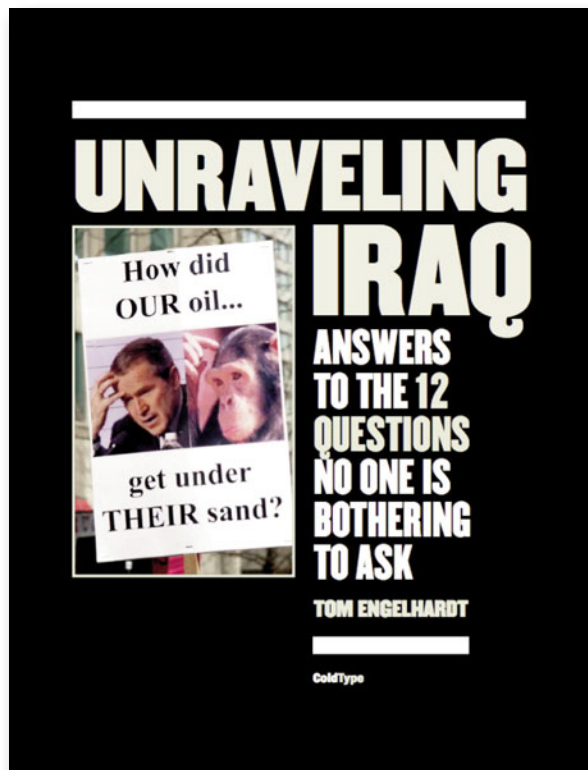

UNRAVELING IRAQ



ANSWERS
TO THE 12
QUESTIONS
NO ONE IS
BOTHERING
TO ASK

TOM ENGELHARDT

ColdType



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Can there be any question that, since the invasion of 2003, Iraq has been unraveling? And here's the curious thing: Despite a lack of decent information and analysis on crucial aspects of the Iraqi catastrophe, despite the way much of the Iraq story fell off newspaper front pages and out of the TV news in the last year, despite so many reports on the "success" of the President's surge strategy, Americans sense this perfectly well. In the latest Washington Post/ABC News poll, 56% of Americans "say the United States should withdraw its military forces to avoid further casualties" and this has, as the Post notes, been a majority position since January 2007, the month that the surge was first announced. Imagine what might happen if the American public knew more about the actual state of affairs in Iraq — and of thinking in Washington. So, here, in an attempt to unravel the situation in ever-unraveling Iraq are twelve answers to questions which should be asked far more often in this country:

1. Yes, the war has morphed into the U.S. military's worst Iraq nightmare: Few now remember, but before George W. Bush launched the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, top administration and Pentagon officials had a single overriding nightmare — not chemical, but urban, warfare. Saddam Hussein, they feared, would lure American forces into "Fortress Baghdad," as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld labeled it. There, they would find themselves fighting block by block, especially in the warren of streets that make up the Iraqi capital's poorest districts.

When American forces actually entered Baghdad in early April 2003, however, even Saddam's vaunted Republican Guard units had put away their weapons and gone home. It took five years but, as of now, American troops are indeed fighting in the warren of streets in Sadr City, the Shiite slum of two and a half million in eastern Baghdad largely controlled by Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia. The U.S. military, in fact, recently experienced its worst week of 2008 in terms of casualties, mainly in and around Baghdad. So, mission accomplished — the worst fear of 2003 has now been realized.

2. No, there was never an exit strategy from Iraq because the Bush administration never intended to leave — and still doesn't: Critics of the war have regularly gone after the Bush administration for its lack of planning, including its lack of an "exit strategy." In this, they miss the point. The Bush administration arrived in Iraq with four mega-bases on the drawing boards. These were meant to undergird a future American garrisoning of that country and were to house at least 30,000 American troops, as well as U.S. air power, for the indefinite future. The term used for such places wasn't "permanent base," but the more charming and euphemistic "enduring camp." (In fact, as we learned recently, the Bush administration refuses to define any American base on foreign soil anywhere on the planet, including ones in Japan for over 60 years, as permanent.) Those four monster bases in Iraq (and many others) were soon being built at the cost of multibillions and are, even today, being significantly upgraded. In October 2007, for instance, National Public Radio's defense correspondent Guy Raz visited Balad Air Base, north of Baghdad, which houses about 40,000 American troops, contractors, and Defense Department civilian employees, and described it as "one giant construction project, with new roads, sidewalks, and structures going up across this 16-square-mile fortress in the center of Iraq, all with an eye toward the next few decades."

These mega-bases, like "Camp Cupcake" (al-Asad Air Base), nicknamed for its amenities, are small town-sized with massive facilities, including PXs, fast-food outlets, and the latest in communications. They have largely been ignored by the American media and so have played no part in the debate about Iraq in this country, but they are the most striking on-the-ground evidence of the plans of an administration that simply never expected to leave. To this day, despite the endless talk about drawdowns and withdrawals, that hasn't changed. In fact, the latest news about secret negotiations for a future Status of Forces Agreement on the American presence in that country indicates that U.S. officials are calling for "an open-ended military presence" and "no limits on numbers of U.S. forces, the weapons they are able to deploy, their legal status or powers over Iraqi citizens, going far beyond long-term U.S. security agreements with other countries."

3. Yes, the United States is still occupying Iraq (just not particularly effectively): In June 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), then ruling the country, officially turned over "sovereignty" to an Iraqi government largely housed in the American-controlled Green Zone in Baghdad and the occupation officially ended. However, the day before the head of the CPA, L. Paul Bremer III, slipped out of the country without fanfare, he signed, among other degrees, Order 17, which became (and, remarkably enough, remains) the law of the land. It is still a document worth reading as it essentially granted to all occupying forces and allied private companies what, in the era of colonialism, used to be called "extraterritoriality" —

the freedom not to be in any way subject to Iraqi law or jurisdiction, ever. And so the occupation ended without ever actually ending. With 160,000 troops still in Iraq, not to speak of an unknown number of hired guns and private security contractors, the U.S. continues to occupy the country, whatever the legalities might be (including a UN mandate and the claim that we are part of a "coalition"). The only catch is this: As of now, the U.S. is simply the most technologically sophisticated and potentially destructive of Iraq's proliferating militias — and outside the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, it is capable of controlling only the ground that its troops actually occupy at any moment.

4. Yes, the war was about oil: Oil was hardly mentioned in the mainstream media or by the administration before the invasion was launched. The President, when he spoke of Iraq's vast petroleum reserves at all, piously referred to them as the sacred "patrimony of the people of Iraq." But an administration of former energy execs — with a National Security Advisor who once sat on the board of Chevron and had a double-hulled oil tanker, the Condoleezza Rice, named after her (until she took office), and a Vice President who was especially aware of the globe's potentially limited energy supplies — certainly had oil reserves and energy flows on the brain. They knew, in Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz's apt phrase, that Iraq was afloat on "a sea of oil" and that it sat strategically in the midst of the oil heartlands of the planet.

It wasn't a mistake that, in 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney's semi-secret Energy Task Force set itself the "task" of opening up the energy sectors of various Middle Eastern countries to "foreign investment"; or that it scrutinized "a detailed map of Iraq's oil fields, together with the (non-American) oil companies scheduled to develop them"; or that, according to the *New Yorker's* Jane Mayer, the National Security Council directed its staff "to cooperate fully with the Energy Task Force as it considered the 'melding' of two seemingly unrelated areas of policy: 'the review of operational policies towards rogue states,' such as Iraq, and 'actions regarding the capture of new and existing oil and gas fields'"; or that the only American troops ordered to guard buildings in Iraq, after Baghdad fell, were sent to the Oil Ministry (and the Interior Ministry, which housed Saddam Hussein's dreaded secret police); or that the first "reconstruction" contract was issued to Cheney's former firm, Halliburton, for "emergency repairs" to those patrimonial oil fields. Once in charge in Baghdad, as sociologist Michael Schwartz has made clear, the administration immediately began guiding recalcitrant Iraqis toward denationalizing and opening up their oil industry, as well as bringing in the big boys.

Though rampant insecurity has kept the Western oil giants on the sidelines, the American-shaped "Iraqi" oil law quickly became a "benchmark" of "progress" in Washington and remains a constant source of prodding and advice from American officials in Baghdad.

Former Federal Reserve chief Alan Greenspan put the oil matter simply and straightforwardly in his memoir in 2007: "I am saddened," he wrote, "that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil." In other words, in a variation on the old Bill Clinton campaign mantra: It's the oil, stupid. Greenspan was, unsurprisingly, roundly assaulted for the obvious naiveté of his statement, from which, when it proved inconvenient, he quickly retreated. But if this administration *hadn't* had oil on the brain in 2002-2003, given the importance of Iraq's reserves, Congress should have impeached the President and Vice President for that.

5. No, our new embassy in Baghdad is not an "embassy": When, for more than three-quarters of a billion dollars, you construct a complex — regularly described as "Vatican-sized" — of at least 20 "blast-resistant" buildings on 104 acres of prime Baghdadi real estate, with "fortified working space" and a staff of at least 1,000 (plus several thousand guards, cooks, and general factotums), when you deeply embunker it, equip it with its own electricity and water systems, its own anti-missile defense system, its own PX, and its own indoor and outdoor basketball courts, volleyball court, and indoor Olympic-size swimming pool, among other things, you haven't built an "embassy" at all. What you've constructed in the heart of the heart of another country is more than a citadel, even if it falls short of a city-state. It is, at a minimum, a monument to Bush administration dreams of domination in Iraq and in what its adherents once liked to call "the Greater Middle East."

Just about ready to open, after the normal construction mishaps in Iraq, it will constitute the living definition of diplomatic overkill. It will, according to a Senate estimate, now cost Americans \$1.2 billion a year just to be "represented" in Iraq. The "embassy" is, in fact, the largest headquarters on the planet for the running of an occupation. Functionally, it is also another well-fortified enduring camp with the amenities of home. Tell that to the Shiite militiamen now mortaring the Green Zone as if it were... enemy-occupied territory.

6. No, the Iraqi government is not a government: The government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has next to no presence in Iraq beyond the Green Zone; it delivers next to no services; it has next to no ability to spend its own oil money, reconstruct the country, or do much of anything else, and it most certainly does not hold a monopoly on the instruments of violence. It has no control over the provinces of northern Iraq which operate as a near-independent Kurdish state. Non-Kurdish Iraqi troops are not even allowed on its territory. Maliki's government cannot control the largely Sunni provinces of the country, where its officials are regularly termed "the Iranians" (a reference to the heavily Shiite government's closeness to neighboring Iran) and are considered the equivalent of representatives of a foreign occupying power; and it does not control the Shiite south, where power is fragmented among the

militias of ISCI (the Badr Organization), Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, and the armed adherents of the Fadila Party, a Sadrist offshoot, among others.

In Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai has been derisively nicknamed "the mayor of Kabul" for his government's lack of control over much territory outside the national capital. It would be a step forward for Maliki if he were nicknamed "the mayor of Baghdad." Right now, his troops, heavily backed by American forces, are fighting for some modest control over Shiite cities (or parts of cities) from Basra to Baghdad.

7. No, the surge is not over: Early in April, amid much hoopla, General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker spent two days before Congress discussing the President's surge strategy in Iraq and whether it has been a "success." But that surge — the ground one in which an extra 30,000-plus American troops were siphoned into Baghdad and, to a lesser extent, adjoining provinces — was by then already so over. In fact, all but about 10,000 of those troops will be home by the end of July, not because the President has had any urge for a drawdown, but, as Fred Kaplan of *Slate* wrote recently, "because of simple math. The five extra combat brigades, which were deployed to Iraq with the surge, each have 15-month tours of duty; the 15 months will be up in July... and the U.S. Army and Marines have no combat brigades ready to replace them."

On the other hand, in all those days of yak, neither the general with so much more "martial bling" on his chest than any victorious World War II commander, nor the white-haired ambassador uttered a word about the surge that is ongoing — the air surge that began in mid-2007 and has yet to end. Explain it as you will, but, with rare exceptions, American reporters in Iraq generally don't look up or more of them would have noticed that the extra air units surged into that country and the region in the last year are now being brought to bear over Iraq's cities. Today, as fighting goes on in Sadr City, American helicopters and Hellfire-missile armed Predator drones reportedly circle overhead almost constantly and air strikes of various kinds on city neighborhoods are on the rise. Yet the air surge in Iraq remains unacknowledged here and so is not a subject for discussion, debate, or consideration when it comes to our future in Iraq.

8. No, the Iraqi army will never "stand up": It can't. It's not a national army. It's not that Iraqis can't fight — or fight bravely. Ask the Sunni insurgents. Ask the Mahdi Army militia of Muqtada al-Sadr. It's not that Iraqis are incapable of functioning in a national army. In the bitter Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, Iraqi Shiite as well as Sunni conscripts, led by a largely Sunni officer corps, fought Iranian troops fiercely in battle after pitched battle. But from Fallujah in 2004 to today, Iraqi army (and police) units, wheeled into battle (often at the behest of the

Americans), have regularly broken and run, or abandoned their posts, or gone over to the other side, or, at the very least, fought poorly. In the recent offensive launched by the Maliki government in Basra, military and police units up against a single resistant militia, the Mahdi Army, deserted in sizeable numbers, while other units, when not backed by the Americans, gave poor showings. At least 1,300 troops and police (including 37 senior police officers) were recently "fired" by Maliki for dereliction of duty, while two top commanders were removed as well.

Though American training began in 2004 and, by 2005, the President was regularly talking about us "standing down" as soon as the Iraqi Army "stood up," as Charles Hanley of the Associated Press points out, "Year by year, the goal of deploying a capable, free-standing Iraqi army has seemed to always slip further into the future." He adds, "In the latest shift, the Pentagon's new quarterly status report quietly drops any prediction of when local units will take over security responsibility for Iraq. Last year's reports had forecast a transition in 2008." According to Hanley, the chief American trainer of Iraqi forces, Lt. Gen. James Dubik, now estimates that the military will not be able to guard the country's borders effectively until 2018.

No wonder. The "Iraqi military" is not in any real sense a national military at all. Its troops generally lack heavy weaponry, and it has neither a real air force nor a real navy. Its command structures are integrated into the command structure of the U.S. military, while the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy are the real Iraqi air force and navy. It is reliant on the U.S. military for much of its logistics and resupply, even after an investment of \$22 billion by the American taxpayer. It represents a non-government, is riddled with recruits from Shiite militias (especially the Badr brigades), and is riven about who its enemy is (or enemies are) and why. It cannot be a "national" army because it has, in essence, nothing to stand up for.

You can count on one thing, as long as we are "training" and "advising" the Iraqi military, however many years down the line, you will read comments such as one from an American platoon sergeant, after an Iraqi front-line unit abandoned its positions in the ongoing battle for control of parts of Sadr City: "It bugs the hell out of me. We don't see any progress being made at all. We hear these guys in firefights. We know if we are not up there helping these guys out we are making very little progress."

9. No, the U.S. military does not stand between Iraq and fragmentation: The U.S. invasion and the Bush administration's initial occupation policies decisively smashed Iraq's fragile "national" sense of self. Since then, the Bush administration, a motor for chaos and fragmentation, has destroyed the national (if dictatorial) government, allowed the capital and much of the country (as well as its true patrimony of ancient historical objects and sites) to be looted, disbanded the Iraqi military, and deconstructed the national economy. Ever since, what-

ever the administration rhetoric, the U.S. has only presided over the further fragmentation of the country. Its military, in fact, employs a specific policy of urban fragmentation in which it regularly builds enormous concrete walls around neighborhoods, supposedly for "security" and "reconstruction," that actually cut them off from their social and economic surroundings. And, of course, Iraq has in these years been fragmented in other staggering ways with an estimated four-plus million Iraqis driven into exile abroad or turned into internal refugees.

According to Pepe Escobar of the *Asia Times*, there are now at least 28 different militias in the country. The longer the U.S. remains even somewhat in control, the greater the possibility of further fragmentation. Initially, the fragmentation was sectarian — into Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia regions, but each of those regions has its own potentially hostile parts and so its points of future conflict and further fragmentation. If the U.S. military spent the early years of its occupation fighting a Sunni insurgency in the name of a largely Shiite (and Kurdish) government, it is now fighting a Shiite militia, while paying and arming former Sunni insurgents, relabeled "Sons of Iraq." Iran is also clearly sending arms into a country that is, in any case, awash in weaponry. Without a real national government, Iraq has descended into a welter of militia-controlled neighborhoods, city states, and provincial or regional semi-governments. Despite all the talk of American-supported "reconciliation," Juan Cole described the present situation well at his *Informed Comment* blog: "Maybe the US in Iraq is not the little boy with his finger in the dike. Maybe we are workers with jackhammers instructed to make the hole in the dike much more huge."

10. No, the U.S. military does not stand between Iraq and civil war: As with fragmentation, the U.S. military's presence has, in fact, been a motor for civil war in that country. The invasion and subsequent chaos, as well as punitive acts against the Sunni minority, allowed Sunni extremists, some of whom took the name "al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia," to establish themselves as a force in the country for the first time. Later, U.S. military operations in both Sunni and Shiite areas regularly repressed local militias — almost the only forces capable of bringing some semblance of security to urban neighborhoods — opening the way for the most extreme members of the other community (Sunni suicide or car bombers and Shiite death squads) to attack. It's worth remembering that it was in the surge months of 2007, when all those extra American troops hit Baghdad neighborhoods, that many of the city's mixed or Sunni neighborhoods were most definitively "cleansed" by death squads, producing a 75-80% Shiite capital. Iraq is now embroiled in what Juan Cole has termed "three civil wars," two of which (in the south and the north) are largely beyond the reach of limited American ground forces and all of which could become far worse. The still low-level struggle between Kurds and Arabs (with the Turks hovering nearby) for the oil-rich city of Kirkuk in the north may be the true explosion point to come. The U.S. military sits precariously atop

this mess, at best putting off to the future aspects of the present civil-war landscape, but more likely intensifying it.

11. No, al-Qaeda will not control Iraq if we leave (and neither will Iran): The latest figures tell the story. Of 658 suicide bombings globally in 2007 (more than double those of any year in the last quarter century), 542, according to the *Washington Post's* Robin Wright, took place in occupied Iraq or Afghanistan, mainly Iraq. In other words, the American occupation of that land has been a motor for acts of terrorism (as occupations will be). There was no al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia before the invasion and Iraq was no Afghanistan. The occupation under whatever name will continue to create "terrorists," no matter how many times the administration claims that "al-Qaeda" is on the run. With the departure of U.S. troops, it's clear that homegrown Sunni extremists (and the small number of foreign *jihadis* who work with them), already a minority of a minority, will more than meet their match in facing the Sunni mainstream. The Sunni Awakening Movement came into existence, in part, to deal with such self-destructive extremism (and its fantasies of a Taliban-style society) before the Americans even noticed that it was happening. When the Americans leave, "al-Qaeda" (and whatever other groups the Bush administration subsumes under that catch-all title) will undoubtedly lose much of their *raison d'être* or simply be crushed.

As for Iran, the moment the Bush administration finally agreed to a popular democratic vote in occupied Iraq, it ensured one thing — that the Shiite majority would take control, which in practice meant religio-political parties that, throughout the Saddam Hussein years, had generally been close to, or in exile in, Iran. Everything the Bush administration has done since has only ensured the growth of Iranian influence among Shiite groups. This is surely meant by the Iranians as, in part, a threat/trump card, should the Bush administration launch an attack on that country. After all, crucial U.S. resupply lines from Kuwait run through areas near Iran and would assumedly be relatively easy to disrupt.

Without the U.S. military in Iraq, there can be no question that the Iranians would have real influence over the Shiite (and probably Kurdish) parts of the country. But that influence would have its distinct limits. If Iran overplayed its hand even in a rump Shiite Iraq, it would soon enough find itself facing some version of the situation that now confronts the Americans. As Robert Dreyfuss wrote in the *Nation* recently, "[D]espite Iran's enormous influence in Iraq, most Iraqis — even most Iraqi Shiites — are not pro-Iran. On the contrary, underneath the ruling alliance in Baghdad, there is a fierce undercurrent of Arab nationalism in Iraq that opposes both the U.S. occupation and Iran's support for religious parties in Iraq." The al-Qaeda and Iranian "threats" are, at one and the same time, bogeymen used by the Bush administration to scare Americans who might favor withdrawal and, paradoxically, realities that a continued military presence only encourages.

12. Yes, some Americans were right about Iraq from the beginning (and not the pundits either): One of the strangest aspects of the recent fifth anniversary (as of every other anniversary) of the invasion of Iraq was the newspaper print space reserved for those Bush administration officials and other war supporters who were dead wrong in 2002-2003 on an endless host of Iraq-related topics. Many of them were given ample opportunity to offer their views on past failures, the "success" of the surge, future withdrawals or drawdowns, and the responsibilities of a future U.S. president in Iraq.

Noticeably missing were representatives of the group of Americans who happened to have been right from the get-go. In our country, of course, it often doesn't pay to be right. (It's seen as a sign of weakness or plain dumb luck.) I'm speaking, in this case, of the millions of people who poured into the streets to demonstrate against the coming invasion with an efflorescence of placards that said things too simpleminded (as endless pundits assured American news readers at the time) to take seriously — like "No Blood for Oil," "Don't Trade Lives for Oil," or "How did USA's oil get under Iraq's sand?" At the time, it seemed clear to most reporters, commentators, and op-ed writers that these sign-carriers represented a crew of well-meaning know-nothings and the fact that their collective fears proved all too prescient still can't save them from that conclusion. So, in their very rightness, they were largely forgotten.

Now, as has been true for some time, a majority of Americans, another obvious bunch of know-nothings, are deluded enough to favor bringing all U.S. troops out of Iraq at a reasonable pace and relatively soon. (More than 60% of them also believe "that the conflict is not integral to the success of U.S. anti-terrorism efforts.") If, on the other hand, a poll were taken of pundits and the inside-the-Beltway intelligentsia (not to speak of the officials of the Bush administration), the number of them who would want a total withdrawal from Iraq (or even see that as a reasonable goal) would undoubtedly descend near the vanishing point. When it comes to American imperial interests, most of them know better, just as so many of them did before the war began. Even advisors to candidates who theoretically want out of Iraq are hinting that a full-scale withdrawal is hardly the proper way to go.

So let me ask you a question (and you answer it): Given all of the above, given the record thus far, who is likely to be right?

TOM ENGELHARDT | UNRAVELING IRAQ

Tom Engelhardt recommends: For another numbered piece on Iraq, check out Gary Kamiya's eminently sane reprise of the Ten Commandments as applied to the launching of the 2003 invasion — to be found at Salon.com. ("Commandment I, "Thou shalt not launch preventive wars..."; Commandment VI: "Do not allow neoconservatives anywhere near Middle East policy... Special Bill Kristol Sub-commandment VI a: Stop giving these buffoons prestigious jobs on newspaper-of-record Op-Ed pages, top magazines and television shows. They have been completely and consistently wrong about everything. Must we continue to be subjected to their pontifications?"). Also let me offer a bow of thanks to Cursor.org's daily "Media Patrol" column. Someone at that site with a keen eye for the less noticed but newsworthy pieces of any day (and an always splendid set of links) makes my life so much easier, when gathering material for essays like this one.]



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