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Victory Is an Orphan in Iraq

By [THANE ROSENBAUM](#)

When it comes to Iraq, a majority of Americans simply won't take yes for an answer.

The surge is succeeding. Security in Iraq's three major cities has vastly improved. The Iraqi army is finally asserting control. American casualties are at their lowest since 2003. Civilian deaths, kidnappings and car bombings have plummeted. Al Qaeda is now virtually friendless in Iraq. Most important, the Shiite and Sunni mainstream are beginning to participate in their own liberation.

Yet instead of rejoicing and a ticker-tape parade, our political leaders and opinion makers speak of immediate timetables for the contraction and withdrawal of our troops, the counting of our losses and the atonement for our sins. Few speak of the war with any sense of pride or patriotism. Never before has a nation so distanced itself from a military triumph. There is an overarching taboo associated with any acknowledgment that it may have benefited Iraqis and Americans. Buried beneath the mosh pit of President Bush's declining approval ratings, Iraq remains a continuing source of shame.

Many say that Saddam Hussein never posed a threat to our security. That by expending military resources in Iraq we squandered the chance to capture Osama bin Laden, and allowed the Taliban to rise from the dead in Afghanistan. That Iran pressed forward with its nuclear ambitions, knowing that we were so alienated in the region and had so stretched our military capacity that we couldn't stop them.

Surely it would have been best had the U.S. been able to mobilize an appropriate and forceful response in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. But no one seriously believes bin Laden fell off the radar of our priorities simply because this part of the world is so rich in terror and instability.

Given the state of the world after 9/11, it was a judgment call as to where our interests would best be served, and where military force would do the most good.

Saddam's Iraq had been one of terrorism's most reliable and dangerous state sponsors. Iraq was not merely an oil-rich sideshow, ultimately irrelevant to our justifiable war against terror.

It is true that the full case for going to war in Iraq was not adequately presented -- although humanitarian reasons for deposing Saddam were certainly present, and we should not have depended alone on the presence of weapons of mass destruction. It is also true that we were pathetically ill-prepared for what we would find in Iraq, and how we would be perceived once we arrived. And the disgraceful practices at Abu Ghraib were undeniably unworthy of the sacrifices our soldiers otherwise made.

Yes, there are many truths about the war in Iraq. But to say America fought an ill-advised war that was both a lost cause and a total loss is surely not one of them.

Unfortunately, the American mainstream hasn't sufficiently found itself on this war yet. There has been no coalescence around a coherent set of facts. Public opinion may be free in America, but sometimes it is shaped by subtle intimidation. Given all the loud rhetoric of defeat and despair, most Americans haven't felt secure enough to look at the war as it is rather than what they have been told to believe.

There is nothing wrong with establishing timetables for our departure -- as long as we are equally prepared to accept the accolades of our hard-won struggle. Leaving Iraq, whenever that date may be, should be done not from a position of defeat and disgust, but rather with the pride and gratitude that our troops deserve for a job well done.

Mr. Rosenbaum, a novelist, essayist and law professor at Fordham University, is the author of "The Myth of Moral Justice" (Harper Perennial, 2005).

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