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The Nation

War, Meet the 2008 Campaign

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FOR the past year, I have led a double existence, dividing my time between military reporting assignments in [Iraq](#) and tracking the campaign debate in the United States.

I have rolled north to Baquba with a Stryker brigade that cleared the city of insurgents and stayed with a cavalry squadron that found common cause with Sunni sheiks in Hawr Rajab. And from Iowa to Washington, I have talked with the leading candidates who were willing to be interviewed on the war (four, so far) and tracked the ones who were not.

Those were parallel universes, in which the discussion of the taxing road ahead and potential fall-back options were often so divergent that the generals and the politicians seemed not to be talking about the same war.

The American officers I met were hardly of one mind on how to proceed in Iraq, but they were grappling with decisions on how to try to stabilize a traumatized country with a hard-headed sense that although there have been significant gains, a long and difficult job still lies ahead a core assumption that has frequently been missing on the campaign trail.

The politicians, on the other hand, seemed more intent on addressing public impatience with

an open-ended commitment in Iraq, either by promising prompt withdrawal (the Democrats) or by suggesting that victory may be near (the Republicans).

Anthony Cordesman, a military specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies who regularly visits Iraq, put it this way: “You have to grade all the candidates between a D-minus and an F-plus. The Republicans are talking about this as if we have won and as if Iraq is the center of the war on terrorism, rather than Afghanistan and Pakistan and a host of movements in 50 other countries.

“The Democrats talk about this as if the only problem is to withdraw and the difference is over how quickly to do it.”

On the ground with the troops, it is clear that a major military change was in fact made in Iraq last year not so much the addition of 30,000 troops, but the shift to a counterinsurgency strategy for using them. That strategy made the protection of Iraq’s population a paramount goal in an effort to drive a wedge between the people and the militants and to encourage Iraqis to provide intelligence that the American military forces need to track down an elusive foe.

But counterinsurgency is inherently a long-term proposition, and that assumption has driven much of the military thinking about the future, even as it heightens the political debate at home.

“Unless you are suppressing insurgents the way the Romans did creating a desert and calling it peace it typically can take the better part of a decade or more,” said Andrew Krepinevich, a military expert at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

“The paradox,” he added, “is that counterinsurgency requires convincing the Iraqis of our

staying power. At the same time, the American people view success in terms of how quickly we can pull out.”

The American military plans to return by mid-July to 15 combat brigades, the total in Iraq before the troop buildup. No decisions have been made on further reductions, but American officers foresee a continued need for American combat forces and generally anticipate a more gradual shifting of responsibilities to Iraqi forces than many of the candidates a reflection of caution they say is warranted by years of sobering experience.

“It is about mitigating risk and not repeating mistakes of the past,” said one senior American officer in Iraq, referring to this cautious approach.

The politicians are suggesting they can produce faster results. But the candidates who have lambasted President Bush for failing to ask the tough questions about what might happen the day after [Saddam Hussein](#) was swept from power often don't fully address hard questions about what might happen the day after the American military gets out.

Senator [Hillary Clinton](#) has advocated that the United States rapidly draw down forces while retraining a residual force to fight terrorists, protect the Kurds, deter Iranian aggression and possibly support the Iraqi military. But it is striking that those assignments do not include the core mission of the counterinsurgency doctrine: protecting Iraqi civilians from sectarian violence, which she sees as involving American forces in a civil war.

She was asked in an interview to explain her thinking. “We would not be trying to insert ourselves in the middle between the various Shiite and Sunni factions,” she said last March in her Senate office. “This is an Iraqi problem we cannot save the Iraqis from themselves.”

But that raises the question of whether American forces could really stay within the security of their bases if thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed outside the gates. It would probably not be long before the media and perhaps the troops themselves asked whether the nation that had taken the lid off Pandora's box by invading Iraq had a responsibility to protect the defenseless.

Senator [Barack Obama](#) has pledged to withdraw combat forces, but perhaps not counterterrorism units or trainers, within 16 months of taking office. Mindful of the risk that such a wholesale withdrawal might lead to an escalation in sectarian killings, he has said that he would be prepared to send American troops back into Iraq as part of an international force to stop genocidal attacks. (That is hardly a far-fetched scenario; a [National Intelligence Estimate](#) on Iraq issued in January 2007 by American intelligence agencies warned that the quick withdrawal of all American forces would probably lead to "massive civilian casualties and forced population displacement.")

"It is conceivable that there comes a point where things descend into the mayhem that shocks the conscience and we say to ourselves, 'This is not acceptable,' " he said in a November interview in his Chicago office. "We don't know whether this is, in fact, a problem, but I acknowledge that you never know what could happen."

But fighting their way back into Iraq in the middle of a raging civil war might well be far more difficult and dangerous for American forces than their current operations.

"When you go over the roads you are going to come across I.E.D.'s because you did not spend the last few months patrolling the streets to know where they are planted," said Michael O'Hanlon, a military expert at the [Brookings Institution](#). "You are going to run into ambushes because you don't have any local informants working with you, because they will be the first ones targeted in the opening weeks of genocide."

[John Edwards](#) has said he would remove all troops from Iraq within 10 months of taking office, save for a small force to protect the United States Embassy and possibly humanitarian workers. But he has also stressed that he would keep a counterterrorism force in neighboring Kuwait or perhaps Jordan; it could swoop into Iraq to operate against militants inside the country.

But that raises the issue of whether such a force could respond in a timely way to terrorist threats from such a distance, and without the sort of intelligence that is gathered through regular interaction with Iraqi civilians.

An argument that Mr. Edwards and other Democratic candidates have made is that the withdrawal of American combat troops will force Iraqi political leaders to make the hard decisions on political reconciliation that they can otherwise avoid if the American military keeps propping them up. But if the Iraqis know that American forces are on their way out regardless of what they do, would they be more likely to respond by overcoming their differences or by preparing for the sectarian blood bath that might follow?

The leading Republican candidates are not talking about rapidly withdrawing troops, but they have provided little in the way of detail as to how they would build on tactical victories to achieve the “sustainable security” that is the military plan’s stated goal.

Senator [John McCain](#), the Arizona Republican who argued that the United States lacked sufficient troops well before Mr. Bush sent the 30,000 reinforcements, has declared the military “surge” a success while acknowledging that the Iraqi political progress that it was intended to stimulate has been slow.

Among the unanswered questions on the ground in Iraq is whether the United States can

persuade the current government to make progress on its political agenda and what alternative approach might be followed if it turns out that the Iraqi efforts at political accommodation fall short.

Looking at the second possibility, some analysts like Stephen Biddle, a military expert at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), say they believe that security might, arguably, be maintained by arranging for Sunni volunteers to protect their home areas while assigning American and other foreign troops to police a Bosnia-style cease-fire. But such suggestions seem to be debated more by the experts than the candidates.

[Rudolph Giuliani](#), [Mitt Romney](#) and [Mike Huckabee](#) have discussed Iraq in less detail than Senator McCain. In a November appearance in New Hampshire, Mr. Giuliani summed up his strategy in one word: “victory.” But victory seems an almost irrelevant concept in a conflict that entails a commitment to nation building and has more in common with the effort to suppress ethnic killings in the Balkans than with the decisive battles of World War II.

The generals and diplomats are taught to stay clear of American politics. Right now, they have their hands full trying to devise a way to thin out the American troop deployments and shift more of the burden to the Iraqis without forfeiting hard-won gains. Their hope, one American civilian official said, is to make enough political and military headway this year that the next president will have time to reassess developments in Iraq and perhaps opt for a course correction rather than wholesale change.

In the meantime, some senior officers seem utterly puzzled by the debate at home. “The one thing that befuddles is I have not heard any candidate describe what their short and long term goals are for Iraq, how it fits into their regional goals for the Middle East and transnational

terrorism,” said the American officer. “Is their goal just to withdraw troops as fast as possible?”

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