



## Angels and Intelligence Estimates

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Charles Krauthammer

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Lost between the Foley tsunami and the Woodward hurricane is the storm that began the great Republican collapse of 2006. It was only a few weeks ago that the Republicans were clawing their way back to contention for the November elections, their prospects revived by the president's strong speeches on terrorism around the Sept. 11 anniversary, the landmark legislation on treating and trying captured terrorists, and a serendipitous fall in gas prices.

Then came the momentum stopper, the leaked National Intelligence Estimate that was trumpeted as definitive evidence that the war in Iraq had made terrorism worse. Mark Foley's folly and Bob Woodward's history have overwhelmed that story, but it will remain an unrebutted charge long after Foley is forgotten

and Woodward is remaindered. It demands debunking.

The question posed -- does the Iraq war increase or decrease the world supply of jihadists? -- is itself an exercise in counting angels on the head of a pin. Any answer would require a complex calculation involving dozens of unmeasurable factors, as well as construction of a complete alternate history of the world had the U.S. invasion of 2003 not happened.

Ah, but those seers in the U.S. "intelligence community," speaking through a leaked National Intelligence Estimate -- the most famous previous NIE, mind you, concluded that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, slam-dunk -- have peered deep into the hypo-

thetical past and found the answer. As spun by Iraq war critics, the conclusion is that Iraq has made us less safe because it has become a "cause celebre" and a rallying cry for jihad.

Become? Everyone seems to have forgotten that Iraq was already an Islamist cause celebre and rallying cry long before 2003. When Osama bin Laden issued his declaration of war against America in 1998, his two principal justifications for the jihad that exploded upon us on Sept. 11, 2001, centered on Iraq: America's alleged killing of more than 1 million Iraqis through the post-Gulf War sanctions and, even worse, the desecration of Islam's holiest cities of Mecca and Medina by the garrisoning of infidel U.S. soldiers in Saudi Arabia (as post-Gulf War protection from the continuing threat of invasion by Hussein).

The irony is that the overthrow of Hussein eliminated these two rallying cries: Iraqi sanctions were lifted and U.S. troops were withdrawn from the no-longer-threatened Saudi Arabia. But grievances cured are easily replaced. The jihadists wasted no time in finding new justifications for fury and reviving old ones. The supply is endless: Danish cartoons, papal pronouncements, the liberation of women, the existence of Israel, the licentiousness of Western culture, the war in Afghanistan. And, of course, Iraq -- again.

How important is Iraq in this calculus? The vaunted National Intelligence Estimate -- unspun -- offers a completely commonplace weighing

of the relationship between terrorism and Iraq. On the one hand, the American presence does inspire some to join the worldwide jihad. On the other hand, success in the Iraq project would blunt the most fundamental enlistment tool for terrorism -- the political oppression in Arab lands that is deflected by cynical dictators and radical imams into murderous hatred of the West. Which is why the Bush democracy project embodies the greatest hope for a reduction of terrorism and why the NIE itself concludes that were the jihadists to fail in Iraq, their numbers would diminish.

It is an issue of time frame. The bombing of the Japanese home islands may have increased short-term recruiting for the kamikazes. But success in the Pacific war put a definitive end to the whole affair.

Moreover, does anyone imagine that had the jihadists in Iraq remained home they would now be tending petunias rather than plotting terror attacks? Omar al-Farouq, leader of al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia, escaped from a U.S. prison in Afghanistan a year ago and was apparently drawn to the "cause celebre" in Iraq. Last month he was killed by British troops in a firefight in Basra. In an audiotape released Sept. 28, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq said that more than 4,000 of its recruits have been killed there since the American invasion. Like Omar al-Farouq and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, they went to Iraq to die in Iraq.

It is clear that one of the reasons we have gone an astonishing five years

without a second attack on the American homeland is that the most dedicated and virulent jihadists have gone to Iraq to fight us, as was said during World War I, "over there."

Does the war in Iraq make us more

or less safe today? And what about tomorrow? The fact is that no definitive answer is possible. Except for the following truism: During all wars we are by definition less safe -- and the surest way back to safety is victory.