Withdrawal Deadlines In War:
Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan

Paul D. Miller

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INTRODUCTION

n August 1914, millions of European soldiers eagerly marched to a war they assumed would be brief. New technology available to the newly industrialized nations gave military planners unfounded optimism about their military prospects. Nationalist fervor led to biased estimates about each nation's relative strength. The long peace among great powers lulled policymakers into believing total war could not recur. Future Member of Parliament and Nobel Laureate Norman Angell had just published *The Great Illusion*, arguing that war was fundamentally irrational because conquest was not profitable.[1] Europeans widely assumed the war would be short—proverbially, that it would be "over by Christmas."[2]

Policymakers seem to find it irresistible to claim that military operations will be brief, easy, and successful—so brief that they and the civilian population can already look forward to the end of hostilities before they even begin. President Ronald Reagan, announcing the deployment of US peacekeepers to Lebanon in 1982, assured Americans, "The participation of American forces in Beirut will again be for a limited period."[3] Indeed, they go further: policymakers often specify a precise deadline or timetable by which they believe military operations will unfold and conclude. When President Bill Clinton told the American people about the deployment of US military personnel to Bosnia in 1995, he assured them, "Our joint chiefs of staff have concluded that this mission should and will take about one year."[4] US forces left Bosnia nine years later.

Policymakers' insistence on setting timetables is odd. Military operations almost never unfold according to a predetermined timetable, muddled as they are by the inevitable "fog" and "friction" of war.[5] No strategist advises the setting of timetables or withdrawal deadlines. No such suggestion is present in the work of military theorists such as Thucydides, Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, or Antoine-Henri Jomini.[6] US military publications, including the US Armed Forces Joint Publication on "Joint Operations" and the US Army Doctrine Publication on "Unified Land Operations," do not prescribe timetables or withdrawal deadlines. Instead, they typically prescribe the withdrawal of forces when a mission has been completed, as prescribed by the military commander or national decision-makers.[7] There is a vast literature of policy debate over the merits of timed withdrawal in specific wars—most recently, Iraq and Afghanistan—but little scholarly literature of comparative case studies examining the effect of timetables on public opinion, military success, and policymakers' goals.[8]

The subject is important because US policymakers repeatedly set deadlines for the termination of military operations, including for the three largest, longest, and costliest operations since the Korean War: the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In Vietnam, President Richard Nixon set an internal deadline to pressure the military and the South Vietnamese, prevent a South Vietnamese collapse before his reelection, and simultaneously demonstrate his dedication to winding down the conflict in time for his reelection. He resisted announcing a specific and

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1   Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2010).

2   Stuart Hallifax, "'Over by Christmas': British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914," *First World War Studie*s 1, 2 (2010), 103-121.

3   Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation Announcing the Formation of a New Multinational Force in Lebanon," September 20, 1982, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/92082f.

4   Bill Clinton, "Address to the Nation on Implementation of the Peace Agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina," November 27, 1995, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/clintonbosnia/pdfs/MT4569.pdf.

5   Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), book 1, chapter 7.

6   At least, no suggestions of which the author is aware. See Clausewitz, *On War*; Sun Tzu, *The Art of War,* Samuel B. Griffith, trans. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Kautilya, *Arthashastra,* L.N. Rangarajan, trans. (New York: Penguin, 2000); Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Rex Warner, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1972); Antoine-Henri De Jomini, *The Art of War*, George Harry Mendell and William Price, trans. (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008).

7   Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-0, "Joint Operations" and US Army, Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, "Unified Land Operations."

8   Among the few comparative studies are David Hazelton, "Withdrawing with Honor: Strategic Lessons Learned from Case Studies on Military Withdrawals," MA thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College (2010); W. Andrew Terrill and Conrad C. Crane, "Precedents, Variable, and Options in Planning a U.S. Military Disengagement Strategy from Iraq," Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College (2005); and Ulrich Pilster, Tobias Boehmelt, and Atsushi Tago, "Political Leadership Changes and Withdrawal from Military Coalition Operations, 1946-2001," *International Studies Perspective* 16 (2015), 463–483. On Vietnam, see Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Ken Hughes, *Fatal Politics* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Gideon Rose, *How Wars End,* (New York: Simon and Schuster: 2008), chapter 6; James Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004); and Gregory A Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also *Diplomatic History* 34, 3 (June 2010), with a collection of essays on the withdrawal from Vietnam and implications for Iraq. On Iraq, see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, From George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon, 2012); and Richard R. Brennan, et al., *Ending the US War in Iraq*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013). The literature on Afghanistan has focused heavily on the causes of the failure of the state-building project there, not on the withdrawal of US and international military forces. See Astri Suhrke, *When More is Less* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2010); and Seth Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency," *International Security* 32, 4 (2008), 7–40. There is broader literature on war termination, which typically does not directly address a withdrawal timetable as one of the pathways to termination. See Bruce B.G. Clarke, "Conflict Termination: A Rational Model," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 16, 1 (1993), 25–50; and Joseph A. Engelbrecht, *War Termination: Why Does a State Decide to Stop Fighting?* PhD, Columbia University, 1992.

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public deadline because he feared—rightly, it turned out—that withdrawing on a timetable would undermine US and South Vietnamese military progress. In Iraq, President George W. Bush resisted setting a withdrawal deadline for the same reasons, but was ultimately forced to agree to one by Iraqi negotiators. President Barack Obama, who had campaigned on withdrawal from Iraq, subsequently carried out the agreement Bush signed, believing withdrawal was politically necessary and would compel the US military and Iraqi authorities to complete the transition of security responsibilities to Iraqi leadership. In Afghanistan, Obama again set a series of deadlines for the withdrawal of US forces, in the belief that they would help shore up public support for the war and compel improved performance by Afghan civilian leaders and security forces.

In all three cases, the United States achieved suboptimal outcomes. The causes are complex and vary across the cases, but the element of commonality—withdrawal deadlines followed by military and political setbacks—at least suggests that withdrawal deadlines have a poor track record, and are probably counterproductive. The following structured, focused case-study comparisons review US policymakers' deliberations about withdrawal from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, while documenting what they believed withdrawal deadlines would achieve and what they feared a withdrawal deadline might cost. Policymakers claimed deadlines were necessary to sustain public support and to pressure military commanders (and, often, allied forces) to accelerate efforts on the battlefield. They also believed withdrawal was necessary to help them focus on other foreign policy priorities. This paper examines the sequence of events in each case, tracing the progress of military operations, and public support for them, during and after policymakers' decisions about setting a withdrawal deadline, and after the actual withdrawal of military forces. It also assesses the impact of withdrawal deadlines on military performance and public support for military operations.

This paper finds that policymakers' hopes are unfounded: there is little historical evidence that withdrawal deadlines sustain support for war (though they may help guard presidents against defection by their political base) or help accelerate success. However, as many policymakers have rightly feared, withdrawal deadlines impose a steep cost on the prospects for military operations' success and, subsequently, on policymakers' reputations. Withdrawal cut short US forces' chances to train and advise local-partner security forces, leaving them unable to carry on independent operations. Similarly, withdrawal before having achieved specified political or military goals—such as the defeat or withdrawal of enemy forces or the establishment of conditions of security—leaves the United States with no resources with which to advocate for its enduring interests in the region. Consequently, while withdrawal may enable presidents to focus on other priorities, they do so with diminished political and diplomatic capital. This paper concludes: withdrawal deadlines do not appreciably sustain public support for military operations; they harm policymakers' reputations; and they undermine the effectiveness of military operations. Yet, policymakers continue to adopt withdrawal deadlines. This suggests that such deadlines show policymakers' revealed preference: while they are unwilling to lose a war suddenly or catastrophically, withdrawal deadlines help them lose gracefully, in a way designed to minimize political costs. Timetables to withdraw troops, without reference to conditions on the ground, are likely a means for policymakers to seek a "decent interval" between the departure of US troops and the military defeat of their local allies, as most strongly suggested by the Vietnam case.

VIETNAMIZATION, 1966-1973

President Richard Nixon did not set a public deadline for the withdrawal of US troops from South Vietnam.[9] Indeed, he steadfastly refused to concede to the North Vietnamese demand for one. In public, the administration insisted (until May 1972) that it would only agree to withdraw US troops if North Vietnam agreed to withdraw its forces. However, Nixon adopted an internal deadline—what one scholar has called a "secret timetable": by 1971 he and his advisers privately "timed American military withdrawal from Vietnam to the 1972 U.S. presidential election," not to a withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces. Nixon's purpose was to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam before he was reelected, while reassuring voters that he was bringing the war to an end.[10]

These tensions were apparent from the beginning of the Nixon administration. On April 1, 1969, in a National Security Decision Memorandum, Nixon reaffirmed, "There will be no de-escalation except as an outgrowth of mutual troop withdrawal." Yet, a few paragraphs later, he directed the development of a "Specific plan timetable [sic] for Vietnamizing the war," or withdrawing US troops and shifting the burden to the South Vietnamese to carry on the war.[11] The administration squared the circle by claiming that withdrawing US forces was not "de-escalation" so long as South Vietnamese forces replaced departing US forces—a contention that was only partially justified by the South Vietnamese Army's later performance.

In June, the Pentagon responded to the president's tasking for a plan to complete Vietnamization. The plan presented four options for the withdrawal of US forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces over eighteen, twenty-four, thirty, and forty-two months. At this point, the administration did not envision Vietnamization as involving the total withdrawal of all US forces; the Pentagon's initial plan still called for a residual force of nearly 267,500 US troops. The administration debated the relative merits of each option—Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird favored the twenty-four-month option—but the proposal was effectively overtaken by events.[12]

Before the Vietnamization plan had been fully worked out, and while the administration was still debating timetables, Nixon announced it as the major cornerstone of his strategy toward the war, in conjunction with an announcement of the first withdrawal of US troops. The initial withdrawal was more a symbolic gesture than a strategic shift—at twenty-five thousand out of five hundred and forty-five thousand troops, less than 5 percent of the total. However, in announcing the strategy of "Vietnamization," Nixon established the withdrawal of US military forces as the basic goal of his Vietnam strategy. Indeed, he may have already jettisoned the idea of a residual stay-behind force. "Midstream into their first year in office, Nixon and [National Security Advisor Henry] Kissinger had concluded that direct American involvement in the war must end," according to Jeffrey Kimball.[13]

In November 1969, after a second troop-withdrawal announcement, Nixon went further. He publicly announced "a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces, and their replacement by the South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable."[14] He explicitly announced that the details of that timetable would not be disclosed—"I have not and do not intend to announce the timetable for our program"—because he argued that would undermine his negotiating leverage in the Paris peace talks. He also argued the withdrawal should remain flexible, to take into account the capacities of Vietnamese forces in the north and the south. While Nixon's plan called for a withdrawal timetable, it was to be flexible and internal, not fixed and public.

The Nixon administration was thus committed to the public rhetoric of mutual withdrawal with North Vietnam. At the same time, it was carrying out unilateral US troop withdrawals under the guise of Vietnamization. It claimed that US troops were being replaced by South Vietnamese forces, that the allies were therefore not "de-escalating" the war, and that each tranche of withdrawal was undertaken with due regard for South

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9   The standard histories of the Vietnam War focus disproportionately on the war prior to 1969, including David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983); Mark Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010); George Herring, *America's Longest War, 5th Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2013); and William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986). Lewis Sorley, *A Better War* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1999), is a rare, if controversial, narrative of the war in its last stage.

10   Hughes, *Fatal Politics*.

11   Edward C. Keefer and Carolyn Yee, eds., "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970," document 51: National Security Decision Memorandum 9, April 1, 1969, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v06. See also Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, chapters 1–2, for a review of the Nixon administration's deliberations on Vietnamization and withdrawal.

12   Keefer and Yee, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VI," documents 87, 114, and 199: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1969; Memorandum from Laird to Nixon, September 4, 1969; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, March 13, 1970.

13   Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, 301.

14   Richard Nixon, "Address on the Vietnam War," November 3, 1969, https://d43fweuh3sg51.cloudfront.net/media/media_files/9293556c-4cd5-453b-bb32-8e74d867db87/efc05669-7718-426a-bfa4-9d7947cb5f9d.pdf.

Elements of US armored units move back into combat base, September 30th, 1971. Source: Tullio Saba, flickr

Vietnamese capabilities and military progress against North Vietnam. The last claim, especially, was increasingly dubious. Some in the administration saw the de facto withdrawal policy clearly. In late 1969, during a National Security Council (NSC) meeting about the US troop withdrawals, Vice President Spiro Agnew asked, "Is there something hard-nosed we can do to show this is Vietnamization and not a bug-out?" Nixon's only idea was to "hit the north," presaging the bombing campaigns of 1972.[15] In reality, the United States was committed to a unilateral withdrawal from South Vietnam.[16]

After 1969, the administration's debates about withdrawals focused on the timing and size of specific withdrawal tranches,

such as the announcement of a withdrawal of an additional one hundred and fifty thousand troops in April 1970, not on the broader strategic approach.[17] Policymakers' deliberations about Vietnam were largely preoccupied by the fallout from operations in Cambodia in 1970 and Laos in 1971, not revisiting the issue of Vietnamization or the pace of withdrawal. By September 1970, facing intense congressional pressure and stymied by the lack of military progress, Kissinger and Nixon were discussing plans for a complete withdrawal of all US forces, with no residual or stay-behind force. "We are talking about total U.S. withdrawal," Kissinger wrote, describing to Nixon his negotiating instructions to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, a point Nixon and Kissinger reiterated to one another

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15   Keefer and Yee, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI," document 120: Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, September 12, 1969.

16   David Schmitz argues that Nixon's Vietnam strategy should be understood as having two distinct stages: an initial stage in which he sought escalation and victory, in 1969–70; and a second stage in which he moderated his goals and pursued negotiation and the "decent interval" in 1971–72. Schmitz's schematic is too neat: it overlooks evidence that Nixon and Kissinger had already moved toward complete withdrawal as their goal by mid-1970, and even late 1969. Nixon's escalatory moves in 1969, and especially in 1970, were motivated in part to compensate for, not preclude, Vietnamization and withdrawal. See David Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014). See also Jeffrey Kimball, "Kimball on Schmitz, 'Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century,'" H-Diplo, September 2014, https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/reviews/41642/kimball-schmitz-richard-nixon-and-vietnam-war-end-american-century.

17   See, for example, Kissinger's notes for a May 31, 1970, NSC meeting (Keefer and Yee, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VI," document 312).

in private conversations a year later.[18] In October 1970, Nixon again addressed the nation about peace plans for Vietnam. He characterized it as a "New Initiative for Peace," but the speech was largely a repackaging of previous announcements. Nixon said, "We are ready now to negotiate an agreed timetable for complete withdrawals as part of an overall settlement. We are prepared to withdraw all our forces as part of a settlement."[19]

By the spring of 1971, if not earlier, Nixon adopted an implicit or internal deadline for the withdrawal of all US troops from Vietnam, centering on or around November 1972, the date of the US presidential election. As Ken Hughes and Jeffrey Kimball have shown through careful examination of Nixon's recordings of his own conversations from 1971 onward, his reelection campaign—unsurprisingly—loomed large in his discussions about Vietnam policy. In February 1971, Nixon told Kissinger during a phone call about troop withdrawals, "It's all got to be out by the summer of '72."[20] The next month, on another phone call, Kissinger noted the upcoming presidential election. Nixon worried that he had "too many chips on South Vietnam" and said, "if my re-election is important, let's remember, I've got to get this off our plate," suggesting his intent to secure a final resolution of the war on or before November 1972.[21]

Kissinger and Nixon talked frankly about the need to avoid a collapse of South Vietnam before the US election, and also the need to remove Vietnam as a political issue by appeasing public expectation for withdrawal.[22] Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman's diaries document additional conversations in which Kissinger recommended timing troop withdrawals to maximize their political benefit.[23] And, Nixon wrote to Kissinger in March 1972 that he expected his Democratic opponent to make a campaign issue out of the remaining troops in Vietnam. He therefore believed it was "vital...that

a final announcement of some kind must be made before the Democratic convention in July...that indicates that all American combat forces have left."[24]

Political considerations led to the natural conclusion that the withdrawal should be precisely timed to appear substantially complete just as voters were making up their minds—but no earlier. Indeed, in April 1971, in yet another televised address to the nation, Nixon declared "Vietnamization has succeeded," announced his intent to accelerate the pace of troop withdrawals, and announced the withdrawal of a further one hundred thousand troops that year—to occur as the president's reelection campaign was gearing up.[25] In July 1971, Kissinger told South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, "Before December 1 [1971] there would be no further troops withdrawn beyond what was planned. After that, because of our own elections, the U.S. would have to make some pretty drastic moves, but President Thiệu had always known this."[26] It is notable not only that Kissinger was so open about the importance of the US presidential election, but also that he assumed its importance was so widely understood that Thiệu would already have been aware of its impact on US military decision-making. Nixon made nine troop-withdrawal announcements in 1971 and 1972, in the run-up to the election.[27]

Nixon and Kissinger were aware of how craven it could look if they too-obviously linked US policy in Vietnam to the US presidential election. In May 1971, Kissinger suggested offering a cease-fire to the North Vietnamese, to take effect September 1, 1972. Nixon replied, "I'd make it July 1st. If you put it September 1st it looks like you're doing it just before the election, and for the election. See my point?"[28] In 1971 and 1972, Nixon and his advisers seem to have lost confidence that South Vietnam could survive without continued US help, yet

18   David Goldman and Erin Mahan, eds., "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII, Vietnam, July 1970–January 1972," document 37: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 12, 1970, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v07; Hughes, *Fatal Politics*, 499–500.

19   Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation About a New Initiative for Peace in Southeast Asia," October 7, 1970.

20   Hughes, *Fatal Politics*.

21   Ibid., 500.

22   Ibid.; Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*.

23   Hughes, *Fatal Politics*, 3, 5.

24   Quoted in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 205.

25   Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," April 7, 1971, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-7-1971-address-nation-situation-southeast-asia.

26   Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 231: Memorandum of Conversation, July 4, 1971.

27   Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 49.

28   Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 200: Conversation Between Nixon and Kissinger, May 10, 1971.

they remained even more committed to their policy of unilateral US withdrawal.[29] The solution was to withdraw slowly enough to forestall a South Vietnamese collapse, but quickly enough for Nixon's reelection campaign. This supports the "decent interval" thesis: withdrawal was not a strategy for securing US interests, but for accepting defeat gracefully, in a politically affordable manner. By September 1971, Kissinger could write that the United States was "head[ing] into the terminal phase of our involvement."[30]

Nixon made the achievement of peace, and the end of the US role in Vietnam, a centerpiece of his reelection campaign. During his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in August 1972, he said, "Standing in this Convention Hall four years ago, I pledged to seek an honorable end to the war in Vietnam. We have made great progress toward that end. We have brought over half a million men home, and more will be coming home. We have ended America's ground combat role."[31] Kissinger reassured the American people that "peace is at hand" on October 26, 1972, twelve days before the presidential election.

The result was that virtually all US forces withdrew from Vietnam by November 1972—leaving behind a residual force of some sixteen thousand US military advisers. The Paris Peace Accords, signed in January 1973, mandated a complete withdrawal of all US military personnel, who were subsequently withdrawn by the end of March, months into Nixon's second term. The administration claimed for four years that it would not unilaterally withdraw from Vietnam, while simultaneously planning for and doing exactly that.

POLICYMAKERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE WITHDRAWAL

What did Nixon and his advisers believe the withdrawal would accomplish? First and foremost, they believed that withdrawing troops was necessary to sustain US support for the war—or, at least, to prevent further erosion of support for it. They believed the war carried a high "audience cost," which withdrawal would help lower (and, if the war was lost, the withdrawal would help shift blame onto the Vietnamese and minimize the political cost to the administration).[32] Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird told Nixon that announcing the first increment of troop withdrawals in June 1969 would not appease critics of the war, "but important elements of the US public would be encouraged."[33] That September, Kissinger wrote to Nixon, "We are well aware of the popular pressures for a prompt settlement of the war," and offered that one way to "buy time with the American public" was to "phase out American presence in South Vietnam."[34] During discussions of US troop withdrawals, Secretary of State William Rogers told an NSC meeting in September 1969, "If we go ahead with reductions, we will get public support…If they think we are going for a military victory the public will leave us. They must know we have a program" for withdrawal.[35]

In April 1971, Kissinger wrote to Nixon, "The extent of the U.S. withdrawal by mid-1972 must be a finely adjusted balance between the maximum allowable by U.S. domestic pressures and the minimum required 'to demonstrate visibly to the Vietnamese that U.S. support is still available.'"[36] Later that year, in September, he again wrote to Nixon that Vietnamization had succeeded at "buying time at home with the steady decline

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29   Nixon and Kissinger went back and forth on this point in 1971 and 1972, sometimes denying they were abandoning South Vietnam to its fate, and other times acknowledging that was the practical result of their policy. By looking at the pattern of behavior and choices, it is clear that US withdrawal without adequate protections for South Vietnam was their revealed preference.

30   Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 257: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 18, 1971.

31   Richard Nixon, "Remarks on Accepting the Presidential Nomination of the Republican National Convention," August 23, 1972, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotpus/4731812.1972.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext.

32   Interestingly, the audience cost works in reverse to what James Fearon identified in his work. He explored the audience cost of backing down in a crisis, whereas Nixon and Kissinger feared the cost of staying in. See James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, 3 (1994), 577–592, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2944796?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents. Bronwyn Lewis argued that audience costs mattered less to Nixon than conventionally believed based on his support for the "decent interval" thesis. But the fact that Nixon and Kissinger believed a decent interval was necessary—as opposed to letting South Vietnam collapse abruptly and swiftly—*supports* the thesis that they were concerned about the cost of public perception of losing the war on their watch, as is amply supported by the primary sources. See his essay in "Audience Costs and the Vietnam War," H-Diplo/ISSF Forum, November 7, 2014.

33   Keefer and Yee, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI," document 87: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1969.

34   Ibid., document 119: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 11, 1969.

35   Ibid., document 120: Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, September 12, 1969.

36   Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 189: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, April 23, 1971.

of U.S. forces, casualties, and expenses."[37] Also, Nixon and Kissinger's recorded conversations are replete with their concerns about the political implications of the war and the necessity of withdrawal. At the same time, they worried about setting a fixed, public, and final deadline for withdrawal. As Kissinger later argued, "How would any administration explain to American families why their sons' lives should be at risk when a fixed schedule for total withdrawal existed?"[38]

Second, Nixon and his team also believed withdrawal was necessary to accelerate military progress and pressure the South Vietnamese government to improve its performance. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) "Objectives Plan" of 1969 explicitly stated, "the reduction of American forces is required, not simply to 'buy' time, but also as a necessary method of compelling the South Vietnamese to take over the war."[39] Laird argued in a memo to Nixon that the initial withdrawals would prompt the South Vietnamese "to understand that we are indeed serious about Vietnamizing the war."[40] In February 1971, Kissinger discussed the merits of a cease-fire proposal, saying, "We can then tell the South Vietnamese, they have a year without war to build up."[41] Policymakers hoped the "shadow of the future"—the knowledge of imminent US departure—would positively influence Vietnamese decision-making in the present.[42]

Policymakers were aware of the military risks of withdrawal, which is why they resisted committing to a public and complete withdrawal. Laird worried that even a slow withdrawal "would probably result in interruption of pacification progress," according to a memo Kissinger wrote to Nixon in June 1969. Kissinger shared his own view, that "a much faster withdrawal could result in more serious problems for pacification and allied military capabilities, as well as possible adverse effects on the GVN [government of South Vietnam]."[43] The next month, Nixon asked Ambassador Bunker if South Vietnam could survive the withdrawal of US troops. Bunker replied, according to the shorthand transcript,

"Depends on speed and adequate psychological preparation. But if impression we on a rigid timetable could have disastrous effects."[44]

In September, Kissinger again wrote to Nixon, "We can drag out the *troop replacement* program [i.e., Vietnamization], thus bolstering the GVN's military position. *However*, this would postpone the withdrawal of all non-South Vietnamese forces from the country and feed dissent in the United States." He continued, "*US troop withdrawals*, if pressed too rapidly, could both undermine the GVN politically and the allied position militarily. Again, the enemy could conclude that it need only wait for our complete withdrawal."[45] Kissinger again warned in April 1971, "We do not want to risk the nightmare of having the situation in Vietnam come apart under the impact of continued U.S. withdrawals."[46] Nixon asked Laird in January 1972 if the pace of withdrawal was too fast, concerned that it would "leave [the South Vietnamese] vulnerable to a major North Vietnamese attack following our withdrawal."[47]

Finally, policymakers were also aware of the diplomatic cost of the withdrawal. Reflecting years later, Kissinger wrote, "the issue was the tactical judgment whether an announcement would help or hinder extrication from the war. For better or worse, our judgment was that a public announcement would destroy the last incentives for Hanoi to negotiate; it would then simply outwait us."[48] As Nixon clearly said in his April 1971 address (and, with variations, in most of his public addresses on the war):

"If the United States should announce that we will quit regardless of what the enemy does, we would have thrown away our principal bargaining counter to win the release of American prisoners of war, we would remove the enemy's strongest incentive to end the war sooner by negotiation, and we will have given enemy commanders the exact information they need to marshal their attacks against our remaining forces at their most vulnerable time."[49]

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37   Ibid., document 257: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 18, 1971.

38   Ibid., 96.

39   Quoted in Sorley, *A Better War*, 113.

40   Keefer and Yee, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI," document 87: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1969.

41   Quoted in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 144.

42   Jan B. Heide and Anne S. Miner, "The Shadow of the Future: Effects of Anticipated Interaction and Frequency of Contact on Buyer-Seller Cooperation." *Academy of Management Journal* 35, 2 (1992), 265–291, https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1992-37288-001.

43   Keefer and Yee, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI," document 87: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1969.

44   Ibid., document 102: Memorandum of Conversation, July 29, 1969.

45   Ibid., document 119: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 11, 1969.

46   Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 179: Minutes of a Meeting of the Senior Review Group, April 13, 1971.

47   Ibid., document 289: Memorandum for the President's File by Haig, January 13, 1972.

48   Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

49   Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia."

In other words, balanced against the audience cost at home, policymakers worried that withdrawal would exact a high price in reputational costs abroad, depriving them of negotiating leverage. The withdrawal, then, could be seen as policymakers' attempt to recalibrate the balance of costs, lowering audience costs while accepting a higher price in reputational costs. Unfortunately, it worked in a way counter to Nixon's and Kissinger's hopes, making an end to the war harder, rather than easier. It was essentially a tradeoff between short-term and long-term gains: lower audience costs made it easier to initiate or continue the war, while higher reputational costs made it harder to conclude the war on favorable terms.

THE EFFECT OF WITHDRAWAL ON PUBLIC OPINION

What did the US withdrawal from Vietnam accomplish? Were policymakers' beliefs about the effects of the withdrawal justified? First, there is little evidence that Vietnamization or the withdrawal of US troops had an effect on public support for the war. In September 1969, shortly after Nixon first announced troop withdrawals, 58 percent of Americans believed the United States "made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam," compared to 32 percent who disagreed. Three and a half years later, when the Paris Accords were signed and the withdrawal nearly complete, the figures were essentially unchanged: 60 percent versus 29 percent. A different set of polls showed a steady decline in support for the war, from 39 percent in February 1969 to 28 percent in May 1971.[50] It may be that troop withdrawals slowed the erosion of support, but it is clear that Nixon's strategy failed in his basic goal of retaining enough support to prosecute the war. The fall of Saigon and the passage of time have only deepened Americans' judgment on the war: In 1990, 74 percent of Americans believed the war had been a mistake.[51]

Similarly, the public's view of Nixon's handling of the war is not positively correlated to the withdrawal of US troops. Approval for his handling of the war swung from 45 percent to 64 percent in the final months of 1969—after Nixon had announced the strategy of Vietnamization, but well before major troop withdrawals began, suggesting the public was initially optimistic when it heard about Nixon's approach but before seeing it in action. Support plunged to one of its lowest points in April 1970, likely in response to the US incursion into

Cambodia—and despite Nixon's simultaneous announcement of the withdrawal of one hundred and fifty thousand troops.

During the phase of major troop withdrawals from 1970–72, if Nixon's assumption was correct that the public would support the war as he withdrew troops, public-opinion polls should have shown either a steady increase in public support as troops steadily withdrew, a short-term improvement to his withdrawal announcements, or, at least, a halt to the decrease in public support. Instead, the approval of Nixon's handling of the war see-sawed between 41 and 58 percent, with no discernable long-term trend and no clear connection to his withdrawal announcements. Approval then spiked to 75 percent in January 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed. Public opinion seemed more tightly tied to military and political developments than to announcements of troop withdrawals, rising with Nixon's initial announcement of his Vietnamization strategy and with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, but dropping during the Cambodia incursion and the Easter Offensive.[52]

Americans' views about the war split along party lines, but trends remained similar. More Democrats favored the war under Lyndon Johnson, and more Republicans under Nixon—but support for the war persistently fell among both groups. More Republicans than Democrats favored escalation over withdrawal, but escalation lost favor with both groups after 1966. Similarly, more Democrats favored withdrawal, but even Republicans favored withdrawal over escalation by 1970, suggesting the president had little room to maneuver.[53]

THE EFFECT OF WITHDRAWAL ON POLITICAL AND MILITARY GOALS

The independent effect of the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam is difficult to isolate because (as in Afghanistan) it happened simultaneously with an escalation in military effort (such as training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), invading Cambodia, and bombing North Vietnam) and a change in military strategy (the increased emphasis on counterinsurgency and pacification). Of course, the United States' choices in prosecuting its war in Vietnam are among the most contested in the fields of military and diplomatic history and international relations. While a full survey of the debate is impossible, the ultimate outcome is not in dispute: the net effect

50 William L. Lunch and Peter W. Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam," *Western Political Quarterly* 32, 1 (1979): 21–44, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/106591297903200104.

51 Lydia Saad, "Gallup Vault: Hawk vs. Doves on Vietnam," Gallup, May 24, 2016, http://www.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx?g_source=vietnam&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles.

52 Joseph Carroll, "The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison," Gallup, June 15, 2004, https://news.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx.

53 Lunch and Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam."

of escalation, withdrawal, and strategic shift was ultimately unsuccessful. In the midst of the United States' overall political and military failure, the withdrawal plans contributed to, rather than mitigated, that failure.

The Vietnamization strategy succeeded in continuing the growth of the ARVN, but did not accelerate the pace of growth. The US-trained South Vietnamese Army grew from one hundred and fifty thousand in 1950 to more than one million in 1975, including more than half a million regional and local units. However, most of the growth happened before 1969, when the army had already grown to around 880,000. Vietnamization improved the ARVN's equipment and tactical proficiency, as the US Army intensified its efforts to transfer weapons and equipment and train small units in combat effectiveness. "The Vietnamization program…gradually transformed the ARVN into one of the largest and best-equipped militaries in the world," according to one historian.[54] ARVN ground forces were capable enough to blunt North Vietnam's Easter Offensive in the spring of 1972, with US air and naval support. The ARVN, however, never surmounted serious problems with corruption, untrained leadership, mass desertion, and sectarianism (between Buddhists and Catholics), and it remained dependent on US support to the last.[55]

US counterinsurgency efforts showed similar promise late in the war. The United States formed the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutions Development Support (CORDS) in 1967, and General Creighton Abrams began to introduce changes to the US force structure and campaign strategy after he assumed command in June 1968. Abrams pressed his commanders to reexamine when they truly needed to use artillery, aerial bombardment, and other highly kinetic tactics and weapons systems.[56] He accelerated pacification and counterinsurgency efforts in 1969, and succeeded in improving rural security, dismantling insurgent infrastructure, and expanding rural defense forces in much of the South

Vietnamese countryside by late 1970; some estimates put the proportion of the South Vietnamese population isolated from insurgents at 90 percent.[57] By early 1970, "most observers agreed that significant gains had been made," according to historian George Herring.[58] Another historian, William Turley, wrote that, "Under the combined pressure of 500,000 U.S. troops, a growing ARVN, and accelerated pacification, the Communists had been unable to recover from losses suffered in the 1968 offensive."[59]

These military developments added up to some strategic gains. The North Vietnamese had long insisted on the removal of the South Vietnamese government led by Thiệu. Following the failure of the 1972 offensive, they dropped that condition, and negotiations proceeded much more quickly. It is easy to dismiss the substance of the North Vietnamese concession, because of the knowledge that the Thiệu government fell anyway, but the North Vietnamese felt it was meaningful enough that they resisted it for as long as they could. Furthermore, the US and South Vietnamese military position helped delay the end of the war until US-Soviet and US-Chinese relations were more favorable—one of Nixon's explicit hopes for the withdrawal. "For the United States, the Vietnam War was never about Vietnam, but rather about its impact on the Cold War. And here, the time gained was put to good use," according to Robert Jervis.[60] The withdrawal did, indeed, allow Nixon to focus on his other major foreign policy priorities. (The counterfactual, however, is at least worth considering: how would US-Chinese relations have been affected by a sustained presence in a stable and independent South Vietnam past 1973?)

Regardless, the ability of US and South Vietnamese commanders to exploit these successes was limited by the overwhelming pressure to withdraw US forces. Because Nixon was intent on withdrawing troops, he "bestowed on MACV a mission well outside its capacity to accomplish," in Gregory A. Daddis' assessment.[61] This was the natural consequence

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54   Lawrence, *The Vietnam War,* 144.

55   Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War, Vol. II* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 776. See also Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 196. See also Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 70–71.

56   Sorley, *A Better War*, 219; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 56–58; Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*. Gregory A. Daddis and Andrew Birtle have argued that the extent of Abrams' change in US military strategy has been exaggerated. As with most such arguments, there are always elements of continuity mixed with discontinuity, but there would be no argument at all if there were not some clear element of discontinuity to frame the debate. The argument here is not about the extent of Abrams' change to US strategy, but that the simultaneous withdrawal undermined whatever promise his changes may have held. See Daddis, *Withdrawal;* and Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History* 72, 4 (2008), 1213–1247.

57   Sorley, *A Better War*, 59–79 and 217–227. Herring echoes Sorley's judgments about Abrams' new direction; see Herring, *America's Longest War,* 284–285.

58   Herring, *America's Longest War*, 285.

59   Turley, *The Second Indochina War,* 126.

60   Robert Jervis, "The Politics of Troops Withdrawal: Salted Peanuts, the Commitment Trap, and Buying Time," *Diplomatic History* 34, 3 (2010), 515, https://academic.oup.com/dh/issue/34/3.

61   Daddis, *Withdrawal,* 47.

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of the "opposing imperatives" of "troop withdrawals" and "the necessity of fighting an ongoing war," among other things.[62] Put another way, the war put "national policy and military strategy at odds with each other."[63] As George Herring summarized, US officials believed that "gains in security had resulted from U.S. military operations and the enemy stand-down," but it was unclear if the gains "could be sustained in the face of the withdrawal of U.S. forces" and the concomitant resumption of enemy offensives.[64]

This is evident in both the conventional and unconventional aspects of the war. One South Vietnamese general later reflected, "By far the widest loophole of the Vietnamization program was its failure to provide the [South Vietnamese Army] with enough time for an overall improvement."[65] The withdrawal also had a psychological effect on the South Vietnamese. Especially late in the war, South Vietnamese officials expressed a sense of betrayal and abandonment, accusing the United States of failing to live up to its promises.[66] Such beliefs surely contributed to a loss of morale among South Vietnamese policymakers and senior military leaders, and may have played a role in the loss of unit cohesion in the ARVN's final months. Conversely, the US withdrawal likely encouraged North Vietnam to persist, and may have helped drag out the Paris talks. In material terms, the absence of US forces from the theater after 1972 left South Vietnamese forces without adequate air cover and with deficiencies in logistics, intelligence, and other combat-support functions. The clearest evidence is that, with US airpower, the South Vietnamese were (just) able to withstand the North Vietnamese offensive in 1972; without that support, they failed to turn back the final offensive in 1975.

In the unconventional war, counterinsurgency and pacification efforts were late additions to the US war effort. By the time they were seriously integrated into US campaign plans, the troop withdrawal was well under way, which deprived counterinsurgency and pacification efforts of the opportunity for success. "In the period leading up to direct U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War, the Army failed to structure its forces for counterinsurgency contingencies," according to Andrew Krepinevich.[67] As a result, despite the large numbers of US forces participating in the conflict as its height, most were engaged in large-scale conventional operations, not counterinsurgency. Krepinevich and others have argued this approach was a leading cause of the failure of US military efforts: "In roaming the countryside in search of targets for its unparalleled firepower, the Army ignored the basic requirement of counterinsurgency: a secure population committed to the government."[68]

Even at its height, CORDS was a tiny effort, comprising fewer than ten thousand US soldiers and civilians. The "focus was so overwhelmingly on the big-unit war that the resources devoted to these counterinsurgency operations—the 'other' war—were insufficient for the task at hand," according to Krepinevich. "If the Army had followed a counterinsurgency strategy, both the human and financial costs of the war would have been significantly lower. This, in turn, would have assisted to some extent in maintaining popular support in the United States."[69] However, US Army leaders and national policymakers did not have clear evidence of the potential of successful counterinsurgency and pacification efforts until 1970, by which time they were unable to take full advantage of them, because of the imperative to withdraw from the conflict altogether.

US commanders were aware of the risk troop withdrawals imposed on military operations, and generally opposed them.[70] Abrams was not consulted on the policy of Vietnamization. While he never requested additional troops, he opposed their withdrawal and the reduction in funding for pacification programs.[71] The Joint Chiefs of Staff advised Laird in 1969 that neither "the military situation nor the [ARVN's] capabilities" justified Vietnamization and US withdrawals.[72] Abrams

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62   Ibid., 11.

63   Ibid., 46.

64   Herring, *America's Longest War*, 286. See also, Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 91.

65   Quoted in Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 278–279.

66   Bernard Weinraub, "Irate South Vietnamese Charge a Betrayal by Washington," *New York Times*, March 30, 1975, https://www.nytimes.com/1975/03/30/archives/irate-south-vietnamese-charge-a-betrayal-by-washington.html.

67   Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 127.

68   Ibid., 197.

69   **Ibid., 215, 233.**

70   Daddis, *Withdrawal,* 61.

71   Sorley, *A Better War,* 128, 176, 179.

72   Quoted in Daddis, *Withdrawal,* 73.

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warned again in the spring of 1971, "Premature or hasty withdrawal contains significant military risk and courts certain North Vietnamese exaggerated claims of South Vietnamese defeat."[73] He "watched helplessly as his resources diminished with every soldier who redeployed home" and believed that "the unilateral US withdrawal was working against the crucial goal of improving South Vietnam's armed forces."[74]

One of Abrams' concerns, often overlooked by critics and later scholars, was the effect of withdrawal of the fighting capacity and morale of the remaining troops. "Ultimately the major impact of the drawdown of American forces was not the loss of combat power or support capability, serious though they were, but rather its effect on the morale and discipline of the remaining troops."[75] It is hard for soldiers to understand why they should continue to take risks when they believe their government has already decided to end the war.

Kissinger, at least, seemed to recognize the looming problem. In a June 1971 meeting of the Senior Review Group, he interrogated the group about the "main force ratio" (MFR)—the ratio between allied and enemy strength—as US forces withdrew. Officially, Vietnamization meant that South Vietnamese forces were replacing US forces, leading to no drop in the MFR. By mid-1971, it was apparent that was not the case.

"If the ratios drop, there will be certain consequences unless there are compensating factors. If you say that a drop in MFRs will be made up by [increased] firepower and mobility, that argument I can understand. On the other hand, if you say that there will be a decline in MFRs, while *firepower and mobility, as a result of U.S. withdrawals, are declining*—or at least certainly not increasing, then I fail to see why we don't have a problem. All the evidence I have seen indicates that firepower and mobility in mid-1972 will be less. What's wrong with this analytical point?"[76]

The United States and South Vietnam made real military progress in the final years of the war—but the US withdrawal gradually decreased the overall combat power available to the allies, with predictable results both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. "Political grand strategy fashioned in Washington trumped military strategy conceived and implemented in South Vietnam," as Gregory Daddis argued in a recent reassessment of the war's final years.[77] Recognizing this does not require endorsing the "lost victory" thesis that some scholars have advanced.[78] Many other factors—above all, the corruption, incompetence, and illegitimacy of the South Vietnamese government—contributed to South Vietnam's defeat. This paper is interested in a narrower question: not whether the Vietnam war was, in fact, ultimately winnable, but what impact the timing and pace of the American withdrawal had on the military and political situation. It may be that the United States would still have achieved a suboptimal outcome even with a slower withdrawal or no timetable, but it may have been *less* suboptimal. Because of the withdrawal and the loss of combat power, the United States and South Vietnam lost ground militarily. Because they lost ground militarily, they had less bargaining leverage at the negotiating table, with the result that the United States was ultimately forced to give up its main negotiating goal: the withdrawal of all North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. Policymakers' fears about the possible consequences of a unilateral US withdrawal from South Vietnam proved prescient.

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73   Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 150: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, March 15, 1971.

74   Daddis, *Withdrawal,* 114.

75   Sorley, *A Better War,* 289.

76   Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 216: Minutes of a Meeting of the Senior Review Group, June 9, 1971. Emphasis added.

77   Daddis, *Withdrawal,* 10.

78   Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954–1965* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Sorley, *A Better War*.

THE IRAQ STATUS-OF-FORCES AGREEMENT, 2008-2011

The Vietnam War had a profound effect on how US policymakers thought about war termination. In 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger outlined criteria he believed should be met for the use of force abroad. Together with an addendum several years later by Colin Powell, then serving as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the set of ideas represented a reaction against US strategy in Vietnam. Weinberger and Powell argued, among other thing, that the United States should fight in pursuit of a clearly defined political and military objective, and should outline an "exit strategy" before committing forces.

These ideas served as a regular critique of President George W. Bush's conduct of the war in Iraq, which critics argued was another open-ended conflict with unclear goals and no exit strategy, and were used to pressure him to outline a pathway to end the war. In November 2007, after the successful synergy between the surge of US troops and the concomitant "Anbar Awakening," Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki agreed to negotiate a bilateral security agreement and a status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) to govern the American military presence in Iraq after its United Nations (UN) mandate expired.[79] Their initial "Declaration of Principles" did not specify a deadline, or anticipate the establishment of a deadline, for the withdrawal of US troops, but simply called for negotiations toward a long-term security agreement.[80] Negotiations began the following spring, but bogged down over the United States' insistence that Iraq grant immunity to US troops, over command and control of US military operations, and over the Iraqi insistence—which emerged through the negotiating process—that the agreement specify a withdrawal deadline.[81]

Bush opposed the inclusion of "an artificial timetable for withdrawal" of US troops, as he put it in a July 2008 news conference, preferring instead to allow US and Iraqi officials to calibrate troop levels based on security conditions in Iraq.[82] Throughout the war,

Bush favored a conditions-based approach, under which US forces would withdraw and Iraqi forces demonstrated capacity to replace them. The Iraqis, however, demanded a timetable: Iraqi Vice President Tariq Hashimi informed US officials in May 2008 that, "the only chance for a security agreement to win political consensus [in Iraq] was if it included a timeline for withdrawing U.S. troops," as summarized by a pair of historians.[83] In June, Bush—recognizing his leverage was slipping away as the end of his term drew near—authorized US negotiators to begin discussing withdrawal. His intention was to keep discussions of withdrawal private, and to shy away from firm dates.

However, in July, after US and Iraqi negotiators opened up the question of withdrawal, Maliki endorsed then-Senator Barack Obama's proposed sixteen-month withdrawal timetable in an interview with *Der Spiegel*. Bush, responding to Iraqi pressure, then issued a public statement agreeing that the United States would consider "a general time horizon for meeting aspiration goals," including "the further reduction of US combat forces from Iraq," his first concession on the issue of withdrawal.[84] While the White House claimed that the administration was still committed to a conditions-based withdrawal, the genie had escaped the bottle. When it became apparent that the Iraqis insisted on a specific date for withdrawal, the Bush administration first offered 2015. Then, after Maliki floated 2010, it offered 2011—conveniently, the date the US military's campaign plan envisioned security for Iraq.

Even then, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice believed that the agreement made room for a stay-behind force of up to forty thousand US troops past 2011.[85] Maliki agreed in principle to a residual force, but preferred to negotiate its size and legal basis after his 2010 reelection. As late as November 2008, the White House "had steadfastly maintained a measure of ambiguity" about the withdrawal, allowing "discussion of goals and notional dates and time horizons, but not a hard-and-fast date for leaving the country altogether," according to Gordon and Trainor. But, after

79 Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37, 1 (2012), 7–40. As with Vietnam, much of the historical work on Iraq focuses on the early years and the surge, less on the withdrawal. See Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006) and *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2009); and Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2007). For a narrative of the later years, see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, From George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon, 2012); and Richard R. Brennan, et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013).

80 "Declaration of Principles for a Long-Term Relationship of Cooperation and Friendship Between the Republic of Iraq and the United States of America," White House, press release, November 26, 2007, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/11/20071126-11.html.

81 Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 523ff.

82 Stephen Lee Myers, "Bush Emphasizes His Opposition to Timetable for Iraq Withdrawal," *New York Times,* July 16, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/16/washington/16prexy.html.

83 Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 528.

84 Ibid., 530; Stephen Lee Myers, "Bush, in a Shift, Accepts Concept of Iraq Timeline," *New York Times*, July 19, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/19/world/middleeast/19iraq.html.

85 Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 539–541.

Ambassador Ryan Crocker advised Bush that the negotiations would fail without a final and explicit withdrawal deadline, the president agreed, and the agreement was finalized in late November.[86] Under the 2008 security agreement, Iraq would assume lead responsibility for security in all eighteen provinces and regain sovereignty over Baghdad's international zone by January 2009; US forces would withdraw from cities in June 2009; and US forces would withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2011.

President Obama inherited a war he had campaigned against. Having opposed the war from its inception, he had called for the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and a refocusing on the war in Afghanistan. In his major campaign speech on the wars, he called for a sixteen-month withdrawal timetable for Iraq, to be completed in the summer of 2010, earlier than the 2011 deadline specified in the security agreement. Like Rice, he did not envision a complete withdrawal: "After this redeployment, we'll keep a residual force to perform specific missions in Iraq: targeting any remnants of al Qaeda; protecting our service members and diplomats; and training and supporting Iraq's Security Forces, so long as the Iraqis make political progress."[87] He pressed the point privately in discussion with General David Petraeus during a trip to Iraq immediately afterward. Obama argued that the United States needed to withdraw from Iraq to free up forces for Afghanistan, which he argued was the central front against al-Qaeda.[88]

The security agreement of 2008 and Obama's election shifted the debate from *how* to *when* US forces would withdraw from Iraq. Petraeus, now head of Central Command, and his successor in Iraq, Ray Odierno, recommended a twenty-three-month withdrawal timetable, specifically minimizing withdrawals prior to Iraq's parliamentary election. They argued the sixteen-month withdrawal timetable would incur "extremely high" risk, jeopardize military and political gains, and undermine the United States' ability to secure the elections.[89] Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put forward a nineteen-month compromise. Obama welcomed the compromise and innovated a new milestone in the withdrawal process: he announced the end of the US "combat mission" in Iraq in August 2010.

Obama's innovation appears to have changed how policymakers thought of the residual force that they envisioned staying in Iraq past withdrawal. Previously, policymakers believed the residual force would stay in Iraq past 2011. Rice had believed the United States might keep forty thousand troops in Iraq after the expiration of the security agreement. The Iraq Study Group, which recommended withdrawing US combat brigades, advised keeping a substantial force in Iraq past whatever withdrawal was eventually agreed upon. US military officials envisioned a force of around fifty thousand troops, with a bare minimum of thirty-five thousand.[90] Gates suggested in early 2009 that the Obama administration was willing to consider a post-2011 US military presence in Iraq. There was a "widely held conviction within [the US military], even at very senior levels, that the plan would be changed at the last minute to permit a follow-on U.S. force."[91] Obama himself had advocated for stay-behind forces during his 2008 presidential campaign. Under the security agreement, US troops were mandated to leave Iraq by the end of 2011, but "there seemed to be a strong possibility that some sort of follow-on agreement allowing some troops to remain might be agreed upon," according to Gordon and Trainor.[92]

After Obama announced that US combat operations would end in August 2010, the stay-behind force evolved into one that stayed behind after August 2010, not after December 2011. Obama publicly announced the policy in February 2009. He announced the end of combat operations in August 2010, with a residual force of thirty-five thousand to fifty thousand troops for counterterrorism, diplomatic protection, and security assistance. Past that, he said, "I intend to remove all US troops from Iraq by the end of 2011," appearing to close the door on—or severely limit—a post-2011 US military presence.[93]

The Obama administration took up the issue of a post-2011 residual force, but not until early 2011, because the issue was too politically charged to consider during the US midterm elections and Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2010. US military officials in Baghdad initially recommended a residual force of twenty to forty thousand, subsequently shrinking their recommendation to sixteen thousand after feedback from Washington. In April, the administration debated options ranging from eight thousand to sixteen thousand troops, with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen arguing for sixteen thousand and Vice Chairman James Cartwright arguing for eight to ten thousand. Obama decided in June to aim for ten thousand, which became the official US negotiating position—before the administration reopened the question again in July and August with even smaller numbers.[94]

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86   Ibid., 554.

87   "Obama's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan," *New York Times*, July 15, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html.

88   Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 537–538.

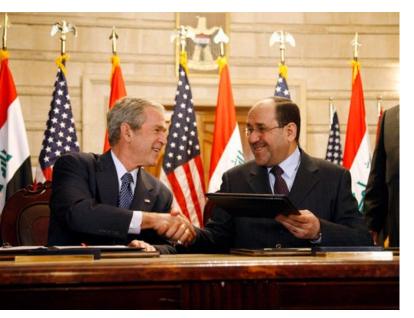89   Ibid., 567. See also James Mann, *The Obamians* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 118–119.

90   Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 568.

91   Brennan, et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*, 104.

92   Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame,* 628.

93   Barack Obama, "Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq," February 27, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-ndash-responsibly-ending-war-iraq.

94   Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 655–660, 665, 669. See also Mann, *The Obamians*, 331–332.

President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki shake hands following the signing of the Strategic Framework Agreement and Security Agreement at a joint news conference Sunday, Dec. 14, 2008, at the Prime Minister's Palace in Baghdad. Source: White House photo by Eric Draper

As the withdrawal deadline loomed, US and Iraqi negotiators started an abortive attempt at another agreement to extend the military presence. It is unclear how serious the negotiations were. One scholar noted that, while the Obama administration participated in negotiations for a post-2011 US military presence in Iraq, it "simultaneously direct[ed] comprehensive planning for only one scenario—the total withdrawal of all U.S. forces" by the end of 2011.[95] Indeed, the White House directed agencies and departments to base planning for post-2011 operations on the assumption that there would be no residual force.[96]

Both sides felt politically boxed in by their respective coalitions at home: neither Obama nor Maliki (nor Ayad Allawi) could go on record advocating for more US troops without risking a loss of support from their respective bases, especially as Obama was gearing up for his 2012 reelection campaign. As late as May 2011, while the Obama administration was debating options, the Iraqi government had yet to formally ask for a residual force, and the Americans had yet to offer one, leaving too little time for an agreement to be reached. Obama finally

broached the idea with Maliki in June 2011, the Iraqis responded with a formal request in August, and desultory negotiations commenced—too late to broker a meaningful agreement, given the nine months it had required to negotiate the 2008 deal. Predictably, negotiations promptly foundered over the Americans' insistence that any agreement be approved by the Iraqi parliament, which Maliki opposed, and by the Iraqis' rejection of US demands for legal immunities for its troops.[97] Obama announced in October 2011 that US forces would complete their withdrawal by the end of the year.[98]

POLICYMAKERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE WITHDRAWAL

Bush opposed withdrawing US troops from Iraq on a fixed timetable because he believed it would undermine military gains. He warned in March 2007 that if the United States withdrew before conditions were ripe, "a contagion of violence could spill out across the country. In time, this violence could engulf the region. The terrorists could emerge from the chaos with a safe haven in Iraq."[99] At another event in July 2007, he said an early withdrawal "would mean surrendering the future of Iraq to al Qaeda. It would mean that we'd be risking mass killings on a horrific scale… It would mean increasing the probability that American troops would have to return at some later date to confront an enemy that is even more dangerous."[100]

US military officials generally agreed. Petraeus and Odierno argued for a conditions-based withdrawal, to consolidate gains and minimize the risk of withdrawal.[101] They recommended to Obama in January 2009 that withdrawals should be limited prior to the upcoming Iraqi parliamentary election, to sustain training for Iraqi forces and minimize violence during the election season. "Consolidating the gains made in the security and governance areas in 2009 by withdrawing in a measured fashion would significantly increase the likelihood of our strategic success in Iraq," they wrote.[102] That is, they recommended calibrating withdrawal to its effect on political and military events in Iraq, not to a fixed timetable. Odierno worried that Obama's emphasis on withdrawal was counterproductive, "fearing that the loose talk would simply embolden the insurgents and militias that remained in Iraq to

95   Brennan, et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*, 97.
96   Ibid., 104.
97   Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 663.
98   Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Ending the War in Iraq," October 21, 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/21/remarks-president-ending-war-iraq.
99   George W. Bush, "President Bush Discusses Fourth Anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom," March 19, 2007, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/03/20070319.html.
100 George W. Bush, "Press Conference by the President," July 12, 2007, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/07/20070712-5.html.
101 Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 564.
102 Quoted in Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 565.

go after the remaining force."[103] Derek Chollet, an official in the Obama administration's Pentagon, later acknowledged that the withdrawal meant that "Washington had less leverage and capacity to influence Iraqi decision-making."[104]

Some Iraqi officials also appeared to recognize the dangers of a complete US withdrawal. In March 2009, Maliki warned US military officials, "al-Qaeda was waiting for the drawdown to reconstitute and attempt a comeback."[105] Earlier, during the 2008 negotiations, US military leaders had drawn up a list of their training, advising, and support activities with the Iraqi military, to emphasize the consequences of a complete pullout; the list helped persuade Iraqi officials to agree to the SOFA. Later, in 2011, Iraqi officials—including Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, Maliki, and Allawi—expressed support for a continuing US military presence. The Iraqi military supported an enduring US presence because its leaders were aware of its dependence on the United States for key supporting capabilities. "If the decision on American troop levels had been left up to the American and Iraqi militaries, some sort of continued United States military presence would have been agreed upon without much controversy," according to Gordon and Trainor.[106] Chollet later wrote, "the administration understood the strategic value of keeping some troops in Iraq. Even a small presence could help keep tabs on the nascent Iraqi security forces and assist with counter-terrorism efforts."[107]

Against those considerations, Obama believed withdrawal was necessary to allow the United States to focus on other foreign policy priorities. "Our single-minded and open-ended focus on Iraq is not a sound strategy for keeping America safe," he said in a 2008 speech. He opposed the war from its beginning, and claimed he wanted to end the war so that the United States could refocus on its war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Obama's concern about other foreign policy priorities was similar to the Nixon administration's concern that Vietnam was damaging the broader Cold War strategy and the US relationship with China—echoing some scholars' arguments that withdrawal from military operations reflects a calculus that short-term losses are an acceptable price for greater long-term gains.[108]

Like Nixon, Obama believed that the withdrawal could be accomplished without risking US interests in the region—and, in fact, that withdrawal was an essential element in pressuring other actors to change their behavior. Obama claimed that his plan for a sixteen-month withdrawal would not lead to a collapse of order or a resurgence of jihadist terrorism. He claimed that "true success" was within reach, by which he meant "a government that is taking responsibility for its future—a government that prevents sectarian conflict, and ensures that the al Qaeda threat which has been beaten back by our troops does not reemerge." Crucially, he claimed his withdrawal plan was the pathway to achieving that success. "That is an achievable goal if we pursue a comprehensive plan to press the Iraqis stand up," he said. The first step in pressing the Iraqis was a new mission for the US military: "ending this war" by withdrawing over sixteen months. The withdrawal would press the Iraqis to take more responsibility for their future, incentivizing improved performance and more rapid progress.

THE EFFECT OF WITHDRAWAL ON PUBLIC OPINION

After its first phase, public opinion about the war in Iraq was relatively stable—and low—for the duration of the war. The percentage of Americans who believed the war was a mistake stayed at or above 50 percent almost continuously from August 2005 through the end of the war. Unlike Vietnam, public opinion did not appear to appreciably spike or drop during major political or military developments, such as the surge, the drop in violence, Petraeus' fall 2007 congressional testimony, the signing of the 2008 security agreements, or the troop withdrawal.[109]

The withdrawal from Iraq was popular—a majority of Americans clearly supported it, and Obama was elected, in part, on a campaign promise to accomplish it. Seventy-five percent of Americans supported withdrawing from Iraq in late 2011.[110] Still, Americans were divided on whether the withdrawal should be accomplished according to a timetable. In 2008, when the idea was first mooted, Americans were evenly divided on the issue, or gave contradictory answers.[111] By the time Obama executed

103 Ibid., 637.

104 Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 76.

105 Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 579.

106 Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 655. Chollet argues that Iraqis gave contradictory and conflicting views about the desirability of extending the US presence in Iraq.

107 Chollet, *The Long Game*, 78.

108 Hazelton, "Withdrawing With Honor," 68ff. For a similar argument, see Bennett Ramberg, "The Precedents for Withdrawal," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2009, 2–8. Chollet argues these considerations weighed heavily in Obama's decision to force an end to the US deployment in Iraq.

109 Andrew Dugan, "Fewer in U.S. View Iraq, Afghanistan Wars as Mistake," Gallup, June 12, 2015, http://news.gallup.com/poll/183575/fewer-view-iraq-afghanistan-wars-mistakes.aspx.

110 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Three in Four Americans Back Obama on Iraq Withdrawal," Gallup, November 2, 2011, http://news.gallup.com/poll/150497/three-four-americans-back-obama-iraq-withdrawal.aspx.

111 Frank Newport, "Exploring the Iraq Timetable Issue," Gallup, August 5, 2008, http://news.gallup.com/poll/109294/Exploring-Iraq-Timetable-Issue.aspx.

the withdrawal on the 2011 timetable, his approval ratings had dropped significantly. Americans' approval of Obama's handling of Iraq dropped from 71 percent in April 2009 to 49 percent in September 2010, when the president announced the end of combat operations.[112]

Similarly, Americans' approval of Obama's handling of foreign affairs dropped from a high of 61 percent in the spring of 2009 to a low of 42 percent in late 2011, when negotiations with Iraq bogged down. The numbers ticked up modestly, to 49 percent at the end of the year—though they worsened considerably later in Obama's presidency, likely, in part, because of the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).[113] Indeed, developments in Iraq after the withdrawal soured Americans' opinions about Obama's foreign policy legacy and, specifically, his decision to withdrawal from Iraq. In late 2014, as the United States resumed military operations in Iraq after the rise of ISIS, support for the 2011 withdrawal dropped from 75 percent to 61 percent, and support for Obama's handling of Iraq had dropped to 42 percent.[114]

The withdrawal did not enhance the president's ratings—but did provide an important political benefit to him. While a supermajority of Americans supported the withdrawal, a staggering 96 percent of Democrats supported it. As early as mid-2008—at the height of Obama's presidential campaign—71 percent of Democrats favored setting a withdrawal timetable, compared with 76 percent of Republicans who opposed a timetable.[115] Whatever political price Obama paid in his broader approval ratings for implementing the withdrawal, he retained his political base and secured reelection to a second term.

THE EFFECT OF WITHDRAWAL ON POLITICAL AND MILITARY GOALS

The withdrawal of US forces from Iraq did not appear to increase or decrease the number of "security incidents" in Iraq in 2010 and 2011, as tracked by the US military. Incidents dropped precipitously during 2007 and 2008, during the surge and the height of the military presence, and remained low and level during the withdrawal through 2011.[116] Unlike Vietnam, the

Iraq war seemed to have arrived at a precarious equilibrium by late 2008—before the withdrawal had been agreed to, and years before it was implemented.

The withdrawal, however, appears to have deprived Iraqi forces of the opportunity to consolidate gains or improve their capacity. It did not accelerate the growth in either the quantity or quality of Iraqi security forces. According to one estimate, Iraqi forces increased by about five hundred thousand personnel between 2003 and 2008, when the security agreement was reached, but increased by less than one hundred thousand during the three years of withdrawal.[117] Nor were Iraqi forces prepared to go without continued US assistance. In September 2010, Iraqi forces were "unable to conduct combined arms operations at any level of command, provide air sovereignty and an integrated air defense, sustain and maintain forces in the field, conduct counterterrorism operations without support from US SOF [special operations forces]," and more. They did not gain those capabilities during the remaining year of the US presence, in part because the focus of US efforts shifted toward the logistical challenges of withdrawal.[118]

In June 2011, the US military judged that its Iraqi counterpart was not on track to achieve its minimum essential capability (MEC) in logistics or sustainment, and faced significant challenges in planning, procurement, and information technology. The logistics shortfall was strategically significant: "without additional resourcing to develop an Iraqi National Logistics System, there is a risk that gains in ISF [Iraq security forces] development over the last seven years will be lost to insufficient maintenance and sustainment." US efforts to build an Iraqi army would wither away without sustained support to its logistics system. The assessment of the Iraqi police was even bleaker: "Achievement of MEC might not be possible without continued support, resulting in enduring gaps in police capability."[119] The Iraqi chief of the general staff believed Iraqi forces would not be ready to assume sole responsibility until 2020.[120] A similar psychological dynamic may have been at work among Iraqi forces as had been true among Vietnamese forces—a feeling of abandonment, leading to a loss of morale and cohesion—but evidence for that is lacking in the unclassified, largely American sources available.

112 "Washington Post-ABD News Poll: Obama and Iraq Policy, June 18–22, 2014," *Washington Post,* June 24, 2014, http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/politics/washington-post-abc-news-poll-obama-and-iraq-policy-june-18-22-2014/1120/.

113 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Obama Approval on Issues, Favorable Rating Up," Gallup, February 18, 2015, http://news.gallup.com/poll/181595/obama-approval-issues-favorable-rating.aspx.

114 Dugan, "Fewer in U.S. View Iraq, Afghanistan Wars as Mistake."

115 Jones, "Three in Four Americans Back Obama on Iraq Withdrawal"; Newport, "Exploring the Iraq Timetable Issue."

116 "Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, Quarterly Report," Office of the Special Inspector General, January 2012, 65. Many of the consequences of the eventual withdrawal were accurately predicted two years before the withdrawal in Terrill and Crane, "Precedents, Variable, and Options in Planning a U.S. Military Disengagement Strategy from Iraq."

117 "Iraq Index," Brookings, July 26, 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/iraq-index/.

118 Brennan, et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq,* 159.

119 Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Towards Stability and Security in Iraq,* June 2011, viii, ix.

120 Brennan, et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq,* 174.

WITHDRAWAL DEADLINES IN WAR

One major problem hindering the development of Iraqi security forces was sectarianism between Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish soldiers—sectarianism stoked, in part, by Maliki himself. Earlier in the war, US commanders threatened Maliki with reprisals if he did not tamp down his sectarian tendencies. However, according to Peter Feaver and Hal Brands—scholars who studied the war and, in Feaver's case, served in the Bush administration on issues related to the war—"It also seems clear that the United States lost nearly all leverage to restrain this [sectarian] behaviour by withdrawing in late 2011—indeed, Maliki began moving harshly against his political opponents just as the US withdrawal concluded."[121]

More broadly, the situation in Iraq in the years immediately following the withdrawal shifted decisively against US interests. Sunni jihadist groups—incubated by the war in Syria, and motivated by the sectarianism of the Shia government in Baghdad—rebranded themselves as the Islamic State and took advantage of the power vacuum across much of Iraq created by the US withdrawal. Without US military assistance to the Iraqi Army, the Islamic State made rapid gains, seizing Fallujah and Ramadi in early 2014, followed by its proclamation of a caliphate and conquest of Mosul in June. "ISIS vanquished four Iraqi army divisions, overran at least a half-dozen military installations, including

western Iraq's largest, and seized control of nearly a third of Iraq's territory," according to Joby Warrick's Pulitzer-Prize-winning account of the group's rise.[122] Genocidal violence against Christians, Yazidi, Kurds, and Shia followed, and the United States was compelled to resume military operations in Iraq in 2014.

Obama initially claimed the withdrawal from Iraq was necessary to let him refocus on other foreign policy priorities—most prominently, the war in Afghanistan. However, Obama's subsequent decision to begin withdrawing from Afghanistan cast doubt on that claim, and the course of the war there suggests that the withdrawal from Iraq led to few gains in Afghanistan. Obama later defended the withdrawal by claiming it did not hurt Iraq nor contribute to the collapse of order and the rise of ISIS. "Maintaining American troops in Iraq at the time [in 2011] could not have reversed the forces that contributed to [ISIS's] rise," Obama said in December 2016.[123] By the same logic, if US troops would not have helped security and prevented the rise of ISIS in 2011, Obama should not have ordered them back to Iraq in 2014. The reverse is true: if Obama believed a deployment of troops in 2014 could have a meaningful impact on Iraqi security, that casts doubt on his claim that the 2011 withdrawal did not negatively affect the security situation there.

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121 Peter Feaver and Hal Brands, "Was the Rise of ISIS Inevitable?" *Survival* 59, 3 (2017), 7–54.

122 Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Anchor, 2015), 296.

123 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Administration's Approach to Counterterrorism," December 6, 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/06/remarks-president-administrations-approach-counterterrorism.

ESCALATION AND WITHDRAWAL IN AFGHANISTAN, 2009-2016

The case of Afghanistan is unique, in that escalation and withdrawal happened under the same presidency. [124] In Vietnam, Johnson escalated and Nixon withdrew; in Iraq, Bush escalated and Obama withdrew.[125] In Afghanistan, Obama campaigned on a promise to escalate and win the war and, in his first year in office, he ordered two major troop increases. Yet, by the end of his first year, Obama had also announced his intent to begin withdrawing from Afghanistan, and he withdrew nearly all US troops from the conflict by the end of his term in office. Thus, it is worthwhile to review Obama's policy toward Afghanistan as a whole, to provide proper context for his decision to simultaneously escalate the war and announce withdrawal plans.

During his campaign for president, then-Senator Obama wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 2007, "We must refocus our efforts on Afghanistan and Pakistan—the central front in our war against al Qaeda—so that we are confronting terrorists where their roots run deepest."[126] In July 2008, in a major speech on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he rightly noted the situation in Afghanistan was "deteriorating" and "unacceptable." He promised, "As President, I will make the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban the top priority that it should be. This is a war that we have to win." He pledged to deploy at least two additional brigades, and to spend an additional $1 billion in civilian assistance every year.[127]

As Obama took office, he convened a strategy review to chart the way forward. In March 2009, he defined the goal clearly: "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan." His policy explicitly committed the United States to "promoting a more capable, accountable, and effective government

in Afghanistan," which required "executing and resourcing an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan." Obama argued the war "is a cause that could not be more just...The world cannot afford the price that will come due if Afghanistan slides back into chaos or al Qaeda operates unchecked."[128] With the support of both parties, a presidential strategy review, and a strong majority of the American people, he ordered twenty-one thousand more troops to Afghanistan, quadrupled the number of US diplomats and aid workers, and increased civilian assistance by an impressive $2 billion from 2009 to 2010. Obama gave no hint of withdrawal from the conflict; he seemed ready to bet his presidency on the success of the war.

Several 2009 events sowed serious doubts within the Obama administration about the feasibility of its new strategy and, eventually, led to the establishment of a withdrawal deadline. Violence worsened dramatically: insurgent-initiated attacks in the summer of 2009 increased by 65 percent compared to the previous summer, including suicide bombings of NATO headquarters in Kabul in August and, later, a CIA base in Khowst in December.[129] Three hundred and fifty-five US soldiers were killed in Afghanistan in 2009, more than double the previous year. The US public was increasingly pessimistic. In July 2009, 54 percent of Americans believed things were going well, compared to 43 percent who thought they were going badly. Five months later, even that tenuous optimism had collapsed: 32 percent thought it was going well, compared to 66 percent who thought it was going badly.[130] The Afghan presidential election that August was marred by fraud, and was widely seen as illegitimate by US officials. In November, US Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry wrote that President Hamid Karzai was "not an adequate strategic partner" for the United

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124 Paul D. Miller, "Obama's Failed Legacy in Afghanistan," *American Interest,* February 15, 2016, https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/02/15/obamas-failed-legacy-in-afghanistan/. Portions of this section are reprinted from the *American Interest* piece, with generous permission from the editors.

125 This is consistent with the finding of Pilster, Boehmelt, and Tago, "Political Leadership Changes," that leadership changes "are associated with premature withdrawals from ongoing military operations."

126 Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2007-07-01/renewing-american-leadership.

127 "Obama's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan," New York Times, July 15, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

128 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," March 27, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

129 "Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan," US Department of Defense, October 2009, 12, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/October_2009.pdf.

130 "Americans More Positive on Afghanistan After Bin Laden Death," Gallup, May 11, 2011, https://news.gallup.com/poll/147488/Americans-Positive-Afghanistan-Bin-Laden-Death.aspx.

States, in a cable that was quickly made public, further souring diplomatic relations.[131]

The event that had the most dramatic impact on the new administration's view of the war was the devastating initial assessment by the new commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), General Stanley McChrystal, in August 2009. "The situation in Afghanistan is serious," he warned. "Many indicators suggest the overall situation is deteriorating. We face not only a resilient and growing insurgency; there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans—in both their government and the international community—that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents." McChrystal, taking seriously Obama's words in March about a "resourcing an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency strategy," called for eighty thousand more troops to maximize chances of success, or forty thousand with medium risk. He also developed a third option: deploying just twenty thousand more troops and abandoning counterinsurgency in favor of a leaner, high-risk counterterrorism mission.[132]

McChrystal's report, his request for more troops, and the cost of the war triggered a major reassessment of the war and its aims. The crises of 2009 led Obama to a "reassessment of whether the war was as necessary as he first believed," according to *New York Times* reporter David Sanger. Obama came to believe that "progress was possible—but not on the kind of timeline that [he] thought economically or politically affordable."[133] The result was another White House strategy review. This time, the result was different.

The president faced a basic strategic choice between a lean, pared-down counterterrorism mission focused on al-Qaeda, or a larger and more ambitious counterinsurgency strategy to beat back the Taliban while improving Afghan governance. Obama attempted to forge a compromise between the two options. Despite his first strategy review's recommendations to adopt a counterinsurgency strategy, Obama's approach was "not fully resourced counterinsurgency or nation building, but a narrower approach tied more tightly to the core goal of disrupting, dismantling, and eventually defeating al Qaeda and preventing al Qaeda's return to safe haven in Afghanistan or Pakistan," according to an internal

NSC memo.[134] Obama ordered another surge, this time of thirty thousand troops—far more than required for a narrow counterterrorism operation, but far fewer than the eighty thousand McChrystal recommended for a fully resourced counterinsurgency campaign.

Because Obama decided against counterinsurgency, he also backed off his commitment to promoting accountable and effective government in Afghanistan. While he continued to argue publicly that improved governance was important to the overall mission, privately, the same internal NSC memo stated the United States would only be "selectively building the capacity of the Afghan government with military [sic] focused on the ministries of defense and interior," a move with major long-term consequences. Following the president's guidance, a group of White House staffers convened, starting in 2010, to search for an "Afghan good enough" solution and exit, an obvious effort to lower the goalposts and make it easier for the United States to declare victory and leave. Civilian aid to Afghanistan decreased every year after 2010. By eschewing investments in Afghan governance and reducing civilian aid, while still deploying one hundred thousand troops, Obama abandoned any vision of a political end state that would allow the United States to disengage with its interests intact.

Finally, Obama set a series of deadlines to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. It is unclear how the withdrawal idea first surfaced in policy deliberations, or who suggested it. Chollet credits the president for insisting on the withdrawal timetable as "necessary to disciplining the process."[135] In Bob Woodward's account, at one point Obama claimed, "I'm not an advocate of the timetable," but said Congress forced him into it because "a Democratic Congress would insist on a timetable," a claim for which there is little evidence.[136] Later, Obama believed that the military recommended it by how it briefed the surge option. The withdrawal deadline "was actually on the chart [the Pentagon] briefed to us," Obama claimed in Woodward's account. "They identified it as the point when Afghans would be able to take the lead and responsibility in certain areas."[137] Obama probably interpreted the military's estimate as to when it might achieve the goals of the surge as a timeline for when surge troops could be withdrawn. Regardless, Obama embraced the idea of a withdrawal for his own reasons.

131 Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Envoy's Cables Show Worries on Afghan Plans," *New York Times*, January 25, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/26/world/asia/26strategy.html?pagewanted=all.

132 Peter Baker and Helene Cooper, "All Afghan War Options by Obama Aides Said to Call for More Troops," *New York Times*, November 7, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/08/world/asia/08troops.html.

133 David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Broadway Books, 2012), 29, 56, 128. See chapters 2, 5, and 10 for the broader narrative of Afghan policy. Also see David E. Sanger, "Charting Obama's Journey to a Shift on Afghanistan," *New York Times,* May 19, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/20/us/obamas-journey-to-reshape-afghanistan-war.html; Mark Landler, *Alter Egos: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and the Twilight Struggle Over American Power* (New York: Random House, 2016), chapter 4; and Mann, *The Obamians*, chapters 9–10 and 16.

134 Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 387.

135 Chollet, *The Long Game*, 81; Landler, *Alter Egos*, 68.

136 Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 232.

137 Ibid., 312.

Marines and sailors with Marine Expeditionary Brigade – Afghanistan load onto a KC-130 aircraft on the Camp Bastion flightline, Oct. 27, 2014. The Marine Corps ended its mission in Helmand province, Afghanistan, the day prior and all Marines, sailors, and service members from the United Kingdom withdrew from southwestern Afghanistan. Source: Wikimedia Commons

In December 2009, Obama simultaneously announced a surge of troops to Afghanistan and a timetable for their withdrawal.[138] The following year, in July, the Afghans and the international community agreed at the Kabul Conference to "transition" to Afghan lead for security by 2014, which many interpreted as the withdrawal deadline.[139] Another year later, in July 2011, as his reelection campaign was in its early stages, the president announced for the first time that he planned to begin withdrawing non-surge troops, and affirmed the 2014 target for transition. It was not until May 2014 that he finally set a deadline—by the end of 2016—to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan. Like Nixon, each time Obama claimed the withdrawal was justified because of military progress. "Thanks to our extraordinary men and women in uniform, our civilian personnel, and our many coalition partners, we are meeting our goals," he said in 2011. "Our troops will continue coming home at a steady pace as Afghan security forces move into the lead."[140] In 2014, he reiterated, "We're finishing the job we started. Over the last several years, we've worked to transition security responsibilities to the Afghans."[141]

POLICYMAKERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE WITHDRAWAL

Obama publicly defended the withdrawal as a necessary tactic to compel the Afghan government to take responsibility for its security and implement needed reforms. In his speech announcing the surge and withdrawal, Obama claimed that the withdrawal would make it "clear to the Afghan government—and, more importantly, to the Afghan people—that they will ultimately be responsible for their own country." He added, "The days of providing a blank check are over." He acknowledged that some critics opposed setting a deadline, but countered, "the absence of a timeframe for transition would deny us any sense of urgency in working with the Afghan government. It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan."[142] Secretary of Defense Robert Gates later wrote that he "was supportive of the president's timeline in Afghanistan because I felt some kind of dramatic action was required to get Karzai and the Afghan government

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138   Barack Obama, "The New Way Forward," December 1, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/12/01/new-way-forward-presidents-address.

139   "Kabul Conference Communiqué," åKabul international Conference on Afghanistan, July 20, 2010, 6, https://www.unodc.org/documents/afghanistan/Kabul_Conference/FINAL_Kabul_Conference_Communique.pdf.

140   Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," June 22, 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-Afghanistan.

141   Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Afghanistan," May 27, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/statement-president-afghanistan.

142   Obama, "The New Way Forward."

to accept ownership of their country's security...The deadline put the Afghan government and security forces on notice that they had to step up their game, for their own survival if nothing else."[143] Unlike the wars in Vietnam or Iraq, the president did not claim the withdrawal was important to let him focus on other foreign policy priorities.

Domestic political considerations also played a part. Obama felt compelled to begin talking about withdrawal because he was worried about the political sustainability of the war. Chollet, who served as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs in the Obama administration, wrote that the president understood the risks of the withdrawal timetable, "yet believed that such clarity was needed to sustain public support for the mission."[144] Obama reportedly worried in meetings that, "I can't lose all the Democratic Party," according to Woodward's account of the administration's deliberations. "And people at home don't want to hear we're going to be there for ten years...We can't sustain a commitment indefinitely in the United States. We can't sustain support at home and with allies without having some explanation that involves timelines."[145] Gates— who initially argued for a more flexible withdrawal based on "conditions on the ground" rather than a fixed timetable, later argued in his memoir that, "with the deadlines Obama politically bought our military—and civilians—five more years to achieve our mission in Afghanistan."[146]

Other policymakers and military officials worried that the withdrawal would risk undermining the United States' political and military gains in the war. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton later wrote of Obama's first withdrawal announcement, though she supported the idea of a withdrawal timetable in principle, "This was a starker deadline than I had hoped for, and I worried that it might send the wrong signal to friend and foe alike."[147] Petraeus told Congress that both the start date of the withdrawal and the rate of withdrawal should be based on "conditions on the ground," and that the withdrawal timetable should be flexible. "It's important that July 2011 be seen for what it is, the date when a process begins based on conditions, not the date when the U.S. heads for the exits," he said. Obama himself acknowledged, when deliberating the merits of the withdrawal, "A timetable could send a message that all the enemy needed to do was run out the clock," but judged the risk worth it because he needed to show some "light at the end of the tunnel."[148]

President Barack Obama addresses the nation from Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, May 1, 2012 Source: Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

Opposition in Congress was pronounced, and the president's Republican critics argued that the withdrawal would encourage the Taliban and undermine any military progress made in the meantime. The United States' Afghan allies did not support the withdrawal deadline. In July 2010, Afghan Ambassador Said Tayab Jawad warned that the deadline was unhelpful. "First, if you over-emphasize a deadline that is not realistic, you are making the enemy a lot more bold. You are prolonging the war... We should give a clear message to the enemy, to the terrorists who are a threat to everyone, that the United States, NATO, Afghans are there to finish this job. If that's not the feeling, we lost the support of the Afghan people, and also make the neighboring countries of interest a lot more bolder to interfere in Afghanistan."[149]

THE EFFECT OF WITHDRAWAL ON PUBLIC OPINION

Did the withdrawal from Afghanistan help shore up public support for the war there? Public-opinion polls suggest nearer the opposite: public support for the war steadily worsened throughout the withdrawal from the conflict. In November 2009, on the eve of Obama's first withdrawal announcement,

143   Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage, 2014), 379.

144   Chollet, *The Long Game,* 73.

145   Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 230, 336. See also Mann, *The Obamians*, 127 for Vice President Joe Biden's concerns about the Democratic Party.

146   Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 331.

147   Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

148   Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 230.

149   "Critics press Obama on Afghanistan withdrawal deadline," CNN, July 4, 2010, http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2010/07/04/critics-press-obama-on-afghanistan-withdrawal-deadline/.

WITHDRAWAL DEADLINES IN WAR

36 percent of Americans believed the war was a mistake, compared to 60 percent who did not; in February 2014, when the withdrawal was substantially complete and security was noticeably worsening, 49 percent believed the war was a mistake, compared to 48 percent who did not—the first time in the war's history that a plurality believed it was a mistake.[150]

Similarly, the withdrawal had no significant effect on public approval or disapproval of Obama's handling of the war. In November 2009, 35 percent of the public expressed support for Obama's handling of the war in Afghanistan, compared to 55 percent who disapproved. His approval rating for the war rose to 53 percent over the next year and a half—the period during the surge, when security measurably improved in Afghanistan, and before the troop drawdown started. But, in August 2011, after his second major withdrawal announcement, support reverted to the pre-surge level: 38 percent approved, and 55 percent disapproved.[151]

Finally, a broader measure of public approval of Obama's handling of foreign affairs showed a similar downward trend. Fifty-three percent approved of his handling of foreign affairs in August 2009, which declined to 42 percent two years later and 32 percent in June 2014 (reflecting developments in Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere).[152] Some of these indices ticked upward in the final year of Obama's presidency, after he reversed his withdrawal plans and announced US troops would stay in Afghanistan past 2016—though the improvement was probably more closely related to the overall increase in his popularity and approval ratings as he left office than to the reversal of the withdrawal policy itself.

There is, in fact, some indication that Obama may have led, rather than followed, public skepticism about the war. In July 2008 (when Obama gave his campaign speech), 57 percent of Americans supported sending more US troops to Afghanistan. In February 2009, 65 percent of the public supported Obama's deployment of more troops, and 70 percent believed Afghanistan would fall to the Taliban if the United States withdrew.[153] In July 2011, when the president first announced withdrawals of pre-surge troops, 59 percent of Americans were not confident the Afghan government was able to secure itself. In March 2012, 58 percent of Americans said they were worried that withdrawing US troops too quickly would make Afghanistan a safe haven for terrorists.

The public eventually expressed support for the withdrawal deadlines—after Obama announced them. In February 2009, 48 percent of Americans believed the United States should keep troops in Afghanistan until the situation got better, while 47 percent believed it should set a timetable for withdrawing troops. Throughout 2009, the public wavered, split evenly between surging and withdrawing.[154] In July 2010, seven months after the president's speech, 33 percent wanted to keep troops there for the duration, while 66 percent supported the timetable. The public did not demand a withdraw deadline prior to Obama's announcement of one. Obama was not forced by public pressure to withdraw troops, and time was not running out on the Afghan mission. As in Iraq, there was a partisan divide on the war: the Democratic Party solidly opposed the surge and supported the deadline. In September 2009, 62 percent of Democrats opposed Obama's impending surge decision, and 63 percent of Republicans supported it, suggesting that while the president did not realize any broad political gain by withdrawing from Afghanistan, he protected his relationship to his political base in the run-up to both the 2010 midterm elections and his 2012 reelection.[155]

THE EFFECT OF WITHDRAWAL ON POLITICAL AND MILITARY GOALS

The Afghan case is complex because, like Nixon with Vietnam, Obama simultaneously escalated the war and announced withdrawal plans. Because of Obama's ambivalence and compromise, the United States implemented a strange policy from 2010 to 2012. Obama deployed more troops than he needed for a counterterrorism operation, but not as many as his top commander recommended for a more robust counterinsurgency campaign. The surge showed some visible and positive effects on the battlefield, but Obama began withdrawing troops as soon as signs of success appeared. After having kept his campaign promise to increase civilian aid in the first year of his presidency, he reversed himself and decreased civilian aid every year thereafter. By 2011, the president "decided to exit even if the job was far from

150 Dugan, "Fewer in U.S. View Iraq, Afghanistan Wars as Mistake."

151 "Presidential Ratings –Issues Approval," Gallup, http://www.gallup.com/poll/1726/presidential-ratings-issues-approval.aspx.

152 Justin McCarthy, "America's Approval of Obama on Foreign Affairs Rises," Gallup, August 15, 2016, https://news.gallup.com/poll/194624/americans-approval-obama-foreign-affairs-rises.aspx.

153 Frank Newport, "Strong Bipartisan Support for Obama's Move on Afghanistan," February 23, 2009, https://news.gallup.com/poll/116047/Strong-Bipartisan-Support-Obama-Move-Afghanistan.aspx; Lymari Morales, "Americans See Afghanistan War As Still Worth Fighting," Gallup, February 19, 2009, https://news.gallup.com/poll/115270/Americans-Afghanistan-War-Worth-Fighting.aspx.

154 Frank Newport, "In U.S., More Support for Increasing Troops in Afghanistan," Gallup, November 25, 2009, http://www.gallup.com/poll/124490/In-U.S.-More-Support-Increasing-Troops-Afghanistan.aspx?g_source=afghanistan&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles; and Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans Divided on Sending More Troops to Afghanistan," Gallup, October 8, 2009, http://www.gallup.com/poll/123521/Americans-Divided-Sending-Troops-Afghanistan.aspx?g_source=afghanistan&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles.

155 Frank Newport, "Americans Tilt Against Sending More Troops to Afghanistan," Gallup, September 25, 2009, http://www.gallup.com/poll/123188/Americans-Tilt-Against-Sending-Troops-Afghanistan.aspx?g_source=afghanistan&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles.

complete, even if there was no guarantee that gains made in the past decade could last," according to Sanger. Obama solidified the withdrawal deadline without even consulting his military advisers.[156]

The surge had measurable effects on the military situation in Afghanistan. The size of Afghan security forces grew rapidly, from 195,000 in December 2009 to 323,000 two years later.[157] In October 2011, the Department of Defense reported, "After five consecutive years where enemy-initiated attacks and overall violence increased sharply each year (e.g., up 94 percent in 2010 over 2009), such attacks began to decrease in May 2011 compared to the previous year and continue to decline." The decline continued throughout 2012. Serious, nonpartisan and nongovernmental sources noted the improvements. In 2011, the *New York Times* reported, "The Taliban have been under stress since American forces doubled their presence in southern Afghanistan last year and greatly increased the number of special forces raids aimed at hunting down Taliban commanders."[158] RAND analyst Seth Jones, the foremost US scholar of the Taliban insurgency and author of *In the Graveyard of Empires*, wrote in May 2011, "after years of gains, the Taliban's progress has stalled—and even reversed—in southern Afghanistan this year."[159]

Even the UN noted progress, reporting in March 2011 that "The number of districts under insurgent control has decreased... As a result of the increased tempo of security operations in northern and western provinces, an increasing number of anti-Government elements are seeking to join local reintegration programmes...In Kabul, the increasingly effective Afghan national security forces continue to limit insurgent attacks."[160] Steve Biddle later examined the record of US operations in Afghanistan at the height of the surge, and concluded, "the Afghan experience shows that current U.S. methods *can* return threatened districts to government control, when conducted with the necessary time and resources."[161]

Fatalities of US troops began to decline in 2011, and the number of Afghan civilians killed in the war declined in 2012 for the first time. Poppy cultivation appeared to be holding steady, and was well below its 2007 peak, while opium production plummeted in 2012. The Obama administration doubled the number of Afghan soldiers and policemen from early 2009 to December 2011, throwing a significantly larger armed force at the enemy.

Other indicators also suggested progress: Afghanistan's rank in Reporters Without Borders' index of press freedom markedly improved after 2012. By 2012, Afghans were registering some optimism in public-opinion polls.[162]

In May 2012, during a visit to Kabul, Obama appeared to lock in the gains of the surge by signing a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan. Obama explained the agreement "establishes the basis for our cooperation over the next decade" and laid the groundwork to give the Afghans the "support they need to accomplish two narrow security missions beyond 2014— counterterrorism and continued training." The agreement was supplemented by a ten-year bilateral security agreement signed in 2014, which most observers—including the Afghans—assumed came with a US military presence on the ground in Afghanistan. In 2013, the United States appeared to get the closest it ever got to opening formal peace negotiations with the Taliban, when the group briefly opened an "embassy" in Qatar and, the following year, agreed to a prisoner exchange for US serviceman Bowe Bergdahl.

Unfortunately, the surge's gains were undone by the withdrawal of US troops and by the United States' underinvestment in governance and reconstruction. By the beginning of 2013, the withdrawal was well under way: there were sixty-five thousand US troops in Afghanistan at the start of 2013, forty thousand in 2014, and just nine thousand and eight hundred in 2015. Afghan security forces were not ready to pick up the slack from the departing US forces. Throughout 2013 and 2014, the US Department of Defense warned repeatedly that Afghan security forces, though improving, faced capability gaps in logistics, intelligence, air support, and more, limiting their ability to undertake independent operations without US support and training.

A wide range of critics warned that that publicly announced withdrawal timetable would have pernicious psychological effects on the battlefield, undermining allied morale and encouraging the Taliban to wait out the surge and resist peace talks.

As international military forces left, the Taliban regained the initiative. Because of the troop departure, the Department of Defense was no longer able to compile the data to track the incidence of enemy-initiated attacks, but other indicators made

156 Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 56.

157 "Afghanistan Index," Brookings, May 25, 2017, 6.

158 Carlotta Gall, "Losses in Pakistan Haven Strain Afghan Taliban," *New York Times*, March 31, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/world/asia/01taliban. html?_r=3&hp.

159 Seth Jones, "Beating Back the Taliban," *Foreign Policy*, March 15, 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/03/15/beating-back-the-taliban-2/.

160 UN Security Council, A/65/783-S/2011/120, page 2.

161 Stephen Biddle, "Afghanistan's Legacy: Emerging Lessons of an Ongoing War," *Washington Quarterly*, June 25, 2014, 75–6, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/ abs/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926210. See also Daniel L. Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security* 31, 2 (2006).

162 "Afghanistan Index," Brookings, 16–18

clear the deteriorating security situation. According to the International Crisis Group in 2014, "Unpublished assessments estimated a 15 to 20 percent increase in violence for 2013, as compared with 2012. Escalation appeared to continue in the early months of 2014."[163] The Defense Department reported at the end of 2013 that "the insurgency has also consolidated gains in some of the rural areas in which it has traditionally held power." Civilian fatalities, which had declined in 2012, rose to an all-time high in 2014. The number of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan exploded, nearly quadrupling from 352,000 in 2010 to 1.2 million in 2016.[164]

At the same time, there was little evidence that the withdrawal had created a sense of urgency for reform, or that the Afghan government had improved its performance, as Obama had hoped. Most indicators showed a stagnant, even regressing Afghanistan, a trend that accelerated as the international withdrawal gathered steam. According to the World Bank's governance indicators, since 2009 Afghanistan made no significant progress on political stability or the rule of law—and barely perceptible progress on government effectiveness, regulatory quality, or controlling corruption. Poppy cultivation reached another all-time high in 2013. In 2016, 66 percent of Afghans said their country was headed in the wrong direction, up from 27 percent in 2010. The licit Afghan economy began to cool, growing by just 0.8 percent in 2015 and 2 percent in 2016, reflecting both decreased international presence and the Obama administration's reduced spending on reconstruction. The most successful part of the US intervention in Afghanistan was the Afghan army: the net effect of Obama's strategy was to create a strong and popular Afghan army and a weak Afghan state—which bodes ill for the country's long-term future.

In a coincidence of poor timing, Obama announced that US forces would leave Afghanistan entirely just one month before ISIS seized Mosul and reminded the world of the dangers of failed states and jihadist groups that find safe haven in them. Within months, the United States had restarted military operations in Iraq—and it was easy to draw the obvious lesson for the war in Afghanistan. The sea change in elite opinion in the United States about Afghanistan was firm and swift. In

March 2015, dozens of former US officials, including Obama's own former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy, signed an open letter to the president calling on him to repudiate his withdrawal policy and keep troops there past 2016.[165] Later that year, dozens more, including former Secretaries of Defense Leon Panetta and Chuck Hagel, endorsed an Atlantic Council report with the same message.[166]

Obama bowed to pressure in late 2015, shortly after the Taliban seized the northern city of Kunduz, scrapping his plans to withdrawal all US troops by the end of his term. In justifying his decision, he explained, "Afghan forces are still not as strong as they need to be," because they still needed work "developing critical capabilities—intelligence, logistics, aviation, command and control." In addition, Obama argued, "the Taliban has made gains, particularly in rural areas, and can still launch deadly attacks in cities, including Kabul," a remarkably candid admission of military setback and, essentially, the failure of his strategy for the war as a whole. Even more remarkably, Obama further recognized, "Much of this was predictable"—as some policymakers had, indeed, predicted. "We understood that as we transitioned, that the Taliban would try to exploit some of our movements out of particular areas, and that it would take time for Afghan security forces to strengthen." In 2009, Obama judged the risk of withdrawal worthwhile; by 2015, after seeing the consequences of withdrawal, he evidently recognized the gamble had not paid off.[167]

Obama spent nearly his entire presidency talking about withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan, and had withdrawn about 90 percent of them by the end of his term. He intended the withdrawal deadline to pressure the corrupt and intransigent Afghan government to reform, but critics argued that it would incentivize hedging behavior instead as Afghans, in the face of uncertainty, became preoccupied with securing their personal interests instead of their country's. Six years after the withdrawal was first announced, the Taliban was resurgent, but the Afghan government had not cleaned up its act: the withdrawal incurred the costs critics feared, without accomplishing the goals its advocates intended.

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163 "Afghanistan's Insurgency After the Transition," International Crisis Group, Asia Report N. 256, May 12, 2014, 4.

164 "Afghanistan Index," Brookings, 13.

165 Al Kamen, "Former Obama Ambassadors Against a Full Afghan Troop Withdrawal in 2016," Washington Post, March 24, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/in-the-loop/wp/2015/03/24/former-obama-ambassadors-against-a-full-afghan-troop-withdrawal-in-2016/.

166 James B. Cunningham, *Afghanistan and US Security, Atlantic Council*, October 14, 2015, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/afghanistan-and-us-security/.

167 Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Afghanistan," October 15, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/15/statement-president-afghanistan.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The circumstances of the United States' withdrawals from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan vary considerably, as do the timetables attached to each. The timetable in Vietnam was never publicly announced; the withdrawal was accomplished in more than a dozen separate installments, and started when the war was at its peak intensity. The timetables in Iraq and Afghanistan were public—though each had its own unique circumstances. There were a multitude of timetables in Afghanistan, rather than just one: a timetable for the beginning of the withdrawal of surge troops, for the completion of the withdrawal of surge troops, for a transition to Afghan lead, and, finally, for complete withdrawal. Iraq faced just one timetable that included several milestones along the way, but US and Iraqi officials widely believed they would reach some arrangement for keeping troops there past the deadline—until they didn't. The Iraq withdrawal started after the war's most intense phase had passed, and did not initially seem to hurt the security situation. The withdrawal from Afghanistan was unique in that it was announced even before Obama's surge started, and so its diplomatic and military effects began to be felt long in advance of any withdrawal actually happening. Nixon and Obama faced their wars in their first terms in office. Their decision-making process took place under the shadow of their pending reelection campaigns, likely increasing the appeal of withdrawal. By contrast, Bush had the luxury of paying less heed to US public opinion—although Iraqi public opinion seems to have played a similar role in Maliki's approach to negotiations in advance of his campaign.

Despite these differences, an overriding commonality stands out: the timetables for withdrawal did not gain the benefits for which US policymakers hoped, but incurred the costs policymakers feared.

SUSTAINING PUBLIC SUPPORT IN WARTIME

There is little evidence that withdrawal timetables helped sustain public support for military operations. A critic may argue the counterfactual: that the withdrawals helped slow the inevitable decline in support that was already under way. But public approval was at least partially correlated to specific political and military events—such as the bombing of Cambodia or the signing of the Paris Peace Accords—and did not always show an inevitable and steady decline. A fuller answer would require a multivariate regression analysis to isolate the independent effects of withdrawal announcements and redeployment operations—a fruitful avenue for further research.

Sustaining public support for military operations is important in a democracy (not because the military cannot win without it, but because presidents run political risks and the military runs the risk of an open break with the population). Setting withdrawal deadlines appears to be an ineffective means to that end. "Reducing the number of troops deployed may well raise as many problems as it solves," according to Robert Jervis. Policymakers believe that reducing the human and financial costs of the war will make it easier for the public to support it; "Politically and psychologically, however, this scenario is unlikely." The public does not weigh its support for wars in a rational cost-benefit calculation. "Once people turn against [a war] they are likely to come to see the entire endeavor as unnecessary and unworthy," regardless of whether costs are high or low. Voters "may simply get tired of the war and no longer want to hear about it."[168]

Public support for war is affected by a host of variables, including the number of casualties, the level of public confidence that the war can be won, the cause for which the war is fought, and whether the public believes the war is worth the sacrifice.[169] Adopting a plan to withdraw from war is tempting to policymakers, because it is an obvious way to minimize casualties, and policymakers can claim withdrawal as a sign of success. But the public appears to interpret withdrawal deadlines differently than policymakers intend. Rather than signaling success, the public may interpret them as a sign of policymakers' loss of faith in the purpose or feasibility of the war (which would explain the loss of support for the war in Afghanistan after Obama's announced withdrawal).

The problem may stem from the difference between how policymakers think of military operations and how the public thinks of war. Clausewitz argued that from the perspective

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168   Jervis, "The Politics of Troop Withdrawal."

169   Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Scott Sigmund Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach," *American Political Science Review* 102, 1 (2008), 95–106, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27644500?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents; Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," *Journal of Politics* 69, 4 (2007), 975–997, http://web.mit.edu/berinsky/www/war.pdf; John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1973); Peter Liberman, "An Eye for an Eye: Public Support for War Against Evildoers," *International Organization* 60, 3 (2006), 687–722, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/an-eye-for-an-eye-public-support-for-war-against-evildoers/32740D712EE6B58A10F12F010D22FEE1.

WITHDRAWAL DEADLINES IN WAR

of the people, war is a creature of violence, of "hatred and animosity" and "blind instinct." By contrast, military officials are likely to see war as "the play of probabilities and chance," which it is their task to orchestrate, and civilian policymakers see it as a rational political instrument.[170] In other words, policymakers and military planners approach war more clinically, along a sliding scale of resources expended and benefits gained, and claim success by reducing costs relative to gains. The public thinks of war more viscerally, as a moral contest of will: it is, after all, the organized effort to kill human beings and impose one nation's political will on another through brute force.

The policymaker might look on years of frustrated military effort and counsel withdrawal, arguing that previous efforts are "sunk costs." To the public, the concept of "sunk costs" is inapplicable, even offensive, to soldiers killed in combat; for them, it is vital to know that "these dead shall not have died in vain." So long as retaining public support remains important for democratic leaders in wartime, they will have to respond to the way the public thinks about war—for example, by explaining the importance and purpose of a war in terms resonant with the public, less attuned to cost-benefit calculations, and more sensitive to the public's moral aspirations. For example, it is remarkable how little Obama spoke about the war in Afghanistan or worked to sustain public support for it: the war was, after all, the largest, longest, and costliest foreign policy endeavor of his presidency. Speaking to the public about the war's importance, rather than setting withdrawal timetables, is likely a more reliable route to sustaining public support in wartime. Winston Churchill was a capable administrator, but that is not why he is remembered as a great wartime leader.

ACHIEVING POLITICAL AND MILITARY GOALS

Once troops begin withdrawing unilaterally, US negotiators lost the ability to credibly threaten their enemies. As Nixon, Bush, and US military officials feared, withdrawal deprived the United States of combat power needed to secure (in Vietnam) or consolidate (in Iraq and Afghanistan) its military objectives. Unsurprisingly, in each case, adversaries were able to use the US withdrawal as an opportunity to regain the initiative. North Vietnam launched its final offensive and conquered South Vietnam just two years after US withdrawal. In Iraq, jihadists regrouped and conquered so much of Iraq and Syria within three years of withdrawal that the United States was compelled

to re-intervene. The Taliban regained momentum and briefly seized control of Afghanistan's fifth-largest city in late 2015, after 90 percent of US troops had pulled out. Their momentum was slowed, in part, because Obama reversed course and halted the US withdrawal.

Many other political and military failures contributed to these outcomes, and failure may have been unavoidable in any case. The withdrawal timetables were not solely to blame. But, within the range of outcomes available after prior events and choices, the withdrawal timetables almost certainly made eventual outcomes worse. Quite simply, attempting to withdraw and fight simultaneously, as in Vietnam and Afghanistan, is a self-defeating strategy. Withdrawing too quickly after the achievement of a fragile stability in the midst of a precarious and complex politico-military counterinsurgency, as in Iraq, is likely to upset the political situation and reintroduce a high degree of military risk.

Because of the loss of military power, US negotiators also lost bargaining leverage with both their allies and enemies. Just as withdrawing while fighting is self-defeating, withdrawing while negotiating is similarly doomed to fail. The enemy understands that he need only outlast US political will, as Bush and Nixon feared, which is why the Paris Peace Accords reflected Hanoi's interests more than Washington's or Saigon's, and why the United States never opened meaningful negotiations with its enemies in Iraq or Afghanistan. (The defection of Sunni tribes through the Sons of Iraq program could be construed as a negotiated arrangement with former enemies—notably, one that corresponded to the surge, not withdrawal, of US troops).

Interestingly, withdrawal also harmed—or at least did not help— the United States' relationship with its allies. This is a complex issue because the power dynamic between the United States and its local allies is counterintuitive; the United States actually has little leverage over them in the first place. "Once America has committed itself to support the ally, it lost its bargaining leverage because it could not credibly threaten to withdraw if the ally failed to reform," according to Jervis. Although Afghanistan doubtless needed the United States for reconstruction assistance, Afghan officials also knew the United States needed their cooperation for counterterrorism operations—and the latter exercised a greater pull than the former, meaning US officials did not enjoy leverage over their Afghan counterparts despite the large amount of assistance provided.

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170   Clausewitz, *On War,* book 1, chapter 1, section 28.

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WITHDRAWAL DEADLINES IN WAR

In any case, withdrawal did not *increase* US leverage over its ally, as policymakers—especially Obama—clearly hoped. Withdrawal did not help the United States compel the Vietnamese, Iraqi, or Afghan governments or security forces to reform or improve their competence. Jervis argues, "The golden mean—rarely achieved—is for the indigenous ally to believe that while its patron will depart unless it does a better job of contributing to the war effort, the patron will not walk away if this response is forthcoming."[171] Nixon, Bush, and Obama failed to achieve the golden mean. Their collective failure suggests withdrawal is not a viable option for pressuring local allies. Although this paper has not explored the dynamic in these case studies, it seems likely that withdrawal inspired counterproductive hedging behavior by allies more concerned with short-term survival than long-term reform.

Nor does a withdrawal timeline help the US military improve its efforts to train, advise, and assist local security forces. It is conceivable that a withdrawal timetable could help accelerate the growth in the quantity of certain kinds of units, as US forces hasten to meet milestones before they depart—though these case studies show little evidence of such a dynamic. What is clearer is that the withdrawals did not improve local security forces' quality, and the accelerated pace of training left capability gaps that undermined their long-term viability. Certain kinds of units are more time consuming to create than others. It is easiest to rapidly raise and train light infantry suited to low-intensity combat, rural security operations, and perimeter and fixed-facility defense. Training these units is cheap, because it requires little more than giving young men rudimentary training in marksmanship and small-squad maneuver. These kinds of units can be indispensable in counterinsurgency and pacification campaigns, because they provide a substantial boost to public order in small, outlying villages.

However, raising and training every other kind of military unit is more time intensive. Training mechanized infantry can still be relatively quick, but not training the units that provide logistics, repair, and maintenance for them. Training armored units is more complex still, as is the training for the higher-level command, control, intelligence, and communications capabilities that tie modern armies together and enable them to act as a unified force under a coherent strategy. Finally, training fixed- and rotary-wing pilots is extraordinarily time consuming—to say nothing of training pilot *trainers*, essential for giving a local force an indigenous long-term ability to develop and maintain an air force. Also, light infantry units, even if rapidly trained and deployed, are highly dependent on air support in contemporary operations—both conventional and unconventional—for aerial reconnaissance, surveillance, combat support, and medical evacuations, to say nothing of more complex airmobile operations.

CONCLUSION

As policymakers and military officials feared, withdrawal from conflict deprived the United States of combat power to sustain its military position on the battlefield. Simultaneously, it signaled to enemy forces that time was on their side, and that they simply needed to survive past the US withdrawal to claim victory. As such, withdrawal left the United States bereft of negotiating leverage, with both enemy forces and allied governments. In short, withdrawal plans—especially when they were specific and public—appear to have contributed to the defeat of US war aims.

The policy implications are straightforward: if policymakers aim to win wars, they should not set withdrawal deadlines or timetables for the completion of military operations. To the extent possible, policymakers should be more selective about the wars they fight, choosing conventional wars that escape the question of withdrawal, or wars whose stakes justify protracted engagement ("wars of necessity" rather than "wars of choice"). If forced into a protracted counterinsurgency campaign, policymakers should key military withdrawal to conditions on the ground—to the achievement of political and military goals—rather than deadlines or timetables. Withdrawal timetables do not achieve the political benefits that policymakers desire, but they do incur the risks policymakers rightly fear. In addition, once announced, withdrawal timetables appear to take on a life of their own. Kissinger famously worried, "Withdrawal of U.S. troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public: The more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded."[172] Withdrawal timetables create bureaucratic inertia and public expectation, both at home and abroad, toward complete withdrawal. Such inertia can overtake policymakers' intentions in setting the timetable in the first place. Despite the desires of Nixon, Bush, and Obama to keep a stay-behind force in every case considered here, they only partially succeeded (so far) in Afghanistan.

The cases considered here are US counterinsurgency operations in foreign lands. The conclusions drawn from them may be of limited applicability to other military operations—but the problem of withdrawal timetables rarely occurs in other military operations. Conventional warfare has a clear endpoint—the defeat of one side's military forces—and while military planners may project timetables for when they expect certain maneuvers to occur, policymakers do not set timetables for the withdrawal of forces in the midst of conventional combat, except as part of surrender negotiations. As for counterinsurgency warfare prosecuted by a state against insurgents in its own territory, withdrawal is impossible unless the government were to withdraw

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171   Jervis, "The Politics of Troop Withdrawal," 510.

172   Keefer and Yee, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VI," document 117.

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from its own territory as part of a partition agreement. The phenomenon of withdrawal timetables seems to occur only in counterinsurgency operations conducted by one nation in another nation's territory.

In fact, it may be a misnomer to isolate a discussion of withdrawal *timetables* as distinct from withdrawal. The two are virtually synonymous once policymakers stop using the language of "victory" or "success." In conventional military operations, military forces withdraw upon having achieved a specified goal, such as the destruction of an enemy army or securing of a surrender (or, alternately, having tendered one). The withdrawal of military forces absent their achievement of military or political goals is, by definition, defeat. When policymakers begin to stage military withdrawals without reference to "conditions on the ground," or to political and military end states those military forces were supposed to have achieved, and instead correlate withdrawal to a timetable, there is little to distinguish withdrawal from retreat.

That may give a clue to better understanding withdrawal timetables. The pattern of these cases suggests that policymakers and military planners understand the diplomatic and military risks of withdrawal timetables—yet choose them anyway. They do not withdraw abruptly because they want to avoid a dramatic battlefield loss, as Nixon and

Bush both feared would happen, yet they accept the same military result if it is stretched out over a longer timeframe. Withdrawal timetables, then, are a form of accepting defeat gracefully—which is to say, in the fashion likely to minimize political fallout. Nixon and Kissinger's conversations in 1971 and 1972 are especially compelling on this point: it is clear that they increasingly saw the withdrawal as a way to achieve a "decent interval" before the inevitable collapse of South Vietnam. The Obama administration's search for an "Afghan good enough" solution echoes Nixon's and Kissinger's desire to find the least costly exit from Vietnam. It is too early to say if withdrawal deadlines are always a tacit admission of eventual defeat, but the Obama archives will, eventually, shed light on how close the similarities were.

The problem is that policymakers' beliefs about the inevitability of military defeat can be self-fulfilling prophesies. By setting a withdrawal timetable, they are contributing to the conditions of likely defeat that led them, perhaps prematurely, to set the timetable in the first place. The counterfactual—that if they had refused to set a withdrawal timetable, they would have achieved victory—is not necessarily true, because other conditions affect the likelihood of victory or defeat. But, it is almost certainly the case that withdrawal timetables are premised on a belief about the certainty of future defeat that are hard to justify in advance, and make eventual outcomes worse than they could otherwise be.

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