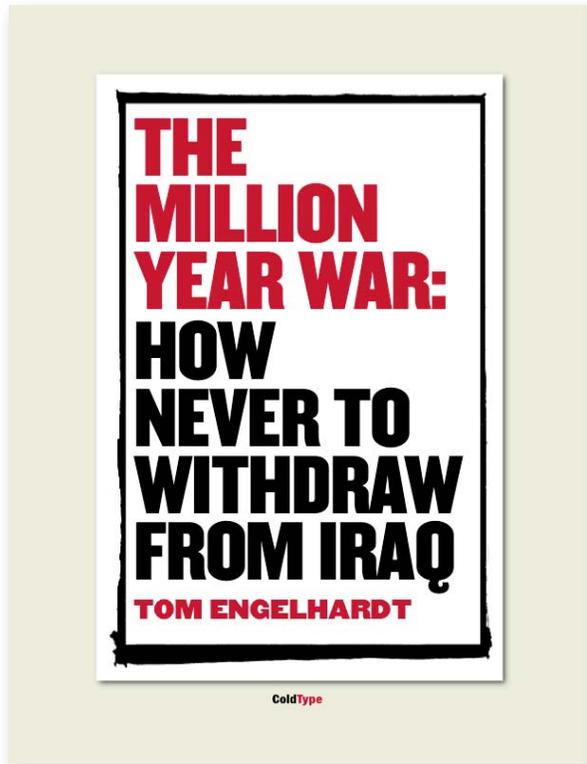


**THE  
MILLION  
YEAR WAR:**

**HOW  
NEVER TO  
WITHDRAW  
FROM IRAQ**

**TOM ENGELHARDT**



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**T**hink of the top officials of the Bush administration as magicians when it comes to Iraq. Their top hats and tails may be worn and their act fraying, but it doesn't seem to matter. Their latest "abracadabra," the President's "surge strategy" of 2007, has still worked like a charm. They waved their magic wands, paid off and armed a bunch of former Sunni insurgents and al-Qaeda terrorists (about 80,000 "concerned citizens," as the President likes to call them), and magically lowered "violence" in Iraq. Even more miraculously, they made a country that they had already turned into a cesspool and a slagheap — its capital now has a "lake" of sewage so large that it can be viewed "as a big black spot on Google Earth" — almost entirely disappear from view in the U.S.

Of course, what they needed to be effective was that classic adjunct to any magician's act, the perfect assistant. This has been a role long held, and still played with mysterious willingness, by the mainstream media. There are certainly many reporters in Iraq doing their jobs as best they can in difficult circumstances. When it comes to those who make the media decisions at home, however, they have practically clamored for the Bush administration to put them in a coffin-like box and saw it in half. Thanks to their news choices, Iraq has for months been whisked deep inside most papers and into the softest sections of network and cable news programs. Only one Iraq subject has gotten significant front-page attention: How much "success" has the President's surge strategy had?

Before confirmatory polls even arrived, the media had waved its own magic wand and declared that Americans had lost interest in Iraq. Certainly the media people had. The economy — with its subprime Hadithas and its market Abu Ghraibs — moved to center stage, yet links between the Bush administration's two trillion dollar war and a swooning economy were seldom considered. It mattered little that a recent Associated Press/Ipsos poll revealed a majority of Americans to be convinced that the most reasonable "stimulus" for the U.S. economy would be withdrawal from Iraq. A total of 68% of those polled believed such a move would help the economy.

Anyone tuning in to the nightly network news can now regularly go through a typical half-hour focused on Obamania, the faltering of the Clinton "machine," the Huckabee/McCain face-off on Republican Main Street, the latest nose-diving market, and the latest campus

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shooting without running across Iraq at all. Cable TV, radio news, newspapers — it makes little difference.

The News Coverage Index of the Project for Excellence in Journalism illustrates that point clearly. For the week of February 4-10, the category of "Iraq Homefront" barely squeaked into tenth place on its chart of the top-ten most heavily covered stories with 1% of the "newshole." First place went to "2008 Campaign" at 55%. "Events in Iraq" — that is, actual coverage of and from Iraq — didn't make it onto the list. (The week before, "Events in Iraq" managed to reach #6 with 2% of the newshole.)

True, you can go to Juan Cole's Informed Comment website, perhaps the best daily round-up of Iraqi mayhem and disaster on the Web, and you'll feel as if, like Alice, you had fallen down a rabbit hole into another universe. ("Two bombings shook Iraq Sunday morning. In the Misbah commercial center in the upscale Shiite Karrada district, a female suicide bomber detonated a belt bomb, killing 3 persons and wounding 10... About 100 members of the Awakening Council of Hilla Province have gone on strike to protest the killing of three of them by the U.S. military at Jurf al-Sakhr last Sunday, in what the Pentagon says was an accident... Al-Hayat reports in Arabic that officials in Baqubah are warning that as families are returning to the city, they could be forced right back out again, owing to sectarian tensions...") But how many Americans read Juan Cole every day... or any day?

On that media homefront, the Bush administration has been Houdini-esque. Left repeatedly locked in chains inside a booth full of water, George W. Bush continues to emerge to declare that things are going swimmingly in Iraq:

"...80,000 local citizens stepped up and said, we want to help patrol our own neighborhoods; we're sick and tired of violence and extremists. I'm not surprised that that happens. I believe Iraqi moms want the same thing that American moms want, and that is for their children to grow up in peace... The surge is working. I know some don't want to admit that, and I understand. But the terrorists understand the surge is working. Al Qaeda knows the surge is working..."

Having pulled the "surge" rabbit out of his hat — even stealing the very word out of the middle of "insurgent" — Bush then topped that trick by making Iraq go away for weeks, if not months, on end. Talk about success!

## **FOREVER AND A DAY**

If you're wondering why in the world this matters — after all, won't the Democrats get us out of Iraq in 2009? — then you haven't come to grips with Bush's greatest magic trick of all. Though a lame-duck president sporting dismally low job-approval ratings, he continues to

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embed the U.S. in Iraq, while framing the issue of what to do there in such a way that any thought of a quick withdrawal has... Poof!... fled the scene.

Admittedly, somewhere between 57% and 64% of Americans, according to Rasmussen Reports, want all U.S. troops out of Iraq within a year. We're not talking here about just the "combat troops" which both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama seem prepared to withdraw at a relatively stately pace. (Obama has suggested a 16-month schedule for removing them; Clinton has only indicated that she would start withdrawing some of them within 60 days of coming into office.) Combat troops, however, represent perhaps half of all U.S. military personnel in Iraq — and Republicans are already attacking even their withdrawal as cut-and-run-ism, if not outright treason.

Americans may not have noticed, but the policy that a large majority of them want is no longer part of polite discussion in Washington or on the campaign trail. The spectrum of opinion in the capital, among presidential candidates, and in the mainstream media ranges from Senator McCain's claim that even setting a date for withdrawal would be a sure recipe for "genocide" — and that's the responsible right — to those who want to depart, but not completely and not very quickly either. The party of "withdrawal" would still leave American troops behind for various activities. These would include the "training" of the Iraqi military. (No one ever asks why one side in Iraq needs endless years of "training" and "advice," while the other sides simply fight on fiercely.) In addition, troops might be left to guard our monstrous new embassy in Baghdad, or as an al-Qaeda-oriented strike force, or even to protect American security contractors like Blackwater.

Hard as it is for the audience to separate the mechanics of a magician's trickery from the illusion he creates, it's worth a try. Before the surge began in February 2007, as five combat brigades were dispatched mainly to Baghdad, there were perhaps 130,000 American forces in Iraq (as well as a large contingent of private security contractors — hired guns — running into the tens of thousands). The surge raised that military figure to more than 160,000.

The Bush administration's latest plans are to send home the five combat brigades, but not all the support troops that arrived with them, by the end of July. This will still leave troop levels above those of February 2007. At that point, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested only last week, the administration is likely to "pause" for at least one to three months to assess the situation. In other words, when Americans enter their polling places this November 4th, there will probably still be more troops in Iraq than at the beginning of 2007.

TIME Magazine typically put the matter this way:

"The pause, which could last up to several months, would be designed to ensure that the smaller U.S. footprint in Iraq doesn't embolden insurgents to reignite the civil war that ripped the country apart in 2006 and the first half of 2007."

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That smaller footprint, however, will be marginally larger than the one that preceded the surge. So consider this a year-long draw-up, not a drawdown. In the meantime, though the mainstream media has hardly noticed, the Pentagon has been digging in. In the last year, it has continued to upgrade its massive bases in Iraq to the tune of billions of dollars. It has also brought in extra air power for an "air surge" that has barely been reported on here — and nobody in Washington or on the campaign trail, in the Oval Office or the Democratic Party, has been talking about drawing down that air surge, even though there has recently been a spate of incidents in which Iraqi civilians, and some of those "concerned citizens" backing American forces have died from U.S. air strikes.

The Bush administration is also quietly negotiating a Status of Forces Agreement with the weak Iraqi government inside Baghdad's Green Zone. It will legally entrench American forces on those mega-bases for years to come. In a recent op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Secretary of Defense Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice denied that the administration was trying to bind a future president to Bush's Iraq policies. ("In short, nothing to be negotiated in the coming months will tie the hands of the next commander in chief, whomever he or she may be.") This, however, is obviously not the case. The agreement is also being carefully constructed to skirt the status of a "treaty," so that it will not have to be submitted to the Senate for ratification. All of this, in the grand tradition of Vice President Cheney, might be thought of as the Bush administration's embunkerment policy in Iraq.

In the surge year, when administration officials and top commanders speculated about withdrawal, they increasingly emphasized the Herculean task involved and the need to take the necessary time to carefully remove every last piece of military equipment in-country. "You're talking about not just U.S. soldiers, but millions of tons of contractor equipment that belongs to the United States government, and a variety of other things," Secretary of Defense Gates told Pentagon reporters last July. "This is a massive logistical undertaking whenever it takes place."

As TIME Magazine's Michael Duffy described it, included would be "a good portion of the entire U.S. inventory of tanks, helicopters, armored personnel carriers, trucks and humvees... They are spread across 15 bases, 38 supply depots, 18 fuel-supply centers and 10 ammo dumps," not to speak of "dining halls, office buildings, vending machines, furniture, mobile latrines, computers, paper clips and acres of living quarters." Some top military commanders claimed that it would take up to 20 months just to get part of the American force out. More recently, it has been suggested that it would take "as many as 75 days" for each combat brigade and all its equipment to depart — and this would, of course, be done one brigade at a time.

When it comes to withdrawal, the highest priority now seems to be frugality in saving all U.S. property. In other words, as the Bush administration continues to dig in, each of its acts

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makes leaving ever more complicated.

If the subject at hand weren't so grim, this would be hilarious. An analogy might lie in an old joke: A boy murders his father and mother and then, arrested and brought to court, throws himself on the mercy of the judge as an orphan.

The administration that rashly invaded Iraq, used it as a laboratory for any cockamamie scheme that came to mind, and threw money away profligately in one of the more flagrantly corrupt enterprises in recent history, now wants us to believe that future planning for drawdowns or withdrawals must be based on the need to preserve whatever we brought — and are still bringing — into the country.

In the land the Bush administration "liberated," violence remains at a staggering daily level; electricity is a luxury; the national medical-care system has been largely destroyed; perhaps 4.5 million Iraqis have either fled the country or become internally displaced persons; approximately 70% lack access to clean water; and 4 million, according to the UN, don't know where their next meal is coming from. Yet, even with such a record before us, the logic of the moment in Washington and in the media remains clear: The last thing we should be doing is getting out of the country with any alacrity. After all, if we do, a disaster, a bloodbath, even genocide might happen.

Put another way, the most self-interested party in the "withdrawal" debate continues to set the terms of that debate. Imagine if, in football, the quarterback calling plays for his team also had the power to assess penalties, declare first downs, and decide whether a ball was caught in or out of bounds.

In the meantime, since the antiwar movement remains relatively moribund, there are no "out now" or "bring the troops home" chants ringing in the streets of our country. You have to look to the fringes for perfectly reasonable suggestions on getting out. Take Professor Immanuel Wallerstein, who wrote an essay, "Walking Away: The Least Bad Option," which you won't find in your local paper. To him, "walking away" would mean "a statement by the US government that it will withdraw all troops without exception and shut down all bases in Iraq within say six months of the date of announcement." He adds: "U.S. withdrawal would mark the first step on the long and difficult path to healing the United States of the sicknesses brought on by its imperial addiction, the first step in a painful effort to restore the good name of the United States in the world community."

Right now, however, any form of "walking away," itself a polite euphemism for retreat from a desperate stalemate or even a lost war, is off that "table" on which this administration has so often placed "all options." As a result, if either Clinton or Obama were to win the next election, enter office in January 2009, and follow his or her present plan — a relatively long period of drawdown not leading to full withdrawal — he or she would, within months, simply

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inherit the President's war. At that point, the present war supporters would turn on the new president with a ferocity the Democrats are incapable of mustering against the present one, attacking her or him as a cut-and-runner of the first order, even possibly even a traitor.

### **WE DON'T DO PERMANENT**

Sen. John McCain made a small stir recently by saying that he doesn't care if American troops stay in Iraq "100 years" as long as "Americans are not being injured, harmed or killed." In fact, as *Mother Jones's* David Corn reported, the senator later elaborated on that statement, adding "a thousand years," "a million years." The President and various top administration officials have offered similar, if more restrained formulas, speaking vaguely of "years" in Iraq, or a "decade" or more in that country, or simply of the "Korea model," a reference to our garrisoning of the southern part of the Korean peninsula for well over half a century with no end yet in sight.

Of course, this administration has already built its state-of-the-art mega-bases in Iraq as well as a mega-embassy, the largest on the planet, to suit such dreams. Yet in April 2003, the month Baghdad fell to American forces, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld first denied that the U.S. was seeking "permanent" bases in Iraq. Ever since then, administration officials have consistently denied that those increasingly permanent-looking mega-bases were "permanent."

Just the other day, the President again told Fox News, "We won't have permanent bases... [but] I do believe it is in our interests and the interests of the Iraqi people that we do enter into an agreement on how we are going to conduct ourselves over the next years." Dana Perino, White House press spokesperson, offered further clarification by indicating that we do not actually have permanent bases on Planet Earth, even in Korea more than half a century later. "I'm not aware," she said, "of any place in the world — where we have a base — that they are asking us to leave. And if they did, we would probably leave." (She made a singular exception for Guantanamo.)

Consider this a philosophic position. Evidently, we don't do permanent because all things are evanescent; everything must end. Where, after all, are the Seven Wonders of the World? Mostly gone, of course.

Such a position might be applied to far more than the permanency of bases. Let me offer two linked predictions based on impermanency:

As a start, the surge-followed-by-pause solution the Bush administration whipped up is a highly unstable, distinctly impermanent strategy. It was never meant to do much more than give Iraq enough of the look of quiescence that the President's war could be declared a modest "success" and passed on to the next president. It relies on a tenuous balancing of unsta-

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ble, largely hostile forces in Iraq — of Sunni former insurgents and the Shiite followers of cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, among others. It is unlikely to last even until the November presidential election.

And let's remember that those on the other side(s) are just as capable of reading draw-down — and election — schedules, of gauging weakness and strength, as we are. It's likely that by the fall the surge effect will have worn off — signs of this are already in the air — and Iraq will be creeping back onto front pages and to the top of the TV news.

Given that Senator McCain is so tightly linked to the surge's "success," as well as the war itself, he is likely to prove a far weaker Republican candidate than now generally imagined. Similarly, it may be far harder to Swift Boat the Democrats over Iraq by this fall — if, that is, the Democratic presidential candidate doesn't move so close to McCain on the war as to take the sting out of his situation. Already, as Gary Kamiya has written at Salon.com, the Democrats' "timid, Republican-lite approach to Iraq and the 'war on terror' has put the country to sleep... Indeed, polls show that the main reason the public has such a low opinion of Congress is that it failed to force Bush to change course in Iraq."

Iraq is a deeply alien land whose people were never going to accept being garrisoned by the military of a Western imperial power. It was always delusional to think that our situation there could be "enduring," no matter how many permanent-looking structures we built. It is no less delusional for Senator McCain to imagine a 100-year garrisoning — in fact, one of any length — in which Americans will not be "injured, harmed or killed."

The time for withdrawal from Iraq has long passed. In those endless years in which withdrawal didn't happen, the Bush administration definitively proved one thing: We are incapable of "solving" Iraq's problems, "building" a nation there, or preventing an endless string of horrific things from occurring. After all, it was under U.S. occupation and in the face of the overwhelming presence of American forces that Iraq devolved and massive ethnic cleansing occurred. It was during the months of the President's surge in 2007, with U.S. troops flooding the streets of the capital, that many of Baghdad's mixed neighborhoods were most definitively "cleansed."

It is a delusion to believe that the U.S. military is a force that stands between Iraqis and catastrophe. It is a significant part of the catastrophe and, as long as Washington is committed to any form of permanency (however euphemistically described), it cannot help but remain so.

Every day that passes, the Bush administration is digging us in further, even though surge commander General David Petraeus recently observed that "there is no light at the end of the tunnel that we're seeing." Every day that passes makes withdrawal that much harder and yet brings it ineradicably closer.

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Getting out, when it comes, won't be elegant. That's a sure thing by now; but, honestly, you don't have to be a military specialist to know that, if we were determined to leave, it wouldn't take us forever and a day to do so. It isn't actually that hard to drive a combat brigade's equipment south to Kuwait. (And there's no reason to expect serious opposition from our Iraqis opponents, who overwhelmingly want us to depart.)

When withdrawal finally comes, the Iraqis will be the greatest losers. They will be left in a dismantled country. They deserve better. Perhaps an American administration determined to withdraw in all due haste could still muster the energy to offer better. But leave we must. All of us.



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