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# The Iraq factor

Barack Obama may have lost control of his own foreign policy, writes **Tony Parkinson**.

Stripped to the rawest of logic, Barack Obama's gameplan was to win the White House on the back of defeat in Iraq.

Heading into the presidential election campaign, the same 'troops home' formula that allowed the Democrats to gain control of the US Congress in 2006 looked as if it might do the trick again. The honey-tongued Senator from Illinois would rescue a nation in despair.

Then came the surge. The success of the Bush administration's shift to a new counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq, aided by 20,000 additional troops, has changed dramatically the complexion of the battle to secure a new democratic order in the land once ruled by Saddam Hussein.

So, too, has it changed the complexion of the US presidential contest. On this critical foreign policy debate, the tide may no longer be running Obama's way.

After five years of gruelling conflict and sectarian feuding—with Iraq the main designated battlefront of Islamofascism's war against democracy—a nation in the heart of the Arab world has survived its rebirth as a free society.

Since the January, 2007, decision by the Bush administration to switch strategy, security in Iraq has improved appreciably, creating space for economic revival and political reconciliation to begin.

So much for the dire warnings about Iraq's descent into an intractable civil war; so much for Iraq as an epochal failure of US policy in the Middle East.

Republican John McCain was among the most steadfast supporters of the surge strategy, including through the long and anxious months when it was ridiculed, by Obama among others, as a policy doomed to failure.

For McCain, this was a mighty gamble, politically. He conceded as much a year ago when, in one of the most memorable moments of his campaign, and at a time when he was all but written off as a contender, he insisted he 'would rather lose an election than lose a war.'

Now, and for much of this year, McCain has held a double-digit lead in polls on the key question of who is best equipped to manage the security challenges the US faces in the world. This has left Obama conflicted—and cornered. Despite the evidence of improving conditions in Iraq, how can he recant on one of the core policy platforms defining his leadership? How, with any credibility, can he step back from the 'troops home' mantra that still brings him standing ovations, and which energised so many of the anti-war activists who swarmed to his campaign in a popular mobilisation unrivalled in recent US electoral history?

Did Obama go out too hard, too early? Having described Iraq repeatedly as the 'greatest strategic blunder in US history', is it possible Obama might have committed an historic strategic blunder of his own?

None of this is to suggest Iraq will be the decisive factor in the election. The last time the *Washington Post*/ABC poll showed Iraq as the most important issue in voters' minds was November last year. Quite clearly, McCain's September bounce had a lot more to do with the electrifying impact of his nomination of vice-presidential running mate, Sarah Palin.

Today, front-of-mind issues for voters are more likely to be high petrol prices, the crisis in financial markets, or the cost and availability of health care—and, overarching all of these, uncertainty about the state of the US economy.

Amid the crisis in US financial markets, there is every opportunity to translate the anxiety of Americans about job and income security into a powerful argument for change in Washington. An old rule of American politics is that economic distress moves voters toward Democrats. Obama has been gifted his plan B by the pinstriped wizards of Wall Street.

Yet the Democratic aspirant has still to overcome the big gap in his resume, the niggling doubt about his readiness and capacity to assume the role of Commander-in-Chief. This comes down to questions of judgment, experience, and conviction. Here, Iraq remains an important barometer of leadership. Let's examine, briefly, the record.

In 2002, the US Congress authorised war against Iraq. The vote in the US Senate was a bipartisan majority of 77-23. Those voting for the war included Hillary Clinton and Obama's vice-presidential nominee, Joe Biden.

As for Obama, at that time a legislator in the Illinois state house, he declared the war wrong, and potentially disastrous. Ever since, he has claimed to have shown superior judgment over his Republican (and Democrat) rivals.

Obama also opposed the troop surge: 'I am not persuaded that 20,000 additional troops in Iraq is going to solve the sectarian violence there. In fact, I think it will do the reverse.'

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U.S. Army General David Petraeus talks with Barack Obama on Sather Air Base, Iraq, July 21, 2008. U.S. Air Force photo.

## Yes, Barack Obama has won the global popularity contest. Problem is, that's not part of the job description for a US president.

In contrast, John McCain led the charge. 'We must have more troops over there,' Senator John McCain told *Fox News* in December, 2006. 'And we have to have a big enough surge that we can get Baghdad under control and then Anbar province under control.'

True to his word, McCain supported President Bush over succeeding weeks as he steered the policy change through Washington's national security establishment, against the advice of some of his most senior Pentagon and State Department officials.

Although no acolyte of Bush, and doubtless sensing that his ambitions for the White House depended on distancing himself as much as possible from an unpopular president, McCain held his nerve, urging other Republicans on Capitol Hill to get in behind the administration.

The surge encompassed three key elements: five additional combat brigades; new street-level tactics to force insurgents out of hiding, and allow Iraqi forces to secure the neighbourhoods; and more sophisticated and more effective intelligence methods to pursue and kill al Qaeda operatives. But the biggest strategic impact was on the psychology of the struggle: the very fact the 'surge' was happening at all told the combatants in Iraq, friends and enemies of the US alike, that the superpower would not be running from the fight.

Now, there is not only hope for Iraq, but legitimate cause for optimism. According to the September-October issue of Foreign Affairs, violence is down at least 80 per cent since the surge began. American fatalities have fallen from 66 in July, 2007, to only five in August. 'By and large, what's left of the insurgency is just trying to hang on,' says US Ambassador Ryan Crocker.

In spite of these trends, Obama went into the primaries promising a timetable for the rapid withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. This remains his policy today.

His continued rhetoric about Iraq as America's greatest foreign policy humiliation has enhanced his stature as hero of the anti-war left, and gave him added momentum in his desperate internal tussle with Clinton. Yet it also gave the impression that Obama was in denial about the surge: that he could never be seen to admit the possibility of success for America in Iraq.

Despite the changing circumstances on the ground, his policy, as stated on his official website, still carries the distinct DNA of the Democrat platform circa 2006: 'Obama will give his Secretary of Defense and military commanders a new mission in Iraq: ending the war. The removal of our troops will be responsible and phased, directed by military commanders on the ground, and done in consultation with the Iraqi government. Military experts believe we can safely redeploy combat brigades from Iraq at a pace of one to two brigades a month that would remove them in 16 months.'

More recently, if reluctantly, Obama has begun to acknowledge the reality that the surge has brought some success. Yet there has been no admission he got it badly wrong when he warned the policy would only exacerbate the violence.

McCain has identified Iraq as one of Obama's key vulnerabilities: 'His proposal to withdraw forces based on a political timetable, no matter the consequences for Iraq or American national security, is profoundly irresponsible. His comments demonstrate his commitment to retreating from Iraq no matter what the cost. His focus is on withdrawal—not on victory.'

The debate over Iraq reveals a Democrat nominee who believes many of his countrymen, and the world beyond, are disaffected with the exercise of American power. McCain, on the other hand, does not appear to be as fussed about what Democrat John Kerry once called 'the global test.' The superpower has special responsibilities that do not permit the luxury of deep immersion in the cosy comforts of multilateralism. It must say and do things others cannot. It needs to follow the beat of its own drum. John McCain's website says:

> I do not want to keep our troops in Iraq a minute longer than necessary to secure our interests there. Our goal is an Iraq that can stand on its own as a democratic ally and a responsible force for peace in its neighbourhood. Our goal is an Iraq that no longer needs American troops. And I believe we can achieve that goal, perhaps sooner than many imagine. But I do not believe that anyone should make promises as a candidate for President that they cannot keep if elected. To promise a withdrawal of our forces from Iraq, regardless of the calamitous consequences to the Iraqi people, our most vital interests, and the future of the Middle East, is the height of irresponsibility. It is a failure of leadership.

What we are seeing in this election is an intense struggle between competing worldviews. How do the candidates see the future leadership role for America in the world? Do they accept or reject the notion that the US is overstretched? If so, how would they redefine the Bush Doctrine, with what consequences for the assertion of US power, and for its allies in the field?

Iraq, of course, is but one of a cluster of momentous global security issues on which the next American president can expect to be tested. How to secure more robust input from NATO for the war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan? How to respond to Russian truculence in the Caucasus? What to do about the nuclear ambitions of Iran, and the mischief-making of Hugo Chavez in Latin America? How to resurrect the Middle East peace process?

In our own region, how will the next President handle the steep ascent of China as an economic and strategic power? A challenge for Australia will

John McCain at a rally in Virginia. © Dlericksen | Dreamstime.com

be to ensure Washington does not lose focus on the Pacific Rim, where active and assertive US diplomacy is vital to the regional power balances.

What does the Iraq debate tell us about the character and disposition of the presidential candidates, and how they might deal with these issues? Will American voters remember who held firm in the greatest moments of anguish in Iraq? Who will they judge to have shown the greater consistency of purpose, and principle? In whom are they more likely to invest greater trust?

Obama, of course, has many millions of supporters for his stance against the war. One is Jonathon Freedland, a columnist for *The Guardian*:

> Obama has stirred an excitement around the globe unmatched by any American politician in living memory,' he writes. 'Polling in Germany, France, Britain and Russia shows that Obama would win by whopping majorities. If November 4 were a global ballot, Obama would win it handsomely. If the free world could choose its leader, it would be Obama.

Freedland goes on to recall the adulation surrounding Obama's visit to Europe in July:

> The crowd of 200,000 that rallied to hear him in Berlin did so not only because of his charisma, but also because they know he, like the majority of the world's population, opposed the Iraq war … non-Americans sense that Obama will not ride roughshod over the international system but will treat alliances and global institutions seriously.

Then comes Freedland's grim warning to the voters of America:

> If Americans choose McCain, they will be turning their back on the rest of the world … suddenly Europeans and others will conclude that their dispute is with not only one ruling clique, but Americans themselves. For it will have been the American people, not the politicians, who will have passed up a once-in-a-generation chance for a fresh start—a fresh start the world is yearning for.

Lest anyone be left in any doubt, and after the usual cheap shot about the prospect that Obama could only conceivably be repudiated by the US electorate because of the colour of his skin, Freedland offers one last piece of stern advice: 'If Americans reject Obama, they will be sending the clearest possible message to the rest of us—and, make no mistake, we shall hear it.'

Setting to one side the astounding pomposity and pretension of a columnist who presumes to interpret the planet unto itself, what is Freedland really saying here? I think his argument can be reduced to something like this: the election of Barack Obama can be America's way of apologising to the world.

I suspect many, if not most, Americans wouldn't much take to that idea. Certainly, you would expect it to get short shrift from anyone with responsibility for prosecuting US strategy in the face of the many difficult security and economic challenges the world faces in the early twenty-first century.

Perhaps it serves merely to illustrate the risks for any American leader who sets out to pander to the puerile posturing of the cosmopolitan Left. Yes, it has won Barack Obama the global popularity contest, whatever that can be taken to mean. Problem is, that's not part of the job description for a US President.

What is part of the job description for a US President is the vital national security responsibility—and that means making the principled call, the right call, the tough call, no matter how hard the politics of it might look at the time.

That is when an American President truly faces 'the global test.' That is when great Presidents come to the fore … and when lesser Presidents demonstrate to the world that the job might have been a couple of sizes too big for them.