

remains central to any serious assessment of its legacy. The language of counterterrorism has often obscured this broader record. Military operations can be measured in territory recovered, targets struck, or militants eliminated. The consequences of intervention are more difficult to quantify: weakened institutions, diminished public trust, prolonged insecurity, and the political fragmentation that can persist long after foreign troops leave. Nor does withdrawal automatically resolve these problems. Iraq still faces the challenge of strengthening its institutions, managing competing armed groups, and maintaining its independence amid regional competition. The departure of foreign forces creates an opportunity to reinforce national sovereignty, but the outcome will depend on the ability of Iraqi leaders to translate that opportunity into effective governance. For Washington, the lesson is

equally important. A foreign military presence may create leverage in the short term, but it can also generate resentment, expose personnel to retaliation, and entangle the intervening power in disputes it cannot settle on its own. The claim that intervention is necessary to preserve stability must therefore be judged against the instability that intervention itself can produce.

A retreat from Iraq, or a reckoning with strategic failure?

The United States will retain important sources of influence in the Middle East after the end of its coalition military mission in Iraq. Diplomatic relationships, economic ties, intelligence cooperation, and bilateral security arrangements will continue to shape its regional position. The withdrawal does not mean that American power has disappeared. But preserving influence is not the same as achieving the ob-

jectives that originally justified a war. Washington invaded Iraq promising a transformed political order. More than two decades later, the end of its military mission highlights the limits of its ability to determine the country's future through sustained military involvement. The confrontation with Iran makes this reckoning more urgent. If escalation increases the dangers facing American forces without producing a durable political settlement, repeating the same strategy under a different name will not resolve the underlying problem. The fundamental issue is not whether the United States possesses sufficient military power to fight another war. It is whether military intervention can deliver the political outcomes Washington repeatedly promises and whether the costs imposed on the societies in which it intervenes can be justified by the results. Iraq offers little reason for complacency about those as-

sumptions. Its history since 2003 demonstrates that overwhelming force cannot substitute for political legitimacy, that occupation does not guarantee stability, and that tactical victories can coexist with profound strategic disappointment. The departure of US forces is thus both the completion of a negotiated transition and a warning about the limitations of American interventionism. Washington may describe the end of the mission as a success against ISIS. Yet the larger record is far more complicated: an invasion that destabilized a state, a prolonged military commitment that failed to meet its goals, and a regional strategy now operating under the additional pressures of war with Iran. For more than two decades, Iraq has been a test of the proposition that American military power can remake the Middle East. The withdrawal does not settle every argument about US influence, nor does it deter-



mine the region's future. It does, however, expose the enduring gap between the ambition to dominate events and the ability to shape their consequences. The most important lesson is that military supremacy cannot guarantee strategic success. Unless Washington draws that conclusion from Iraq, the end of this mission may become merely

A member of the Iraqi security forces flashes the victory sign during a military parade in Baghdad on September 30, 2026, marking the withdrawal of the US-led coalition from Iraq. ● AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP

another pause in a cycle of intervention, escalation, and diminishing returns.

And so this is how it ends

'Shock and awe' curdles into 'Aw, shucks'

By Mark Thompson
Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist

OPINION

The US ended its military campaign in Iraq on September 30, as the final American combat troops based there left the country. Their departure ended 23 years of fitful fighting. They found no weapons of mass destruction, which was the battering ram President George W. Bush and his combative coterie used to scaremonger the US to invade in 2003. We captured Saddam Hussein, and the Iraqis hanged him in 2006. We toppled his Ba'athist regime, only to see it replaced with a government that today is riven with next-door Iran's influence. It's important to remember how this war looks from the other end of the telescope. Two weeks before it began, The Bunker asked Air Force General Richard Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, how the Pentagon's ballyhooed "shock and awe" campaign would unfold. "If asked to go into conflict in Iraq, what you'd like to do is have it be a short conflict," he responded. "The best way to do that would be to have such a shock on the system that the Iraqi regime would have to assume early on the end was inevitable." Well, you know what they say about assume. In fact, a fellow Air Force officer, Colonel Clarence Lollar, spelled it out in 1964, 39 years before Myers used the word to explain why the Iraq war would be short: "Mister, when you have an important job to do, never assume. When you look at the word, you can see it is made up of three parts — 'ass,' 'u,' and 'me.' When you rely on assumptions, sooner or later it will make an ass of both of us." Turns out toppling Saddam was only the beginning of a generation-long campaign that cost 4,418 US troops their lives. It will end up costing US taxpayers an estimated \$2.9 trillion through 2050, including veterans' care yet unbilled.



The Bunker spent years reporting on the war, and its spasmodic successes like toppling Baghdad, hunting down Saddam in his "spider hole," and the jittery calm wrought by "the surge" of US troops into Iraq in 2007. But he also told the stories of those killed, as well as those who killed themselves (and their family). He wrote about the more than 30,000 physically wounded, as well as the roughly 15%

of the 1.5 million US troops who served in Iraq who came home mentally maimed. He covered the military's inadequate, and sometimes fatal, efforts to render aid, even among those trying to deliver it. He reported on the war's deadly impact on recruiters back home. He wrote about those captured, dead or alive, as they used to say in the Westens. Not to mention the 3,600 contractors, and perhaps 200,000

Iraqi civilians, killed in the war. The stories were tough to report, tough to write, and they remain tough to read. But in the hurly-burly of today's world, the heroes at the heart of these stories must never be forgotten. We must remember and honor their sacrifice, even as we ponder its wisdom, given its paltry prize. Otherwise, it might happen again.



American soldiers wait out a sandstorm listening to BBC on shortwave radio in Iraq in 2003. Not good news at this point with reports of American casualties and the war not going well. ● CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS

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A US Marine watches as a statue of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein topples in 2003. ● GORAN TOMASEVIC/REUTERS

Long overdue, but it must be done right. The same day the US military pulled out of Iraq, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth pledged to continue his campaign to shrink the Pentagon's nearly 1,000-strong corps of generals and admirals by 20% (he's currently about halfway there). "The media calls that a purge," he said. "I call it accountability, and long overdue." Accountability, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. We here at the Project On Government Oversight have long fought to cut the US military's senior ranks. "We have more officers than we need — and we're running the risk of creating a military force of bureaucrats rather than warriors," Executive Director Danielle Brian said ... in 1998. The numbers don't lie: The ranks of generals and admirals, as their share of the entire US military, has grown by 40% since Vietnam. But the cutting has to be smart. Based on the results of the Iran war — so far — it's plain that neither Hegseth nor his military high command knows how to wage war smartly. Promoting the right military personnel is just as challenging. Bazookaing brass that displease the boss doesn't automatically lead to a lighter and, to coin a phrase, lethaler fighting force. Based on Hegseth's track record, his thinning of the herd is likely to be more about politics and partisanship than proficiency and prowess. "This is just a less personal version of the purge he's already been executing since taking office," Virginia Burger, a Marine veteran now here at POGO's Center for Defense Information, says. "By announcing he's cutting the generals by 20%, he has justification for refusing to promote scores of officers without even having to pull their names from [promotion] lists. This just lets him continue to remove senior leaders who are in the strongest positions to oppose him and his actions."

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