



## Which Is 'The Real War'?

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*"Our bill calls for the redeployment of U.S. troops out of Iraq so that we can focus more fully on the real war on terror, which is in Afghanistan."*

-- House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, March 8

The [Senate](#) and the House have both passed bills for ending the Iraq war, or at least liquidating the American involvement in it. The resolutions, approved by the barest majorities, were underpinned by one unmistakable theme: wrong war, wrong place, distracting us from the real war that is elsewhere.

Where? In Afghanistan. The emphasis on Afghanistan echoed across the Democratic side of the aisle in Congress from Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee to former admiral and Rep. Joe

Sestak. It is a staple of the three leading Democratic candidates for the presidency, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards. It is the refrain of their last presidential candidate, John Kerry, and of their current party leader, Howard Dean, who complains that "we don't have enough troops in Afghanistan. That's where the real war on terror is."

Of all the arguments for pulling out of Iraq, the greater importance of Afghanistan is the least serious.

And not just because this argument assumes that the world's one superpower, which spends more on defense every year than *the rest of the world combined*, does not have the capacity to fight an insurgency in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan. But

because it assumes that Afghanistan is strategically more important than Iraq.

Thought experiment: Bring in a completely neutral observer -- a Martian -- and point out to him that the United States is involved in two hot wars against radical Islamic insurgents. One is in Afghanistan, a geographically marginal backwater with no resources and no industrial or technological infrastructure. The other is in Iraq, one of the three principal Arab states, with untold oil wealth, an educated population, an advanced military and technological infrastructure that, though suffering decay in the later years of Saddam Hussein's rule, could easily be revived if it falls into the right (i.e., wrong) hands. Add to that the fact that its strategic location would give its rulers inordinate influence over the entire Persian Gulf region, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Gulf states. Then ask your Martian: Which is the more important battle? He would not even understand why you are asking the question.

Al-Qaeda has provided the answer many times. Osama bin Laden, the one whose presence in Afghanistan (or some cave on the border) presumably makes it the central front in the war on terror, has been [explicit](#) that "the most . . . serious issue today for the whole world is this Third World War that is raging in Iraq." Al-Qaeda's No. 2, Ayman Zawahiri, has [declared](#) that Iraq "is now the place for the greatest battle of Islam in this era."

And it's not just what al-Qaeda says, it's what al-Qaeda does. Where are they funneling the worldwide recruits for jihad? Where do all the deranged suicidists who want to die for Allah gravitate? It's no longer Afghanistan but Iraq. That's because they recognize the greater prize.

The Democratic insistence on the primacy of Afghanistan makes no strategic sense. Instead, it reflects a sensibility. They would rather support the Afghan war because its origins are cleaner, the casus belli clearer, the moral texture of the enterprise more comfortable. Afghanistan is a war of righteous revenge and restitution, law enforcement on the grandest of scales. As senator and presidential candidate Joe Biden [put it](#), "If there was a totally just war since World War II, it is the war in Afghanistan."

If our resources are so stretched that we have to choose one front, the Martian would choose Iraq. But that is because, unlike a majority of Democratic senators, he did not vote four years earlier to authorize the war in Iraq, a vote for which many have a guilty conscience to be soothed retroactively by pulling out and fighting the "totally just war."

But you do not decide where to fight on the basis of history; you decide on the basis of strategic realities. You can argue about our role in creating this new front and question whether it was worth taking that risk to topple Saddam Hussein. But you cannot reasonably argue that in 2007 Iraq is not the most critical strategic front in the war on terrorism.

There's no escaping its centrality. Nostalgia for the "good war" in Afghanistan is perhaps useful in encouraging antiwar Democrats to

increase funding that is needed there. But it is not an argument for abandoning Iraq.

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