



The consequences of quitting Iraq

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Louder, more insistently, the drums are beating for an American retreat from Iraq.

No longer is declaring the war unwinnable and leaving Iraqis to sort out their own problems a prescription taken seriously only on the antiwar fringe. Back in November 2005, when Representative John Murtha's call for an [immediate withdrawal of US troops](#) was put to a vote, [the House voted it down](#) by a nearly unanimous 403-3. Last week, a House bill mandating a departure from Iraq by next April was [approved](#), 223-201. There may not be -- yet -- a veto-proof majority for pulling the plug, but it is clear where the momentum lies.

The end-the-war bandwagon is rolling in the Senate, too. Some prominent Republicans have climbed

aboard, joining Democrats who have been denouncing the war for many months. "We cannot continue asking our troops to sacrifice indefinitely," [Pete Domenici of New Mexico](#) said on July 5, as he called for "a new strategy that will move our troops out of combat operations and on the path to coming home." George Voinovich of Ohio has urged President Bush to give up on the surge and adopt "[Plan E for Exit](#)" instead.

The media echo chamber, meanwhile, reverberates with defeatism on Iraq and disdain for the president. Rapt attention is devoted to the Republican wobbling; much less to the heartening dividends being returned by General David Petraeus's surge. "If not now, when?" Matt Lauer recently [demanded](#) on NBC's "Today" show. "The White

House says it's not considering pulling US troops out of Iraq right now but with sinking approval ratings and defections from his own party, is it just a matter of time before the president changes course? . . . How long can the president ignore calls to bring the troops home?"

But for all the clamor to quit Iraq, there is little serious discussion of just what quitting will mean.

If US troops leave prematurely, the Iraqi government is likely to collapse, which could trigger violence on a far deadlier scale than Iraq is experiencing now. Iran's malignant influence will intensify, and with it the likelihood of intensified Sunni-Shiite conflict, and even a nuclear arms race, across the Middle East. Anti-American terrorists and fanatics worldwide will be emboldened. Iraq would emerge, in [Senator John McCain's words](#), "as a Wild West for terrorists, similar to Afghanistan before 9/11." Once again -- as in Vietnam, in Lebanon, in Somalia -- the United States would have proven the weaker horse, unwilling to see a fight through to the finish.

Yet none of this seems to trouble the surrender lobby, which either doesn't think about the consequences of abandoning Iraq, or is convinced a US departure will actually make things better. "If everyone knows we're leaving, it will put the fear of God into them," Voinovich declares. Sure it will. Nothing scares Al Qaeda like seeing Americans in retreat.

Three decades ago, similar arguments were made in support of abandoning Southeast Asia to the communists. To [President Ford's warning](#) in March 1975 that "the horror and the tragedy that we see on television" would only grow worse if the United States cut off aid to the beleaguered government in Cambodia, then-Representative Christopher Dodd of Connecticut retorted: "The greatest gift our country can give to the Cambodian people is peace, not guns. And the best way to accomplish that goal is by ending military aid now." So Washington ended military aid, and Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge, which proceeded to [exterminate nearly 2 million Cambodians](#) in one of the ghastliest genocides of modern times.

On April 13, 1975, four days before the communist reign of terror began, Sydney Schanberg's [front-page story](#) in The New York Times was headlined: "Indochina Without Americans: For Most, A Better Life." In retrospect, perhaps such drastic misjudgments can be partly excused on the grounds that Americans didn't really know what horrors Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were capable of.

But there will be no such excuse for those who insist on pulling out of Iraq. For they know only too well what horrors Al Qaeda and its jihadist allies are capable of. Beheadings. Suicide bombings. Lynchings. Child murder. Chlorine gas attacks. Bali. Madrid. 7/7. 9/11.

We are in a war with barbarians who [proclaim their love of death](#) and [revel in the slaughter of innocents](#) -- and are fighting to win. We can choose to settle for defeat in Iraq, but far from ending the war, it

will only make it more difficult and deadly. The price Americans will pay if they abandon Iraq will be steep. The price Iraqis pay will be steeper.