army. And imprudent warfare – and how can the Iraq fiasco be called anything else? – may actually worsen the disease rather than cure it. Certainly the medicine of brute force is not enough. That is surely the lesson of Iraq. That doesn't mean no use of force; but it must mean a much more chastened deployment of it. I think Obama has that chastening almost in his bones.

May 8, 2007
1.03 pm

We are used to thinking of the war in Iraq in terms of what has happened to Iraq. And this is a completely defensible priority. Maybe two million of the country's crucial elite have fled. Perhaps as many have been forced to relocate within the country. The infrastructure has been shattered; Baghdad remains a place where 30 bodies appear on the streets overnight,

even during the "surge"; suicide bombers continue their rampage through the country almost at will. The war has given al Qaeda a new base of operations and a new front. And the occupation continues to provide them with more recruits.

But we have not considered as much the damage that has been done to America. The first casualty has been the military itself. This war is now in its fifth year. In Iraq, there is no safe zone anywhere. The tours of duty are much longer than at any time in recent U.S. history. While equipment has been eroded very quickly in the punishing desert of the Middle East, the human toll has been perhaps more profound. Over three thousand dead minimizes the toll – because so many seriously wounded soldiers now survive but with terrible and permanent injuries. The psychological toll on an over-stretched military is also profound:

"A considerable number of Soldiers and Marines are conducting combat operations everyday of the week, 10-12 hours per day seven days a week for months on end," wrote Col. Carl Castro and Maj. Dennis McGurk, both psychologists. "At no time in our military history have Soldiers or Marines been required to serve on the front line in any war for a period of 6-7 months."

But much more alarming, it seems to me, is the moral cost to this country of such a brutal and brutalizing occupation. For the first time in history, the president of the United States has allowed torture as an option for treatment of military captives. We saw some of the worst consequences of the Bush policy in Abu Ghraib. But Abu Ghraib represents a fraction of the incidents of abuse and torture throughout the conflict.

This is why the Iraq war, so far, must be seen as a huge al Qaeda propaganda victory. Their narrative is that Muslims are under siege by an evil, imperialist, infidel army that tortures and abuses Muslims at will. Before Iraq, this was an absurdity. After Iraq, less so. Iraq has helped sustain al Qaeda's narrative with imagery and violence that will always stain the image of America in the Middle East. Yes, the paranoia of the Arab street would have invented such atrocities even if they didn't exist. But they did exist and continue to exist. The images of Abu Ghraib did not shock Iraqis used to far worse horrors under Saddam. But they did help educate Arabs and Muslims across the world into believing the very worst about U.S. intentions. Because this war is a war of ideas and ideals, this matters a huge amount. Our one massive advantage – that we are a free and decent civilization – has been fatally blurred.

At home, the public has come to accept torture as a legitimate instrument of government, something that the Founding Fathers would have been aghast at. We have come to accept that the president is not bound by habeas corpus, if he decides he isn't. He can sign laws and say they don't apply to him. We know that an American citizen can be detained for years without charges and tortured and abused – and then critical evidence of his torture will be "lost". We have come to accept our phones being tapped without a warrant and without our even knowing about it. These huge surrenders of liberty have occurred without much public outcry. When the next major terrorist attack comes, the question will simply be how much liberty Americans have left. That is a victory al Qaeda could not have achieved by force of arms. It is something they have achieved with our witting and conscious help.

May 16, 2007
12.45 pm

Whether you agree with Ron Paul or not (and I know few outside doctrinaire libertarians who agree with *everything* he says), he has already elevated the debates by injecting into them a legitimate, if now suppressed, strain of conservatism that is actually deeper in this country than the neoconservative aggression that now captures the party elite and has trapped the U.S. in the Iraq nightmare. Last night, Fox News tried to destroy him. Today the right-wing blogs will. My view is that the Beltway has this wrong again, as Byron York is finding out. Paul is saying things many Americans and many Republicans believe. On the war and spending, he is venting a vital part of conservative opinion – and, in my view, the conservative critique of this war and these Republicans is more damning than any liberal one. I may not agree with him on everything and he is far from a smooth operator. But he has more balls than most of them put together.

May 29, 2007
3.10 pm

Yes, my position on fighting in Iraq has turned 180 degrees from four years ago. I thought then that fighting in Iraq was the best way to defeat Islamist terrorism. After four years of observing it, and its actual empowerment of Islamist terrorism, I've changed my mind. I have openly acknowledged my change many times, have expressed shame and sorrow at my early misjudgment, wrote a book trying to figure out how I could have strayed so far from small-c conservatism in the traumatized wake of 9/11, and am doing my best to figure out the best way forward. If you think I have no credibility now, having been so wrong then, all I can say is: there are plenty of other blogs to read. But as Keynes said, "When the facts change, I change my mind – what do you do, sir?"

June 12, 2007
12.14 pm

I'm happy for the world not to be unipolar. I'm content if America is not the dominant power in many regions. I'm fine with China having its own zone of influence, or Russia emerging as a regional power. I really don't see our moral obligation to save Africans from the consequences of their own awful decisions. This restraint may not always mean freedom and happiness the world over. But it's not one country's God-given role to impose and spread such freedom and happiness indefinitely. And if you want to see the evidence that such good intentions do not always lead to freedom and happiness in any case, then please read the paper.

I think that's where I part company with my neoconservative friends.

And please don't give me that crap that somehow if we leave there, they'll follow us home. They've already followed us home. They can now. They always will be able to target us in the modern world. The question is simply whether ineptly occupying a country that even the Brits couldn't pacify makes us less or more safe. I don't see how any sentient observer of the last five years can believe it has made us more safe. It has certainly made us less free.

There will be many times and places where the U.S. needs to maintain a presence – and a

credible threat of military force – for world stability and peace. I can see the rationale for overwhelming superiority in fire-power, in a strong navy, in missile defense, in bases across the globe in friendly countries. But occupying the Middle East for the rest of our lifetimes? You've got to be kidding me. If that's the agenda, can we please say so and let the public thrash it out? For my part, I can't for the life of me see how keeping thousands of troops in Iraq for the indefinite future serves our national interest. At this point, I also don't see what right we have to be there. Assuming we will be there for ever – as the Bush administration's plans for bases and a mega-embassy indicate – is a form of imperialism. In so far as Iraq's insurgents oppose this, they have a point.

July 11, 2007
12.34 pm

It seems to me that there's one policy around which we should all be able to unite: a commitment to protect the nascent Kurdish entity in the north. The Kurds had their civil war in the last century. They have a fledgling democracy. They love the U.S. They are Sunni Muslims. Hemmed in by Persians, Arabs and Turks, they need an external broker to defend and secure their achievement. If we are going to cut our losses among Iraq's Arabs, and I see no alternative, then that is no reason to abandon the one clear success story of this entire gamble.

If we rescue Kurdistan, moreover, it does retrieve a sliver of the original hope. They will be free of Saddam; they will be a Muslim democracy deeply grateful to the United States; they will be a Sunni society that is not hostile to the West; their economy could boom; their freedoms could flourish further. It seems to me we should be investing in those places that have a chance, rather than further antagonizing those regions that have yet to develop any politics but violence, paranoia and graft.

July 17, 2007
9.41 am

I haven't pretended Obama isn't a liberal. But a small-c conservative can consider backing a liberal if all the viable "conservatives" are corrupt, divisive, shallow, in hock to religious fanatics or palpably unserious about national security. So far, that roughly describes the GOP candidates (excepting Paul and McCain). Hell, I was forced to endorse Kerry last time. Not because I like Kerry, or even agree with him on most issues. But when you have an unhinged, incompetent fanatic in power, unable to recognize let alone govern reality, sometimes you have to pick the least worst option. And when the "conservatives" explode entitlements, lose wars, legalize torture, violate the Constitution or abuse it for electioneering, what's a real conservative supposed to do? Sometimes, punishing a party for its betrayal of core principles is a necessary act of cleansing.

July 23, 2007
3.01 pm

Where is Charles Krauthammer's mea culpa? Where is Bill Kristol's? They were key architects of this fiasco in Iraq but they glide seamlessly from defending its maximalist goals to new benchmarks and new criteria with nary a hiccup of introspection. This is not a sign of a serious intellectual movement. It is a sign of an ideological fixation.

Kristol's response to the empirical collapse of his own intellectual project is simply to accuse his critics of attacking the troops. We all make mistakes; we can articulate things for good motives only to find them dashed on the shores of implementation. But to exhibit absolutely no reflection or humility in the face of a concept so flawed and a project so steeped in the blood of innocent people, to respond to such a chastening experience with more partisan attacks is a sign not of a set of ideas, but of a rigid ideology. If conservatism exists as a coherent philosophy, this is its opposite.

July 27, 2007
12.03 pm

One of my own errors before the war was a function of being steeped in Washington policy debates – and neoconservative arguments – for years. I had been so conditioned to suspect Iraq after 9/11 that my skepticism deserted me. I mentioned Saddam on September 12. The result was that the prelude to the Iraq war was far too easily framed by the information and biases of the Beltway elite, the Pentagon establishment, and the neocon brain-trust. Worse, we were unspeakably condescending to those on the outside who were right. We trusted far too much, and people much further away from the levers of power saw more clearly than we did.

Something is stirring out there – as the Obama and Paul candidacies show. The polls show record levels of discontent. The logic for permanent engagement in the Middle East is far less cogent than it was only a year ago. And the capacity of Americans to throw their own elites overboard will be tested in the next two years.

I do not know where this is headed. A new isolationism? A new liberal hegemony? More of the same? But I have a feeling that those of us in the Beltway may be among the last to see it coming.

September 12, 2007
10.38 am

In thinking out loud about the surge, it seems to me that the arguments of Petraeus could logically lead to two opposite conclusions: a) that the tactical military gains have obviously not led to political conciliation and so the entire project should be scrapped and we should cut our losses; or b) we have enough tactical military success to suggest that the theory is not insane that less violence could lead to political progress. So, in the case of b), there's an obvious follow-up: add many more troops. If the surge is working as they claim, why should we not amplify its success by expanding its reach? If Bush were arguing for 300,000 troops to pacify the entire country effectively, and use such numbers for classic counter-insurgency, I could understand the logic.

Instead we have the notion that the surge has succeeded somewhat and so we will now take the military presence back to 2006 levels. That makes absolutely no sense to me at all. Why would we return now to the policy of 2003 – 2007? The police and Iraqi army are as incapable of picking up the slack as they were three years ago. And the national government commands less authority.

October 8, 2007
10.48 am

Morally, the cost-benefit ratio has shifted. Would Saddam have murdered as many innocents as have perished under American occupation? It is becoming a more even match, isn't it? And would the United States have lost its moral leadership without the torture tactics adopted across the war theater in Iraq? The answer is yes: torture was authorized before the Iraq invasion. But using it in Iraq, against Muslims and in Saddam's own prisons, deepened the stain. With every day we stay on, the day we leave recedes from view. We will, I think, never leave. A Clinton presidency would be the means by which half the country is reconciled to that fact. Which is why the neocons will come to terms with it. And she with them.

October 27, 2007
11.04 am

The longer this war goes on and the more we find out, the following scenario seems to me to be the best provisional explanation for a lot of what our secret, unaccountable, extra-legal war-government has been doing - and the countless mistakes which have been laid bare. On 9/11, Cheney immediately thought of the worst possible scenario: What if this had been done with WMDs? It has haunted him ever since - for good and even noble reasons. This panic led him immediately to think of Saddam. But it also led him to realize that our intelligence was so crappy that we *simply didn't know* what might be coming. That's why the decision to use torture was the first - and most significant - decision this administration made. It is integral to the intelligence behind the war on terror. And Cheney's bizarre view of executive power made it easy in his mind simply to break the law and withdraw from Geneva because torture, in his mind, was the only weapon we had.

Bush, putty in Cheney's hands, never wanted torture, but was so cowardly and lazy he never asked the hard questions of what was actually being done. He knows, of course, somewhere in his crippled fundamentalist psyche. But this is a man with clinical - Christianist *and* dry-drunk - levels of reality-denial, whose interaction with reality can only operate on the crudest levels of Manichean analysis. All he needs to be told is that whatever it is they're doing, it isn't torture. He won't ask any more questions. They're evil; we're good; so we can't torture. Even when they were totally busted at Abu Ghraib, his incuriosity and denial held firm. After all, what if he were to find out something he didn't want to know? His world might collapse.

But torture gives *false information*. And the worst scenarios that tortured detainees coughed up - many of them completely innocent, remember - may well have come to fuel U.S. national security policy. And of course they also fueled more torture. Because once you hear of the existential plots confessed by one tortured prisoner, you need to torture more prisoners to get at the real truth. We do not know what actual intelligence they were getting, and Cheney has ensured that we will never know. But it is perfectly conceivable that the torture regime - combined with panic and paranoia - created an imaginationland of untruth and half-truth that has guided U.S. policy for this entire war. It may well have led to the president being informed of any number of plots that never existed, and any number of threats that are pure imagination. And once torture has entered the system, *you can never find out the real truth*. You are lost in a vortex of lies and fears.

November 7, 2007
1.34 pm

Even if, in a decade or so, we see something approaching a normal society in Iraq (which would be the first time in centuries), I will still have been fantastically wrong. Just because in the very long run, it is possible that a decision made was retrospectively the right one, that was not the basis on which I supported the war and lambasted its opponents. I'm not going to pull that excuse. And the costs of the enterprise – both human and financial – continue to bear no rational relationship to the benefits we haven't even begun to see. To have embroiled ourselves in a large, open-ended, \$3 trillion occupation of a country that is clearly no longer a country, and to trap the bulk of the military in that theater while threats proliferate globally, and to have no viable exit strategy ever: this is a colossal, historic error.

November 26, 2007
12.53 pm

Since the Iraq invasion, which I passionately supported, I've been forced, like a lot of people, to re-examine my core principles and ideas about intervention. I've learned that just because the French oppose something, it doesn't automatically mean it's a good idea. Pre-emption? I don't think the concept should be ruled out entirely, but the criteria are much stricter in my mind than they once were. I now think we should pre-empt only when a grave threat is indeed imminent – not *before* it is imminent, as was the case with Iraq. After Iraq, my skepticism toward all government intelligence has, like many others, gone through the roof. I am far less likely to believe or trust the CIA or the vice-president on Iran than I once was, for example.

January 13, 2008
5.40 pm

I suspect that the fundamental quid pro quo offered to the anti-war forces – once we get calm, we can withdraw – is in fact the reverse of the truth. The more calm there is, the more the basic rationale of the neocons will revive: this is part of an empire we can keep. So why go anywhere?

We had a choice: ten months or ten years, and by default we picked the latter – and, according to McCain, it's more like a hundred years. This is very hard to undo, given the quicksand of a Muslim country that requires you either get out quickly or settle in for a loong occupation. Whether the Iraq that emerges is a meaningful state, or whether it is an effectively dismembered hodge-podge of regions held together by American troops and local forces, becomes less relevant once you accept Bush's premise that the U.S. has absorbed the area as a client state for the indefinite future. He has had five years to entrench this into the global order and American politics and, simply by not budging, he has changed the facts on the ground. Iraq, I suspect, is now America's for ever – something Iraqis will always resent but never be able to reverse.

Welcome to Empire: an endless, grueling slog in treacherous places where no one loves us, but which we cannot leave. Fewer casualties perhaps (and that, of course, is a wonderful thing); but more debt, more money, more treasure, more risk, more Muslim resentment and more blowback in the end. But marginally cheaper oil in the long run, perhaps. Lovely, isn't

it?

January 13, 2008
8.06 pm

There were several moments on Meet The Press when Clinton could have said, even in a small way, that she misjudged the Iraq war. She could have conceded that, in fact, Obama's judgment was actually better than hers at the outset. Heck, many of us have been able to say such a thing, and in the end, we take our lumps but move on. But she simply cannot. If you want yet another president who cannot say he or she made a mistake, who can never cop to errors, and who uses everything as a political tool against his or her opponents, you have your candidate. And she is ready on Day One. Oh, so ready.

January 22, 2008
8.26 am

Which of the candidates will either be able to get us out of Iraq with the least trauma and the most national unity or which will be able to entrench us there with the most national unity for the next century? The answers are Obama and McCain. Clinton? I think she's too beholden to the politics of triangulation to pull troops out. She would get crucified by the right if she tries to withdraw. And her decisions are always largely driven by political calculation.

If the Clintons are re-elected, what are the odds we will still be occupying Iraq with over 100,000 troops by the end of their third term in 2012? Pretty high, I'd say. They simply don't have the domestic leverage to do anything else. I actually think McCain is likelier to get us out of there. At least he *could*.

February 11, 2008
10.46 am

The debate over Iraq cannot be reduced to an analysis of whether the surge produced or coincided with a drop in sectarian violence from 2006 levels to 2005 levels. The questions we have to answer are much bigger ones. How does this reduction in violence connect to a serious political strategy to get Iraq functioning as a halfway normal country without over 100,000 US troops in occupation? Why is it in the national interest to remain occupying such a country for the indefinite future? What national security goals have been met by the last six years of warfare? Can any non-partition scenario be feasible without permanent occupation? Making the larger debate about whether al Qaeda is now – let's hope – on the run in Iraq seems to me a bit stupid when al Qaeda *barely existed in Iraq before the Bush occupation*.

February 28, 2008
11.03 am

I didn't believe the surge, as advertized, would work in even reducing the violence. I was wrong about that, even though I was following Petraeus's own metrics. But surely two facts help explain its unexpected success: the Sunni insurgency decided that crazy Jihadists were temporarily a greater threat than the Shiites or the Americans, and were happy to be trained, armed and paid by the U.S. to regain control of their territory; and Sadr decided it was in his

interests to facilitate rather than impede the construction of a Shiite-dominated state. The question now is whether the reduced violence means a greater chance of an historic rapprochement between the various ethnic and sectarian factions that divide Iraq at a national level – which was *explicitly* the goal of the surge. I don't see any serious evidence that this is the case.

March 21, 2008
12.24 pm

How did I get Iraq wrong? I think I committed four cardinal sins.

I was distracted by the internal American debate to the occlusion of the reality of Iraq. For most of my adult lifetime, I had heard those on the left decry American military power, constantly warn of quagmires, excuse what I regarded as inexcusable tyrannies and fail to grasp that the nature of certain regimes makes their removal a moral objective. As a child of the Cold War, and a proud Reaganite and Thatcherite, I regarded 1989 as almost eternal proof of the notion that the walls of tyranny could fall if we had the will to bring them down and the gumption to use military power when we could. I had also been marinated in neoconservative thought for much of the 1990s, and seen the moral power of Western intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo. All of this primed me for an ideological battle which was, in retrospect, largely irrelevant to the much more complex post-Cold War realities we were about to confront.

When I heard the usual complaints from the left about how we had no right to intervene, how Bush was the real terrorist, how war was always wrong, my trained ears heard the same cries that I had heard in the 1980s. So I saw the opposition to the war as another example of a faulty Vietnam Syndrome, associated it with the far left, or boomer nostalgia, and was revolted by the anti-war marches I saw in Washington. I became much too concerned with fighting that old internal ideological battle, and failed to think freshly or realistically about what the consequences of intervention could be. I allowed myself to be distracted by an ideological battle when what was required was clear-eyed prudence.

I recall very clearly one night before the war began. I made myself write down the reasons for and against the war and realized that if there were question marks on both sides, the deciding factor for me in the end was that I could never be ashamed of removing someone as evil as Saddam from power. I became enamored of my own morality and this single moral act. And he was a monster, as we discovered. But what I failed to grasp is that war is also a monster, and that unless one weighs all the possibly evil consequences of an abstractly moral act, one hasn't really engaged in anything much but self-righteousness. I saw war's unknowable consequences far too glibly.

I heard and read about ancient Sunni and Shiite divisions, knew of the awful time the British had in running Iraq but had never properly absorbed the lesson. I bought the argument by many neoconservatives that Iraq was one of the more secular and modern of Arab societies, that these divisions were not so deep, that all those pictures of men in suits and mustaches and women in Western clothing were the deeper truth about this rare, modern Arab society; and believed that it could, if we worked at it, be a model for the rest of the Arab Muslim world. I should add I don't believe that these ancient divides were necessarily as deep as they

subsequently became in the chaos that the invasion unleashed. But I greatly under-estimated them – and as someone who liked to think of myself as a conservative, I pathetically failed to appreciate how those divides never truly go away and certainly cannot be abolished by a Western magic wand. In that sense I was not conservative enough. I let my hope – the hope that had been vindicated by the fall of the Soviet Union – get the better of my skepticism. There are times when that is a good thing. The Iraq war wasn't one of them.

Yes, the incompetence and arrogance were beyond anything I imagined. In 2000, my support for Bush was not deep. I thought he was an okay, unifying, moderate Republican who would be fine for a time of peace and prosperity. I was concerned – ha! – that Gore would spend too much. I was reassured by the experience and intelligence and pedigree of Cheney and Rumsfeld and Powell. Two of them had already fought and won a war in the Gulf. The bitter election battle hardened my loyalty. And once 9/11 happened, my support intensified as I hoped for the best. His early speeches were magnificent. The Afghanistan invasion was defter than I expected. I got lulled. I wanted him to succeed – too much, in retrospect.

But my biggest misreading was not about competence. Wars are often marked by incompetence. It was a fatal misjudgment of Bush's sense of morality. I had no idea he was so complacent – even glib – about the evil that men with good intentions can enable. I truly did not believe that Bush would use 9/11 to tear up the Geneva Conventions. When I first heard of abuses at Gitmo, I dismissed them as enemy propaganda. I certainly never believed that a conservative would embrace torture as the central thrust of an anti-terror strategy, and lie about it, and scapegoat underlings for it, and give us the indelible stain of Bagram and Camp Cropper and Abu Ghraib and all the other secret torture and interrogation sites that he created and oversaw. I certainly never believed that a war I supported for the sake of freedom would actually use as its central weapon the deepest antithesis of freedom – the destruction of human autonomy and dignity and will that is torture. To distort this by shredding the English language, by engaging in newspeak that I had long associated with totalitarian regimes, was a further insult. And for me, an epiphany about what American conservatism had come to mean.

I know our enemy is much worse. I have never doubted that. But I never believed that America would do what America has done. Never. My misjudgment at the deepest moral level of what Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld were capable of – a misjudgment that violated the moral core of the enterprise – was my worst mistake. What the war has done to what is left of Iraq – the lives lost, the families destroyed, the bodies tortured, the civilization trashed – was bad enough. But what was done to America – and the meaning of America – was unforgivable. And for that I will not and should not forgive myself either.

June 1, 2008
7:59 pm

The WaPo reflects what I've been trying to understand better: the surprising success (after a rocky start) of the Iraqi army in Basra, the neutralization of the worst parts of the Sadr forces in Sadr City, increasing success in Mosul, and four-year lows in sectarian violence. The trap Obama must not be caught in is one of excessive pessimism. Conditions now favor expeditious withdrawal more than they did only a few months ago. But the manner of

withdrawal, its pace, and its concomitant diplomacy now require a different cast, and may require an even different one next February and March.

None of this means that this war was not a mistake; it does suggest it need not in the medium term be a catastrophe. Petraeus deserves the lion's share of the credit; luck and time and the self-defeating nihilism of the Jihadists have helped. But Bush and McCain equally merit points for pursuing the surge, even though the metrics pointed to failure. Obama needs to capitalize on these gains, not dismiss them.

June 4, 2008
12.11 pm

I've long since come to the conclusion that the Iraq war was a terrible strategic mistake, conceptually and operationally. But I've just as long since been open to good things happening in a country that we do not well understand and that is in great flux. And I've been diligent in posting and linking to as much data and reporting in Iraq as possible, data that adds to the argument on all sides. I didn't believe the surge would work because I didn't believe that there were sufficient troops to make it a success (and believed at that point that giving the benefit of the doubt to the Bush administration was a form of insanity). But several factors – Petraeus' obvious genius, the Sunni switch, Sadr's temporary quietude, Maliki's sudden urgency, and the knowledge that America's patience was running low – seem to have tipped the balance. I am delighted to be proven tactically wrong – as I said at the time. But I have been adjusting to the facts on the ground for many months. More to the point: I do not regard this unexpected progress as a reason to insist on 50 permanent military bases in Iraq or for any other purpose than to find a way out of the place as expeditiously as possible. I see this progress as an opportunity to leave with as little collateral damage as possible.

And in fact, it seems clear to me that the American public's growing impatience with the war was a factor in concentrating some Iraqi minds.

To those who say I was for the war before I was against it, I have long ago conceded the point. I don't think one should hold onto an ideological position when the facts refute it, however painful such a concession would be. Strategically, when you factor in costs, blowback, the absence of WMDs, the blow to US credibility, the hundreds of thousands of dead and injured and displaced, the rise and fall of al Qaeda in Iraq, and the strengthening of Iran's hold on the region, it is clear to me, as it is to most Americans, that the Iraq war was a terrible strategic blunder. But tactically, we are where we are, and no one should be anything but thrilled that the short term is brighter than we could have imagined only a few months ago.

A tactical shift has led to a tactical opportunity. We should leave as soon and as completely as responsibly possible.

June 11, 2008
12.28 pm

McCain would love to see US troops stationed peacefully in Iraq for the foreseeable future. To him it does not matter when they come home. What matters is that the casualty rate get

low enough to persuade Americans they shouldn't care about another expansion of American empire. In fact, the entire debate about bringing them home is puzzling and frustrating to McCain. After all, why *should* we bring them home when being there for ever is the point?

It wasn't WMDs or Saddam's threat that motivated this war, we now understand, so much as the capacity to forward station U.S. troops in an oil-rich region and help contain Iran. Is this a good idea? That's what the Iraqis are now furiously debating. And it's what Americans should be furiously debating in this campaign. It's the biggest difference between the two candidates and it couldn't be more important.

June 25, 2008
12.45 pm

Max Boot is admirably candid. He helps us realize that this election is indeed at root a decision on whether to keep troops in Iraq for the next century or more:

In order to build on the success that General Petraeus and his soldiers have had, we need to maintain a long-term commitment in Iraq – for 100 years if need be, as John McCain has said. That doesn't mean 100 years of fighting; clearly, that would be unsustainable. It does mean a long-term troop presence designed to reassure Iraqis of our commitment to their security against an array of enemies.

Their security? Heh. In 50 years' time, the Iraqis will not be able to defend themselves against Iran? Or Syria? Please. If they've managed this much progress in the last year, we could be almost out of there in the next president's term of office. Even under Saddam, the Iraqis weren't defeated by the Iranian mullahs. Notice also how a few months of relative calm are instantly deployed to justify a *century* of occupation. Can you imagine what the next platform for invasion will be? And on what planet does Boot live to think that permanent US troops in the heart of the Muslim Middle East will not require endless, endless fighting?

This obviously isn't about Iraq, as we are fast discovering. It's about an ever-greater American entanglement in the Middle East in part to secure oil supplies we need to wean ourselves off and in part a foolish attempt to protect Israel. The truth is: We didn't need this war, we now see, and neither did the Israelis; and a war that was originally about our existential security should not be morphed into a permanent US occupation of a region that chews up outsiders and spits them out with alarming economy and frequency.

June 30, 2008
12.24 pm

I have a bunch of books in my Ptown shack, remnants of summer reading from years gone by and I stumbled across a classic yesterday: *The War Over Iraq* by Lawrence Kaplan and Bill Kristol. It's an Encounter book from 2002/2003 before the invasion, and Kristol should hope it's out of print. Reading it years later, its tone and content are shockingly off-base, and most of its core assertions and arguments categorically refuted by history. In fact, it would be very hard to think of a piece of analysis so riddled with misconceptions and errors and so self-evidently wrong in almost every respect only five years later. The book is almost entirely on internal American debates, on the ancient post-Vietnam boomer split on foreign policy,

on settling scores with the first Bush administration, and extrapolating the roll-back of the Reagan years to a post-9/11 world. The complex, difficult, murky reality of Iraq and its people remains clouded behind a Berlin wall of ideology. But among the core points of the book with respect to Iraq: there are no deep sectarian divisions, there would never be a civil war or anything approximating it once we removed Saddam, and the smallest of forces and lowest of costs would be needed for turning the place into a beacon of democracy. A typical passage from page 98:

The United States may need to occupy Iraq for some time. Though U.N., European and Arab forces will, as in Afghanistan, contribute troops, the principal responsibility will doubtless fall to the country that liberates Baghdad. According to one estimate, initially as many as 75,000 troops may be required to police the war's aftermath, at a cost of \$16 billion a year. As other countries' forces arrive, and as Iraq rebuilds its economy and political system, that force could probably be drawn down to several thousand soldiers after a year or two.

So let's be very, very clear: Kristol favored and supported a tiny post-war occupation force, less than half what was required even *five years after* invasion to prevent a metastasizing civil war. The civil war raged with enough ferocity to kill and maim and traumatize millions of Iraqis and thousands of Americans. Kristol sold the war on what turned out to be the preposterous sum of \$16 billion a year. The figure has ended up at around \$12 billion *a month*. So Kristol was off in his troops levels by a factor of two at the start of the occupation and by up to 20 today, and he was off in his cost levels by a factor of ten. He also predicted "several thousand" troops by 2005, compared with 150,000 today.

Now, we all get things wrong, and I certainly got things massively wrong. But when you're this prominent a war-backer and you get things this wrong on a subject this important, don't you think a smidgen of self-criticism or self-analysis could be in order? (I'm omitting the fact that the WMD casus belli Kristol also asserted *as fact* was a total chimera, but given the number of Kristol's errors, this now seems small beer). Kristol has indeed criticized the war's execution but always against others, especially Rumsfeld. Kristol has never fully copped to, let alone apologized and accounted for, *his own* profound errors and responsibility for the catastrophe in Mesopotamia. And yet Kristol now writes with an assurance about Iraq – yes, the subject on which his credibility among intelligent people should be precisely zero – as if his critics are still the ones who need to prove their point beyond the benefit of any doubt.

It seems to me that we demand accountability from our politicians and we should demand accountability from our intellectuals. Not that they always get things right – but that they give a full accounting when they are wrong. Instead we reward and celebrate those who not only get things wrong – Kristol and Rove now have prominent columns in the New York Times and Wall Street Journal – but those who have never taken personal responsibility for their own mistakes. Until we purge all these tendencies from Washington, we will not learn from history and we will keep repeating it.

July 3, 2008
7:46 pm

I'm relieved that Obama has shifted on Iraq exactly as I hoped he would: to a pragmatic

commitment to a withdrawal strategy that does not jeopardize the fragile and reversible gains of the last year or so. I don't see this as a U-turn, any more than I regard my own attempt to understand the situation in Iraq as best I can and to remain open to good, as well as bad, developments as some kind of flaw. Very few people foresaw the extent of the gains we have made this past year, in part because a new counter-insurgency had the luck to coincide with some real shifts among Sunni tribes and the Sadrite opposition. But facts change. Shouldn't tactical policy respond? I would never have felt that Obama would be a good president if I felt he'd stick to a position on an issue irrespective of empirical data. As long as the goal is total withdrawal from Iraq as soon as possible, and the man doing it has the vital characteristic of having opposed the war in the first place, I'm fine with pragmatism. Any conservative should be.

And this shift is yet another instance of Obama's remarkably shrewd post-primary strategy. He is slowly undermining every conceivable reason to vote for McCain. If you want to withdraw from Iraq – as prudently as possible – Obama is your man. He won't risk chaos in a precipitous withdrawal regardless of the strategic and tactical situation. Unlike McCain, he is also unafraid of Baker-Hamilton diplomacy; and unlike McCain, he does not threaten a hundred years of occupation and the suspicion that he'd like the U.S. to stay there for ever. What can McCain say now?

July 6, 2008
11.28 am

If someone had told me a year ago that fifteen of eighteen benchmarks had been reached, that all the parties were in negotiation over future politics, that al Qaeda was close to dead at the hands of the U.S. and the Iraqis, and that oil contracts were being handed out amid four-year lows in violence, I wouldn't have believed them. Of course, this all makes Obama's 16-month withdrawal timetable more and more feasible. It really now is a question of prudence and strategy in how best to withdraw troops. Do you trust McCain to get them all out swiftly and prudently? Or do you trust Obama to get them all out prudently and swiftly? It's a judgment call. And the options are better than they were six months ago.

July 7, 2008
11.26 am

Finding a way not to jeopardize the gains we have made in the surge, if we can, while remaining committed to withdrawal is fundamentally different than an open-ended commitment to "victory" and a desire to stay in Iraq for the rest of our lives. This is not as clear as the debate before the war began – in or out? – because it has to deal with the reality the invasion and occupation have created. And in the execution, McCain's and Obama's two positions may well be closer than some debaters would like, especially in the short term. But the long term will be deeply affected by each man's long-term vision. McCain is still trying to make the original concept work; Obama isn't. He's about damage control. In this respect, Obama is more of a realist and conservative than McCain. And the possibility Obama uniquely offers is a way out that brings America's soft power more to the fore, and makes America's internal divisions less profound.

It strikes me as fundamental – for the trust of both the American and the Iraqi people – that Obama never believed in this war to begin with, while McCain strongly did (and has not

reversed himself). Moreover, the more the Iraqis are convinced we are serious about leaving – and they will be more convinced if Obama is president – the swifter their necessary accommodations may be. All of it will be very very tricky. Which is another reason to favor the politician gifted at conciliation.

August 27, 2008
11.26 am

My main worry with John McCain is foreign policy. What do I worry about? That everything that has been awry with this administration would be made worse by his. Seeing the world as a series of enemies to be attacked rather than as a series of relationships to be managed and a series of foes to be undermined has proven of limited use. Even the successful removal of the Taliban has led, six years later, to a long and grueling counter-insurgency with no end in sight and a reconstituted al Qaeda in a nuclear-armed, unstable state. The invasion of Iraq – in the abstract, a noble cause against an evil enemy – has caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the displacement of millions, the price of \$3 trillion ... all for a less despotic Shiite government in league with Iran, making contracts with China. And that's if it turns out *as a success*. Along the way, the U.S. has lost a vast amount of its moral standing and its legitimacy as a global power-broker.

Insofar as neoconservatives do not understand this, and cannot understand this, they are a clear and present danger to the security of the West. Their unwillingness to understand how the U.S. might be perceived in the world, how a hegemon needs to exhibit more humility and dexterity to maintain its power, makes them – and McCain – extremely dangerous stewards of American foreign policy in an era of global terror.

August 31, 2008
1.21 pm

Among the tiny number of occasions on which Sarah Palin has expressed even an opinion on foreign policy, one of the most recent bears putting out there one more time. It's from a critical moment in the war in Iraq, December 2006, which John McCain has made the centerpiece of his campaign. In fact, his support for a double-down strategy in Iraq in the winter of 2006 and early 2007 is one central argument he has made for his candidacy. He has now chosen as the person who would replace him instantly if, at any time between the ages of 72 and 76, he might be incapacitated or die, a person whose view of the situation was as follows:

Alaska Business Monthly: We've lost a lot of Alaska's military members to the war in Iraq. How do you feel about sending more troops into battle, as President Bush is suggesting?

Palin: I've been so focused on state government, I haven't really focused much on the war in Iraq. I heard on the news about the new deployments, and while I support our president, Condoleezza Rice and the administration, I want to know that we have an exit plan in place; I want assurances that we are doing all we can to keep our troops safe. Every life lost is such a tragedy. I am very, very proud of the troops we have in Alaska, those fighting overseas for our freedoms, and the families here who are making so many sacrifices.

As far as I can tell, her response to this central issue of national security was three-fold: I don't know enough to have an opinion apart from what I hear on the news, I agree with the Democratic party's focus on the welfare and safety of the troops, I'm a loyal Republican and patriot, and:

I want to know that we have an exit plan in place.

Wasn't the whole point of the surge to kill off any notions in Iraq that we were going to withdraw and to ramp up counter-insurgency and troop levels indefinitely until the place was secure, and democratic? The whole point was that there was no exit plan for 2007 or beyond, and McCain opposed such an exit plan. The point, according to McCain, was "victory." So McCain has picked a woman who, in so far as she had any views at all, actually echoed Democratic party talking points, not McCain's.

Do you think he even asked her about foreign policy? Me neither. This pick has told us very little about Sarah Palin, except that she seems like a promising young governor focused almost entirely – and understandably – on the demands of her idiosyncratic state. But it has told us a huge amount about McCain. As in: way too risky for the White House right now.

September 12, 2008
9.42 am

On one of the most critical decisions of the war, Obama staked out a position a while back that the Bush camp and neocons assailed as naive, disastrous, and revealing of his unfitness to be president. But like almost everything else Obama has said about the war, he was right and Bush was wrong. Obama was ahead of Bush in proposing to shift troops to Afghanistan, ahead of Bush in suggesting a timetable for Iraq withdrawal (subsequently embraced by Maliki), ahead of Bush in arguing we should talk directly to Iran, and, of course, right about not fighting the war in the first place.

September 22, 2008
10.06 am

In trying to understand where we are in Iraq, what our realistic options are and what either candidate really believes, two must-reads jointly present the case for staying in Iraq indefinitely. Dexter Filkins' report from some of the previously most devastated parts of that blighted country is a beautifully nuanced, rich, and persuasive portrait. Reading the piece, you can sense both his immense joy at seeing some kind of normalcy return to places where hell recently resided but also, to his immense credit, an unbending intellectual resistance to false hope and unreasonable expectations. What Filkins reports is what so many others testify to: that the combination of the Sunni Awakening, the effect of widespread ethnic cleansing, the construction of massive walls throughout Iraq and especially in Baghdad, and the resilience and surge of American troops have all managed to keep the vile Jihadists at bay, to win hearts and minds against them, as well as to calm the sectarian tensions that the Jihadists brutally exploited. No one should be anything less than overjoyed that this very fragile but very-real progress (which I, among many, didn't expect) has taken place. But as we must be open to good news we must not be blind to deeper realities.

The trouble is: the critical rapprochement between the Sunni Awakening and the Shiite government in Baghdad has only happened very superficially or locally, if at all. And the critical disputes between the Kurds and the rest of the country in the north are also unresolved. The Iraqi army, although larger and stronger than before, has not yet become a non-sectarian national entity; it is still overwhelmingly Shiite and understandably suspicious of integrating former al Qaeda murderers into its ranks. There are a few signs of local reconciliation, and some tentative saplings of a post-sectarian future sprouting through the corpses, but the fundamental shift we need – integration of the Awakening into the Iraqi army and provincial elections to move the stagnating political process forward – is not here yet. It is not on the horizon. It may be on the horizon over the horizon. But it may also never come. This is what it means to live history. It means not knowing.

Yes, the U.S. forces have drawn down somewhat, although to nowhere near the levels that anyone could describe as "withdrawal". And, yes, Petraeus became the commander who might have been able to save this misadventure at the start. But the Petraeus lesson is that we cannot leave a security vacuum; and we do not have the kind of government in Iraq capable of filling it in a non-sectarian way yet. Reading Jeffrey Goldberg's superb profile in the current Atlantic, McCain is clearly committed to keeping US troops at whatever level is necessary to retain this calm permanently. And what that must mean is that unless there is a political breakthrough at the national level, it is unrealistic to believe that McCain will be able to withdraw any serious number of troops in his first term. That is what commitment to "victory" means. We need to be very clear about this. It could very well mean a heavy military presence in Iraq for the rest of our lives.

The difference between McCain and Obama on this, I think, is that Obama wants to see a time when there are no U.S. troops in Iraq (which was the case until 2003) and this fiasco, like the Vietnamese occupation, can become a part of history. McCain wants the U.S. to stay in Iraq for ever if necessary, in some capacity, as the neo-imperial power devotes its maximum resources to integrating the heart of the Arab-Muslim world into secular modernity. Obama doubts that this can be done and that if it could be done, its price would be worth it; and so his goal is a realist minimizing of the damage, while attempting to reallocate American resources more rationally. McCain simply insists that war can work and occupations can pacify counties never truly pacified in history before if done competently and if backed with enough raw national will.

This, I think, is the core foreign policy difference in this election. I do not think it is an easy one to resolve. As readers know, I started this war believing in John McCain's vision of the future. I would still like to. At least McCain did not deny the incompetence and derangement of the initial occupation strategy. And I do not want to succumb to defeatism any more than I want to engage in denialism. There is a moral responsibility to cope with the chaos we have wrought and the nightmare our departure could mean; but there is also a moral responsibility to the American people not to sacrifice their young and squander what's left of their treasury on a fool's errand. No path is morally pure. And neither offers a clear path to security.

But take a few steps back and see where we are: a deeply divided country with only the most fragile national institutions, held together by exhaustion, oil money, ethnic cleansing and American troops. Currently, I believe that Obama is the one who is seeing the world and U.S.

interests more clearly and rationally. Withdrawal is essential; and yet it is currently impossible without serious risk. Staying, however, is another form of risk, the risk of permanent enmeshment in a hell-hole from which there is no ultimate way out. To escape from this trap will require more dexterity and pragmatism than McCain believes in – especially when McCain doesn't view it as a trap at all, but as the final occasion for him to exorcize the ghost of Vietnam.

October 7, 2008
12.14 pm

The real reason for the Obama surge is not simply punishing the GOP for the financial meltdown. It's also the public's judgment of which candidate responded better to the events of the last two weeks. McCain seemed unstable, bombastic, temperamental and at times, hysterical. Obama seemed, well, presidential.

Here's what I think matters more than ideology at this point. The American people have lived through a nerve-wracking few years. So many certainties have collapsed. We had 9/11 and then Abu Ghraib. We had the Iraq fiasco and the Katrina catastrophe. Now we have the structure of capitalism on the brink. Americans do not want a president adding to the drama. They want calm and authority and reason.

And that's why the attempt to paint Obama as a flaming radical is so ill-timed. Obama just proved that he is a careful, calm guy in a crisis. What the voters saw is at odds with what the GOP is now saying. Temperament matters. And in a country desperate for assurance and poise at the top, Obama is winning that debate. It's no surprise to those of us who've followed him closely for a while. But for most voters, this is a new and first impression of Obama's character. And it's powerful.

November 3, 2008
12.30 pm

On a spectacular September morning more than seven years ago, our world changed. I remain one of those who believe that that day remains indelible, and its lesson unforgettable. The civilized democratic world came under attack from a small but lethal band of religious fanatics bent on destroying free societies, and, more terrifyingly, eager to get their hands on weapons of mass destruction that could make 9/11 look like a dry run.

We are still under attack.

This confluence of fundamentalism and lethal technology is the greatest danger of our time. And in the last seven years, the threat has not abated. Al Qaeda remains at large, and the very top leadership that planned and executed 9/11 is alive. They have reconstituted a base of sorts in Pakistan. They have scored several major propaganda victories – from Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo Bay to trapping most of the U.S. military in an unending counter-insurgency in one country where al Qaeda was weak before 2002, Iraq. Islamist factions in Pakistan's government are horrifyingly close to nuclear technology. Iran has gained in power and influence in the Middle East and its ability to launch and use nuclear weapons is much greater than it was on 9/11. At its best, the Iraq war will lead to a fractured petro-state, closely allied with Iran, beset by constant infighting and terrorism. At its worst, Iraq will

keep over 100,000 young Americans trapped there for the rest of our lives. The war in Afghanistan against the Taliban is at a seven-year nadir.

Now the really bad news: the view of co-presidents Bush and Cheney is that this is a war that can and should be controlled by only one branch of government and a war in which the job of the citizenry is to shop. It is a global war where force of arms remains too often a first resort and in which talking to our enemies is regarded as "the white flag of surrender," instead of another tool at our disposal. It is a war where the American government has alienated – in some cases deeply – democratic allies whose police work and intelligence we desperately need. I do not doubt that military force is part of the mix to defeat this threat. (Like everyone else, I'm heartened that General Petraeus has introduced some minimal intelligence into the occupation of Iraq, although I fear it has merely made our presence more protracted and our withdrawal more difficult.) But the crudeness with which military force has been deployed, the absence of strategy or even due diligence in the execution of the long war, and the massive public relations blunders which have led the United States to lose a propaganda war against a bunch of murderous, medieval loons are unforgivable.

These mistakes were compounded – and in large part created – by what I believe will one day be seen as the core event of the last eight years: the collapse of constitutional order and the rule of law fomented in a mixture of hubris and laziness by the president himself. It is now indisputable that the president and vice-president of the United States engineered a de facto coup against the Constitution after 9/11, declaring themselves above any law, any treaty, and any basic moral norm in their misguided mission to rid the world of evil. This blog has watched this process with increasing dismay – and watched several attempts to bring the U.S. back to sanity foiled by a relentless and unhinged vice-president's office.

Cheney and Bush, unlike any presidency in American history, have dangerously pushed constitutional government to the brink of collapse. They did not merely assert a unified executive in which actions and regulations reserved to the executive branch were kept free from Congressional and judicial tampering. That is a perfectly defensible position, especially in wartime. They did not merely act in the immediate wake of an emergency to protect American citizens swiftly – again a perfectly legitimate use of executive power, unhampered by Congress or courts. They declared such power to be unlimited; they asserted also that it was as permanent as the emergency they declared; they claimed their dictatorial powers were inherent in the presidency itself, and above any legal constraints; they ordered their own lawyers to provide retroactive and laughable legal immunity for their crimes; they bypassed all the usual and necessary checks within the executive branch to ensure prudence and legality and self-doubt in the conduct of a war; they asserted that emergency war powers applied to the territory of the United States itself; they claimed the right to seize anyone – *anyone, citizen or not* – they deemed an "enemy combatant," to hold them indefinitely with no due process and to torture them until they became incoherent, broken, brutalized shells of human beings, if they survived at all. They did this to the guilty and they did this to the innocent. But they also had no way of reliably knowing which was which and who was who. Never before in wartime has the precious, sacred inheritance of free people been treated with such contempt by the leaders of the democratic West.

They seized countless individuals with no trials and no hearings. They tortured dozens to death. They subjected many more to some of the worst psychological torture techniques

devised by Communist totalitarians and the worst physical suffering devised by the Gestapo. They crossed lines no American president had ever crossed before. They withdrew the U.S. from the Geneva Conventions – and did so secretly. They tapped Americans' phones without warrants, and forced many of their randomly grabbed prisoners into the black hole of insanity. They set up secret sites in former Soviet gulags to torture their victims. They single-handedly devastated America's reputation for human rights and the rule of law in the minds of the vast majority of people in other Western democracies, let alone the developing world, let alone the millions of Muslims across the Middle East who now suspect that America is not really better than their own thugocracies, that America also tortures when it wants to, that the shining city on a hill is actually a place where men above the law can do anything they want to other human beings in their custody.

No economic mismanagement can compare with this attack on the basic institutions of our democracy and the Constitution. No incompetence in conducting an occupation can be deemed comparable with this level of criminality and indecency. No reaction to a natural disaster, however hapless and negligent, is as grave as this crime. No financial crisis eclipses it in gravity. The president's oath is to protect the Constitution from enemies foreign and domestic. Instead, the president himself became an enemy to the Constitution he swore to uphold.

This is the depth of the predicament the United States is in. The Islamist threat remains; but the Constitution is in deep disrepair, the military stretched to breaking point, the national debt doubled, and America's reputation in terrible shape. More important, the president and vice-president deeply damaged the reliability and integrity of America's intelligence services, creating a self-perpetuating loop of phony intelligence procured by torture which then justified more torture which led to worse intelligence. It will be decades before we learn the full extent of the damage Bush and Cheney have done to the country's ability to find out what the enemy is really up to, how much risk these sadists and goons have subjected us to, how much damage to this country they may have facilitated by filling intelligence with the garbage always created by torture. We do know that their policy has led to just one successful prosecution – and that many guilty figures will escape justice because torture has tainted the legal process beyond repair.

My great fear since 2004 is that this could have gotten even worse. Another attack and the abuse of power could have become much worse. A Romney or a Giuliani, empowered by religious fanaticism and a worship of state power, could have taken us down a path much darker than even the Cheney-Addington-Yoo cul-de-sac. Ron Paul emerged as the one Republican prepared to defend the rule of law, the Constitution and habeas corpus in the primaries. But, in the end, McCain emerged by default, a torture victim himself, and a critic of some aspects of the conduct of the war. But we saw in 2006 that, when push came to shove, even McCain acquiesced to the legalization of America's use of the very same torture techniques once used against him. And in this campaign, we have seen how no Republican candidate can escape the logic of bigotry, fanaticism and xenophobia that now grips and motivates the Republican party base. We have also learned, much more importantly, that McCain would appoint Justices to the Supreme Court who would acquiesce to and constitutionally entrench the dictatorial presidency that Bush-Cheney believe in as loyally as Roberts, Alito, Thomas and Scalia. That means we are one vote away from the court ever restraining this unchecked executive. It doesn't matter who that executive is and what party

he or she belongs to. What matters is that the controls upon it – controls critical to the endurance of constitutional balance and individual freedom in America – have been frayed to the breaking point. There is no greater cause right now than repairing that.

If I were to give one reason why I believe electing Barack Obama is essential tomorrow, it would be an end to this dark, lawless period in American constitutional government. The domestic cultural and political reasons for an Obama presidency remain as strong as they were when I wrote "Goodbye To All That" over a year ago. His ability to get us past the culture war has been proven in this campaign, in the generation now coming of age that will elect him if they turn out, in Obama's staggering ability not to take the bait. His fiscal policies are too liberal for me – I don't believe in raising taxes, I believe in cutting entitlements for the middle classes as the way to fiscal balance. I don't believe in "progressive taxation", I support a flat tax. I don't want to give unions any more power. I'm sure there will be moments when a Democratic Congress will make me wince. But I also understand that money has to come from somewhere, and it will not come in any meaningful measure from freezing pork or the other transparent gimmicks advertized in advance by McCain. McCain is not serious on spending. But he is deadly serious in not touching taxes. So, on the core question of debt, on bringing America back to fiscal reason, Obama is still better than McCain. If I have to take an ideological hit to head toward fiscal solvency, I'll put country before ideology.

But none of this compares to the task of restoring the rule of law and constitutional balance. Unlike McCain, Obama has never wavered on torture or habeas corpus or on keeping the executive branch under the law. His deep understanding and awareness of the Constitution eclipses McCain's. Coming from the opposing party, he will also be able to restore confidence that what lies within America's secret government – the one constructed by Bush and Cheney beyond any accountability, law or morality – will be ended or cleaned up. He can restore critically needed trust again – and force the Democratic party to take responsibility for a war which we all need to own, and take responsibility for, again.

We cannot win this war without regaining our democratic soul, ending torture, and returning to lawful governance. But these things won't win the war either. On that, we have a perilous task ahead. I don't know how Obama will be able to get out of Iraq in his first term. I fear that Bush and Cheney have made withdrawal deliberately difficult if not impossible. I fear the same in Afghanistan. I don't know how Obama will handle Iran, given the power that Bush and Cheney have ceded to the Islamist regime there, and the danger of a pre-emptive strike before Obama even gets inaugurated. But I do know that he will handle these wars with reason, with prudence and with care. Those are three qualities absent from the White House for eight years. And I do know that Obama's very person, and what he symbolizes, will do more to restore America's image and repair our global public relations than any single measure any new administration will be able to accomplish.

The truth is: we are in a war for the future of human civilization. We are fighting for a world in which destructive technology need not collide with fierce religious fundamentalism to annihilate us all; for a world in which dialogue across cultures and religions and regions (even within America) is essential if we are to survive. We need to win the argument in the developing world; we need to reach out and persuade the Muslim middle – especially the next generation in Iran and Iraq and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and Turkey and Western

Europe – about the virtues of democracy and constitutionalism. We cannot do that if we trash our own values ourselves. It is self-defeating. We cannot be a beacon to the world until we have reformed ourselves. In this war, we are also fighting for an America that does not lose its soul in fighting our enemy. Just because we are fighting evil does not mean we cannot ourselves succumb to it. That is what my Christian faith teaches me – that no nation has a monopoly on virtue, and that every generation has to earn its own integrity. I fear and believe we have given away far too much – and that, while this loss is permanent, it can nonetheless be mitigated by a new start, a new direction, a new statement that the America the world once knew and loved is back.

It will not be easy. The world will soon remember why it resents America as well as loves it. But until this unlikely fellow with the funny ears and strange name and exotic biography emerged on the scene, I had begun to wonder if it was possible at all. I had almost given up hope, and he helped restore it. That is what is stirring out there; and although you are welcome to mock me for it, I remain unashamed. As someone once said, in the unlikely story of America, there is never anything false about hope. Obama, moreover, seems to bring out the best in people, and the calmest, and the sanest. He seems to me to have a blend of Midwestern good sense, an intuitive understanding of the developing world that is as much our future now as theirs, an analyst's mind and a poet's tongue. He is human. He is flawed. He will make mistakes. His passivity and ambiguity are sometimes weaknesses as well as strengths.

But there is something about his rise that is also supremely American, a reminder of why so many of us love this country so passionately and are filled with such grief at what has been done to it and in its name. I endorse Barack Obama because I will not give up on America, because I believe in America, and in her constitution and decency and character and strength.

And the world needs that America now as much as it ever has. Can we start that healing, that rebirth, tomorrow?

Yes. We. Can.

Afterword

This book itself is an afterword, so I will be brief. Re-reading this material was a grueling personal experience. To see one's errors exposed, to see one's emotions get the better of you, and to see, in real time, the cost of the war and occupation is not a recipe for self-esteem. Although my intentions were good, I feel ashamed of some of the sentences in this book. The only thing I am not ashamed of is the struggle of changing my mind.

There is only one piece of context that I would add.

A blogger writing daily - and sometimes several times a day - has nowhere to hide. A columnist can duck something for a week or two; an essayist can wait till the desert sand clears from an event. A blogger has no such options. And so my errors and insights, my hopes and terrible fears are jumbled together here in a stream of shifting consciousness through real time that can seem contradictory or inconsistent if judged by the standards of more considered journalism. This is not an excuse for my massive errors of judgment. And it may lead some to consider blogging an inferior form of discourse. But if taken for nothing more than it is, it can reveal things other forms cannot.

The power of the moment the towers fell - and all the restraint and reason that fell with them; the confusion; the emotion; the daily unknowables; the paranoia; the slow re-emergence of reason. We have forgotten a lot of that now - but in these pages, the experience is as raw as ever.

And to state the obvious: I was not alone in those feelings of terror and trauma. I was just one of the least filtered expressions of them. A hefty majority of Americans supported the war before it began. Far, far fewer now believe it was worth it. All of those people traveled something like the path I did - but less publicly. In that sense, I hope this edited volume can be of some use in understanding that period in history - for good and ill.

I want to thank Brendan James, Matt Sitman, and Patrick Appel and Chris Bodenner for their multiple efforts at culling this account from the archives of the Dish. I had input and reviewed the whole thing in detail, but they had the final edit, to keep this thing as honest as possible.

My old friend, Eric Baker, of Eric Baker Design, created the cover.

I dedicate this chronicle to all the victims of the conflict, on both sides. May they rest in the peace this brutal war never allowed them.

Andrew Sullivan
Veterans Day, November 11, 2013